

# CONFESSING THE FAITH IN 1644 AND 1689

by

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## Introduction

Try to imagine a situation like this: You live in a large city, the capital of your country. You are a member of one of a handful of churches, just beginning to grow and be noticed in the city. But it is illegal for you to meet with your brothers and sisters. For as long as anyone living can remember, there has been only one legal religion, and every attempt to disagree with that one religion has met with opposition and persecution.

As your churches grow, rumors begin to spread. A hundred years before, some people with beliefs that were marginally similar to your own had been involved in a terrible rebellion in another country relatively close by, and rumors were beginning to spread that your churches would do the same kinds of things. What would you do?

That is something of the situation facing the members of seven Calvinistic Baptist churches in London in 1644. In the space of a few short years, their numbers had grown, and people were beginning to take notice of their presence in London. But it was often not a friendly notice. In 1642, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *A Warning for England, especially for London; in the famous History of the frantick Anabaptists, their wild Preachings and Practices in Germany* was published. It is an amazing piece of work. The author, in 9 double sized pages, described the sad events of Munster, Germany. Rebellion, sedition, theft, murder are all charged to the "anabaptists." Throughout, there is no mention of anything but these events from another time and place — until the very last sentence of the pamphlet which stated "So, let all the factious and seditious enemies of the church and state perish; but, upon the head of king Charles, let the crown flourish! Amen." The warning was in one sense subtle, but in another brilliantly powerful: beware! What was done in Germany by the anabaptists may well happen again in London, if these people are allowed to spread their doctrines.

So what did the Baptists do? The situation was potentially explosive. They knew that it was essential to demonstrate that they were not radicals, subversively undermining the fabric of society. To the contrary, they were

law-abiding citizens, who were being misrepresented and misunderstood by many around them. They wanted and needed to demonstrate that they were quite orthodox in their theological beliefs, and that they had no agenda beyond a faithful and conscientious commitment to God and His Word.

As the Baptists faced these circumstances, they decided that they needed to take action to relieve the fears and misinformation spreading. God had blessed their efforts thus far, and they did not want to see those efforts frustrated by the rumor and innuendo of their enemies. So they adopted a practice frequently used by others in the last 150 years — they issued a confession of faith so that anyone interested in them might be able to obtain an accurate understanding of their beliefs and practices.

One of the primary purposes in publishing their Confession of Faith in 1644 was to disavow any ties with the Continental Anabaptists. This is evident by a glance at the title page which says, "*The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are commonly (though falsly [sic]) called Anabaptists.*"<sup>[1]</sup> The epistle at the beginning of the Confession identifies the problem:

Wee question not but that it will seeme strange to many men, that such as wee are frequently termed to be, lying under that calumny and black brand of Heretickes and sowers of division as wee doo, should presume to appear publickly as now wee have done: . . . it is no sad thing to any observing man, what sad charges are laid, not only by the world, that know not God, but also by those that thinke themselves much wronged, if they be not looked upon as the chiefe Worthies of the Church of God, and Watchmen of the Citie: . . . charging us with holding Free-will, Falling away from grace, denying Originall sinne, disclaiming of Magistracy, denying to assist them either in persons or purse in any of their lawfull Commands, doing acts unseemly in the dispensing the Ordinance of Baptism, not to be named among Christians.<sup>[2]</sup>

It is evident that in this list of charges there are several that were relevant, either in reality or fancy, to the Anabaptists of the Continent. All that an opponent of the Baptists had to do was say the name "Münster," and all of the supposed horrors of that sad city would be imputed to their English "counterparts."<sup>[3]</sup> Evidently, the Particular Baptists felt the pressure of these charges, and desired to remove as many of them as possible. They therefore openly asserted that the name "Anabaptist" was falsely given, and did not

reflect their own convictions.

### **The First London Confession of 1644**

The Baptists were concerned to demonstrate to all that their doctrinal convictions had been, from the very start, orthodox and to a large degree identical with the convictions of the Puritans around them. In order to do this, they looked for the best available means by which to prove that their views were indeed closely in line with the convictions of the other churches around them. They did this by issuing a Confession of faith. This *First London Confession of 1644*, published prior to the Westminster Confession of Faith, was heavily dependent on older, well-known documents. It was their purpose to prove that they did not hold wild new ideas, but rather shared the same basic theological perspectives of the best churches and ministers around them. Probably the best and most detailed Confession available to them was the True Confession of 1596, a document that had been issued by men of stature like the famous commentator on the books of Moses, Henry Ainsworth. About 50% of their Confession was taken directly from this older document. In addition, they relied very heavily on a book called *The Marrow of Theology*, written by a very famous and important puritan, William Ames. They brought together this material from the sources available to them, for one specific purpose: to prove that they had a great deal in common with the churches and ministers around them. Yes they had some differences, but they were only minor and not central. They were not wild-eyed fanatics intent on overthrowing society as it was known. To the contrary, they were reformed Christians, seeking to advance the principles on which the reformation had been built to their logical conclusion.

This is how we must understand the appearance of the First London Confession in 1644. It was an apologetic tool to say "Hey, we really are like you in almost every way. We are not like the anabaptists of Munster. We are like you. Give us a break. Accept us for what we are. Don't reject us just because someone else, at another time and in another place, did some really bad things. We repudiate them. We are not anabaptists. We are reformed Christians."

