

Baptists And The Westminster Confession

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It is not too much to say that traditional Baptist historiography has been obsessed with issue of denominational origins. Christopher Hill has bluntly evaluated the method which has characterized this approach to church history: "There seems to me sometimes to be as much fiction and unwarranted assumption—and sheer waste of time—in tracing the genealogy of sects as of individuals."¹ For all this, the role of the Westminster Confession in the development of the Baptist tradition is a topic which raises important historical and theological questions about the origin and identity of the Baptist movement.

The debate over Baptist beginnings has been shaped by three distinct theories of historical origins. First, Baptist successionism has argued for an unbroken chain of true Baptist churches stretching back across the centuries to the New Testament itself—to Jerusalem, Jesus, and John the Baptist (not John the Presbyterian!). Second, others have traced the beginnings of the Baptist movement to sixteenth-century continental Anabaptism. Clearly, there are many strong affinities between Anabaptists and later Baptists in England and America including believers' baptism, voluntary church membership, and the requirements of moral discipline. But the differences between these two streams of congregationalism are even more distinct and the case for genetic influence remains: "not proved."² Both the successionist and Anabaptist theories, though widely held in some circles, have tended to isolate Baptists from the Reformation matrix which gave birth to their early theological and confessional writings.

Still other historians have identified two separable beginnings of the English Baptist movement in early seventeenth-century Puritanism: the General Baptists, who evolved out of the church planted by Thomas Helwys at Spitalfields near London in 1612, which was an offshoot of the rebaptized exiled congregation of John Smyth; and the Particular Baptists, who arose among the underground London congregations of the 1630s.³ The General Baptists stressed the universal scope of the atonement, holding with the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius that Christ died for all persons. The Particular Baptists, on the other hand, were strict Calvinists who were in basic agreement with the five heads of doctrine propounded by the Synod of Dort (1618-19). Older historians tended to blur the distinct origins of these two Baptist streams. Thus John Marsham wrote, "They early fell into contention upon points of doctrine and split in 1611, into two great parties, called the *particular* and *general* Baptists."⁴

The Particulars, however, tended to be better educated, better organized and more successful than the Generals who were more and more drawn into the orbit of that "swarm of sectaries and schismatics," as John Taylor put it, which included Levellers, Ranters, Seekers, Quakers, and, at

¹Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. xii.

²Timothy George, "The Reformation Roots of the Baptist Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 86 (1989), 9-22.

³Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 41-50, 99-168.

⁴*An Epitome of General Ecclesiastical History* (New York: J. Tilden and Co., 1847), 408.

A more accurate reconstruction is given in B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983).

the fag end of the Puritan movement, the mysterious Family of Love.”⁵ Needless to say, the Particulars also shared a closer theological kinship with the Westminster divines than with their Arminian Baptist cousins. For all that, one of the most substantial Baptist confessions of the seventeenth century was produced by the Generals. This was the Orthodox Creed of 1678. This document reflected a robust orthodoxy and sought to mediate some of the sharper differences between the Calvinist and Arminian soteriological schemes. It also included the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds of the early church, all three of which, it was declared, “ought to be thoroughly received and believed. For we believe they may be proved, by most undoubted authority of Holy Scripture and are necessary to be understood by all Christians.”⁶

In the following century, the General Baptists declined rapidly as the strong doctrinal commitments of their forebears gave way to the laxity and latitudinarianism of the times. Many English Baptists, along with many English Presbyterians, were in fact swept into the rising Unitarian movement. In the wake of the revivals led by John Wesley and George Whitefield, the Generals experienced an evangelical awakening which doubtless saved them from extinction. Led by Dan Taylor, they established the New Connection which eventually merged with the Particulars to form the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1891.⁷

Exactly one year after the Westminster divines had assembled in London to begin their work, the Particular Baptists of that city set forth their first major confession of faith. The London Confession of 1644, also known as the First London Confession, was published in the name of seven local congregations, “the poor despised churches of God in London.” These early Baptists had felt the sting of criticism brought against them by established religious leaders of the day.

They finding us out of that common roadway themselves walk, have smote us and taken away our veil, so that we may by them be recommended odious in the eyes of all that behold us, and in the hearts of all that think upon us, which they have done both in pulpit and print, charging us with holding free-will, falling away from grace, denying original sin, disclaiming of Magistracy, denying to assist them even in person or purse in any of their lawful commands, doing acts unseemly in the dispensing of the ordinance of baptism, not to be named amongst Christians.⁸

They deny such charges as “notoriously untrue” and set forth their own positive theological commitments which reflect the kind of consensual Calvinism set forth at the Synod of Dort.

