

GEORGE W. TRUETT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE: THE EVOLVING CREED OF THE
ANTI-CREEDAL PEOPLE

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THE BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE: THE EVOLVING CREED OF THE ANTI-CREEDAL PEOPLE

I. The Background of the Confessions

When it comes to ecumenical discussions on important issues of authority in the church, a student of denominational polity can almost hear the proud Baptists yelling “No creed but the Bible!”¹ This statement of belief serves modern Southern Baptist reliance on the inerrancy of their scriptural interpretations well during times of peace. From the very beginning of the Baptist movement though, these “non-creedal” people have not been afraid to write clear statements of faith in the face of conflict.² For the Southern Baptist Convention until 1925 though, these confessions were for churches, agencies, and seminaries, not for the whole denominational body. A professor at Mercer University in the 1800s named S. G. Hillyer writes that individual churches had confessions of faith, but each “confession was adopted by each church, as an independent body, for itself.” In fact, the Southern Baptist goes on to say that “Baptists never appeal to the confessions found in their church records, but directly and exclusively to the inspired Word.”³ In the next century, the denomination would adopt three confessions of faith,

¹ Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 39.

² C. Douglas Weaver, “Southern Baptists”, *The Baptist River: Essays on Many Tributaries of a Diverse Tradition* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2008) 57.

³ S. G. Hillyer, *Reminiscences of Georgia Baptists* (Atlanta: Fotte and Davies Co., 1902) 219-220.

declaring that the most recent revision of the “Baptist Faith and Message” would act as an “instrument of doctrinal accountability”, in stark contrast to S. G. Hillyer’s perceived concept of Baptist confessions.⁴ How did the Southern Baptists get to this point? How did they come to adopt confessions for their whole group? How did they grow to understand these confessions as contractually binding covenants? The 1925, 1963, and 2000 editions of the Baptist Faith and Message each have a unique place in the modern history of the Southern Baptist Convention, serving as physical representation of the evolution of the denomination through the twentieth century.

As the Southern Baptists matured into a large, nationwide denomination with an impressive and unique governance, endowment, and numerous boards for missions and resources, the group needed to address the troubling crisis of modernism and the Christian faith. The fiery, energetic voice of J. Frank Norris spoke against the growing and strengthening denomination in the early 1920s; accusing them of “teaching biological evolution in their colleges, tolerating ‘modernistic’ views of Scripture in their seminaries, and making an idol of the denomination.”⁵ In response to these salacious claims, the 1924 convention charged a committee with drafting a stronger, centralized confession of faith for the denomination. The resulting document was essentially a reiteration of the New Hampshire Confession, a statement with which many Southern Baptists were already familiar because of its use in some Northern Baptist curricula. Though the confession seemed to calm some fears in the Southern Baptist Convention, it did not explicitly address evolution: brilliantly calming loud voices for

⁴ Adrian Rogers, “Report of the Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee to the Southern Baptist Convention”, *The Baptist Faith and Message* Online. [cited 7 Mar. 2017]. Online: <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/preamble.asp>.

⁵ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987) 677.

fundamentalism, and allowing a narrow space for the more moderate believers to coexist quietly in the denomination.⁶ In a rather unexpected declaration from the chairman of the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, the Baptist statesman E. Y. Mullins said that the situation did not call “for a doctrinal statement, and [he was] very thoroughly convinced that too much of this sort of thing [would be] very dangerous.”⁷ It would seem that this confession served its purpose at the time, and proved to be a purposely weak statement for the Southern Baptists. In forty years’ time, the denomination would again face similar problems and be forced to clarify their beliefs.

Like the first Southern Baptist confession, the second one was predominantly prompted by the actions of one man. Ralph Elliot, a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, published a controversial book entitled *The Message of Genesis* through the Convention’s own Broadman Press in 1961. In his work, Elliot purposed that the historical truth of Adam and Eve were not as important as the theological truths they represented.⁸ The post War Southern Baptists had coalesced together in the religious fervor of the midcentury; creating a conservative, evangelical group that had become the largest protestant denomination in the nation. As the now mature, massive denomination faced the cultural change of the 1960s, it seemed almost impossible to some in the Convention that one of their own professors could propose a perceived threat to the Bible, in a book published by their own press! In response to this perceived threat of liberalism, Elliot was fired from Midwestern, Broadman Press had to cancel plans for a second edition of the book, and the Convention appointed a committee to

⁶ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 678.