This action had two important facets.

*First*, by publication they desired to make their views, held commonly and unanimously, known to a wide audience of readers.

**Secondly**, by subscribing their names as representatives of the churches, they were publicly asserting that these doctrines were a true representation of the theological views held among them.

Much was at stake, especially their on-going freedom in the face of rising Presbyterian anti-toleration political power. Remember Milton's famous words: "New Presbyter is but old priest writ large." Few of the Presbyterians were for religious toleration, desiring to replace the Episcopalian state church with a Presbyterian state church. Subscription was not a nicety, it was a sober, serious and public proclamation that they were orthodox Christians.

Did it work? Well, apparently it did, for we find that their opponents took notice of them. There were several men who seem to have been self-appointed "heresy-hunters," who wrote about the Confession as it was published by the Baptists. The first we should mention was a man named Thomas Edwards. In 1646, he published in three separate parts, a work entitled *Gangraena, or A Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies and pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time, vented and acted in England in these last four years*. On page 106 of the first part of *Gangraena*, Edwards mentions the 1644 Confession, but does not find any fault with it, admitting that its statements are like those of "the Reformed Churches" but calling it instead "fraud and fallaciousness" intended to conceal whatever he thought was the real truth of the Baptist doctrines. At least the Confession was orthodox. When Stephen Marshall, a member of the Westminster Assembly, attacked the Baptists in 1645, John Tombes replied to him by pointing to this Confession as a means of establishing the orthodoxy of the Particular Baptists.<sup>[4]</sup>

Even more interesting are the comments of Daniel Featley. Dr. Featley was briefly a member of the Westminster Assembly and a self-appointed heresy-hunter. He said this of the 1644 Confession:

if we give credit to this Confession and the Preface thereof, those who among us are branded with that title [i.e. Anabaptist], are neither Hereticks, nor Schismatics, but tender hearted Christians: upon whom, through false suggestions, the hand of authority fell heavy, whilst the Hierarchy stood: for, they neither teach free-will; nor falling away from grace with the *Arminians*, nor deny originall sinne with the *Pelagians*, nor disclaim Magistracy with the *Jesuites*, nor maintain plurality of

Wives with the *Poloygamists*, nor community of goods with the *Apostolici*, nor going naked with the *Adamites*, much less aver the mortality of the soul with the *Epicures* and *Psychophannichists*: and to this purpose they have published this confession of Faith, subscribed by sixteen persons, in the name of seven Churches in *London*.<sup>[5]</sup>

Featley's words are very interesting. He understood exactly what the Baptists intended in the publication of their Confession: an honest demonstration of what they believed. Of course Featley didn't believe them, saying, "they cover a little rats-bane in a great quantity of sugar, that it may not be discerned: for, among the fifty three Articles of their Confession, there are not above six but may passe with a fair construction: and in those six, none of the foulest and most odious positions, wherewith that Sect is aspersed, are expressed." But the point is important. Taken at face value, one of the most fervent heresy-hunters acknowledged that their words were orthodox. Featley made six specific criticisms of the Confession:

1. That the Baptists in article 31 seem to imply that the right to earthly possessions is founded in grace, not nature;
2. That article 38 speaks against the support of ministers by the state;
3. - 5. All deal with believer's baptism;
6. That the Baptists allowed non-ordained men to preach.

These are all of Featley's criticisms of the Confession. But notice what the Baptists did in response to Featley: they revised their Confession in 1646. In article 31, they added a statement to say that "outward and temporal things are lawfully enjoyed by a civil right by them who have no faith." In article 38, they dropped the language against state support of ministers. They even slightly altered their language on baptism to head off some of his carping. The second edition of the Confession, in fact the one that is more commonly available to us today, is a revised version in reply to the strictures of Daniel Featley. The Baptists toned down or altered some of their language so that it would be more acceptable to the paedobaptists around them. Now I don't think that they were compromising. They were simply carrying out their original purpose. They wanted these men to acknowledge their orthodoxy, and understood that the only way to do this successfully was to reconsider some of their expressions. We must always remember this. The First London Confession of 1644 was an attempt to remove the threat of persecution and

gain theological acceptance from paedobaptists, and the second edition of 1646 was even more explicitly so. It served its purpose well, even if some thought that it was a smoke screen for more nefarious doctrines. It placed the Baptists within the mainstream of reformed theology in mid 17th century England.

Who edited the 1644 Confession? We really don't know for sure. Some have suggested John Spilsbury, one of the earliest London pastors, and this is probably as good a candidate as any. A. C. Underwood cites an anonymous writer who called him the "great Patriarch of the Anabaptist Confession," and R. L. Greaves says that "he was a signatory and probably the principal author of the Particular Baptist confession."<sup>[6]</sup> W. L. Lumpkin's suggestion that "he must have played a prominent part in its preparation" is probably correct. He then suggests that "if the Confession was the product of joint authorship, [he] probably had the assistance of William Kiffin and Samuel Richardson."<sup>[7]</sup> Given the importance of these men, the proposed scenario is highly possible.

