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Do Denominational Confessions Compromise Local Church Autonomy? (What about Women Pastors?)

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The Southern Baptist Convention is an associational structure of churches. Its purpose is to carry “into effect the benevolent intentions of our constituents, by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort for the propagation of the gospel.” The assumption behind the union was that each participating church would be a “regular Baptist church.” No Baptist church is forced to join an association of churches nor forced to stay. No association may exert authority over the internal affairs of a local church, but it may determine the terms of membership in the association. The church is autonomous; the association is autonomous. The church may select its own officers, receive and discipline its own members according to its understanding of Scripture, and choose to affiliate with other churches of like faith and order. An association of churches may govern its internal affairs

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according to the will of the associating churches and may adopt a confession of faith that expresses its understanding of the Scriptures. It may receive or reject churches into its associational structure on the basis of that confessional statement. A local church may not demand that an association of churches allow its participation while it holds doctrines out of accord with the association's confessions. A church may not demand that an association change its confession to allow for its participation while dissenting from its doctrine. A church disagreeing with the confessional stance of an association may continue its autonomy independent of the association.

When the Philadelphia Association received queries from churches, a committee appointed to investigate the question would answer with pertinent Scripture and frequently would refer to a section of their confession of faith. In 1724, for a question on the Sabbath, one element of the response was "We refer to the Confession of Faith, set forth by the elders and brethren met in London, 1689, and owned by us, chap. 22, sect. 7 and 8." In 1727 a question on marriage evoked the response "Answered, by referring to our Confession of faith, chapter 26th in our last edition." A question about laying on of hands referred to the Confession in chapter xxvi, section 9. A question in 1735 about church membership of a person too far away to attend was answered by invoking the Confession of faith, chapter xxvii, and the *Treatise on Discipline*.

In 1743, the association heard discussion about a theological dispute that had developed in one of its member churches concerning the eternal generation of the Son. After the discussion, one person, Joseph Eaton, "recanted, renounced, and condemned all expressions, which he heretofore had used, whereby his brethren ... were made to believe that he departed from the literal sense and meaning of that fundamental article in our Confession of faith, concerning the eternal generation and Sonship of Jesus Christ our Lord." At the same meeting a "brother Butler" wrote an acknowledgement, "I freely confess that I have given too much cause for others to judge that I contradicted our Confession of faith concerning the eternal generation of the son of God, in some expressions contained in my paper, which I now with freedom condemn."

When Baptist associations opened formal correspondence with other associations, they determined their doctrinal purity through examination of their confession of faith. The Philadelphia Association minutes from 1788 read, "A letter and minutes which contain the sentiments of the Stonington Association, were received. From which it appears, that they have adopted the same printed Confession which this Association has heretofore approved. We shall therefore cheerfully concur with them in maintaining a mutual correspondence."

OK, well, you get it. No need to multiply instances. The confession was important and no article would have been inserted unless there was good reason to believe that all the

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churches should affirm their conscientious acknowledgement of the biblical doctrines so stated. A denominational confession necessarily includes doctrines deemed of secondary importance in relation to historic orthodox Christianity. If the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed were all that we should confess, and we certainly should confess them, we would have no denominations, but we would have constant disagreement between and even within churches about those things that seem to be secondary—not saving truths—but still vital for the health and unity of local churches **AND** vital associational structures, as well as personal obedience to the Lord. Among these are the mode and meaning of baptism—surely anyone can see that this could rise to the level of a first order issue—, the number, authority, and qualifications of the officers of the church, and the manner of church discipline.

An essay on the relation of local churches to an association appeared in the minutes of the Philadelphia Association in 1749. After affirming the autonomy of each local church, and the right and obligation to administer the biblical ordinances, receive and discipline its membership, set apart its officers “independent of any other church or assembly whatever,” it discussed the autonomy and powers of an association, or confederation of churches that unite on a voluntary basis. Though not a “superior judicature,” there is nevertheless a power that the association has over itself. “For if the agreement of several distinct churches, in sound doctrine and regular practice be the first motive, ground and foundation or basis of their confederation,” the essay premised, and then drew the inference, “then it must naturally follow, that a defection in doctrine or practice in any church, in such confederation, or any party in any such church, is ground sufficient for an Association to withdraw from such a church or party so deviating or making defection, and to exclude such from them in some formal manner.”

Baptists have never believed that baptism, the Lord’ Supper, or the calling and setting apart of church officers are minor matters for they are part of divine revelation and are given in order to bring the church to a “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” ([Ephesians 4:13](#)). These are the doctrines that distinguished Baptists in their seventeenth-century emergence from English Puritanism and Separatism. Within the framework of the broader Christian confession of credal orthodoxy and Protestant evangelicalism—both affirmed clearly by Baptists as necessary for true Christian faith— issues of church order and officers might be considered secondary or even tertiary, but for the *distinctive identity* of Baptists they are primary. Baptists consider their views of baptism, church membership, the continuing mandate of the great Commission, ecclesiastical non-establishment, and the qualifications of local church officers as essential elements of our quest for the purity and spiritual power of local churches.

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Acceptance of regulating confessions of faith and even so-called creedal affirmation are not foreign to Baptist convictions in protecting their commitment to “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” ([Jude 3](#)). James P. Boyce famously argued extensively for a governing confession in the founding of a theological seminary: “Let subscription to it [the confession of faith] on the part of each Theological Professor be required as an assurance of his entire agreement with its views of doctrine, and of his determination to teach fully the truth which it expresses, and nothing contrary to its declarations.” He also stated with conviction and clarity that it fit well—even necessarily—in the stewardship of a local church. After allowing for the broad spectrum of biblical understanding and doctrinal maturity of the members of a local church In light of the hopeful reality of the presence of recent converts, Boyce proceeded to argue, “But I cannot grant that such a test is without due warrant from Scripture even in the Church. The very duties which God enjoins upon the Churches, plainly suppose the application of every principle involved in the establishment of creeds” [Boyce, *Three Changes* 1856].

