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A CLOSER LOOK AT CONFESSIONS OF FAITH



The Founders Journal



Committed to historic Baptist principles

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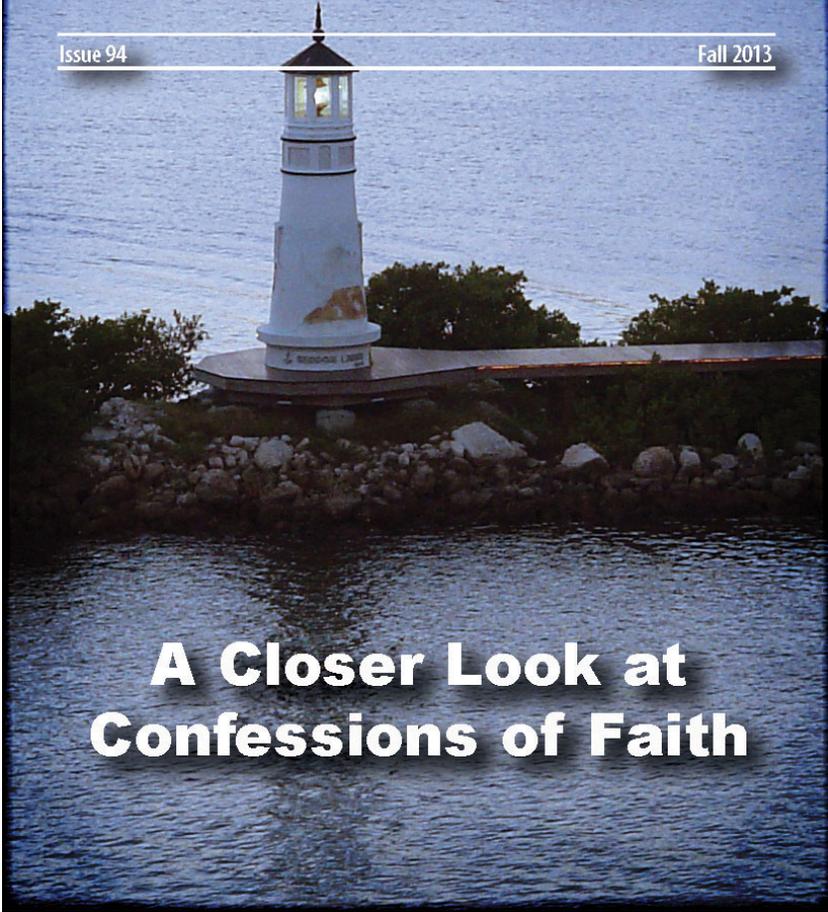
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**A Closer Look at
Confessions of Faith**

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A Closer Look at Confessions of Faith

Editorial Introduction

Ken Puls

Confessions of Faith have long served the church. In them we express together what we believe to be true and affirm the Scriptures to teach. They provide a helpful way to highlight connections and systematically organize the truth of God's Word. They are tools that serve us in explaining and remembering that truth.

But Confessions of Faith also have another significant role. They dot the landscape of church history as strategic guideposts and beacons. They identify Christians of like-mind and like-faith. We can look back at these confessions and see groups of believers united together, declaring together: Here is what matters to us! Here is where we have nailed our colors to the mast! Here are the doctrines we wish to emphasize, clarify and stand upon.

A comparison of confessions of faith can yield some helpful insights in understanding the voice of the church and gauging its health, now and in the past.

In this issue of the *Founders Journal* we take a closer look at some confessions of faith and examine them in light of some specific doctrines. In the first article John English Lee traces the understanding of the Moral Law of God through several confessions, beginning with the *Eighteen Dissertations* of the Anabaptists (1524) through the *New Hampshire Confession* (1833). In the second article Jason Smathers compares the doctrine of man in the 1925 and 1963 editions of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. Finally Tom Hicks reviews the book *The Creedal Imperative* by Carl Trueman and outlines some of the benefits of creedalism.

We pray this issue of the journal will be an encouragement, not just to learn and benefit from the historic confessions of faith, but to grow deeper in our love and understanding of truth as God has revealed it in His Word.

The Moral Law of God

And Baptist Identity

Jon English Lee

The question of the ongoing and binding nature of the Moral Law of God, as particularly summarized in the Ten Commandments, is fiercely debated today.¹ Some want to argue that Christians are, “not bound by the Ten Commandments.”² Others want to argue that the Decalogue is still binding on believers today. Both sides, however, try to cite Baptist confessional history for evidence of their claims. The aim of this paper is to try and shed some light on this debate by tracing Baptist beliefs concerning the Moral Law of God, as articulated in Baptist confessions and American Baptist newspaper articles through the mid-1800s, and to draw some conclusions about the connection between the doctrine of the Moral Law and Baptist identity. Through this study, I will attempt to demonstrate: first, that Baptists have from their beginning believed in the perpetually binding nature of God’s moral commands (i.e., moral law); and second, that the pinnacle of clarity on the doctrine of God’s moral law was in the 17th Century.

FORERUNNER CONFESSIONS³

Anabaptist Confessions

A survey of the Anabaptist Confessions will show that the Anabaptists had begun to think through issues of the law of God and its relation to believers. However, not much was explicitly written concerning the Moral Law of God specifically. Even so, there is clearly evidence for a standard of morality to which all believers are held; it is this moral standard that concerns us here.