As we have noted, the 1st LCF was revised in reply to Daniel Featley in 1646, and then again in 1651. It served for many years as the basis for orthodoxy and fellowship among the Calvinistic Baptists. But by the middle 1670s, the churches would find it necessary to offer another confession to the world. Several reasons might be mentioned. First, the Baptists themselves indicate that copies of the 1644 Confession were scarce and hard to obtain. It might have been possible to reprint copies of the first confession, but doing so would not have accomplished their purpose. By the mid 1670s, the 1596 *True Confession* had been eclipsed by the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration, and to issue a document based on it would have seemed anachronistic. In addition, it is clear that the first Confession does not deal with every area that could be mentioned in a doctrinal statement. By the 1670s, other issues needed to be stated. For example, it was important to address the Sabbath, because there was a small but growing movement advocating the observance of the 7th day as the Sabbath. But perhaps most importantly, a sad situation involving a man of prominence pressed upon the churches. Thomas Collier, an evangelist who had been sent out by William Kiffin's church in the 1640s, had adopted and was promoting a strange mixture of heresies, and the men in London knew that decisive steps needed to be taken to cut off Collier's false teachings. Michael Haykin speaks of Collier's defection as "perhaps the most pressing reason for a new

confession."<sup>[8]</sup> So, a new Confession was edited and circulated among the churches for approval.

### **The Second London Confession**

The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1677/89, along with its predecessor of 1644/46, are perhaps the two most influential Baptist Confessions in existence. In many ways, the more recent Confession eclipses the earlier in importance, for by 1689 the First London Confession had become scarce, so much so that one of the key subscribers to the Second Confession stated that he had not previously seen the earlier document. It was the latter document which quickly became the standard of Calvinistic Baptist orthodoxy in England, North America, and today, in many parts of the world.

This Confession, influential as it is, may perhaps best be understood against its historical and theological backgrounds. It did not appear out of the blue, the product of a sudden burst of theological insight on the part of an author or authors, but in the tradition of good Confession making, it is largely dependent on the statements of earlier Reformed Confessions. A quick glance will demonstrate that it is based, to a large degree, on that most Puritan of documents, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647. A closer inspection will reveal that it is even more intimately related to the revision of the Westminster Confession made by John Owen and others in 1658, popularly known as the Savoy Declaration and Platform of Polity. In almost every case the editors of the Baptist Confession follow the revisions of the Savoy editors when they differ from the Westminster document. In addition, the Baptists make occasional use of phraseology from the First London Confession. When all of this material is accounted for, there is very little justify that is new and original to the 1677/89 Confession.

This heavy dependence on previous sources was very much part of the purpose of the composition of the Confession. In the epistle "To the Judicious and Impartial Reader" attached to the first edition of the Confession, the editors state:

And forasmuch as our method, and manner of expressing our sentiments, in this, doth vary from the former [i.e. the First London Confession] (although the substance of the matter is the same) we shall freely impart to you the reason and occasion thereof. One thing that greatly prevailed with us to undertake this work, was (not only to give a

full account of ourselves, to those Christians that differ from us about the subject of Baptism, but also) the profit that might from thence arise, unto those that have any account of our labors, in their instruction, and establishment in the great truths of the Gospel; in the clear understanding, and steady belief of which, our comfortable walking with God, and fruitfulness before him, in all our ways, is most neerly concerned; and therefore we did conclude it necessary to expresse our selves the more fully, and distinctly; and also to fix on such a method as might be most comprehensive of those things which we designed to explain our sense, and belief of; and finding no defect, in this regard, in that fixed on by the assembly [i.e. the Westminster Assembly], and after them by those of the Congregational way [i.e. the Savoy Synod], we did readily conclude it best to retain the same *order* in our present confession: and also, when we observed that those last mentioned, did in their confession (for reasons which seemed of weight both to themselves and others) choose not only to express their mind in words concurrent with the former in sense, concerning all those articles wherein they were agreed, but also for the most part without any variation of the terms we did in like manner conclude it best to follow their example in making use of the very same words with them both, in these articles (which are very many) wherein our faith and doctrine is the same with theirs, and this we did, the more abundantly, to manifest our consent with both, in all fundamental articles of the Christian Religion, as also with many others, whose orthodox confessions have been published to the world; on the behalf of the Protestants in divers Nations and Cities: and also to convince all, that we have no itch to clogge Religion with new words, but do readily acquiesce in that form of sound words, which hath been, in consent with the holy Scriptures, used by others before us, hereby declaring before God, Angels, & Men. our hearty agreement with them, in that wholesome Protestant Doctrine, which with so clear evidence of Scriptures they have asserted: some things indeed, are in some places added, some terms omitted, and some few changed, but these alterations are of that nature, as that we need not doubt, any charge or suspition of unsoundness in the faith, from any of our brethren upon account of them.

These words are of real importance, and need to be considered very carefully.



In both of their general Confessions, the Baptists purposely used existing documents in order to demonstrate their agreement with much of current theological thinking. In the quote above, they argue that the doctrines expressed in both Baptist Confessions are the same, but they have chosen to base the newer Confession upon the more recent and widely available documents of Westminster and Savoy. In doing this, they were declaring with some vigor their own desire to be placed in the broad stream of English Reformed Confessional Christianity.

