

Baptist Confessions of Faith by Carol Crawford Holcomb

When Baptists talk about confessions of faith, someone usually asks what the difference is between a confession and a creed. It is true that confessions and creeds could both be described as concise statements of belief, but the difference hinges upon how they are used.

Baptists originated in 17th-century England when state churches crafted creeds that carried the force of law. These churches imposed penalties upon those such as Baptists who dissented from accepted doctrine or practice. Baptist confessions carried no punitive measures, but rather affirmed what a group of Baptists believed in a specific time and place. Creeds connote coercion while confessions suggest voluntarism.

The story of Baptist confessions begins with two Englishmen, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, who founded the first Baptist church in 1609. Smyth wrote a short statement of faith in 1609 to explain his views to the Dutch Mennonites. His confession countered the prevailing Calvinism of the day by affirming free will and denying the existence of original sin. However, historians consider Helwys' **Declaration of Faith** written in 1611 to be the first Baptist confession of faith. Because Smyth and Helwys held that Christ died for all people (general atonement), this original group of English Baptists became known as General Baptists.

The earliest Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist churches emerged during the tumultuous years leading up to the English Civil War. The attitude toward Baptists in the 1630s and 1640s was decidedly negative. Baptists were accused of publishing "seditious pamphlets," of conducting "night meetings of naked men and women," and of promoting "licentious spiritual marriages." English authorities disrupted Baptist meetings, assaulted church members, and often placed them in jail.

Because of these accusations and persecutions, seven Particular Baptist churches issued the **First London Confession in 1644** to set the record straight concerning their beliefs and practices. The document reflects the Reformed emphases of original sin, particular election, limited atonement, and lack of free will. Thus, the thorough Calvinism of the First London Confession demonstrated that Particular Baptists were in step with the larger Puritan movement and commended them as orthodox to their contemporaries in England.

Under King Charles II all those who dissented from the Anglican pattern experienced persecution. Particular Baptists again felt pressure to state their agreement with their fellow dissenters—Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The framers of the **Second London Confession of 1677** patterned their document on the Westminster Confession and retained the wording of the articles that agreed with their faith. Particular Baptists demonstrated their agreement with the Reformed tradition to minimize persecution.

The first Baptist association in America was organized in Philadelphia in 1707. Elias Keach and his father, Benjamin Keach, revised the Second London Confession to form the **Philadelphia Confession of Faith**, which was adopted by the association in 1742. In addition to aiding in apologetics and education, this confession served as a basis of union for merging groups. This was the primary

confession for Calvinistic Baptists until the Second Great Awakening.

About the time Philadelphia Baptists were adopting their confession, the revivals of the First Great Awakening produced a new strain of Baptists—largely converts from Congregationalist churches. These new “Separate Baptists” rejected confessions of faith in the Colonial Era because they had experienced them as tools of coercion within Congregationalism. This Separate Baptist tradition profoundly influenced Baptists in the South.

In response to the doctrinal diversity in their state, New Hampshire Baptists adopted a softened form of Calvinism in their **New Hampshire Confession** of 1833. The doctrines of free will and divine election were equally acknowledged along with perseverance of the saints and the judgment of the wicked.

In the 20th century when Southern Baptists met to draft a confession in response to the bitter struggles over fundamentalism and evolution, they turned to the New Hampshire confession as a guide. The result was the **Baptist Faith and Message of 1925**. The SBC adopted this confession along with a preface that contained five articles enumerating the limits of confessions of faith, stating strongly that the “sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists” is the Bible. “Confessions are guides,” continued article 4, “having no authority over conscience.”

Unfortunately, the Baptist Faith and Message of 1925 failed to eliminate the conflicts within Baptist life. The churches greeted the document with a “tremendous outburst of silence.” When tensions resurfaced in the 1960s over the authority of the Bible, the convention called a committee to revisit the confession. The committee was comprised of the presidents of the various state conventions and chaired by the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Herschel Hobbs. The SBC adopted the committee’s work as the **Baptist Faith and Message of 1963**.

The revision preserved the flavor of the 1925 confession while nuancing the traditional Calvinism and expanding the doctrine of God. The confession also included two additional statements on the scriptures: “the Holy Bible is the record of God’s revelation of himself to man,” and “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.”

The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message remained the doctrinal expression of the SBC until 1998 when the new fundamentalist leadership of the SBC felt it necessary to revise the document to better reflect their beliefs. The convention approved a full revision in 2000. Among other changes this revision deleted the above additions on the scriptures—effectively removing the Christological criterion for interpreting the Bible.

The most glaring additions were social and ethical articles—including statements defining marriage and family, requiring wives to “graciously submit” to their husbands, and excluding women from pastoral ministry. Upon its completion, the SBC leadership used the confession as an instrument of conformity, compelling denominational employees to sign the document as evidence of their orthodoxy. Ultimately, the convention extended the policy to include missionaries, many of whom resigned from their ministries rather than sign the new confession.

Baptist churches and individuals have drafted confessions of faith since 1609 for a variety of reasons. Individuals and associations adopted confessions for polemical and educational reasons. In times of

persecution, confessions functioned as apologies, answering false accusations and offering testimony of the Baptist faith to all who could be persuaded. The Baptist identity was forged in the fires of persecution brought about by their refusal to conform to the creed of a state church. This historical experience shaped their views of religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and confessions of faith. The theology expressed in these confessions is quite diverse, and there have been instances in which Baptists have used their confessions as creeds. Yet, the prevailing Baptist approach has been that confessions are merely guides and that the sole written authority for Baptist faith and practice is the Bible.

Carol Crawford Holcomb, assistant professor of religion at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas, also serves as vice president of the Baptist History and Heritage Society.