One of the innovations introduced by the Particular Baptists was their insistence on baptism for believers only by full immersion under the water. Their opponents ridiculed this “scandalous” practice. They accused the Baptists of practicing baptism in the nude thus polluting all the streams, rivers, and lakes of England. The article on baptism (Article 40) in the 1644 Confession responds to this calumny: “The word *Baptizo*, signifying to dip under the water, yet so as with convenient garments both upon the administrator and subject with all modesty.” The 1644 Confession was used widely by Baptists outside of London. Its chief value lies in the precedent established for later confessional developments among Baptists: a strong commitment to historic Christian orthodoxy and the doctrines of grace embodied in Reformation theology alongside a careful declaration of

⁵Quoted, Watts, *Dissenters*, 83.

⁶Timothy George, ed., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996).

⁷Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1978), 116.

⁸W. L. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 154-55.

Baptist distinctives including congregational governance, believers' baptism by immersion and religious liberty.

In the three decades following the publication of the 1644 London Confession, Baptists in England were buffeted by the cataclysmic events of the times including civil war, regicide, the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, and renewed persecution against religious dissenters. The Clarendon Code imposed severe penalties on those who would not conform to the religious requirements of the Book of Common Prayer and the newly reestablished church. In 1662 some two thousand Protestant dissenters were expelled from their ministry for nonconformity, among whom was the grandfather of John Wesley, the Reverend Samuel Annesley.

Baptists too were implicated in these events; many of them suffered fines, imprisonment, and torture for their faith. During these turbulent times of revolution, Particular Baptists in England came to identify themselves even more closely with the mainstream Protestant tradition. This effort culminated in the promulgation of a new confession of faith in 1677. In that year an impressive company of Baptist leaders throughout England gathered in London to reaffirm their faith in what came to be known generally as the Second London Confession. Twelve years later, following the Glorious Revolution and the Act of Toleration, which granted statutory freedom of worship to religious dissenters, another Baptist assembly representing more than one hundred congregations throughout the land, met in London July 3-11, 1689 and approved the Confession of 1677, a second addition of which had been published in 1688.

The Second London Confession was soon transplanted to America where it was adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association which secured the services of Benjamin Franklin to publish it in 1742. The Philadelphia Confession, as the American recension came to be called, contained two new articles: "Of Singing Psalms" and "Of Laying On Of Hands." In England, many Baptists, along with other Reformed believers, had insisted that only the Psalms were proper material for singing in church. The Philadelphia Confession takes the contrary position declaring that Christians should "sing God's praises according to the best light they have received" including the use of hymns. This statement also recognized the laying on of hands as an ordinance of Christ intended "to confirm, strengthen, and comfort" newly baptized believers. The Philadelphia Confession became the most widely used and most influential Baptist statement of faith in America.

The Second London/Philadelphia Confession was, with some significant changes, almost a word for word duplication of the Westminster Confession. Before considering the differences between the two confessions, however, we should first ask a prior question: What prompted the Particular Baptists of England to adopt in such a wholesale manner the standard of Westminster? Fortunately, the framers of the 1677 Confession drafted a preface declaring quite clearly their reasons for this procedure. It appears that four considerations were uppermost in their mind. First, the Congregationalists had already used the Westminster Confession in a similar way in their Savoy Declaration of 1658. The Savoy Declaration was only a slight modification of the Westminster Confession, the principal changes touching on matters of church government and discipline. Significantly, several members of the Westminster Assembly including Goodwin, Nye, Bridge, Caryl, and Greenhill, were also framers of the Savoy Declaration. The Baptists of 1677 were well aware of the extensive debates on the nature of church government introduced by these Independent divines at the Westminster Assembly. They acknowledged their affinity for the Congregationalist position even as they moved forward with their own distinctively Baptist statement.

Second, the Baptists of 1677 wanted to show their solidarity with other believers who espoused the kind of Reformed theology set forth in the Westminster Confession. Thus, they declared their explicit agreement with the Westminster divines—

in all the 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 diverse nations and cities; and also to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but to 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, and men, our hardy agreement with them, in that wholesome Protestant doctrine, which, with so clear evidence of Scripture they have asserted.

Third, they joined other Protestants in appealing to Holy Scripture as the final arbiter in all matters of faith and doctrine. For this reason, they eschewed harsh and unnecessary polemics in favor of a straightforward confessional declaration. They intend to exercise love and meekness toward each other, they say, and not “spend our breath in fruitless complaints of the evils of others, but may everyone begin at home, to reform in the first place our own hearts and ways.”