Eighteen Dissertations, 1524

Balthasar Hubmaier (Also known as Balthasar Freidberger) was the, “most scholarly and prolific literary exponent of early Anabaptism” (18). Being one of the earliest baptistic confessions, his *Eighteen Dissertations Concerning the Entire Christian Life and of What it Consists* understandably has only introductory statements regarding the moral standards of God. The

most relevant of those statements is in the fourth article: “All works are good which God has commanded us. And all acts which he has forbidden are evil” (21). While he does not specifically mention the Moral Law of God, it is clear he believes (1) that God has spoken concerning moral matters, and (2) believers are bound to follow those commands.

The Schleithem Confession, 1527

On February 24, 1527 the Swiss Brethren gathered at a general conference in Schleithem. This conference resulted in a document entitled *Brotherly Union of a number of Children of God Concerning Seven Articles*, also known as the *Schleithem Confession*. This was not an extensive statement of their doctrine; rather, the seven articles served as, “a defense against the teachings of... antinomianism [i.e., rejection of the law], and a guide for the congregations represented at the conference” (22).

Like the *Eighteen Dissertations*, the *Schleithem Confession* contains no explicit reference to the Moral Law of God; however, like the above confession, it does have many references to a standard of morality. The second article discusses “the ban” (excommunication) and its use against those who have “given themselves to the Lord, to walk in His commandments” (26). The fourth article speaks of the “obedience of faith,” and claims that, “the command of the Lord is clear... be separate from the evil” (27). Finally, in the concluding section, the confession exhorts believers to, “Eliminate from you that which is evil,” and speaks of the grace of God that brings to all men a, “denying [of] ungodliness and worldly lusts” (31).

The Schleithem Confession stands clearly in line with the *Eighteen Dissertations* and its clear use of moral standards as the guide for holiness and the benchmark for judging the use of “the ban.”

Discipline of the Church, How a Christian Ought to Live, 1527

With all the emphasis on a disciplined and regulated church (e.g., ‘the ban’), the Anabaptists drew up a sort of ‘manual’ of church order. This church order, or *The Discipline*, lists several practical articles that help describe how an Anabaptist church should be run.

The Discipline speaks only briefly about morality in the lives of believers. The third article describes the punishment of, “a brother or sister [who] leads a disorderly life.” The sixth article describes positively the same sentiments: “A decent conduct shall be kept among them before everyone and no one shall carelessly conduct himself before the brotherhood both with words or deeds, nor before those who are ‘outside’” (34).

While brief in its discussions of the ethics of the Christian life, *The Discipline* is clearly standing in the Anabaptist tradition that maintains a certain moral benchmark as the standard to which every believer should be judged.

Ridemann's Rechenschaft, 1540

While being held in two different prisons in 1540, Peter Ridemann drew up a great doctrinal work titled *Rechenschaft unserer Religion, Lehre, und Glaube*, which “became ‘the central document’ of the Moravian Anabaptists (38). The first half of the 110-page work deals with the basic articles of their faith, while the latter half covers the practical regulations.

Because of the size of the work, both Lumpkin and McGlothlin simply summarize its contents. According to Franz Heimann’s brief doctrinal summary of the confession, the third article speaks of faith as, “a divine power which renews man and makes him like God in nature, ardent in love and in *keeping His commandments*” (41, emphasis added). In the second article, Ridemann also writes of God as the one who has cast out evil from our heart and therefore we are to “seek, love, hear and keep His Word.” These are the only two clear references to obedience that are found. This “most pretentious Anabaptist document,” despite its considerable size, does not add much to the earlier confessions regarding the Moral Law of God (41).

The Waterland Confession, 1580

Hans de Ries, a native of Flanders and pastor of the Waterlander Church at Middleburg, with the help of Lubbert Gerrits, wrote a, “Confession of faith of forty articles which long served the Waterland Churches” (44). This confession, officially titled *A Brief Confession of the Principal Articles of the Christian Faith*, is considered the second Mennonite Confession of Faith, with an earlier one supposedly having been drawn up in 1577.⁴ Of particular relevance to Baptist history, this confession was reprinted in 1610 at the request of John Smyth. It was also employed to test the agreement of the English and the Mennonites (45).

The confession stands as a significant development from the previous Anabaptist confessions, especially regarding the Law of God. The tenth article speaks of the, “Intolerable burden of the Mosaic Law... was brought to an end in Christ” (49). However, they did not believe that the end of the Law meant to moral constrains on believer. On the contrary, the author speaks of Christ as the “Lawgiver” (article 9) who has, “Demonstrated what the law of Christians is, what the rule and norm of life, and what sort of life and path leads to eternal life” (article 10, 49f.). In the twenty-third article, the author says that believers should live through love, “in all good works, according to the laws and precepts and customs enjoined on him by God through Christ” (54, emphasis added). Clearly, the Anabaptists at Waterlander understood that the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law did not remove moral restraints upon a believer, even if there is not clear delineation between the Moral Law and the ceremonial or civil.

The Dordrecht Confession, 1632

The “Most influential of all Mennonite Confessions,” the *Dordrecht Confession* was adopted on April 21, 1632, at a conference of Flemish and Frisian ministers (61). Its enduring influence can be seen even today as it is still owned by the “Mennonite Church” and other conservative Mennonite bodies in America (62).

The confession declares that, according to the New Testament, “all men without distinction, if they are obedient, through faith, follow, fulfill, and live according to the precepts of the same [New Testament], are His children” (66). Also, after baptism, believers are to “learn and observe all things whatsoever the Son of God taught, left on record, and commanded His followers to do” (article 7, 67).

