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Baptists And Confessionalism

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My thesis is that until the advent of modern “pluralism,” or the “inclusive policy,” Baptists have always been a confessional people and have held to a hard core of basic, nonnegotiable doctrines. Sometimes these truths were held implicitly, and were not written down in some “creedal” form. But even in such cases the truth was held.



Let us take now a couple of illustrations. When Baptists were celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of America in 1876 they sought to assert their convictions with a statistical summary and a doctrinal affirmation. The American Baptist Publication Society of Philadelphia printed in that year *A Baptist Affirmation of Faith: Baptists and the National Centenary*, comprised of ten chapters, one by George D. B. Pepper, “Doctrinal History and Position.” At the time Pepper was teaching at Crozer Theological Seminary in Upland, Pennsylvania. Pepper claimed that throughout America, mainstream Baptists, both North and South, held to common evangelical views. He repudiated the notion that the Baptist brotherhood was homogeneous only on the matter of the mode and subjects of baptism.

The very existence of the denomination, as we now see it in the United States, is the sufficient disapproval of such partial homogeneousness. One needs only to look into its doctrinal literature. In the great Unitarian apostasy in New England, Baptists stood their ground solidly and unitedly on the fundamental doctrines of grace. It has always been prompt and decided in casting out or withdrawing from ripened heresy touching those doctrines, whether advocated by individuals or parties. Campbellism, Arminianism, Antinomianism, Universalism—these and other heresies have never been harbored. Separation was brought about by inward necessity. A truly Baptist church is not Noah’s ark, gathering into itself beasts clean and unclean, orthodox and heterodox, agreed only in using the ark to be saved by water.¹

The Baptist boat, says this professor of theology, is not a Noah’s ark, containing beasts clean and unclean. Yet some inclusivists today insist that is exactly what we have in the

¹ George D. B. Pepper, *A Baptist Affirmation of Faith* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Heritage Publishers, 1976), 6.

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Baptist fellowship. This is why I raised the following questions in an article in the *ABE* (American Baptists Evangelicals) *Journal*, “Pluralism Reexamined.”

The idea that the church should include every type of theological and moral permutation is a historical novelty which must be challenged. It receives no support from the New Testament and is in conflict with Baptist history.

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What defines American Baptist Churches—USA? Do we have an identifiable message and purpose, or are we serving simply as an opinion forum? Are we an evangelistic force, or a sociological experiment in cultural diversity?

When the world looks at us does it see an army marching together toward a common goal, or do they see an ecclesiastical zoo exhibiting different religious specimens (genre)?

The idea that the church should include every type of theological and moral permutation is a historical novelty which must be challenged. It receives no support from the New Testament and is in conflict with Baptist history. It is true that believers in the apostolic age were commanded to “accept the one who is weak in the faith” (Rom. 14:1). But surely we must insist that the leaders carry the banner of Jesus Christ. The Christian boat is big, but it cannot include everything. When the church harbors those who deny cardinal doctrines of the faith and adopt pagan behavior patterns, it undermines its own existence. Some modern theologians, evidently, believed that the church is nothing more or less than an extension of the community, which must of necessity tolerate every species of belief and practice.

We could bring forth many other witnesses to establish the point that Baptists held to a core of truth prior to the twentieth century. One of the greatest of our Baptist historians was Thomas Armitage. He said in his volume, *A History of the Baptists*:

There is a substantial agreement in the entire fraternity of our churches, which is not difficult to set forth. In common with other orthodox Christians, so called, we believe the doctrine of the Divine Unity and Trinity; of Christ’s incarnation and proper Deity, of man’s fall and helplessness, and his redemption by the vicarious sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ; of the Personality and Deity of the Holy Spirit, and His plenary inspiration of the Scriptures.²

² Thomas Armitage, *A History of the Baptists*, 2 vols. (New York: Bryan, Taylor and Co., 1887), 1:150.

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SOME IMPORTANT BAPTIST CONFESSIONS

English Baptists

Anabaptism arrived in England during the early years of the Reformation period and spread rapidly throughout Western Europe. Like Luther the Anabaptists believed in the priesthood of the believer. But they also insisted that the church was a voluntary community of individuals who professed faith. Unlike the Lutherans and Calvinists they held to the separation of church and state. During the Puritan period they, like the Congregationalists, despaired of reforming the Church of England and became "Separatists." They were among those who were persecuted for their beliefs and migrated to America, via Holland.