Fourth, the framers of the Second London Confession were deeply concerned to pass on the faith intact to the rising generation. They regarded the neglect of family worship and careful religious instruction as the “one spring and cause of the decay of religion in our day.” The Baptists were, of course, well aware of the Westminster Shorter Catechism and set about creating various Baptist versions of the same. Henry Jessey, an early Baptist pioneer, had published a *Catechism for Babes* as early as 1646. The most influential document of this kind was the *Baptist Catechism*, commonly called *Keach’s Catechism*, published in 1693 and widely used by Baptists on both sides of the Atlantic.⁹ In the nineteenth century Charles Haddon Spurgeon would publish his own *Baptist Catechism* which was in essence another Baptist recension of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

We have seen thus far that the most substantial and most influential Baptist confession of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries belongs to the confessional family inspired by the Westminster standards. However, despite the strong doctrinal affinity and striking verbal parallels between the two confessions, significant differences can be detected as well. Not surprisingly, the most obvious differences are ecclesiological. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are declared to be ordinances rather than sacraments. The proper subjects of baptism are declared to be “those who do actually profess repentance unto God, faith in, and obedience to our Lord Jesus,” rather than infants. Immersion is the only proper mode of baptism. Each local church shall be governed congregationally, with full authority to call and dismiss pastors and to maintain proper discipline over all its members. In the chapter, “Of Christian Liberty,” the Baptists follow Westminster in declaring that “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” but they omit the section in which those who oppose any duly constituted power, civil or ecclesiastical, are said to be resisting the ordinance of God. The advocacy of unrestricted religious liberty was deeply rooted in the Baptist experience,

⁹Benjamin Keach, and his son Elias Keach, were strong leaders in the Particular Baptist movement. See the study on Benjamin Keach by J. Barry Vaughn in *Baptist Theologians*, eds. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1990), 49-76. Both the Jessey and Keach catechisms are reprinted in George, *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*.

and this commitment is reflected in the refusal of Baptist confessions to concede coercive power to religious establishments.¹⁰

In the articles dealing with theology proper, the Second London Confession largely echoed the language of Westminster, although here too there were different nuances and contrasting emphases. The first chapter in both confessions is a strong Reformed statement on Holy Scripture. In section six of this chapter, the Westminster Confession declares that the whole counsel of God related to human life "is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence" deduced there from. The wording about necessary consequence is omitted from the Baptist Confession which declares that God's counsel is "expressly set down or necessity contained in the Holy Scripture." The Baptists insisted on a strict application of the regulative principle finding in the Bible a blueprint for Christian living and a clearly-defined, universally binding model of church life including the details of polity and discipline.

Another important difference surfaces in chapter three, "Of God's Eternal Decree." The Westminster divines declared that by the decree of God, some men and angels are "predestinated unto everlasting life; and others for ordained to everlasting death." The Baptists were quite willing to embrace foreordination of the elect to eternal life, but the "others" are merely "left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of [God's] glorious justice." On this controverted point of predestinarian theology, the Particular Baptists echoed more closely the canons of the Synod of Dort which declare that God "leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy."¹¹ The debates over infra- and supralapsarianism would surface again among the Particular Baptists in the eighteenth century as hyper-Calvinism was embraced by some of their leading theologians. The mainstream Particular Baptist tradition, however, represented by Andrew Fuller and Charles Haddon Spurgeon, would continue to affirm the traditional doctrines of grace while resisting hyper-Calvinistic notions such as eternal justification, antinomianism, and the restriction of the offer of grace to the lost.¹²

Another important debate in Reformed theology is echoed in chapter eleven, "Of Justification." Westminster declares that "the obedience and satisfaction of Christ" is imputed to those whom God effectually calls. On this point the Baptists are more explicit in distinguishing the active and passive obedience of Christ: God imputes to those who are called "Christ's active obedience unto the whole Law and the passive obedience in His death, for their whole and soul Righteousness." Calvin himself had emphasized the active obedience of Christ as an essential dimension of His atoning work. This holistic view of Christ's work was also reflected in the extra emphasis given in the Second London Confession to the threefold office of Christ:

"This number and order of offices is necessary; for in respect of our ignorance, we stand in need of his Prophetical Office; and in respect of our alienation from God,

¹⁰Some Baptists, however, were willing to draw the line at the toleration of Roman Catholics. John Tombs, a noted Baptist theologian, declared in 1659: "Nor do we desire...that popery should be tolerated...nor any persons tolerated that worship a false god; nor any that speak contentiously and reproachfully of our Lord Jesus Christ; nor any that deny the Holy Scriptures...to be the Word of God. And yet we are not against tolerating of Episcopacy, Presbyters, or any stunted form, provided they do not compel others to a compliance therewith."