When the Confessions depart from either of these documents, we should take note. It is at these points that the Baptists express their distinctive contributions to Christian Theology. Where are these things most evident, in both Confessions? Clearly when it comes to the Doctrine of the Church. While they could concur with much that was believed by the paedobaptists, the distinctive aspects of their belief are to be found in the statements on the church. Here we find the difference. Both of these documents are Baptist documents. Ecclesiology was the driving force behind the Baptist movement, and is the head of theology that gives these two confessions their distinct emphases, different from either the *True Confession* or the *Savoy Declaration*.

### **The Origins of the Second London Confession of Faith**

Based on the available information, it is impossible to determine precisely the origins of the Second London Confession. There are, however, some indications which help us to narrow the field.

The first known reference to the Confession is found in the manuscript Church book of the Petty France Church in London. On 26 August, 1677, this note was entered "It was agreed that a Confession of faith, wth the Appendix thereto having bene read & considered by the Bre: should be published." Joseph Ivimey, the English Baptist historian of the early Nineteenth Century took this to imply that the Confession originated in the Petty France Church, and this is probably an accurate supposition.

This church was one of the original seven London churches, having benefited from the ministry of Edward Harrison for many years. In 1675, two men of immense importance for Particular Baptist history, Nehemiah Coxe and William Collins, were ordained as co-pastors on the same day.

Nehemiah Coxe was the son of the early Particular Baptist leader Benjamin

Coxe. He was a qualified physician, skilled in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and a discerning theologian. When the West Country evangelist Thomas Collier began to deviate from the Calvinistic Orthodoxy of the London Churches, the elders in London asked Coxe to reply in print to Collier's views. He did this in his 1677 work *Vindiciae Veritatis, or a Confutation of the Heresies and Gross Errours Asserted by Thomas Collier*. The book is a very powerful expression of Reformed doctrine. In 1681, during a period of persecution, Coxe published *A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of an Elder and Deacons in a Baptized Congregation in London*. This is a helpful summary of the roles and responsibilities of elders and deacons. Also in 1681, Coxe published *A Discourse of the Covenants that God made with Men before the Law*. Coxe's contemporary C.M. du Veil said in his 1685 Commentary on Acts spoke of him as, "that great divine, eminent for all manner of learning." It is clear that Nehemiah Coxe was held in high regard by his brethren, and would thus have been well equipped to serve as an editor of the Confession of Faith.

Coxe's co-elder William Collins received a thorough education, graduating B.D. and touring Europe prior to his call to serve at Petty France. The esteem in which he was held by his brethren may be noted in the fact that he was requested by the General Assembly to draw up a Catechism, and on the strength of this Joseph Ivimey asserts "It is probable that the Baptist Catechism was compiled by Mr. Collins, though it has by some means or other been called Keach's Catechism." [2:397]

Collins, according to comments made in a funeral sermon by John Piggott, was a studious elder and a good pastor, noted for his peaceable spirit. "The Subjects he ordinarily insisted on in the Course of his Ministry, were the great and important Truths of the Gospel, which he handled with great Judgment and Clearness. How would he open the Miseries of the Fall! And in how moving a manner would he discourse of the Excellency of Christ, and the Virtues of his Blood, and his willingness to save poor awaken'd burdned [sic.] Sinners! . . . His sermons were useful under the Influence of Divine Grace, to convert and edify, to enlighten and establish, being drawn from the Fountain of Truth, the Sacred Scriptures, with which he constantly convers'd in their Original Languages, having read the best Criticks, Antient and Modern; so that Men of the greatest Penetration might learn from his Pulpit-Discourses, as well as those of the meanest Capacity." Such a testimony of

his character and abilities well suits one thought to be co-editor of the Confession of Faith.

Though it cannot be stated with certainty, much circumstantial evidence points to Coxe and Collins as the originators of the Confession. They were both qualified and respected men, and the first mention of the document is found in their church book, approving publication. Each one of them was requested to take the lead in theological writing, a fact that would be expected of such men. Until other evidence is found, this seems to be the most likely scenario for the origin of the Confession.

The Confession quickly became the standard of orthodoxy in the churches. When the Second London Confession was initially published in 1677, its title page indicated that it contained the views of "many congregations of Christians . . . in London and the Country."<sup>[9]</sup> It is probably impossible to determine the number of, or even the identity of, most of the "many congregations" willing to confess their faith by means of this document in 1677. But there are some indications of its acceptance in the 1680s.

It found its way into the literature of the day, and was used as a test of orthodoxy.<sup>[10]</sup> The utilization of the Confession as a doctrinal standard is demonstrated by an incident from the life of the Broadmead, Bristol church. In April 1682, they required Thomas Whinnell, a member of an Arminian Baptist church who was attempting to join their assembly, to subscribe the Confession, in order to ensure that his views were consonant with their own.<sup>[11]</sup> The serious differences in the convictions of these theologically diverse groups were settled by means of this personal affirmation. Whinnell went on to become pastor of the Taunton, Somersetshire Particular Baptist church.