The early Swiss Brethren, or Anabaptists, produced a confession in 1527 known as the *Schleitheim Confession*, which is accepted even today by Mennonites and others. Fifty-three years later a group of Baptists in Amsterdam published a theological statement known as the *Waterland Confession*. It was republished in 1610 by an English Separatist leader, John Smyth, who organized the first General Baptist Church. Already at this time a division among Baptists had developed on the Calvinistic-Arminian debate.

Particular, or Calvinistic, Baptists of London and vicinity published a confession in 1644 known as the *First London Confession*. Later on they produced another confession, which became more influential, known as the *Second London Confession of Faith*. This statement of faith was obviously designed to identify with the *Westminster Confession* on many major points of theology. Except on issues such as civil authority and baptism, the theology is essentially the same as the confessions of the Presbyterians. Other confessions of faith appeared among various Baptist groups in England during the seventeenth century.

American Baptists

The first association of Baptist churches in America was organized in 1707 by five small Baptist churches in the Delaware Valley. They called themselves the Philadelphia Baptist Association, named after the largest city in their district. This event was a watershed in Baptist history because the Philadelphia Association eventually became quite large. At one time its environs even covered parts of Virginia and New York.

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For more than thirty years no attempt was made by the Philadelphia Association of Baptists to adopt a confession of faith. But in 1742 the Association subscribed to a slightly enlarged version of the *Second London Confession*, which became known as the *Philadelphia Confession*. Through the growth and influence of the association, its doctrinal standards spread through the American Colonies. William L. Lumpkin says, "The Philadelphia Association published many editions of the confession, and it was adopted by many churches and associations."³ Among these were the Ketockton Association of Virginia, the Warren Association of Rhode Island, and the Charleston Association of South Carolina. The influence of the Philadelphia Association and its confession gave a decidedly Calvinistic cast to many American Baptist groups which were being organized throughout early America.

With the beginning of the nineteenth century it soon became apparent that the old concept of a local association of churches, although necessary within itself, was not an adequate expression of the growing national consciousness of Baptists. Since life tends to organization, the Baptists, very much alive in all parts of the new growing nation, needed to organize on a national level. The movement toward organization was precipitated and finally consummated by the absolute need for some agency for international missionary cooperation. The catalyst for this development was the missionary aspiration of Adoniram Judson (1788–1845). He had become a Baptist while in passage to India under the auspices of a New England Congregationalist missionary society. In order to enlist support for himself and others with whom he was associated, Baptists convened in Philadelphia in 1814 to form a society to promote international missions. This became known as the Triennial Convention, because of its early custom of meeting every third year.

The Triennial Baptist Convention, which was organized specifically to promote missions, was originally a truly national body. There were delegates from Baptist groups scattered throughout America, but particularly the eastern seaboard. Out of this convention missionary societies developed. Interestingly, the convention did not seek to spell out a theological position. It was assumed that this had already been done by the churches and the associations.

³ William, L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1959), 352.

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Throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century the individual churches and associations maintained a strong theological consciousness. There was one noticeable theological development, and that was the decline of strict Calvinism as a strong emphasis. At first it was not so much the repudiation of these views as a relative neglect of them. In New Hampshire the growth of Arminian Baptist groups induced the Baptists of that area to formulate a confessional statement which eventually became the most influential document of its kind in America. It was known as the *New Hampshire Confession*. Although maintaining traditional Baptist views such as the authority of Scripture, regeneration, heaven and hell, etc., it was decidedly less Calvinistic.

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The *New Hampshire Confession* was published in 1853 by the American Baptist Publication Society and was adopted by thousands of churches across the land. It is noteworthy, however, that no attempt was made on the part of the national Baptist agencies to adopt this confession or anything similar to it. The deliberations and debates of these institutions pertained to matters of organization, membership and procedure—not theology. There was an implicit agreement on basic Baptist doctrines, but no attempt to formalize or confessionalize them.

In the 1840s Baptists of the South broke away from their connection with the national Baptist institutions, forming in 1845 their own convention. The original preamble and constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention had thirteen articles, none of which affirmed any particular doctrinal position. As the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy unfolded in the early twentieth century however, the Southern Baptists felt the need to identify themselves on basic doctrine. In Memphis in 1925, the Convention authorized the publication of the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith*, with some additional articles on religious liberty, peace and war, education, social service, cooperation, missions and stewardship.