A declaration of several of the people called Anabaptists in and about the city of London (1659), quoted by H. C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 61.

¹¹Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), vol. 3, 582.

¹²Peter Toone, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (London: The Oliver Tree, 1967), 70-89.

and imperfection of the best of our services, we need his Priestly Office, to reconcile us, and present us acceptably unto God: and in respect of our averseness, and utter inability to return to God, and for our rescue, and security from our spiritual adversaries, we need his Kingly Office, to convince, subdue, draw, uphold, deliver, and preserve us to his Heavenly Kingdom.”

The Westminster standards, then, stand at the headwaters of the Reformed Baptist tradition. Although the First London Confession (1644) antedated Westminster by two years, the latter had a decisive shaping influence on both the form and content of all subsequent Particular Baptist confessions. At the same time, Baptists put their own stamp on the theology of Westminster significantly modifying its ecclesiology especially with reference to the sacraments, church polity, and the civil magistracy.

Among Baptists in America the theology of Westminster was transmitted through the enormously influential Philadelphia Confession of Faith. Despite a persistent Arminian strain within Baptist life, until the twentieth century most Baptists adhered faithfully to the doctrines of grace as set forth in Pauline-Augustinian-Reformed theology. David Benedict, following an extensive tour of Baptist churches throughout America in the early nineteenth century, gave the following summary of the Baptist theology he encountered: “Take this denomination at large, I believe the following will be found a pretty correct statement of their views of doctrine. They hold that man in his natural condition is entirely depraved and sinful; but unless he is born again—changed by grace—or made alive unto God—he cannot be fitted for the communion of saints on earth, nor the enjoyment of God in heaven; that where God hath begun a good work, He will carry it on to the end; that there is an election of grace—an effectual calling, etc., and that the happiness of the righteous and the misery of the wicked will both be eternal.”¹³ On the eve of the Civil War Francis Wayland, noted Baptist statesman and educator, echoed the same sentiment:

“I do not believe that any denomination of Christians exists, which, for so long a period as the Baptists, have maintained so invariably the truth of their early confessions...the theological tenets of the Baptists, both in England and America, may be briefly stated as follows: they are emphatically the doctrines of the Reformation, and they have been held with singular unanimity and consistency.”¹⁴

This same theological trajectory is also reflected in the major writings of Baptist theologians of this period including John L. Dagg, James Petigru Boyce, B. H. Carroll, and Augustus H. Strong.

It cannot be denied, however, that Baptist confessionalism in general, and Reformed theology in particular, has lost much of its appeal among Baptists in America during the past century. Many factors have contributed to the blurring of this part of the Reformation heritage which has shaped Baptist identity: the routinization of revivalism, the growth of pragmatism as a denominational strategy, an attenuated doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and a general theological laxity which has resulted in doctrinal apathy.

Among Baptists in the North, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy left deep scars and a fragmented denomination less concerned with confessional integrity than individual autonomy and prudential diversity. In 1922 the Northern Baptists refused to adopt the moderately Calvinistic New Hampshire Confession of 1833 declaring instead that “the Northern Baptist Convention

¹³ David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1813) 2:456.

¹⁴ Francis Wayland, *The Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (London: J. Heaton and Son, 1861), 15-16.

affirms that the New Testament is the all-sufficient ground of our faith and practice and we need no other statement."¹⁵ In the 1940s a similar proposal for a denomination-wide confession of faith was again defeated. In recent decades, several blue-ribbon committees and task forces have studied the continuing fragmentation and loss of theological vision within the American Baptist denomination. As a former president of the ABC put it recently in a blunt statement: Mere pluralism and diversity "is a lousy identity."¹⁶

The reception of Reformed theology among Baptists in the South has been affected by three major controversial movements in the nineteenth century: Campbellism, Landmarkism, and hyper-Calvinism. In different ways, each of these movements led to a loosening of historic Reformed theology and confessional commitment among Southern Baptists. The restorationist movement led by Alexander Campbell was both Arminian and anti-confessional. Campbell introduced slogans such as "No creed but the Bible" and "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent" into the parlance of Baptist polemics.