⁷ James Edward Carter, “The Southern Baptist Convention and Confessions of Faith, 1845-1945” (Th.D. diss, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1964), 115.

⁸ Weaver, *The Baptist River*, 63.

revise the 1925 confession.⁹ The original confession had stopped short of officially decrying evolution, but seemed to calm both sides of the issue; perhaps this attempt could achieve similar goals. The committee, led by SBC president Herschel Hobbs, released a new statement which further clarified several articles of the 1925 confession and featured extremely careful language concerning the Bible as a “record of God's revelation of Himself to man”¹⁰ This confession again forged a careful balance between the conservative and more progressive parties within the Southern Baptists. For about fifteen years after the confession was adopted, it served the intended purpose well, until the next major flare in Southern Baptist life.

One could argue that the 1960s and 1970s were perhaps the most progressive decades in Southern Baptist life. The official Broadman Press commentaries began to include the Documentary Hypothesis of Old Testament authorship¹¹, women were given a promising future in vocational ministry through the newly formed “Consultation on Women in Church-Related Vocations”¹², and moderate views were beginning to be taught alongside conservative ideas in the seminaries.¹³ In the midst of these almost frightening times for conservative believers, two prominent Southern Baptists formulated a plan to stop all progressive leanings in the denomination, and bring about a fundamentalist agenda. In March of 1967, Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson planned a fundamentalist takeover of the convention at Café du Monde in New Orleans. In the ensuing years, Pressler and Patterson seized the controversy stirred by Harold

⁹ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 678.

¹⁰ Herschel Hobbs, “The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message”, *The Baptist Faith and Message Online*. [cited 8 Mar. 2017]. Online: <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>.

¹¹ Weaver, *The Baptist River*, 64.

¹² Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012) 61.

¹³ Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 104.

Lindsell's books on biblical inerrancy and the new strength found in the quickly forming religious right to have a likeminded fundamentalist elected to the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention.¹⁴ The framers of the takeover knew that if they could control the presidency for a generation, then they could eventually control the appointments of every Southern Baptist Board member in every agency, creating a newly fundamentalist denomination from the inside, without any need for a hostile overthrow. By the time the Convention released their most recent revision of the Baptist Faith and Message, this infiltration was complete, and they had held the Presidency for twenty-one years.

Many would consider the completion and adoption of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message as the final stage in this fundamentalist takeover, solidifying in writing the theological implications of practical actions taken by the past two decades of SBC presidents. After seeking to confront the evangelical push for anti-abortion politics, the growing issue of homosexuality in Christendom and the newly articulated complementarian role of women in the Southern Baptists, the Convention adopted a 1998 amendment to the Baptist Faith and Message entitled "The Family".¹⁵ At the 2000 Southern Baptist Convention, Adrian Rogers, the same pastor who acted as the first fundamentalist president of the Convention's takeover, presented an edited Baptist Faith and Message with conservative views for the new millennium.¹⁶ The document served ultimately as a way to protect the legacy of the "reformers", becoming for the first time a strong "instrument of doctrinal accountability" which could (and would) be used to test employees,

¹⁴ Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 70-71

¹⁵ Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 145.

¹⁶ Weaver, *The Baptist River*, 65.

seminarians, and missionaries on their agreement with the fundamentalists.¹⁷ In stark contrast to E. Y. Mullins' mistrust of man made confessions, proponents of absolute biblical inerrancy now required adherence to their seemingly inerrant set of beliefs to be in full cooperation with the Convention.

Though the Southern Baptists progressed through their first 80 years without need for a unified confession of faith, the twentieth century proved to yield a nationwide, massive denominational entity that constantly found itself at the crossroads of a conservative and moderate faith. Though the leaders of the denomination in the early 1900s were able to downplay larger theological issues for the sake of cooperation and missions, the forces of modernity eventually caused the predominantly conservative group to coalesce around their confessional doctrines several times throughout the twentieth and early twenty first centuries.¹⁸ While the first two confessions served as points of fellowship for the Convention, the final one ultimately split the group. While the first two confessions were viewed as necessary evils to confront the issues of the day, the most recent one was viewed by its proponents as a tool for rightfully disagreeing and breaking fellowship with non-conforming individuals and churches.