Even though this confession gives clear primacy to the New Testament commands, it is clear that the Anabaptists drafting this confession believed that the Word of God was to be the ethical standard by which men should be judged, even if explicit articulation was not given regarding the Moral Law of God.

All of the early Anabaptist confessions explain that a believer’s life should be transformed and should be lived according to the Word of God. The major confessions discussed (*Schleitheim*, *Waterland*, and *Dordrecht*) all include sections defending and explaining the church’s role in excommunication. The inclusion of such articles implicitly describes the continuing moral standard that is found only in the Word of God. Despite the lack of clear explanation regarding the Moral Law of God, the trajectory toward greater confessional clarity has been set. This pattern toward greater clarity will begin to accelerate as the Baptist movement begins to grow.

Pioneer English Separatist-Baptist Confessions

A True Confession, 1596

After founding a separatist church in England, Francis Johnson, John Greenwood, and 56 other members were imprisoned in London between winter 1592 and spring 1593 (76). Thanks to a change in the English government’s policy, the church members were allowed to emigrate, though without the leadership of their elders. The newly released congregants moved to Holland, re-gathered the church, and elected Henry Ainsworth as pastor. In 1596, a new creed was drawn up and titled *A True Confession*.

Following in the tradition of the previously described confessions, *A True Confession* has no formal article describing the Moral Law of God. However, the confession does reveal several times the moral obligations, either implicit or explicit, found in scripture: Christ has revealed all that believers need for knowledge and obedience (Article 8); Christ has separated the church from

unbelievers, idolatry, superstition, vanity, works of darkness... (Article 17); and believers are to strive to do the will of God and walk in the obedience of faith (Article 27).

A Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles, by John Smyth, 1609

A group of English Separatists, lead by John Smyth, fled to the Neatherlands in order to avoid persecution. After baptizing himself, Smyth began to regret his decision and sought membership in a Mennonite church. In order to show his doctrinal solidarity, “Smyth seems to have written... a twenty-article Confession of Faith for perusal by the Mennonites and probably sent it along with the application for admission to the Waterland Church of Amsterdam.” This confession is noteworthy among English Separatist confessions prior to 1610 for two reasons: it was anti-paedobaptist and anti-Calvinistic (93).

A Short Confession has twenty short articles, only three of which relate to the law directly. The fourth article speaks of the “law of life,” that is, man was to continue living by keeping the law of God (otherwise known as the Covenant of Works made between God and Adam). The fifth article denies original sin and defines all sin as, “actual and voluntary, viz., a word, a deed, or a design against the law of God” (94). The final reference to the ethical requirements of believers is in Article 11: “true and living faith is distinguished by good works” (95). The brevity and clearly Anabaptistic doctrinal nature does not hide the fact that Smyth certainly believed that man was to be held accountable to the ethical standards of God’s law.

A Short Confession of Faith, 1610

The Waterlanders sent a confession back to the Smyth group for their examination. The confession, “practically a reproduction of that of Gerits and de Ries of 1580, with articles XIX and XXII omitted,” was signed by forty-three of the English. Because of this confession’s similarity to the *Waterland Confession* described above, it will not be examined further.

English Declaration at Amsterdam, 1611

Another English pastor in Amsterdam, Thomas Helwys, disagreed with Smyth’s doctrinal turns and decided to write a confession of faith to defend the truth of God, to enlighten some of his own members, and to “clear those represented of unjust charges.” This confession renounces Arminian views of sin and the will, but is anti-Calvinistic on the doctrine of atonement (107).

The *English Declaration* is significant in this study because it makes the first explicit mention of the Moral Law of God: “That everie church ought... not labor in their callings according to the equitie off the moral law, which CHRIST came not to abolish, but to fulfill. Exod. 20.8,

&c.” (Article 19, sic). This is the first confession that makes explicit the Moral Law category; furthermore, it seems to also imply the perpetually binding nature of that Moral Law.

Propositions and Conclusions, 1612

After the death of their leader and having been abandoned by the Helwys party, Smyth’s party continued to seek admission to the Waterlander church. Smyth’s followers responded to Helwys’ confession by issuing another confession. This confession, *Propositions and Conclusions concerning True Christian Religion, containing a Confession of Faith of certain English people, living at Amsterdam*, contained 102 articles.

This confession, like the ones immediately preceding it, speaks of Christ as the only “law-giver” (Article 29). Relying on language from Romans 3, Article 63 states that, “the new creature although he be above the law and scriptures, yet he can do nothing against the law or scriptures, bur rather all his doings shall serve the confirming and establishing of the law” (124). Furthermore, Article 68 defines faith as, “knowledge in the mind of the *doctrine of the law* and gospel contained in... the Old and New Testament” (125, emphasis added). This is noteworthy because it links knowledge of the law as a necessary component of faith.

The early English Separatist confessions mark significant advancement in the clarity of articles concerning the Moral Law of God. In this group we see the first mention of the Moral Law (*English Declaration*) and the first positive link between knowledge of the Law and true faith (*Propositions and Conclusions*). As the Baptists are forced to more clearly delineate their beliefs, the articulation of the doctrine of the Moral Law of God increasingly more precise. With this growing doctrinal precision, we can begin to see how the confession writers saw a link between true faith and the Law of God.

Early English Baptist Associational Confessions

The London Confession, 1644

A group of seven Particular Baptist Churches decided to publish a confession of faith in order to distinguish themselves from both the General Baptists and the Anabaptists (132). This confession, *The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists*, also known as the *First London Confession*, is the first Baptist confession to claim immersion as the preferred mode of baptism. It is clearly Calvinistic in doctrine, and “it largely anticipates the Westminster Confession, ‘but with more rhetorical expansion and greater tenderness of tone’” (134).

