

Comparing the 1963 and the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message Statements:

The early history of those Baptists in the United States who eventually called themselves Southern Baptists was marked by an aversion to creeds. For eighty years—from 1845 to 1925—Southern Baptists adopted no official statement of common doctrinal belief.

Responding to concerns over modernism which grew in part out of early twentieth-century controversies surrounding evolutionary theory, the SBC appointed a committee chaired by E. Y. Mullins to draft a statement of faith. Depending heavily on the New Hampshire Confession of 1833, the committee crafted the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*.

Thirty-eight years later, again responding to concerns over modernism, the 1963 SBC appointed a committee chaired by Herschel Hobbs to draft a revised statement of faith. Both the 1925 and 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statements clearly interpreted themselves as (1) helpful doctrinal summaries for the Baptist community and (2) concise witness statements to the world. Both statements painstakingly disavowed creedal status, claiming no authority over individual believers or churches.

When messengers to the SBC meeting in June, 2000, adopted yet another revised *Baptist Faith and Message*, the precedent of noncreedal self-interpretation changed dramatically. For the first time the Baptist Faith and Message held itself out to be an “*instrument of doctrinal accountability*.” The creedal nature and intent of this change is manifest in recent events. Since its adoption, many staff members of Southern Baptist institutions have been required either to sign/affirm the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* or to forfeit their positions.

The ascension of the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* to creedal status mirrors another problematic change—a de-emphasis on the historic Baptist doctrine of soul competency. The 1963 BFM preamble makes the claim, “*Baptists emphasize the soul’s competency before God, freedom in religion, and the priesthood of the believer.*” The 2000 preamble states, “*We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers, affirming together both our liberty in Christ and our accountability to each other under the Word of God.*”

While these two sentences appear to be similar, they are in fact quite different. The phrase “*accountability to each other under the word of God,*” coupled with the new-found status of the 2000 BFM as an “*instrument of doctrinal accountability,*” effectively trumps the historic Baptist emphasis on soul competency.

Accountability to other believers is compatible with soul competency so long as accountability is voluntary and informal. We test our beliefs and interpretations against those of other Christians in the context of the Spirit’s guidance. When accountability assumes the form of a human tribunal mediated through a creed, soul competency is effectively emptied of its power and historic meaning, i.e., the individual believer’s right and responsibility to interpret Scripture and practice faith before God.

Commenting on the critical importance of the doctrine of soul competency in the 1963 BFM preamble, Herschel Hobbs observed that if this doctrine were “*denied or ignored, then the statement [i.e., the 1963 BFM] becomes a creed.*”¹ Dr. Hobbs’ warning has become prophecy. The 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* has been used to disemploy staff

members from their positions in Baptist institutions and to prequalify potential members of SBC boards and committees. In other words, the 2000 BFM has become exactly what the 1925 and 1963 versions insisted that the *Baptist Faith and Message* should never become in Baptist life—an authoritarian creed.

The other major change is signaled by the deletion of the sentence in the 1963 preamble, “*The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.*” This critical deletion and other changes which de-emphasize the role of Jesus are just as devastating as the moves toward creedalism.