II. Comparing the Confessions to Other Documents

Though the three Baptist Faith and Message confessions proclaim a uniquely Southern Baptist faith, they were not developed in a theological vacuum. The Southern Baptist confessions were written by committee as iterations and revisions of earlier documents, allowing the differences between the confessions to stand in glaring dichotomy with one another. Though it

¹⁷ Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 147.

¹⁸ Flowers, *Into the Pulpit*, 3.

has less articles, the most recent Baptist Faith and Message is substantially longer than the original, employing carefully chosen language to clarify the points most important to the editors. While adapted from the New Hampshire Confession, the 1925, 1963, and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message confessions each share a unique vision for Southern Baptist life because of their carefully worded differences.

Though the Foreign Mission Board had issued a short statement of faith in 1920 for guidance on the things their missionaries would teach,¹⁹ the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message was not based on this shorter statement. The document instead corresponded greatly to the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith, sometimes copying whole passages, ideas, and structures from the older confession.²⁰ The places where the Baptist Faith and Message did differ from the New Hampshire Confession, while sometimes only by the inclusion of a word, reveal specific theological differences and attempts to confront the pressing issues of the day. For example, as the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message faced issues of the modern scientific world, it promoted the Bible's use as the standard by which *religious* opinions should be tried, where the New Hampshire Confession did not limit the Scriptures to only judging religious opinions. Though still thoroughly committed to Scripture, E. Y. Mullins and his committee allowed for scientific inquiry and opinion with the addition of one simple word to the New Hampshire Confession. While this may be seen as a compromise to moderate believers, the writers of the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message also added some language that would please more conservative believers, such as the explicit inclusion of the virgin birth and physical resurrection of Christ, beliefs that some fundamentalists accused other believers of ignoring or denying. While fighting the battles

¹⁹ Foreign Mission Board, *Annual* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 1920), 196-199.

²⁰ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 677.

of evolution, the writers purposely included multiple references to the Genesis creation accounts in the confession. Throughout the document we see some minor edits that de-emphasized Calvinism, promoted a more traditional Baptist view of the perseverance of the saints, and a less mystical, more explicitly simple view of the ordinances. Beyond this, many articles of the confession at the end were added, and much of the language had been modernized from the original confession. In all, the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message remained true to the familiar New Hampshire Confession²¹ from which it had gleaned so much of its content, while crafting a uniquely Southern Baptist document for both the conservative and moderate elements within the denomination.²²

The next iteration of the Baptist Faith and Message rearranged and consolidated a few things, but usually copies the text of older confession, word for word. Some changes seem to be initiated as simply modernizations of the text, such as the removal of the dated hyphen in the term “cooperation” and simple rephrasing of the verb tenses in the statements. Among the most major changes in the 1963 confession were the reorganizing of the sections on God and grace. These reorganizations serve to clarify the more current Baptist understandings of the different processes in salvation, and for the first time, gave Christ and the Holy Spirit dedicated sections in the confession. Because this revision had come about in another controversy over the Bible and creation, special attention should be given to the portions relating to the Scriptures and humanity. When discussing a theology of the Scriptures, the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message for the first time defined the Bible as “the record of God’s revelation of Himself to man”. This definition of

²¹ J. Newton Brown, “The New Hampshire Confession of Faith”, *California Baptist University Baptist Studies Online*. [cited 8 Mar. 2017]. Online: <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/the-new-hampshire-confession-of-faith.pdf>.

²² E. Y. Mullins, “The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message”, *The Baptist Faith and Message Online*. [cited 8 Mar. 2017]. Online: <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>.

the Scriptures implies that our purpose in seeking the words of the Bible should be for a record of God's revelation, not necessarily for historical and scientific facts. In an interesting and oft debated addition, the 1963 confession states that Bible should be interpreted through Jesus Christ; implying that difficult Old Testament passages should be understood with the knowledge of the Gospel. In a truly shocking move, the quotes from the Genesis accounts have been removed from the portion that talks about the creation of humanity, as if to give explicit permission to believe in a non-literal six-day creation. In all, the document emphasized Arminian thought beyond the previous Southern Baptist confession, stating humanity's original innocence and freedom of choice. Though the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message had rewritten the New Hampshire Confession's section on the perseverance of the saints, the 1963 confession utilizes even stronger language to emphasize God's responsibility in keeping believers in eternal communion, not humanity's works. In the section on the Kingdom of God, the 1963 document spiritualizes the Kingdom more than the previous confession, then goes on to replace several sections with a new section called "Last Things". The portion on education removed antiquated and insensitive language on perceived Christian superiority in education, and allowed for the dismissal of teachers who did not submit to the "authoritative nature of the Scriptures", as had happened in the Elliot Controversy. In a final notable change, the 1963 confession removes an insistence to pray for peace.²³