This confession follows the pattern of many before it by speaking in general terms regarding the ethics of believers: of “Christian duties” (Article 7); that believers can find all that is needful “to know, believe, and obey” in the in the “Prophesie of Christ” (Article 15, sic); that the power of conversion carries on “the soule still through all duties” (Article 16, sic); that believers “presseth after a heavenly and Evangelicall perfection, in obedience to all the Commands which Christ... has prescribed to him” (Article 29, sic).

One article of particular note claims that the offering of the gospel to sinners is “absolutely free, no way requiring... terrors of the Law, or preceding Ministry of the Law.” This appears to be contradicting the role of the law as necessary for faith that had previously been articulated (e.g., *English Declaration*, Article 19). However, because most of the represented churches that signed the *First London Confession* signed the *Second London Confession* (discussed below), it can be assumed that a denial of the necessity of the Moral Law of God is not being insinuated here.⁵ Rather, the drafters are refuting the notion of ‘terrors of the law,’ that is, physical or mental manifestations of contrition or remorse not commanded by scripture, in order for a sinner to be found truly penitent. According to one author, “modification of the strong preparationism of Thomas Hooker’s scheme of evangelism was more the concern than a rejection of any use of the Law in evangelism.”⁶ The way that the rest of this confession speaks of the use of the moral commands of God, combined with the doctrinal solidarity of both the London Confessions and the signers of both confessions make it clear that this *First London Confession* stands in the tradition of earlier and later Baptist confessions that affirm the ongoing necessity of the Moral Law of God in the lives of believers.

The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations, 1651

At a General Baptist associational meeting in 1651, probably held in Leicester, thirty churches, each represented by two delegates, adopted a confession called *The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations, Gathered According to the Primitive Pattern* (160). This confession is important “because it is the first General Baptist statement representing the view of more than one church.” The confession, shortened to *Thirty Congregations*, reveals “no consistently Arminian system... rather, some traditional emphases of Calvinism are set forth” (161). For example, the doctrine of free will is rejected in Article 25.

Regarding the moral commands of scripture, the confession makes many typical claims as well as a couple interesting ones. The typical references to Christ as lawmaker (Article 28) and the necessity of obedience to scriptures’ moral commands are both present (Articles 42, 45, and 52). Interesting additions are given as well: Article 12 speaks about the “Lawes [sic] or commands” that God gave to Adam and Article 28 claims that Christ is the, “Law giver to every man that liveth in the world, in that he giveth every man therein some measure of light.” These two claims mark a significant advancement in the doctrine of the moral law of God because they claim that, at least in some measure, Adam knew of the moral requirements of God and that the Moral Law of God is given to every man, saved or not. These are small steps toward the later

confessional clarification given regarding the universality and perpetuity of the Moral Law of God.

The True Gospel-Faith, 1654

By the mid-1650s General Baptists in London grew increasingly concerned with the influence of Quakerism in Baptist circles. A result of their growing concern was *The True Gospel-Faith Witnessed by the Prophets and Apostles, And Collected into Thirty Articles, Presented to the world as the present Faith and Practice of the Church of Christ*. The confession is perhaps the “best picture of the reaction of Baptist to the first serious effort of the Quakers to win London” (176).

While the confession contains the usual references to the need for holiness (Article 15), excommunication (Article 21), and perseverance in the “Commandments of God” (Article 29), the most telling aspect of this confession regarding their views on the Moral Law is not actually in the confession itself. The main publisher of the confession, John Griffith, published a pamphlet against the Quakers that, among other things, accused them of “rejecting the Law of the Lord” (173). That antinomianism, or rejection of the Law of God, would be one of the heretical charges leveled against Quakers proves that the binding nature of the Moral Law of God was clearly an important part of the General Baptists’ doctrine.

The Somerset Confession, 1656

General Baptists were not the only ones to produce a confession refuting the influence of Quakerism. Penned primarily by hands of the “great Particular Baptist apostle to West of England,” Thomas Collier, *A Confession of the Faith of Several Churches of Christ In the County of Somerset, and of some Churches in the Counties neer adjacent* [sic] was the Particular Baptists’ response to this new invading heresy (184). This confession probably attempts to unite all Baptists, General and Particular, and resulted in the weakening of the Quaker influence among Baptists (187).

Keeping in mind the general charge of antinomianism leveled against the Quakers, Collier continued the pattern of describing Christ as “our Prophet [who]... hath given us the scriptures... as a rule and direction... for faith and practice,” and Christ as our “law-giver... [who] hath given rules unto us, by the which he ruleth over us.” Not only has he given us rules, Collier extends the usual language regarding obedience to include our affections: Believers should, “bow before him [Christ] submitting ourselves to him alone in all his commands with joy” (Article 18). This is the most significant contribution of the *Somerset Confession* to the Baptist clarification and articulation of the doctrine of the Moral Law of God: that the Law itself is not an impediment to true faith; rather, when viewed properly, the ethical commands of God can and should be an opportunity of joyful obedience (Articles 18 and 23).

English Baptist General Confessions

The Standard Confession, 1660

Against the backdrop of many heinous accusations being leveled against them (e.g., opposing the magistracy, countenancing with Quakers, and desiring to destroy those who differed from Baptists...), the General Baptist assembly drew up a confession in 1660 to defend themselves from unjustified doctrinal and practical accusations (202). Being more of a true confession than a statement of practice, *The Standard Confession* eventually, after several revisions and expansions, become one of the most influential confessions in General Baptist life, even being used in American Baptist life (206).