Benjamin Keach used the Confession as an apologetic tool in 1694. He was engaged in a debate over the validity of infant baptism, responding to a question on the status of infants. Asserting that "all infants are under the Guilt and stain of original sin . . . and that no infant can be saved but through the Blood and Imputation of Christs righteousness." He refers to the "Article of our Faith," and bluntly says "See our confession of Faith."<sup>[12]</sup>

At the 1689 General Assembly, the importance of the Confession was manifest. As many as 108 churches were represented or sent communications to the Assembly, and the Confession was endorsed in famous terms:

We the Ministers and Messengers of, and concerned for, upwards of one

hundred Baptized Congregations in *England* and *Wales* (denying *Arminianism*) being met together in *London* from the 3<sup>d</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup> Month to the 11<sup>th</sup> of the same, 1689, to consider of some things that might be for the Glory of God, and the good of these Congregations; have thought meet (for the satisfaction of all other Christians that differ from us in the point of Baptism) to recommend to their perusal the Confession of our Faith, Printed for, and sold by, Mr. *John Harris* at the *Harrow* in the *Poultry*; Which Confession we own, as containing the Doctrine of our Faith and Practice; and do desire that the Members of our Churches respectively do furnish themselves therewith.[13]

They "own" the Confession, and insist that it is a plain statement of their belief and practice. For them, the Confession was an apologetic tool. Outsiders would be able to read its declarations and recognize that these churches were doctrinally orthodox.[14]

Confessional subscription was considered to be a serious matter among many churches.[15] It was "solemn owning and ratifying," a commitment to a definitive theological system. So strongly were these men committed to the words contained in their Confession that they considered anyone "the grossest sort of Hypocrite, in professing the contrary by their Profession of Faith, and yet believing and practicing quite otherwise to what they solemnly professed as their Faith in that matter." [16] Throughout the period under consideration, the Second London Confession was accepted as the defining standard of theological orthodox belief and practice within a large circle of churches. They wanted it to be known that when someone read their Confession, they were getting a fair understanding of the beliefs and practices of the churches.

### **Implications**

I would like to mention three implications of this material.

1. There is no substantial theological difference between the First and Second London Confessions. I get very much bothered when I read statements asserting or inferring that there is some kind of theological difference between these two great confessions. Some seem to think that the 1644/46 Confession is more authentically Baptist, while the second is less so. Most often, this is asserted by those who dislike the Covenant theology that is more explicit in the Second Confession than in the first. It is especially true of

those who espouse the so-called "New Covenant" theology. But the question that I would like to ask those who assert this difference is this: On what basis do you make this assertion?

Too often, this alleged distinction is made by those who have little or no familiarity with the historical and theological backgrounds of the two confessions. Like good postmodernists, they read into the Confessions the type of theology that they hope to find there, without any serious investigation into the theological thinking of the men who wrote the Confessions. Like any other historical document, our confessions need to be subject to historical and grammatical exegesis. We cannot simply read into them what we think we may find there. Instead, we need to ask and answer the question "How did the men who first adopted this Confession understand its theology? Do their writings give support to the notion that there are significant theological differences between the two?" An examination of this kind can be a very fruitful exercise in sorting out this notion.

There are several things that we need to say.

**First**, the method of editing these Confessions was the same. Both are based on existing paedobaptist documents, adapted, not to highlight differences, but to emphasize commonalities. The editors of both Confessions used the identical method. They chose the best existing paedobaptist confessions and "baptized" them. Beyond this, it is important to remember that the first Confession was actually revised to make it more palatable to the paedobaptist opposition. Throughout the 17th century, the Calvinistic Baptists sought to demonstrate their orthodoxy to their paedobaptist counterparts.

**Secondly**, the writings of the men who published the First London Confession demonstrate that they were committed to the same kind of Covenant Theology that is more explicitly articulated in the Second London Confession. John Spilsbury, sometimes suggested as the author of the First Confession, writing in his 1643 book *A Treatise Concerning the Lawful Subject of Baptisme*, said on the very first page of the text, "As the Scriptures being a perfect rule of all things, both for faith and order; this I confesse is a truth. And for the just and true consequence of Scripture, I doe not deny; and the covenant of life lying between God and Christ for all his elect, I doe not oppose: and that the outward profession of the said Covenant, hath differed under severall Periods, I shall not deny." William Kiffin, the man whose

name heads the list of those who published the 1644 Confession, wrote in his 1642 book entitled *Certain Observations upon Hosea the Second the 7. & 8. Verses*, "in Scripture men are said to forsake God when they forsake the Law of God, the *Commandments* of God, or the worship of God . . ." (page 4), "to keep close to God is to keep close to the Law of God, the Commandments of God . . . it is best both with persons & churches, when they do so" (Page 16). Hanserd Knollys, a man who signed the second edition of the Confession in 1646 wrote in his 1646 book *Christ Exalted : A Lost Sinner sought and saved by Christ*, "The difference betweene these two schholmasters, the Law and Christ, is this, Moses in the Law commands his Disciples to do this, and forbear that, but gives no power, nor communicates no skill to performe anything: Christ commands his Disciples to do the *same moral duties*, and to forbear the same evils, and with his command he gives power, and wisdom, For he works in us both to will and to do according to his good pleasure" (page 24), and again a little later in the same book, when commenting on the sins of those he calls carnal professors "They are so far departed from the Faith, which they sometime professed, and seemed to have, 1 Tim. 4.1. that they question whether the Scriptures of truth be the Word of God? Whether Christ be the Son of God? Whether the first day of the Week be the Sabbath of God?" (page 34). He places doubt with regard to the validity of the 1st day Sabbath alongside of doubts about the inspiration of Scripture and the deity of Christ! It would not be difficult to multiply the evidence. When one considers the theological writings of the men who subscribed the 1644/46 London Confession, one finds that they believed the same things articulated more clearly in the 1689 London Confession. The difference is not one of belief, simply of expression.