The same we find in B. H. Carroll, the founder of Southern Baptists’ second theological seminary. Carroll fully agreed with Boyce’s view of the stewardship of revealed truth through adherence to a confession and applied it to his attempt to give “safeguards” to the seminary. He also believed that hearty and hardy confessional adherence was fitting, in fact, required for a church. “A church with a little creed is a church with a little life. ... the fewer its articles of faith, the fewer its bonds of union and compactness.” Carroll continued, therefore, with the warning, “Shut off the creed and the Christian world would fill up with heresy unsuspected and uncorrected, but none the less deadly.” When confronted with the claim of some that individual liberty would be challenged by the requirement of creedal authority, he responded, “We are entitled to no liberty in these matters. It is a positive and very hurtful sin to magnify liberty at the expense of doctrine. A creed is what we believe. A confession of faith is a declaration of what we believe. The church must both believe and declare.” Contemplating that Christ came to bear witness to the truth and that apostles would teach and write under the inspiration of the Spirit of truth, Carroll insisted, “To Christ and the apostles, false creeds were the most deadly things, and called most for the use of the knife.” The setting aside of men to the gospel ministry must conform, therefore, to this Christological and apostolic concern for truth: “The limit of ordination examination on doctrine is the maximum of church creed on doctrine. ... Unless ‘the faith’ is a needed creed of definite vital truth, there is no basis for examination looking to ordination and no standard up to which the convert must be developed” [Carroll on Ephesians 4].

One of the favorite tactics of the so-called and self-styled “moderate” wing of the Convention during the years immediately preceding and then during the conservative resurgence involved implying a dichotomy between adherence to strict orthodoxy and

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personal religious experience. One writer in 1978 warned against a growing tendency to “Creedal Subscription” and characterized the developing conflict as one between scholastics and pietists. He characterized the scholastic as the person who “wants to make the confession compulsory lest the faith become lost,” and the pietist as the one who “wants to make the confession optional lest the freedom for the vitality of faith become lost.” [Walter Shurden, *R & E*, Spring 1978, 231]. Pietism, not scholasticism, the writer implies, should be the model for promotion of Baptist unity and mission.

Another looked to positive lessons to be learned from American mystics who consistently asserted that “formal creedal authority was much less significant than the inner reality of the divine presence.” This heightening of inner experience disconnected from dogma “may be extremely useful” in providing “a unity beyond denomination and dogma which is the foundation of the Church universal, the mystical body of Christ.” [William Leonard, *R & E*, Spring 1978, 277.]

Then in the midst of the fray, soon following the Glorieta Statement issued in 1986, a prominent Moderate spokesman pitted “scholarship” against “confirmation and indoctrination,” “authentic education” against “brainwashing,” “personal religious experience” against a “memorized religion,” and authentic education” against “indoctrination of students with predigested teachings.” [Roy Honeycutt, *Risking the Arm*, Convocation Address, September 1987] In his infamous convocation sermon for the fall of 1984, Roy Honeycutt saw the “cosmic Christ” as making us free from any attempts at uniformity, particularly confessional uniformity, but asserted, “Communities such as this seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention should affirm not stifle or otherwise restrict pluralism.” Instead of uniformity, “we need to rediscover authentic, New Testament pluralism as an essential quality of the church on mission with God.” Certainly, we are not back to the practice of conceding that confessional infidelity is a sign of spiritual maturity, a deeper grasp of the mind of Christ, and educational superiority.

We know that this present concern about a confession of faith’s usurpation of the rights of conscience and the autonomy of a church is prompted by the question of the ordination of women to the office of elder/bishop/pastor-teacher. Again, the precedent of Baptist exposition on this issue shows that no assertion of lack of clarity either exegetically, ecclesiological, or doctrinally need make a strong stance unwarranted. Carroll wrote in his exposition of 1 Timothy, commenting on 2:11-13 along with [1 Corinthians 14: 34, 35](#), “The custom in some congregations of having a woman as pastor is in flat contradiction to this apostolic teaching and is open rebellion against Christ our king, and high treason against his sovereignty, and against nature as well as grace. It unsexes both the woman

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who usurps this authority and the men who submit to it. Under no circumstances conceivable is it justifiable.”

Likewise in his commentary on 1 Timothy in the American Commentary series, Hezekiah Harvey, considering the text carefully in the setting of Paul’s argument concerning creation, fall, and redemption says, “The passage plainly denies to woman the office of the ministry, or the function of prayer and instruction in the public assemblies of the church, on the ground that such an office, as it involves authority over the man, is inconsistent with the divinely-constituted nature and position of woman as subordinate to man.” Then again, after more detailed exposition he reconfirms, “These reasons [the ones Paul has given in the text], founded on the original constitution and nature of the woman, are plainly valid in all places and in all ages; and the rule excluding woman from the office of the ministry in the church, of which they form the ground, is consequently universal and perpetual.”

Neither exegetically, confessionally, nor ecclesiologically should this issue be a point of controversy among Baptists. The Bible is our sole authority; the confession gives clear expression to a coherent, canonically derived understanding of the Bible’s teaching; The churches obey the text in order to be found sincere and blameless, filled with the fruit of righteousness.



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