The Standard Confession's statement on Christ is “brief” and “vague,” which allows the article to become, “a bone of future contention” (204). Brevity notwithstanding, the article is clear that Christ “is most worthy their [believers’] constant affections and subjection to all his Commandments” (Article 6). Regardless of the confession’s strict use of scriptural language, which leaves the interpretation up to the reader and leaves much clarity to be desired, and the somewhat poor arrangement of the subjects, *The Standard Confession* still stands in line with the previous confessions that all assert the moral commands of scripture are still binding for believers.

The Assembly or Second London Confession, 1677 and 1688

By the end of the 1670’s, both General and Particular Baptists began to reach the pinnacle of clarity regarding their beliefs about the Moral Law of God and its perpetuity. The Particular Baptists, in the wake of much persecution, decided to “show their agreement with Presbyterians and Congregationalists by making the Westminster Confession the basis of a new confession of their own.” Agreement with the 1644 Confession was cited in the introductory note, “but scarcity of copies and general ignorance of that Confession offered, were given as reasons for preparing the new confession” (217). The original signers could hardly have ever imagined the influence of this new confession; the *Second London Confession*, as it came to be known, would eventually be amended and adopted as the Philadelphia Confession, one of the most influential confessions in the New World.

The confession itself represents the most significant advance in the articulation of Baptist beliefs regarding the doctrine of the Moral Law of God to date. An entire article is given specifically devoted to explanation, defense, and application of the Law. The usual references to required obedience to Christ’s commands are found (Articles 13, 14, and 16). The significant advances, however, are found in Article 19 entitled, “Of the Law of God.” The article begins with a reference to the “Law of universal obedience” that was written on Adam’s heart (Article

19.1).⁷ This, “same Law that was first written in the heart of man, continued to be a perfect rule of Righteousness after the fall; & was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in Ten Commandments and written in two Tablets” (19.2). These moral commands are not limited to the Old Covenant; rather, “The moral law doth for ever bind all... Neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolved, but much strengthen this obligation” (19.5). The confession does make clear that believers are not “under the Law, as a Covenant of *Works*, to be thereby Justified or condemned.” Believers are not bound to keep the law as a means of justification, but are called to follow the Moral Law as a path toward sanctification: “it [the Moral Law] directs and binds them, to walk accordingly discovering also the sinfull [sic] pollutions of their Natures, Hearts and Lives... [that] they may come to further Conviction of, Humiliation for, and Hatred against Sin... together with a clearer sight of the need they have of *Christ* and the perfection of his Obedience.” The Moral Law is not only used to expose sin and point to Christ. In the regenerate, the Law is also used, “to restrain their Corruptions” by forbidding sin and by the “Threatenings” made. Conversely, the promises made in it, “shew them [believers] Gods approbation of Obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon their performance thereof.” This is no prosperity gospel message, however, for the writers make clear that these blessings are “not due to them by the Law as a Covenant of Works” (19.6).

Finally, in order to refute those who may be tempted to call this whole scheme ‘legalism,’ the writers of the *Second London Confession* added two statements which both conclude this article and summarize it nicely: (1) “mans doing Good and refraining from Evil, because the Law encourageth to the one and deterreth from the other, is no Evidence of his boing under the Law and not under Grace” (19.6); and, “Neither are the forementioned uses of the Law contrary to the Grace of the Gospel; but do sweetly comply with it.” And to be sure, the drafters of this confession made sure to explain that this was no mere fleshly activity: “the Spirit of Christ subduing and inabling the Will of man to that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God revealed in the Law, requireth to be done.”

Clearly this confession significantly improves the clarity of articulation of Particular Baptists regarding the doctrine of the Moral Law of God. This standard would be used in countless churches and associations worldwide, either verbatim or with slight modifications, for centuries to come.

The Orthodox Creed, 1678

Not to be outdone, the General Baptists followed the Particular Baptist example and drew up another confession in 1678 titled *An Orthodox Creed, or A Protestant Confession of Faith, Being an Essay to Unite and Confirm All Protestants in the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Religion, Against the Errors and Heresies of Rom* (300). With particular focus to refuting Roman Catholic heresy, the drafters of the confession also sought to “refute the Hoffmanite Christology” that was being preached in England (298). The *Orthodox Creed* loosely follows the form of the *Westminster Confession*, but takes much more freedom than the *Second London*. The doctrine of the confession “approaches

Calvinism more closely than any other General Baptist confession,” and has been praised as, “noteworthy as an early attempt at compromise between the two great systems of theology [Calvinism and Arminianism], thus anticipating the work of Andrew Fuller and others” (299).

The *Orthodox Creed*, much like the *Second London*, contains more about the Moral Law of God than any previous General Baptist Confession. It speaks of Adam “having the law written in his heart” (Article 11), and that Adam’s sin was essentially transgressing the Ten Commandments: “but he [Adam] sinning against the covenant, which consisted in two roots, viz. To love God above all things; and his neighbour as himself; it being the substance of that law which was afterwards written in two tablets of stone, and delivered upon mount Sinai” (Article 13). This fall, which resulted in “concupiscence” remaining even in the regenerate (Article 15), left man with ongoing need for instruction and correction. Article 26 on Sanctification and good works states that believers are to press toward heaven, “in evangelical obedience to all the commands that Christ, their king, and law-giver, hath commanded in his word.” How does man know which commands to follow? The article concluded with “The ten commandments, as handed forth by Christ the mediator, are a rule of life to a believer, and shew us our duty to God and man, as also our need of the grace of God, and merit of Christ” (Article 26).