Nonconfessional Stance of Northern Baptists

Prior to the end of the Civil War the debates and divisions among Protestants of North America pertained primarily to social issues such as slavery and internal ecclesiastical matters. There had been no serious challenge to traditional conservative views on the nature of divine revelation and human redemption. As Clifton Olmstead states in his *History of Religion in the United States*, “Orthodoxy was in the saddle and its continued status seemed assured.”⁴ During the final quarter of the century, however, this situation changed drastically. Intellectual forces arose which affected all areas of human thought,

⁴ Clifton E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 465.

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including philosophy, sociology, and religion. The “age of science” was destined to shake all the Christian churches to their very foundations.

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Charles Darwin's thesis on the evolution of man seemed to militate against the literal interpretation of Scripture and was the object of fierce opposition among many evangelical denominations. The higher critical approach to the study of the Bible gained increasing support in schools of higher learning, especially in schools in the Northeast. This view was refined and popularized through the efforts of the German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918). He propounded the view that there was an evolutionary pattern of thought throughout the Old Testament which began with “primitive polytheistic origins and progressing to ethical monism.” The traditional views on the authorship of the various books of Scripture were challenged, and many historical and scientific errors were attributed to them.

Southern Baptists were affected only slightly by the new views, but Baptists of the North were more seriously and permanently changed. They were first formally taught by W. N. Clarke, who taught theology at Hamilton Theological School of New York, a Baptist institution. He denied the prevailing Baptist views on the accuracy of Scripture. This viewpoint spread powerfully through most of the Northern Baptist seminaries by the turn of the century and soon were believed by a substantial number of pastors. Dr. Walter Rauschenbush, a professor in Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York, had a leading role in disseminating this position.

Along with changing views on the Bible came a more optimistic view of human nature than had been believed. Man was no longer seen as a sinner deserving of God's condemnation but as a creature of misfortune who through long eons of social and spiritual struggle would be able to arrive at a state of nobleness. Sin was not so much an offense to a holy God as a social evil against society. Salvation is cosmic, environmental, and social rather than personal. The question of man's ultimate destiny in heaven or hell was considered irrelevant.

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As these changes were taking place early in this century, Northern Baptists decided to organize a convention more like their brethren in the South. Prior to that the missionary, educational and benevolent cooperation had been carried on largely through independent societies, such as the American Baptist Missionary Union. By the time the actual deliberations took place between 1906 and 1910 the churches contained a wide range of theologies, ranging from traditionalists who held to the old views and the more modern thinkers who sympathized with new views, now dubbed “modernism.” A power struggle developed which culminated in 1922 at the national convention. Dr. W. B. Riley presented the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* to the convention for adoption as a summary of denominational belief. Clarence Woelfkin, a New York minister and former president of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, presented a counter motion that “the Northern Baptist Convention affirms that the New Testament is the all-sufficient ground of our faith and practice, and we need no other statement.” Woelfkin’s motion carried by 1,264 to 637. The effect of this decision was to leave the denomination without any theological standards as long as a church or pastor was supportive of the programs.

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THE PROBLEM OF HERESY

The inclusive or “pluralistic” stance of the Northern Baptist Convention placed the denomination in a position of being unable to recognize or deal with heresy. Fellowship became a great umbrella to cover all, regardless of their beliefs or lifestyles. And yet every Christian group had said that there is such a thing as heresy, although the way they dealt with departures from the faith varied. Churches with the Episcopal system of government have the easiest method of handling doctrinal defection. The church hierarchy simply expels those who repudiate the faith of the church. Representative bodies, such as Presbyterians, exercise discipline through the parliamentary action of synods or sessions. With Baptists, expulsion is more difficult, but it has occurred. The local church is regarded as the ultimate court of appeal, and most church constitutions provide for the exercise of disciplinary action. Larger Baptist groups have disfellowshipped churches or individuals who repudiate the basic tenets of their faith. In the early days of the Philadelphia Association there are instances in which churches were expelled for heresy.

Dr. Robert Torbet, one of the best of modern Baptist historians, discusses the efforts of Baptists during the early 1800s to maintain doctrinal purity within their ranks. “In the latter years of the eighteenth century, two forms of heresy began to plague Baptists in particular.”⁵ Baptists refused to recognize any Unitarian churches as legitimately Baptist.

⁵ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson, 1975), 267.