In 1998, a section on "The Family" was added to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. Because it is identical to the corresponding section on the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, and was added in the process that would lead to the creation of the newest confession, this portion

²³ Hobbs, "The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message".

will be treated later. The statement more closely fits the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message than the 1925 confession.

More than any other edition of the Baptist Faith and Message, the 2000 confession kept many articles unchanged, from the previous document. The articles that were changed sometimes re-introduced language from the 1925 confession that had since been deleted. Special care was taken in the changes that were made to solidify more conservative beliefs, confront more modern issues, and provide reasoning for their beliefs. Many would argue that the main issue at stake in the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention was biblical inerrancy, so the changes in the portion about Scripture are important. One subtle omission in the newer confession is a change in phrasing; declaring that the Bible is “God’s revelation”, not simply a record of God’s revelation. This change in phrasing implies absolute authority in how events are recorded in the Text, as God’s exact dictation, not simply a record of God’s revelations. Though the writers of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message did not explicitly include the term “inerrant”, they did add a sentence declaring the Bible to be “totally true and trustworthy”, which effectively both affirmed inerrancy and accused those who disagreed of finding the Bible to be false. The last sentence of the statement on Scripture was changed to exclude any mention of needing to interpret the Bible: if the Scriptures are inerrantly dictated then in theory no one will need to interpret them. The sections following contain strengthened language surrounding God’s sovereignty, allowing for more Calvinist views. Interestingly, the section on humanity restored some of the language found in the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message, quoting the Genesis creation stories. In this and several other sections, the committee added language of racial equality, responding specifically to the racial reconciliation attempted by the Convention in the 1990s. The portion on the church restores some language from the 1925 confession on the church being

governed by God's law, emphasizing legalism a bit more than the previous confession. Emphasizing the new understanding of complementarianism, the committee removed language of church member's equality and limits the office of senior pastor to men. The section on the Sabbath was updated to reflect a more current understanding of what should and should not be allowed on a Sunday. The article on evangelism emphasizes verbal witness, and the portion on education restores the antiquated language of Christian exceptionalism found in the 1925 statement. The section on social order was drastically edited to include the issues of the evangelical culture wars. The article on peace and war restores the oddly omitted section on prayer for the reign of Christ.²⁴

Beyond the pleas for inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention the need for firmly establishing conservative positions in the emerging evangelical culture wars became a dominant issue. No section further illustrates this motive than the final article, a section titled "The Family". Initiating the changes to the Baptist Faith and Message for this generation, the section was adopted in its entirety as an addition to the 1963 confession in 1998. Though influenced by the Danvers statement²⁵, the section appears to, for the most part, be an original work of Southern Baptist theologians. Issues addressed for the first time as theological imperatives in this section include homosexuality, complementarianism, pro-life issues, and Christian parenting.

Though much of the same language is used between the three statements and the confession on which they were based, the editors of the three Baptist Faith and Message

²⁴ Adrian Rogers, "The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message", *The Baptist Faith and Message Online*. [cited 8 Mar. 2017]. Online: <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>.

²⁵ Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, "The Danvers Statement", *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood Online*. [cited 9 Mar. 2017]. Online: <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/>.

statements carefully chose their words to calm fears, occasionally welcome diversity, and most recently, promote an evolving conservative agenda for the Southern Baptists. Even if the phrasing is minutely different, these editors are informed, intentioned individuals, shaping the future of the convention, and Baptists around the world as they write.

III. Analyzing the Confessions of Faith and their Baptist Identity

Beyond the background of the three Baptist Faith and Message documents, denominational changes, and the differences between the confessions, one is still faced with the question of if these documents are indeed Baptist in their confession and if they are beneficial for the common use of the Southern Baptist Convention. As the largest protestant denomination in America has impacted the nation's religious practice, the cultural battles of the last four decades and the larger development of a broad evangelicalism has also effected Southern Baptists. After the changes to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, one must examine how "Baptist" the document remains.