This General Baptist confessional response to the *Second London Confession*, while differing in a few places related to soteriology, shows almost complete solidarity regarding the Moral Law of God. The agreement between these two contemporary expressions of Baptist thought on this doctrine shows that virtually all Baptists at this time agreed in the perpetually binding nature of the Moral Law of God.

A Short Confession or a Brief Narrative of Faith, 1691

A small group of Western England Particular Baptists, not wanting to join with the 1689 Assembly in London, decided to produce a confession to prove they were doctrinally aligned with Baptists and to remove themselves from suspicion of heresy. While their confession, *A Short Confession or A Brief Narrative of Faith*, is noteworthy because it tried to speak to both General and Particular Baptists, it did not find use beyond the west of England, and for that reason will only briefly be addressed here (349).

The confession adds little to the Baptist development of the doctrine of the Moral Law of God, but certainly is still in line with its predecessors. Using typical language of God as divine Law-maker (Article 4), the law as a gracious gift (Article 9), knowledge of the law as necessary for repentance (Article 11), and the law as necessary and binding for sanctification (Article 16), this confession is clearly standing in the tradition of the Particular and General Baptist confessions that came before it.

Articles of Religion in the New Connexion, 1770

“To Indicate their doctrinal position and to guard against the prevalent Socinianism,” the New Connexion of General Baptists, formed in 1770, drew up a brief six article statement of faith. This group, led by Daniel Taylor out of Wesleyanism, had as the design of the New Connexion to “revive experimental religion or primitive Christianity in faith and practice” (355).

Probably as a result of their emphasis on “experimental religion,” this group’s brief statement of faith includes a surprisingly thorough article titled “On the Nature and Perpetual Obligation of the Moral Law,” worth quoting in full:

“We believe, that the moral law not only extends to the outward actions of the life, but to all the powers and faculties of the mind, to every desire, temper and thought; that it demands the entire devotion of all the powers and faculties of both body and soul to God: or, in our Lord's words, to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength: —that this law is of perpetual duration and obligation, to all men, at all times, and in all places or parts of the world. And, we suppose that this law was obligatory to Adam in his perfect state—was more clearly revealed in the ten commandments—and more fully explained in many other parts of the bible.”

This brief 6 article confession, remarkable for its comprehensive statement on Moral Law, shows complete solidarity with preceding General and Particular Baptist confessions regarding the Moral Law and its perpetually binding nature.

American Baptist Confessions

The Philadelphia Confession, 1742

The American Baptists had no Calvinistic confession when the first churches were being formed in New England. However, as the use of confessions grew in the 18th Century, Calvinistic Baptists led the way in terms of confessions and numbers of churches (363). The most famous American Baptist confession, commonly referred to as “the Baptist Confession” even into the 1800s (369), was the *Philadelphia Confession*.

Because the confession is essentially the same as the *Second London* confession, with the addition of articles on hymn-singing and the laying on of hands, discussion of it will be minimal. Carrying on the tradition of the *Second London Confession*, the *Philadelphia Confession* obviously held to a strong doctrine of the Moral Law of God and held that Law as binding for all believers for all time.

New Hampshire Confession, 1833

Seeking to “restate its Calvinism in very moderate tones,” the New Hampshire Baptist Convention prepared a statement of faith and practice now known as *The New Hampshire Confession* (376). This confession also found much use in Baptist churches subscribing to Landmarkism because of its silence on the doctrine of the universal church (378). The confession held a wide influence and was adopted by several associations and conventions.⁸

The Confession has an entire article devoted to a discussion of the subject of law and its relation to the Gospel. Entitled, “Of the Harmony of the Law and the Gospel,” Article 12 of the confession claims that the, “Law of God is the eternal and unchangeable rule of his moral government.” One of the “great end[s] of the Gospel,” this article claims, is to deliver fallen men from their love of sin, “and to restore them through a Mediator to unfeigned obedience to the holy law.” While not having the clarity of articulation of the doctrine as the Second London or Philadelphia Confessions, the New Hampshire clearly stands in line with the tradition and continues to see the Moral Law of God as perpetually binding in on believers.

Baptist Newspaper Articles

Another means of gauging Baptist beliefs on doctrine is to examine the Baptist state newspapers that began to grow in popularity as American Baptists began to grow in numbers and prominence. Many of these state papers were prompted to print articles by the presence of several heresies and controversies (e.g., Campbellism, revivalism, Landmarkism). In light of such attacks on biblical truth, the papers began explaining and defending historic Baptist doctrine to their readership; and among those articles were many explaining and defending the perpetually binding nature of the Moral Law of God, as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Because of the vast number articles from a vast number of papers and because of space limitations, only a few representative articles will be mentioned here.

The *Western Baptist* published an article entitled “The Law of God— No. 1,” which traces a number of, “errors in doctrine that prevail” specifically because of wrong teaching about the Law of God (i.e., the Ten Commandments).⁹ The author explains that the Law of God is spiritual, perfect, unlimited (“extend[s] to every creature in the universe”), immutable, and it brings punishment if broken.

Another *Western Baptist* article claims that the Decalogue is the, “epitome of divine laws by which human beings in every age are governed.”¹⁰ Addressing the problems present in Campbellite theology,¹¹ specifically their rejection of the Moral Law of God, this author is clearly standing in the tradition of earlier Baptists that defended the ongoing and binding nature of God’s Law.

