

THE USE OF CONFESSIONS OF FAITH IN BAPTIST HISTORY

by Pastor Steve Weaver

Baptist leaders in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted the use of confessions of faith as summaries of essential Biblical beliefs, expressions of unity, and protection from error. Confessions of faith summarized the essential teachings of Scripture in a topical manner. Confessions of faith expressed unity among those who were truly one in the truth. Confessions of faith protected churches and institutions from those who did not adhere to those doctrines commonly held by Baptists.

Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University and editor of *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, argues that Baptists have used confessions of faith throughout their history: “The idea that voluntary, conscientious adherence to an explicit doctrinal standard is somehow foreign to the Baptist tradition is a peculiar notion not borne out by careful examination of our heritage.”¹ An examination of Baptist history reveals that many Baptist leaders have promoted the use of confessions of faith for individual churches, associations, and institutions (seminaries and mission boards). These confessions were used to summarize essential Biblical beliefs, express unity, and protect from error.

A Summary of Essential Biblical Beliefs

Baptists have never exalted a confession of faith above Scripture. Confessions of faith

¹Timothy George, “Introduction,” in *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, eds. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 3.

were used to summarize what Baptists believed the Scriptures taught. S. M. Noel, moderator of the Franklin Baptist Association in Kentucky, wrote a circular letter in 1826 that was sent to all the churches in his association. In this letter, Noel defended the historic Baptist use of confessions as a summary of Biblical teaching: “By a creed we mean an epitome, or summary exhibition of what the Scriptures teach.”² Noel also notes that when one affirms a confession of faith “he simply declares by solemn act how he understands the Bible, in other words, what doctrines he considers it as containing.”³

A little over twenty years later, J. L. Reynolds wrote *Church Polity* in which he argued that a confession or creed “is a digest of the whole” of Scripture.⁴ Reynolds continued by stating:

A creed is not intended to supersede the word of God, as the standard of faith and practice; for it derives its validity and authority solely from its agreement with that word. It is a standard or rule of faith only in a secondary sense, and only to those who adopt it as the exponent of their views. It does not create, it simply expresses the truth; and is to be viewed, not in the light of an authority but a testimony.⁵

Confessions were only seen as authoritative to the degree that they accurately reflected the teaching of Scripture. The ultimate allegiance of Baptists was to the Word of God, but they saw confessions as helpful summaries of Biblical truth.

B. H. Carroll, founding president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, defended the use of creeds and confessions of faith in his treatise “Creeds and Confessions of Faith.” There he argued that everyone has a creed because a creed merely summarizes what you

²S. M. Noel, “Circular Letter on Confessions of Faith,” in *Treasures from the Baptist Heritage*, eds. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 140.

³*Ibid.*, 144.

⁴J. L. Reynolds, “Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ,” in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D. C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 337.

⁵*Ibid.*

believe:

There never was a man in the world without a creed. What is a creed? A creed is what you believe. What is a confession? It is a declaration of what you believe. That declaration may be oral or it may be committed to writing, but the creed is there either expressed or implied.⁶

Since confessions of faith are declarations of what one believes, anyone who believes anything has one.

Another president of a Baptist seminary who defended the use of confessions in Baptist life was E. Y. Mullins. Mullins served as the fourth president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at approximately the same time Carroll was serving as the president of Southwestern at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mullins, in his essay “Baptists and Creeds” (probably written between 1920 and 1925), defended confessions of faith as our attempt to summarize New Testament teaching: “The New Testament, of course, is our final standard and authority. Our confessions are simply our effort to state what the New Testament teaches. They are all to be tested and estimated according to the New Testament.”⁷

An Expression of Unity

Baptists not only viewed their confessions as summaries of Scripture’s teachings, they also used them in practical ways. One way confessions of faith were used by Baptists was to show where true unity existed. S. M. Noel, in his “Circular Letter,” asked a series of rhetorical questions to demonstrate the necessity of a confession of faith to “preserve the unity”:

Are we to admit members into the church and into office, are we to license and ordain

⁶B. H. Carroll, “Creeds and Confessions of Faith,” in *Baptists and their Doctrines*, eds. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 81.

⁷E. Y. Mullins, “Baptists and Creeds,” in *The Axioms of Religion*, eds. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 187.

preachers without enquiring for their creed? Shall we ask them no question in regard to principles or doctrines? Shall we receive license and ordain candidates, upon a general profession of faith in Christ requiring of them this only, that they agree to take the Bible for their guide? Can we do this and still expect to preserve the unity, purity and peace of the church?⁸

The obvious answer to Noel's questions is "No!" Confessions of faith are necessary to "preserve the unity, purity and peace of the church."

J. L. Reynolds, in his *Church Polity*, also acknowledged that Christian unity requires a clear summary statement of Christian doctrine. Reynolds argues that it is appropriate to have a written confession of faith to show agreement about the nature of Christianity:

The right of a Church to frame for itself a summary of Christian doctrine is evident from the nature of its organization. If "two cannot walk together except they be agreed," much less can professors of Christianity constitute a harmonious and efficient body, unless they concur in their views of what Christianity is. If it be proper for them to have correct views, it is proper to express them; and if it be proper to express them orally, it is equally so to express them in a written form. Again, each member of a church is bound to bear his testimony to the truth.⁹

Even more forceful are the following words of Reynolds concerning the nature of true Christian union: "Real uniformity can exist only among those who 'all speak the same thing, and are perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.' 1 Cor. 1:10. A union of contradictions is an impossibility. Agreement in sentiment is the bond of Christian union."¹⁰

E. Y. Mullins described the limits of cooperation as the extent to which we agree doctrinally: "Practical cooperation is, after all, a fine test of doctrinal fellowship, and doctrinal fellowship is a fine test of the limits of practical cooperation."¹¹ Then, to be sure he was

⁸Noel, "Circular Letter on Confessions of Faith," 140.