In two important senses, of course, Baptists have never been advocates of creedalism. They have always held to the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* believing that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the only normative rule of faith and practice for all Christians. Further, Baptists have never regarded their confessions as divinely inspired artifacts of revelation. On the contrary, they hold that confessional statements are true only to the extent that they faithfully represent the teaching of Holy Scripture. For this reason, confessions of faith are always revisable in the light of God's infallible Word in Holy Scripture. Historically, however, Baptists have not regarded conscientious adherence to an explicit doctrinal standard as compatible with biblical authority. The struggle with Campbellism brought this issue to the fore and bequeathed to many progressive Southern Baptists in the twentieth century a bias against confessions of any sort. The Southern Baptist Convention, however, unlike American Baptists in the North, have adopted a denomination-wide confession of faith, *The Baptist Faith and Message*. This statement, published in 1925 and revised in 1963, more nearly parallels the New Hampshire Confession of 1833 than the Philadelphia Confession with its roots in the Westminster tradition.

Landmarkism was a powerful populist movement which strongly emphasized the independence of each local congregation and Baptist distinctives over against the practices of other denominations. Thus the landmarkers opposed alien immersion (the recognition of believers' baptism in other denominations), open communion (the practice of sharing the Lord's Supper with those of other denominations), and pulpit affiliation (inviting non-Baptist preachers to speak from Baptist pulpits). Although some landmarkers were, and still are, strict Calvinists in their theology, the narrow ecclesiology of the movement as a whole tended to isolate Baptists from other evangelical Christians. By so strictly defining the church as "a local assembly of baptized believers," landmark ecclesiology also denied the catholicity of the church as set forth in the historic Baptist confessions based on the Westminster standards. Significantly, when the *Baptist Faith and Message* was revised in 1963, the article on the church was amended to include the statement: "The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages."

¹⁵ *Annual*, Northern Baptist Convention, 1922, 133.

¹⁶ Quoted, William H. Brackney, " 'Commonly, (Though Falsely) Called...': Reflections on the Search for Baptist Identity," in *Perspectives and Churchmanship: Essays in Honor of Robert G. Torbet*, ed. David M. Scholer (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 81.

Not surprisingly, many landmarkers shied away from acknowledging any linkage between the Baptist tradition and the classic heritage of the Reformation. Instead, they taught a form of Baptist successionism attempting to trace the lineage of true Baptist churches through various dissenting groups throughout the history of the church including the Cathari, the Petrobrusiani, the Donatists, the Montanists, and others with equally questionable theological pedigrees!

Among Southern Baptists hyper-Calvinism took the form of a virulent anti-missionary, anti-evangelistic emphasis. Primitive or "Hard Shell" Baptists were opposed to theological seminaries, Sunday Schools, mission boards, and other cooperative efforts to share the Gospel promiscuously. They saw little need for such strenuous evangelistic efforts, since, from their perspective, it was obviously useless to exhort unconverted sinners to do what they neither could do, nor indeed had any obligation to do! Charles Haddon Spurgeon encountered a similar hyper-Calvinistic movement in nineteenth-century England. He claimed that it had "chilled many churches to the very soul," leading them "to omit the free invitations of the Gospel, and to deny that it is the duty of sinners to believe in Jesus."¹⁷ Spurgeon's own evangelical Calvinism was more typical of Southern Baptist leaders as well. In the tradition of Andrew Fuller, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Luther Rice, and Richard Furman, they continued to affirm both the sovereignty of God in salvation and the obligation of the church to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples everywhere. Nonetheless, the skirmish with hyper-Calvinism left an indelible mark on subsequent Southern Baptist history. Today many Baptists find it difficult to distinguish hyper-Calvinism from the kind of evangelical Calvinism modeled by Spurgeon and embodied in the historic Reformed Baptist confessions.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of Reformed theology among Southern Baptists. While certain skeptics regard this renewed emphasis as a resurgence of hyper-Calvinism, the Westminster confessional tradition does not assert divine sovereignty to the exclusion of human responsibility. Seen in proper perspective, a renewed commitment to the sovereignty of God in salvation, as set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Baptist documents which derive from it, will issue in worship that centers on the glory of God rather than the entertainment of the audience. It will also bring a perspective on history and culture which sees Jesus Christ as Lord of time and eternity. And it will also guard faithful believers against lethargy and laziness, against defection and darkness on every hand. All of this can only result in the building up of the Body of Christ and the setting forth of the glory of God in ever increasing measure.

SOLI DEO GLORIA!

¹⁷ Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1986), 76.