Before examining the confessions, one must define what features a distinctively Baptist confession of faith would contain. From the first and second Baptist confessions ever written, we learn that any statement of faith should ideally define where the group stands in relation to other denominational groups. Baptist theologian Steven Harmon would argue that all Baptist confessions of faith should identify with the larger authority of historic Christianity by corresponding to Nicene Creed.²⁶ Because Baptist Americans have traditionally never recognized this need in the formation of their faith, this criterion will be considered but not counted against the Baptist Faith and Message. Baptist confessions will, by definition support the

²⁶ Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 83.

most basic Baptist theological stand points of believer's baptism by immersion, personal regeneration, and personal priesthood in an autonomous church. Perhaps the most interesting conversation surrounding these confessions though, is if they are utilized in a distinctly Baptist way; to further the freedom of the soul, the church, and the Spirit.

Shortly after his church formally broke relation to the Anabaptists and began practicing believer's baptism on their own, pastor John Smyth became convinced that they should have never separated from the Anabaptists and wrote the first Baptist confession of faith to try to convince the "water lenders" that his church should be admitted into their fold. The second Baptist confession of faith was a response by Smyth's associate Thomas Helwys in an attempt to demonstrate why Baptists were different enough from Anabaptists to remain separate.²⁷ Any acting confession should be able to define where a group stands in relation to other entities . Therefore, one must ask how the Baptist Faith and Message documents are relating to other denominational groups. Baptist historian H. Leon McBeth records that the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message found its roots in the pleas of fundamentalists to adopt one of the "more conservative confessions ever framed by Baptists in this country."²⁸ This certainly had its desired effect; sharing who the Southern Baptists were not, and who they were quickly becoming. The 1963 confession, in response removed Genesis creation language and overall seemed more "moderate" than the previous document, proving reactionary and necessary for the convention. For a short while, the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message crafted a place of retreat for moderate Baptists, until the dramatic conservative take over that began in 1979. As the culmination of this event, the 2000 confession acted as written proof of the denominational changes the convention

²⁷ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 67.

²⁸ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 576.

had undergone. The careful addition of substitutionary atonement and so-called biblical literalism firmly identified America's largest protestant denomination with a broader fundamentalist movement.

Baptist theologian Steven Harmon argues in his book *Towards Baptist Catholicity* that for Baptists to be credible among Christendom and remain orthodox moving forward, they should identify with the larger historical movement of the church by basing any confession on the works of the church fathers and the Nicene Creed.²⁹ Though all three of the Baptist Faith and Message documents share similar sentiments about God as stated in the Nicene Creed, they are not based on it or any works of the early Christians. Much of the concern prompting the adoption of the three Baptist Faith and Message confessions originated in accusations of a swayed orthodoxy, so it makes sense for the documents to find their origin in an older statement such as the 1833 New Hampshire Confession. Baptists had to this point never been a group known for an in depth study of patristics, so any identification with an older Christian group at all shows a sign of cooperation and progress. Perhaps appealing to the Great Tradition of the Church Fathers could be a constructive move for future Baptist confessions, but these do show some signs of fellowship with the larger Christian witness.

The most obvious requirement of a distinctively Baptist confession would be the proclamation of Baptist theology concerning the basic beliefs of the movement. When discussing baptism, all three Baptist Faith and Message documents share that baptism is “the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”; sharing the distinctive Baptist view of believer's baptism by immersion in a believer's church.³⁰ Beyond this most

²⁹ McBeth, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 83.

³⁰ E. Y. Mullins, “The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message”.

important distinctive of the Baptist faith, the documents also share traditional Baptist theological distinctives such as a symbolic, ordinance based view of baptism and communion, as well as the traditional high view of Scripture and suspicion of the words of humanity. The concept of church autonomy is present in all three confessions, though only stated explicitly in the latter two. The priesthood of individual believers finds its strongest support in the 1963 confession. If the only criterion to be considered in analyzing if these documents are Baptist is the presence of these distinctives, they would certainly prove themselves true.