⁹Reynolds, "Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ," 337.

¹⁰Ibid., 342.

¹¹Mullins, "Baptists and Creeds," 190.

understood, Mullins adds the following example: “If a man holds consistently the Unitarian view of Christ’s person, he cannot long cooperate with those who hold the deity of Christ.”¹²

Agreement upon the great doctrines of the faith is essential to unity, fellowship and cooperation. Confessions of faith provide the instrumentality to express this unity.

A Protection from False Teaching

_____ Baptists used confessions of faith in another practical way. Confessions were not only used as a means of expressing unity, they were also used to protect against error creeping into their churches or institutions. James P. Boyce gave the Inaugural Address at Furman University in which he called for “Three Changes in Theological Institutions.” One of these changes involved confessional integrity, which required professors to sign a doctrinal statement to which they agreed to teach in accordance. In his Address at Furman, Boyce stated the responsibility of that institution’s trustees to preserve doctrinal truth by use of a confession of faith:

It seems to me, gentlemen, that you owe this to yourselves, to your professors, and to the denomination at large; to yourselves, because your position as trustees makes you responsible for the doctrinal opinions of your professors, and the whole history of creeds has proved the difficulty without them of convicting errorists or perversion of the Word of God – to your professors, that their doctrinal sentiments may be known and approved by all, that no charges of heresy may be brought against them; that none shall whisper of peculiar notions which they hold, but that in refutation of all charges they may point to this formulary as one which they hold “ex amino,” and teach in its true import – and to the denomination at large, that they may know in what truths the rising ministry are instructed, may exercise full sympathy with the necessities of the institution, and look with confidence and affection to the pastors who come forth from it.¹³

Boyce understood creeds to be necessary to fulfill the trustee’s responsibility to their denomination in whose place they acted. Without a confession of faith, protection against false

¹²Ibid., 190-191.

¹³James P. Boyce, “Three Changes in Theological Institutions,” in *Treasures from the Baptist Heritage*, eds. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 129.

teaching would be impossible.

E. Y. Mullins was the fourth president of the seminary which Boyce helped found, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Mullins also saw the need of confessions of faith to protect the beliefs held by Baptists. Mullins argues that confessions do not violate an individual's rights, but rather preserves the right of the group:

Baptists have always insisted upon their right to declare their beliefs in a definite, formal way, and to protect themselves by refusing to support men in important places as teachers and preachers who do not agree with them. This group of self-protection is as sacred as any individual right. If a group of men known as Baptists consider themselves trustees of certain great truths, they have an inalienable right to conserve and propagate those truths unmolested by others inside the denomination who oppose those truths. The latter have an equal right to unite with another group agreeing with them. But they have no right to attempt to make of the Baptist denomination a free lance club.¹⁴

_____ James F. Love, who served as the executive secretary of the Foreign Mission Board from 1914 to 1928, wrote in the July 8, 1920 edition of *The Religious Herald* concerning the mission boards "Statement of Belief." This statement was adopted during the Board's annual meeting in June, 1919.¹⁵ Love described the reason for the adoption of this Statement as a responsibility to Southern Baptists:

The Foreign Mission Board is . . . appointed to secure the proclamation of a Christian message. The men who compose it will not consent that young and immature people . . . shall revise the historic and generally accepted faith of Southern Baptists and set up for this message some bit of rationalism or irrationalism with which some teacher or school has inoculated them. The denomination chooses the Board and makes it responsible for these matters and it will not delegate its responsibility.¹⁶

Southern Baptists used Confessions to ensure that they were not supporting teachers and

¹⁴Mullins, "Baptists and Creeds," 189-190.

¹⁵J. F. Love, "The Statement of Belief by the Foreign Mission Board," *The Religious Herald* (July 8, 1920), 7.

¹⁶Ibid., 15.

missionaries financially whom they could not support theologically.

Conclusion

Baptist leaders in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted the use of confessions of faith as summaries of essential Biblical beliefs, expressions of unity, and protection from error. Baptists used confessions of faith to summarize the essential teachings of Scripture in a topical manner. Baptists used confessions of faith to express unity among those who were truly one in the truth. Baptists used confessions of faith to protect their churches and institutions from those who did not adhere to those doctrines commonly held by Baptists. As J. F. Love noted in his defense of the Foreign Mission Board's Statement of Belief:

Southern Baptists have a message for a lost world, or they ought to abandon altogether this whole scheme of foreign missions. . . . The things contained in this **Statement** are the very things which we preach from Sabbath to Sabbath, which we use in calling sinners to repentance, which probably every church in the South has adopted in its confession of faith, which every association of the nearly one thousand in the South requires of any church whose messengers apply for seats in the association, and which our two seminaries require, and much more besides, of every professor that holds a chair in them. This **Statement** is not, therefore, something new, but that which is new and revolutionary is criticism of such a statement of Baptist faith.¹⁷

This is the majority position held by Baptists historically in regard to confessions of faith.

¹⁷Ibid.

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