Another review and refutation of Campbellite theology was written by a Mr. Clopton in 1831.¹² This *Christian Index* article, “Remarks on the Moral Law and the origin and nature of saving faith, in contradistinction to that taught in the Campbellite Creed,” is a multi-page review that confronts many of the errors of Campbellite theology. Among the errors listed and refuted is their denial of the perpetual binding nature of the Moral Law of God. Mr. Clopton lays out the traditional Baptist position that the Moral Law of God, as summarized by the Ten Commandments, is still binding on believers today.

Perhaps illustrating most decisively the link between mid-19th century Baptists and their English predecessors on the doctrine of the Moral Law of God, Jesse Mercer and the *Christian Index* of Georgia published a series of articles covering all 32 sections of the *Second London Confession* of 1689.¹³ The republishing and explaining of this confession, which contains probably the clearest articulation of the doctrine of the Moral Law of God out of any of the Baptist confessions, perhaps most vividly demonstrates that mid-18th century Baptists in America still believed that God’s Moral Law was still binding on believers.

That many Baptists felt the need to confront the many heresies of the day, specifically regarding the ongoing and binding nature of the Moral Law of God, further confirms the consensus among Baptists regarding the Law. As the number and variety of Baptist confessions continued to grow, the Baptist newspapers of the early 19th century describe almost universal agreement on the doctrine of God’s Moral Law.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of our survey of Baptist beliefs through the mid-19th century concerning the Moral Law of God, a few conclusions may be drawn regarding the Law and Baptist Identity. First, Baptists from the beginning not only had much to say regarding the Moral Law of God, but were also ardent defenders of its continued usefulness. Some today (e.g., Wells and Zaspel)¹⁴ want to argue that the Moral Law of God is no longer binding; some even go so far as to reject the moral/ceremonial/civil distinctions altogether as unbiblical and unhelpful.¹⁵ Their hermeneutic is that the Old Testament commands are only binding if they are explicitly repeated in the New Testament. However, as has been shown, this interpretive notion was not with Baptists from the beginning. Baptists have had a very high regard for the *entire* moral law of God from the beginning. Because this interpretive method is new and deviates from the path set before us in Baptist history, modern theologians should travel with extra caution and should be aware that they are implicitly saying that most Baptist theologians have been wrong on this point (or, as it has been shown, at least the first 200 years of Baptist theologians (and others, i.e., Reformed). Historical precedence does not mean that modern theologians are necessarily incorrect, but the undeniable burden of proof is on them to show that many generations of biblical interpreters were incorrect about the perpetuity of the moral law of God.

A second observation that can be seen is that Baptists' clarity on the Moral Law of God seems to be tied to their ability (or desire) to comprehensively articulate their beliefs; that is, the more thorough confessions seem to most clearly articulate their beliefs concerning the Moral Law of God. Furthermore, there seems to be a highpoint (i.e., an apex in clarity of articulation) in Baptist life regarding the clarity of moral law articulation: during the 17th century (*Second London and Orthodox Creed*). This observation shows in both Particular and General Baptist traditions. There is complete agreement between the two very different parties on this point.

As the term Baptist becomes more inclusive (or elastic) the clear articulation of belief regarding the moral law of God has seemed to decline. The earliest Baptists seemed less clear regarding the Moral Law. This lack of clarity could have been because they were uncertain of their beliefs on the matter, which could be an area of further research, or because they were more concerned with articulating how they were and were not in line with other theological traditions, (e.g., soteriology and ecclesiology) and not as concerned with articulating doctrines in which they were in complete agreement with already established ecclesial traditions (e.g., Moral Law). After the apex of clarity, the confessions tended to slide further into 'lack of clarity' regarding the Moral Law. This results in most modern confessions completely lacking a statement about the Moral Law of God.¹⁶ Hopefully this is a trend that will reverse.¹⁷

¹ I use the term "moral law" of God to refer to the moral standards revealed by God and placed upon man, most clearly summarized in the "Ten Commandments" (e.g., Exodus 20). By using such a term I am already assuming the traditional categories of the law divided into moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects. I am also assuming that the civil and ceremonial aspects of the Old Covenant law have been abolished. A full defense of the tri-fold division of the law, as well as the abrogation of the civil and ceremonial law, is outside the scope of this article.

² Peter John Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: a Biblical-theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 513.

³ The subheadings of this paper and the confessions cited are drawn from William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed. / revised by Bill J. Leonard (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011). All further references to Lumpkin will be made in parenthetical citations.

⁴ Lumpkin cites Horsch, *Mennonite History*, 1:246.

⁵ In researching the interpretation of this article I discovered an ongoing debate over the unity between the two London Confessions. Apparently, some try to argue that the First London is the ‘more Baptist’ confession. Many ‘New Covenant’ theologians want to try and claim the First London as their confessional heritage and reject the Second London, because of its clear articulation of the Moral Law’s perpetuity and its assumed Covenant Theology. For a persuasive list of arguments in favor of doctrinal unity between the two London Confessions, see: James Renihan, “Confessing the Faith in 1644 and 1689,” *The Reformed Reader*, <http://www.reformedreader.org/ctf.htm> (accessed April 15, 2013); or, Richard P. And Anthony Mattia Belcher, *A Discussion of the Seventeenth Century Particular Baptist Confession of Faith* (Southbridge, MA: Crowne Publications, Inc., 1990). For help with the interpretation of this article and the suggestion of sources, I am indebted to Dr. Tom Hicks, Pastor of Discipleship at Morningview Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL.