Beyond the words of the confession and the theology they support, the true test of how Baptist a confession may be is how the group tends to use their statement of faith. As noted earlier, Southern Baptists until the 1920s understood confessions to be for the use of churches, local associations, and seminaries. E. Y. Mullins, the chairman of the committee assigned the responsibility of drafting the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message shared his concern about adopting the confession, and the preamble shares its purpose as being to “clarify the atmosphere and remove some causes of misunderstanding, friction, and apprehension” in the Convention.³¹ This is intentionally weak, apprehensive language so that the confession would not be used in a way that large Baptist denominations traditionally have never used them. The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message initially pleased the convention, but in just a few years conservative advocates had enacted a plan that eventually led to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, a document described in its preamble as “an instrument of doctrinal accountability”.³²

Though many current Southern Baptists would argue that strongly enforcing a confession of faith protects belief and coalesces the denomination around shared practice, a study of Baptist

³¹ E. Y. Mullins, “The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message”.

³² Adrian Rogers, “The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message”.

history reveals that to this point, large denominational bodies have not adhered to a firmly defined confession of faith to the exclusion of large amounts of people, churches, and employees. Many may argue that Caffyn controversies of the British General Baptists could have been solved by a simple, conservative statement of faith³³, or that Charles Spurgeon's death could have been avoided in the downgrade controversy if the Particular Baptists had simply adhered to an exclusionary, conservative confession.³⁴ For over 400 years, nationwide Baptist groups traditionally have not used their confessions to exclude others. In breaking this tradition, the Southern Baptists used their newest confession of faith to fire non-conforming missionaries, cause vicious takeovers of the seminaries, and exclude any dissenting Baptists from their midst.³⁵ God has preserved the Baptist faith through intense British persecution, the theological fears of modernism, and the dangers of landmarkism. Surely God could have preserved the Southern Baptists through the threat of 20th century fundamentalism, had the convention not looked toward their own understandings instead of trusting in God's provision.

Considering the identification to and from other denominations, relation to a larger Christian history, the presence of distinctive Baptist theology, and a hesitant and exclusionary use of the documents, one could consider the 1925 and 1963 Baptist Faith and Message confessions to be Baptist in nature. Their editors understood them to be tools of clarity and cohesion, not instruments of exclusion and division. Though the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 shares a distinctively conservative, Baptist view, it cannot be considered a Baptist confession because of its use as an almost divine document, suitable for breaking fellowship and ignoring

³³ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 152.

³⁴ McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 302.

³⁵ Weaver, *The Baptist River*, 65.

mission if not followed to the closest degree. Surely, the Baptist river is wide enough to include the most fundamentalist among us, but when any group, conservative or liberal feels they have their faith so perfectly right as to exclude other believers, they have lost the ability to truly form together as the Body of Christ, and can no longer rightly claim the cooperative term “Baptist”.

IV. A Personal Confession of Faith

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

-Hebrews 11:1

“Splendor and majesty are before God; strength and joy are in God’s place.”

-1 Chronicles 16:27

Faith in God is a progressive, radical, world-changing calling. Following the way of our Creator into the created world requires of us faith worth studying, evolving, believing, and proclaiming. This confession is an attempt to articulate that faith. Because our limited minds will never understand God, and our beliefs are not the subject of our worship, these articles are to be seen as a starting point for dialogue, not a point of division. With most Christians through most of Christian history, we affirm the Nicene Creed. *(These articles are presented in single space to clarify the organizational outline of the statement.)*

I. God

God is. God created all that was, all that is, and all that ever shall be in the visible and invisible world. God is revealed to us in three persons: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. All three members of the Godhead are of the same substance and are one God. *Genesis 1:26, 1 Chronicles 16:27, Isaiah 61:1, Matthew 28:19, Mark 1:10-11*

a. God the Creator

God is revealed to us in the Scriptures as a loving Father, Mother, Creator, King, Judge, Healer, Sustainer, and Sovereign over all things. God is Love. God is all knowing, all loving, all good, and eternal. *Genesis 1:1, Genesis 2:4, Psalm 145:8, Matthew 5:9-10, Ephesians 2:4*

b. God the Christ

God is incarnate on this earth as Jesus Christ. Fully God and Fully human, Jesus was born of a virgin as the savior of the world. Christ invites us to build the Kingdom of God, teaches us the best way to live, redeems us of sin, and defeated

all powers of hell, sin, and death in the resurrection. Jesus is co-eternal with God.
Isaiah 53:5, Jeremiah 23:5-6, Mark 15:39, John 1:1, Hebrews 1:3

c. God the Holy Spirit

God and Jesus sent us a helper and mediator in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit connects us to God, convicts us of sin, intercedes on our behalf, and gifts us with all that is necessary to build the Kingdom of God and encourage the Body of Christ.