**Thirdly**, it should also be remembered that it was the same churches, and several of the same men, who issued both of the Confessions. Seven London congregations published the 1644/46 Confession. By 1689, representatives of 4 of these churches also publicly signed the 1689 Confession. What happened to the other 3? They either ceased to exist, or had merged into the remaining churches. In addition, several key men signed both Confessions: William Kiffin, Hanserd Knollys, and Henry Forty, as well as the father-son duo of Benjamin and Nehemiah Coxe. If the theology of the two Confessions is different, one would have to demonstrate that these churches and these men went through a process of theological change. But no evidence for such

exists.

*Fourthly*, we must listen to the words of the authors of the 2nd London Confession, writing in the forward to the 1677 edition:

Courteous Reader,

It is now many years since divers of us (with other sober Christians then living and walking in the way of the Lord that we professe) did conceive our selves to be under a necessity of Publishing a Confession of our Faith, for the information, and satisfaction of those, that did not throughly understand what our principles were, or had entertained prejudices against our Profession, by reason of the strange representation of them, by some men of note, who had taken very wrong measures, and accordingly led others into misapprehensions, of us, and them: and this was first put forth about the year, 1643. in the name of seven Congregations then gathered in London; since which time, diverse impressions thereof have been dispersed abroad, and our end proposed, in good measure answered, inasmuch as many (and some of those men eminent, both for piety and learning) were thereby satisfied, that we were no way guilty of those Heterodoxies and fundamental errors, which had too frequently been charged upon us without ground, or occasion given on our part. And forasmuch, as that Confession is not now commonly to be had; and also that many others have since embraced the same truth which is owned therein; it was judged necessary by us to joyn together in giving a testimony to the world; of our firm adhering to those wholesome Principles, by the publication of this which is now in your hand.

And forasmuch as our method, and manner of expressing our sentiments, in this, doth vary from the former (although the substance of the matter is the same) we shall freely impart to you the reason and occasion thereof.<sup>[17]</sup>

We must not miss these words. These men assert that though the "method and manner of expression" is different in the two confessions, yet the substance is the same. Now, if the two confessions have a different theological perspective, these men are guilty of an untruth.

But think about how unlikely that is:

1. Some of them were the same men, who knew what they believed throughout these years.
2. Some of the churches were the same churches, in which it is not unlikely that some of the members, as well as the officers, were the same people.
3. There was a public record that could be consulted in order to determine the truthfulness of this statement. Everything points to the veracity of this statement. Doesn't it only seem right that we take these men at their words, recognizing that the doctrine of both Confessions is the same? Both the 1644/46 and the 1677/89 Confessions, as understood by their original authors, teach covenant theology, the abiding validity of the law of God and, by implication, the obligation of the 1st day Sabbath. Anything less is at best a misunderstanding, and at worst a misrepresentation, of 17th century Calvinistic Baptist theology. The 1644/46 Confession gives no support to those who would undermine the essentially *Reformed* and covenantal identity of Baptist theology.

*Fifthly*, we need to remember that the 1644/46 Confession was publicly examined and criticized by some of the most cautious opposing theologians of the day. *Gangreana* Edwards, Robert Baylie and Dr. Daniel Featley justify no stone unturned in seeking to prove that the Particular Baptists were heretical. And yet they never give indication that the Baptists or their Confession were unorthodox in terms of Covenant theology, the perpetuity of the moral law, or the abiding validity of the Lord's day Sabbath. There can be no doubt that they would have made much of these things if they had been present, but they weren't. If the best heresy-hunters of the day did not find differences on these issues, how can we?

It is a mistake to assert that there are theological variances between these confessions. Simply because the 1644 Confession does not highlight and emphasize these things does not mean that it, and the men and churches who issued it, held a view distinct from the latter Confession. The differences can be simply explained in terms of the documents used to construct the Baptist statements. If you examine the 1596 *True Confession*, you will find that it does not highlight Covenant theology, but rather the Doctrine of the Church. This explains the direction and emphases of the Baptist Confession. Nothing more is necessary. The theology of the two confessions is the same.

2. Secondly, this discussion highlights the importance of Confessions of



Faith, especially as they are found in early Baptist life. So often we are told, especially by those who dislike careful theological expression, that Confessions are really an imposition on Baptist freedom. One famous Southern Baptist author has written a very long book on Baptist History, in which one of his major themes is an attempt to show that the most basic value in Baptist history has been religious liberty. For him, confessions are an intrusion on that heritage. They bind people to a mold — a set of doctrines — a situation that is to be avoided at all costs. But we must reply that our forefathers did not seem to feel this way. They believed that Christianity was a religion based upon revelation, and that that revelation was cohesive and consistent. For this reason, they believed that the doctrines found in that body of revelation could be systematized and expressed in such a way that many Christians could agree together about them.

