

Baptists, the Bible and Confessions: The need for statements of faith

by

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Baptists have adopted creeds throughout their history. They probably have adopted creeds more than any other denomination. Baptist churches by the tens of thousands adopted a confession of faith when they constituted as a church. Some thousands of Baptist associations have similarly adopted their own confessions.

When critics of creeds raised their objections, Baptist leaders in earlier times answered that Baptists generally adopted creeds in their churches and associations because they were necessary to carrying out the church's mission. John Taylor, the great Separate Baptist preacher of the Kentucky frontier, said that "in every church in its constitution" the members should agree upon some creed. He estimated that nine out of ten of the Baptist churches in Virginia and Kentucky had adopted "what may properly be called a creed." Thomas Meredith, longtime editor of North Carolina's *Biblical Recorder*, believed that "the articles of faith form an indispensable element of the constitution" of a church. He knew of no church or association that "did not have its summary of faith, as an essential part of its constitution." Joseph S. Baker, who was a missionary preacher in Virginia and who edited several Baptist papers in his long career, noted that the majority of Southern Baptists rejected anti-creedal arguments and "every association with which we are acquainted" had a confession of faith.

The Southern Baptist Convention's seminaries each adopted a confession upon its establishment. The mission boards, state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention however did not adopt confessions until the twentieth century, when the spread of modernism among Southern Baptist missionaries, teachers and preachers prompted these institutions to take additional measures to prevent modernists from gaining appointment. One of the first conventions to adopt a confession was the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which in 1913 adopted a report containing an extensive confession of faith. The Southern Baptist Convention followed suit in 1914 when it adopted the report of the Efficiency Commission, which consisted in large part of a confession of faith composed by E. Y. Mullins. Both

conventions adopted these confessions to justify their contention that denominational unity derived from agreement on doctrine.

Such progressive leaders as R. H. Pitt, editor of Virginia's *Religious Herald*, objected strenuously to the creed-making of these two conventions. A few Baptist leaders in the past had also protested against the Baptist practice of adopting confessions of faith. John Leland, the famous evangelist of Revolution-era Virginia, spoke harshly of confessions. William B. Johnson, first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, opposed many of the traditional practices of Baptist churches, including the use of confessions of faith. The twentieth-century American commitment to a robust individualism gave Pitt and other anticreedalists some new advantages, but just as in generations past, the majority of Southern Baptists rejected anti-creedal arguments. The Southern Baptist Convention adopted a new version of the New Hampshire Confession, the *Baptist Faith and Message*, in 1925 and revised it in 1963, 1998 and 2000.

Confessions are legitimate

The Convention was justified, for creeds are legitimate. Creeds do not displace the Bible's authority, they are merely summaries of what the Bible teaches. Sermons do not have to be inspired or inerrant to be useful, and neither do creeds. Our state governments publish one-volume "codes" or summaries of the laws of the state, organized by topic. In many states the "code" is not law and has no legal authority, yet it is critical to the efficient functioning of the law.

Everyone has a creed - written or unwritten. One's creed is what one believes that the Bible teaches. The only question is whether it is a good creed or a bad one. It is a good one to the extent that it agrees with Scripture. A creed has authority only to the extent that it is true, which is merely to say that Scripture is our authority. Good creeds effectively summarize Scripture truth. If it is good to know Scripture truth and to speak it from the pulpit and in the Sunday school classroom, then there can be no harm in writing it down. Creeds that do harm are those that include error.

Those who refuse to commit their beliefs to writing can not be trusted as sound teachers. The polity of our churches and conventions ensures that Baptists jointly elect their teachers. They have a right to know what their teachers believe, for they will teach in accordance with their beliefs. Baptists

have a duty to appoint those only who will teach in accordance with Scripture truth.

To require assent to sound doctrine as expressed in a creed as a condition of service as a pastor, missionary or seminary professor imposes no hardship on any candidate. Stewards of every human agency have a duty to examine a candidate's qualifications for service. One essential qualification of those who teach the Word and preach the gospel is soundness of faith. "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9).

To require orthodoxy as a condition of denominational service limits no one's freedom. The doctrine of religious freedom derives directly from the spiritual and personal nature of saving faith. This is a freedom that we have in the state - the state has no right to impose, establish, or restrict religion. As a society God bids us to uphold the freedom of each one to worship according to conscience, not because all worship is pure and good in God's sight, but because the worship that pleases God comes from personal conviction alone. It must be with a sincere heart.

All persons are free in our society to believe and practice religion as they see fit. But churches and their agencies are likewise free to require agreement in doctrine and practice as a condition of service. To require churches to hire persons who disagree with their fundamental beliefs is same as asking them to dissolve their constitutions and be absorbed into civil society. Churches are constituted upon scriptural faith and practice. If they are not free to make agreement with their faith and practice a condition of service, they commit ecclesiastical suicide. Bible-believing Baptists have made this argument repeatedly against libertarian and anti-creedal agitators.

Those who appeal to religious freedom and soul liberty to prohibit adopting creeds as conditions of service in fact reduce the churches and their conventions to bondage, a tyranny of the individual. They argue that Baptist institutions must welcome as members, officers and even teachers, persons whose views are hostile to their very being. Churches and conventions however are no less free than individuals. If they decide that they will have no fellowship with certain beliefs, then they are free to do so. If they require agreement with sound doctrine as a condition of service, they are free to do

so.

Those who are excluded from service because of their refusal to subscribe to a summary of Scripture truth retain their freedom also. The churches and conventions do not seek to impose their beliefs on them. They do not seek to coerce them or injure them in their person, property or free movement. Persons ought to be free in human society to believe error; the churches are free to refuse to elect such persons to teach and preach the gospel.

Confessions are necessary

Creeds are not only legitimate, however, they are necessary to the unity, efficiency, cooperation and orthodoxy of the denomination. Creeds express and promote unity of faith and practice. We do not seek uniformity in all things, only agreement in those matters of doctrine and polity that our churches believe are essential to the gospel and to the integrity of the churches of Jesus Christ.

Creeds promote the efficiency and progress of the denomination by promoting unity. Unity of faith and practice is the only solid basis for cooperation. Christ has given the churches a mission to proclaim good news - news that includes such doctrines as the nature of God, the condition of humanity, God's means of rescuing sinners through the person and work of his Son, and the like. If we are to cooperate in our common mission, we must agree in the essential aspects of our mission and message. It is in the nature of things. "Do two walk together unless they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3).

Christ also has commanded the churches to oppose false doctrine. The New Testament epistles recall this duty in many places. In Revelation Christ places the responsibility for maintaining pure doctrine squarely on congregations. He rebuked the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira for tolerating false teachers. He commended the church at Ephesus for disfellowshipping false teachers: "I know that you can not tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (Revelation 2:2).

The churches cannot oppose false doctrine unless they have a clear understanding of Scripture truth. To commit the church's beliefs to writing aids clarity and understanding. Creeds promote unity and strength of conviction as believers test them before the bar of scripture.

Adopting scriptural creeds will not guarantee our faithfulness to Christ. We must be convinced personally of Scripture truth from careful study of the Bible and have a heart to love and obey Christ. Creeds are not a substitute for conviction—but they are remarkably helpful when they arise from conviction. Anticreedalists rightly claim that they too have firm convictions about doctrine. But to say that it is right to believe a doctrine but wrong to write it down is not even respectable nonsense.

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