Numbers 27:18, 1 Samuel 10:10, John 3:5, John 14:17, Acts 1:8

II. Creation

a. The Created World

In God's own way for God's own purposes, God created a beautifully intricate world, and a cosmos we can never fully comprehend. On our planet, God created time, life, water, air, weather, land, plants, and animals. God created this world and declared it "good". God is also the creator of the worlds we cannot see.

Psalms 19, Psalm 33:6, Jeremiah 32:17, Romans 8:19, Hebrews 3:4

b. Humanity

As the culmination of creation and the commissioned caretakers of the earth, God created humanity in the very image of the divine; higher than animals but lower than God. Humanity experienced the original blessing of God in creation, and each individual chose to live in a way outside of God's blessing. By our own action we hurt ourselves, others, and attempt to value our own opinions over the loving rebuke of our heavenly Parent. These actions are called sin.

Genesis 1:28, Genesis 3:11, Psalm 139:13-14, Mark 10:6, Ephesians 2:10

III. Grace

Grace, as understood in the context of the Christian faith, is the process by which God reconciles and redeems us into Holy relationship once more.

a. Regeneration

Regeneration is the process by which God creates in us a new life. This is the beginning of God's grace in us, begging us to be "born again", with Christ as our savior, the Holy Spirit as our Guide, and God as our loving Parent. This new life bears in us repentance.

Genesis 17:5, Genesis 35:10, John 3:3, Ephesians 2:5-6, 1 Peter 1:22-23

b. Justification

Justification is the process by which God, through the victory of Christ on the cross, acquits us of all sin and wrong. We are in relationship with God because of justification.

Genesis 15:6, Habakkuk 2:4, Luke 23:43, Romans 5:1, Galatians 3:24

c. Sanctification

Sanctification is the process by which God brings about in us practices of holiness and forms in us the character of Jesus Christ. While regeneration and justification are instant upon becoming a Christian, sanctification is a life-long process of growth.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8, Leviticus 20:7-8, John 15:6, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Colossians 3:16

d. Glorification

Glorification is the final stage of grace; the final destination of all Christians, the glory and perfection of God's eternity.

Leviticus 10:3, Exodus 34:35, Matthew 17:2, Colossians 3:4, 1 Peter 5:4

IV. Our Work

a. The Kingdom of God

Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God more than any other subject in his ministry. We understand the Kingdom of God to be two realities: the Kingdom of heaven and the Kingdom on earth. All believers are bound for an eventual home in the Kingdom of heaven upon their death, because of the victory of Christ on the cross. While still inhabiting our mortal bodies, Christ calls us to build the Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. This is the redemptive and grace filled work of both social justice and evangelism.

Psalms 103:19, Daniel 2:44, Matthew 16:19, John 5:24, Acts 28:31

i. Social Justice

As redeemed people of faith, and the recipients of a grace beyond measure, our call on this earth is to provide food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, comfort the sick, and visit those in prison. All believers are to do this work, and if a Christian leaves this world worse than they found it, one might question the fruit of their salvation.

Deuteronomy 15:7-8, Micah 6:8, Luke 4:18-19, 1 Corinthians 10:24, James 2:15-16

ii. Missions

Along with practical social justice, we are a people called by Christ to go into all nations and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has taught us. All Christians are required to do this in their daily lives, and support mission efforts. Evangelistic efforts should take special care to never impose non-biblical Western norms, the colonization of any of God's people, and should seek to find the value of all people and cultures.

1 Chronicles 16:24, Psalm 96:3, Mark 13:10, Acts 13:47, Romans 10:14

b. The Body of Christ

Christ instituted the Church as a called out body of regenerate believers for the worship of God, the practice of the ordinances, and the betterment of the world. The Church is illustrated in the Bible as the body of Christ, the spouse of Christ, the light of the world, and the salt of the earth.