Dr. Robert Martin has stated that a church without a Confession of faith has the theological equivalent of the AIDS virus, and certainly he is right. It has no defenses, no means by which to repel the onslaughts of error. When confessions are neglected or rejected, the opportunity arises for churches to slip and fall into error and unbelief. Has not our own century demonstrated to us the truth of this statement? Why have so many churches, and even denominations been lost to unbelief? It is because the doctrines that were held at the beginning were undervalued by following generations. The Lutherans lost touch with Luther, the Methodists lost touch with Wesley, and the Baptists lost touch with their Confessions. The brave stand taken by Dr. Mohler at Southern Seminary demonstrates this. He called his faculty back to the doctrinal standard of the past — and God has blessed him — and sent opposition to him — as a result.

A good Confession — and honesty in living with it — can be a means by which much good is done in a church. It will not be an albatross to hinder the work of God; rather it will be a means of uniting the people of God around truth, and prevent the spread of error. We believe that the Bible is a cohesive book. The doctrines found in it integrate with one another, and produce a system that is to be received and believed. A good confession simply expresses the truth that is found in Scripture in a concise form. In this way, everyone who is interested can understand exactly what we believe.

**3.** The third implication that I would like to draw out has reference to our

heritage as Baptists in America. The theology of these Confessions is our own. When one considers the history and development of Baptist thought and practice in America, one must give a significant place to these two London Confessions of Faith. Their common theological statements shaped and molded much of the thinking and practice of the churches on this side of the Atlantic.

The story must begin with a brief mention of the close ties that existed between Baptists in England and America during the middle of the seventeenth century. In spite of the distance between them, and the difficulties in communication and in fellowship, it is clear that the small and struggling American churches considered themselves one with their English counterparts. When John Clarke, patriarch of the Newport, Rhode Island church wrote his famous *Ill Newes From New England* in 1652, he included a letter written by fellow-sufferer Obadiah Holmes and addressed to John Spilsbury and William Kiffin of London, asserting their oneness in the Gospel. At the founding of the First Baptist Church of Boston in 1655, three of the original nine members "had walked in that order in old England" (including a member of William Kiffin's church, Richard Goodall). John Myles and many of his church members moved from Wales to Swansea, Massachusetts in 1663, and William Screven, a member of one of the West Country churches, after his emigration founded in 1682 a new assembly in Maine. When the 1st Baptist Church of Boston published an apology for its existence in 1680, the book included a preface signed by William Kiffin, Hanserd Knollys, William Collins, Nehemiah Coxe, and two others. They said, "The authors of this apology have declared their perfect agreement with us both in matters of Faith and Worship, as set down in our late Confession."<sup>[18]</sup> The American Baptists held the same theological views as their English counterparts.

This theological kinship fostered a sense of unity across the Ocean, and paved the way for the introduction into America of the doctrinal views of the English churches. The Americans looked to the English for leadership, counsel and assistance during the latter half of the century. Into this situation came Elias Keach, son of London's famous pastor Benjamin Keach. He brought with him his father's commitment to a well-defined theological system, and urged the use of the Confession of Faith that was so well known in the homeland. Elias ministered in Penepek, near Philadelphia, but his

influence extended over a wide area of southern New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania, and several churches came into existence. These became the nucleus of the churches of the Philadelphia Association.

It is really through this Association that the Second London Confession gained its greatest influence. While the records of the Association do not list a date at which they adopted the Confession, they refer to it early on. The records state, "in the year 1724, a query, concerning the fourth commandment, whether changed, altered or diminished. We refer to the Confession of faith, set forth by the elders and brethren met in London, 1689, and owned by us, chap. 22, sect. 7 and 8." In 1727, they responded to a question about marriage in the same way. The records tersely state "Answered, by referring to our Confession of faith, chapter 26th in our last edition." These statements make it evident that the Association churches had adopted the Confession as their own.

By 1742, it was decided to reprint the Confession, a motion that was repeated in 1765. It is true that, under the influence of Keach's theology, two articles were added, namely one on singing hymns in worship, and the other treating the "laying on of hands" as a third ordinance of the church. But the rest of the Confession was justifiably intact, and was the doctrinal standard for the churches in the Association.

As the first and oldest Association in America, the influence of the Philadelphia churches was powerful. The Ketchikan, Virginia Association adopted it in 1766, as did the Charleston, South Carolina Association, and the Warren, Rhode Island Association, both in 1767. Through these Associations, and others, and the constituent churches, the doctrine and practices of the Second London Confession molded much of the early thinking among Baptists in America.

Writing in 1881, William Cathcart, the editor of *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, said "In England and America, churches, individuals, and Associations, with clear minds, with hearts full of love for the truth, . . . have held with veneration the articles of 1689." Certainly, this was true, but sadly, Cathcart failed to see that even in his own day there was a serious departure from this great old document. Many churches moved away from the London-Philadelphia standard in favor of the New Hampshire Confession, a product of J. Newton Brown's attempt to placate the objections of Arminian Baptists

in New Hampshire to the strong Calvinism of the older Confession. With a watered-down theology, theological depth was lost in the churches, and they were swept away by the dueling movements of liberalism and fundamentalism. Without a clear-cut theological system in place, the churches had no defense against the vagaries of liberalism or the reductionism of fundamentalism. For the first half of the twentieth century, awareness of the Second London Confession was at an all-time low among the Baptist churches.