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For example, Unitarianism spread to Kentucky and was adopted by the Cowpers Run Church. “Accordingly, the Elkhorn Association to which the Cowpers Run Church belonged, in 1803 found it necessary to exclude the church from membership.”⁶ Baptists in the same state were a little later troubled by the Universalist view that all men would eventually go to heaven. Two influential preachers were excluded from the Baptist ministry for this view. Torbet says, “It was the general watchfulness of the local churches that saved Baptists from more serious inroads of this heresy.”⁷



It is perfectly clear from these comments by Torbet that Baptist leaders of the nineteenth century did not consider their views on freedom of conscience incompatible with the necessity of internal discipline. They believed that no civil government had the right to tell a person what to believe. They believed that each person is free to adopt any religious system he or she pleases, or none at all, as far as the secular courts are concerned. But they also were convinced that within the community of faith itself there are limits to freedom. It has been the Baptist position that each citizen can choose his or her own religion and worship any way he chooses. But once a person, particularly a minister, professes faith in Christ and identifies with the Baptist faith he is expected to remain true to the principles of the church.

Throughout the ninety years of the Northern Baptist Fellowship, now known as ABCUSA, there have been many attempts to bring the denomination to a confessional position. It was attempted in the 1920s and the 1940s. Failure in this regard has resulted in two major divisions, with a resultant numerical decline and the draining off of financial support for missions and education. American Baptist Evangelicals is the third major effort at impacting Northern Baptist Fellowship with historic orthodoxy.

In general, leadership of the denomination has resisted strongly all such efforts. But in doing so they always place themselves in a posture of inconsistency and confusion. A good example can be cited in an article in the denominational paper, *The American Baptist*, which is devoted to explaining “Who We Are, Where We Come From and Where We’re Going” by S. Mark Heim. In describing the denominational position he states, “Our identity as “American Baptists cannot stand apart from our confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”⁸ He also says, “In the past Baptists have readily listed ‘distinctives’ such as believer’s baptism, priesthood of all believers, religious freedom, or Scriptures as

⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁷ Ibid., 268.

⁸ S. Mark Heim, “American Baptists: A People of Faith,” *The American Baptist* (Nov./Dec., 1987), 11.

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sole rule of faith and practice. As American Baptists we are used to listing a further set, affirming ourselves to be evangelical, ecumenical, interracial and international.”⁹

A confession of faith in Christ, believer’s baptism, and religious freedom are certainly “beliefs.” Terms such as evangelical and ecumenical also can obviously be identified as describing a specific credo. Yet, in the same article Heim disavows that American Baptists are in any way a “creedal” people. “We are not a creedal group. This means that we do not have a written summary of fundamental Christian beliefs that we make binding in our church life.”¹⁰ Heim says that American Baptists “list” their distinctive tenets but do not “write” them in creed form. Certainly a “list” of beliefs put down on an eight-and-a-half by eleven-page which is in the magazine, *The American Baptist*, is creedal. Obviously, the disclaimer notwithstanding, the American Baptist leader, S. Mark Heim, is not averse to using the written method in order to set forth Baptist tenets.

He might answer that what he is writing are his own personal convictions and interpretations. Yet the declared intention of the magazine in general and his article in particular is to declare “who American Baptists are, where they came from, and where they are going.” It is the official magazine of the denomination.

Another illustration of this inconsistency occurred in the recent controversy over homosexuality. In a recent issue of *In Mission*, which has taken the place of *The American Baptist*, a long list of leaders issued an open letter to American Baptist pastors and congregations. It alludes to the controversy regarding homosexuality and the status of churches that welcome and affirm gays and lesbians. It issues a familiar call for tolerance and inclusiveness. It pleads for acceptance to different views on these things. It upholds the right of individuals to worship God without imposition of creed.

And yet the same article speaks of certain views and convictions the denomination has affirmed in the past. It talks about the “covenantal relationship” of churches and organizations that make up the national body. It refers to “commonly agreed criteria for cooperating churches.” My question is, What is the difference between “covenantal relationship,” “commonly agreed criteria” and “creed or belief”? It seems that these leaders are saying that on matters of denominational polity and cooperation we do have “beliefs” or a “creed.” But when it comes to how we behave or what we believe about what the Bible teaches regarding who God is or what salvation is, we have no creed. The practical result of such a position is to protect, embrace, and affirm the most extreme viewpoints and lifestyle, as long as one claims to be a Baptist. This is unscriptural and a contradiction of the Baptist historic conviction that there are limits to freedom within the

⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

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community of faith. It ignores the fact that the faith can be denied and discipline must be implemented.

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¹¹ Thornbury, J. F. (1998). "Baptists and Confessionalism." *Reformation and Revival*, 7(1), 104–118.