Genesis 2:3, Exodus 20:8, Matthew 16:18, 1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 4:4

i. The Worship of God

One of the primary purposes of the Church is the worship of God. This is carried out in our daily lives, our fellowship, our worship services, our educational pursuits, our giving, the reading of Scriptures, our music, the arts, our work in the world, in our training and exhorting of one another to godliness.

Exodus 20:2, 1 Chronicles 16:23, John 4:24, Romans 12:1, Hebrews 10:25

ii. The Ordinances

Christ instituted two ordinances in His ministry: baptism and communion.

1. Baptism

Baptism is the immersion of believers in water as a symbol of their death with Christ and their resurrection to walk in the newness of life. It is carried out in the name of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, and serves as a powerful symbol of the work of redemption in their lives.

Leviticus 15:10, Ezekiel 16:9, Luke 3:21, Acts 22:16, Galatians 3:27

2. The Lord's Supper

Christ instituted a remembrance of Himself during His last meal on earth. Through bread and wine, we remember with the church the body and blood of Christ, shed for us on the cross. This is a solemn, powerful time for personal reflection, and worship with the gathered body of Christ. Because Christ served this meal to everyone present, including His betrayer, we should never limit anyone, even and especially non-Christians from dining at the table of grace with us.

Genesis 14:18, Exodus 16:4, Luke 21:19, John 6:35, Acts 2:46

iii. The Betterment of the World

Through social justice and missions, the Church must be in a daily pattern of making the world better.

V. The Scriptures

The 66 books of the Old and New Testament are a record of God's revelation to humanity. They are a treasure of God-breathed stories, law, genealogies, parables,

poetry, and letters profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. The Scriptures are only below God in authority for our lives, and the believer should submit themselves to the teaching of the Bible. Our best contextual and scriptural understandings of the grand narrative the Text should guide our lives. All Scripture should be interpreted through the lens of the Gospel and words of Jesus Christ in a faithful context.

Psalm 19:7-11, Psalm 33:4, Matthew 4:4, Romans 10:8, 2 Timothy 3:16

VI. Other Things

a. Religious Liberty

It is the duty of every Christian to ensure that every human being is free to worship in any way they choose, as long as those practices do not impede on anyone else. Christianity should never be favored by any government, and Christians should not purposely seek special exemptions and treatment from their civil authority. Because government is ordained by God, believers must submit cheerfully to every law that is not in opposition to the Way of Jesus Christ.

Leviticus 19:34, Psalm 46:10, Mark 12:17, Galatians 5:13, 1 Peter 2:16

b. Creation Care

In creation we were commissioned to be the caretakers of the whole earth. As part of that duty, we should work wherever possible to take care of the planet we were given. Climate change, the extinction of animals, and the depletion of our fresh water is the result of our sin, and we should be working to repent from and reverse these things.

Genesis 9:13, Psalm 135:7, Matthew 6:19, Colossians 1:20, 2 Corinthians 5:17

c. Human Equality

The church has often sinned in finding others to be less than human. Throughout history, we have sometimes treated diverse races in horrible, unspeakable ways. As the Church, we should repent of such things, working hard for racial reconciliation and fighting all outward and inward signs of racism. The church has also been a place where the value of women has not been fully realized as their voices have been silence and the ugly tradition of patriarchy has appeared. This is wrong, and part of the churches work should be repentance and the full empowering of the women in our midst. As we progress, we must constantly examine ourselves and our practices to find those whom we are oppressing and those whom we silence. This requires the hard work of listening to those we do not understand, and allowing the risen Christ to continue to speak to us in new ways. If we are using the Bible to oppress people we do not understand, we have lost sight of our faith.

Deuteronomy 10:17, Proverbs 22:2, Mark 12:31, Galatians 3:28, Hebrews 12:14

d. Cooperation

Each church of Jesus Christ, in our understanding, is a fully autonomous, independent Body filled with of fully autonomous, independent priests choosing

to worship, serve, and grow together. Churches may choose to work together for common fellowship, worship, social justice, advocacy, missions, and education. The bodies churches may form with one another must always submit to the autonomous churches that formed them; excluding churches from this body for any non-Gospel related issue cannot and should not be done.

Psalm 133:1, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Mark 6:7, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Peter 3:8

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