But thanks be to God, through the influence of several men and movements, the grand old doctrines of God's sovereign grace were recovered among Baptists, so that gradually churches adopted the old Confession, or new churches were formed based on these vital and vigorous convictions. Where once there was a desert, there are now signs that the dry ground is bringing forth beautiful flowers. There is still a long way to go, and most of the Baptist churches in America still wander in a theological wasteland. But God has raised up many churches holding forth a clear testimony to the truth, and we hope that many more will come to birth in the days ahead. By God's grace, the future looks bright for churches that adopt the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. May God bless our efforts to His glory.

## FOOTNOTES:

[1] William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 153.

[2] *Ibid.*, 154-55.

[3] Lumpkin mentions two books which may have been especially obnoxious in their charges against the Baptists: *A Short History of the Anabaptists of High and Low Germany* (1642), and *A Warning for England especially for London* (1642), BCF, 145.

[4] John Tombes, *Two Treatises and an Appendix to them Concerning Infant Baptisme* (London: George Whittington, 1645), 31, 34. The statements are in the second treatise, entitled "An Examen of the Sermon of Mr. Stephen Marshal, about Infant Baptism, in a Letter sent to him.

[5] Featley, *The Dippers Dip't*, 177-78. He did not accept the Baptist claims to orthodoxy.

[6] A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, (London: The Baptist Union Publication Department, 1947), 60; *BDBR* 3:193-94.

[7] Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 145-146.

[8] Michael Haykin, Kiffin, Knollys and Keach: *Rediscovering Our English Baptist Heritage* (Leeds: Reformation Today Trust, 1996), 68.

[9] *A Confession of Faith*, title page.

[10] In 1681, Hanserd Knollys makes direct reference to the Confession in his book *The World that Now is; and the World that is to Come*. In the midst of a section explaining the procedure of church discipline, Knollys incorporates phrases from Chapter 26, paragraphs 3 and 13. Nehemiah Coxe, in a sermon preached and published in 1681, similarly incorporates phrases from Chapter 26, paragraphs 8 and 10 into his expressions. Cf. Nehemiah Coxe, *A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of an Elder and Deacons in a Baptized Congregation in London* (London: Tho. Fabian, 1681), 15, 36-38.

[11] Hayden, *The Records of A Church of Christ*, 241. The records actually state that he "professed to believe ye principles contained in ye Baptist Confession of Faith, 1667." The modern editor states "No Confession of Faith of this date is known. It is likely that Terrill [the author of the Records] is referring to the Particular Baptist Confession of Faith for 1677, which was

a standard test of orthodoxy among Particular Baptist Churches of the time."

[12] Benjamin Keach, *A Counter Antidote to purge out the Malignant Effects of a Late Counterfiet, Prepared by Mr. Gyles Shute, an Unskilful Person in Polemical Cures* (London: H. Bernard, 1694), 12.

[13] *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the General Assembly Of divers Pastors, Messengers and Ministring Brethren of the Baptized Churches, met together in London, from Septemb. 3. to 12. 1689, from divers parts of England and Wales: Owing the Doctrine of Personal Election, and final Perseverance* (London: Printed in the Year, 1689) 18. It is curious that though the document is commonly known as the 1689 Confession, I can find no bibliographic evidence that it was printed in that year. It was published in 1677, 1688, and 1699. See Donald Wing, *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and British America and of English Books Printed in Other Countries 1641-1700*, 2d ed., (New York: The Index Committee of the Modern Language Association of America, 1972), 1:369.

[14] Bagnio/Cripplegate Church Minute Book 1695-1723, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, unnumbered page facing page 27. The seriousness of this statement is exemplified in the words of the host Broken Wharf church, whose pastor in 1691 was Hanserd Knollys. In 1706, when an attempt was being made to revive the defunct London Association, they refused to join in "Because the solemn owning & ratifying of our so well attested & generall approved Confession of Faith, as transmitted to us in ye full evidence of yt word by our late pastors &c in ye general assembly seems to us as it did also to them a thing absolutely nessesary to ye just & regular constitution of all associations: but ye admitting of the above sd churches into Association renders this altogether impracticable." They published these words in a public letter explaining their reasons for remaining aloof, "Humbly offered to ye consideration of all those Baptized Churches wch have or can sign the confession of our Faith printed in ye year 1688 and recommended to ye churches by ye Generall Assembly that met at Broken Wharf in London 1689." *Ibid.*, 26. Broken Wharf was the location of this same church when Knollys' was pastor.

[15] When the Maze Pond church was constituted in Feb., 1694, it explicitly adopted the Confession in the first article of the church covenant. Maze Pond

Church Book 1691-1708, The Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, 1.

[16] William Kiffin, Robert Steed, George Barrett and Edward Man, *A Serious Answer to a Late Book, Stiled, A Reply to Mr. Robert Steed's Epistle concerning Singing* (London: Printed in the Year, 1692), 18.

[17] For the following parts of the forward, see above.

[18] Nathan Wood, *The History of the First Baptist Church of Boston*, 150.

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