⁶ Tom Nettles, *Baptists: Beginning in Britain*, vol. 1 (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2005), 142.

⁷ See also the above discussion of Article 12 in *Thirty Congregations*.

⁸ E.g., General Association of Baptist Churches (now the American Baptist Association), General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, and the Southern Baptist Convention (who adopted a revised and amended version of the *New Hampshire Confession*) See Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 378.

⁹ “The Law of God—No. 1,” *The Western Baptist*, Vol. 1, No.6 (February, 1831), 44.

¹⁰ *Western Baptist*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (January 1831).

¹¹ Regarding Campbellites and refuting their rejection of the Ten Commandments, see also: J. M. Peck, “Remarks,” *The Western Recorder*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 1830).

¹² Clopton, “Remarks on the Moral Law and the origin and nature of saving faith, in contradistinction to that taught in the Campbellite Creed,” *Christian Index*, Vol. 4, No. 7 (February 12, 1831), 100.

¹³ The series began with: “Our Old Confession of Faith,” *Christian Index*, Vol. 45, No. 7 (November 7, 1839).

¹⁴ Tom Wells and Fred G Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), 151.

¹⁵ Ibid. See also: Peter John Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: a Biblical-theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 355.

¹⁶ E.g., *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* of the Southern Baptist Convention, or the *Identity Statement* of the American Baptist Churches in the USA (510ff).

¹⁷ A few notable exceptions do exist. See in Lumpkin’s *Baptist Confessions* the *Sweedish Confession* of 1861 (426). See also, McGlothlin’s, *Baptist Confessions* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911): the *German Baptist Confession* of 1908 (330) and the *Baptist Confessions of French Churches* (360).

The Deterioration of the Baptist Faith and Message

The 1963 Revision of the Doctrine of Man

Jason Smathers

On May 9, 1963, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted the 1963 revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. Among the changes in the revision, section three was renamed from “The Fall of Man” to simply “Man” and a subtle but significant change was made to the sentence concerning the state of man’s depravity and the imputation of Adam’s guilt to his posterity.

The 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* reads:

whereby his posterity inherit a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin, are under condemnation, and as soon as they are capable of moral action, become actual transgressors.

The 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* revised this sentence as follows:

whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin, and as soon as they are capable of moral action become transgressors and are under condemnation.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The 1963 revision to the *Baptist Faith and Message* moves from a clear statement of imputed guilt to an ambiguous statement that can be interpreted multiple ways. Further, the language concerning man’s inherited corruption is softened and a statement concerning the effect of Adam’s sin on the environment is added.

In the original 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*, the descendants of Adam inherit “a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin.” Whereas in the revised 1963 version, man inherits from Adam “a nature and an environment inclined toward sin.”

The 1963 revision includes a statement on the corrupted environment being passed down, which was not included in the original. Although Southern Baptists then and now would agree

that the environment has been corrupted because of Adam's sin, this is a statement on man, not on his environment. Further, the 1963 revision has clearly attempted to lessen the degree in which mankind is affected by the sin of Adam. Including a statement on the environment allows one to assume that the sinful nature of man is at least in part caused by living in a sinful environment. In the 1963 revision, man simply has "a nature... inclined toward sin." The original 1925 statement clearly uses much stronger language, ascribing to man a corrupt nature that is not only inclined to sin, but has sin for a master. The original language shows man is "in bondage to sin."

The 1963 revision becomes ambiguous concerning imputed guilt. The 1925 version is clear that mankind is "under condemnation" as a result of Adam's sin. However, the 1963 revision can be interpreted as mankind being under condemnation as the result of Adam's sin or as a result of each man's own personal transgressions.

An interpretation faithful to the clear meaning of the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* would be:

whereby his posterity inherit: (1) a nature and an environment inclined toward sin, (2) and as soon as they are capable of moral action become transgressors (3) and are under condemnation. (Italics added)

In this first reading, man is under condemnation as one of three things inherited from Adam due to his sin.

However, a more plain reading of the revision is not faithful to the clear meaning of the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*:

whereby his posterity inherit: (1) a nature and an environment inclined toward sin, (2) and as soon as they are capable of moral action become transgressors and are under condemnation. (Italics added)

In this second reading, man inherits two things from Adam. Being under condemnation is not inherited from Adam, but a result of man becoming a transgressor himself after being capable of moral action.

Herschel Hobbs, then president of the Southern Baptist Convention and Chairman of the committee that revised the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1963, appears to have made this revision late in the process. His papers, now at the Southern Baptist Historical Library, include a typed draft copy of the proposed 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*. This draft copy shows the 1925 language on imputed guilt is in type and the 1963 language added in hand writing indicating a late revision in the process.

A. J. Smith, who wrote a doctoral dissertation on the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, summarizes the edits on man: "In the end, Article III moved from being a tightly worded expression of the Calvinistic view of man's sinfulness to an article open to widely divergent theological interpretation. One can read it through either a Calvinist or New Haven lens on depravity and find it acceptable."¹

“New Haven theology postulated voluntary sin as a moral disposition or tendency.”² This theology was employed by Charles Finney, an evangelist known to have based his gospel invitations on an assumption of the free will of man. He and his contemporaries introduced into their evangelistic efforts “new measures” —measures that focused on the natural ability of man to turn toward Christ. New Haven theology “viewed individuals as free moral agents. Finney believed strict Calvinism denied the very possibility of salvation by removing human ability to respond to grace.”³

WHY A REVISION?

Southern Baptists were in the midst of controversy in 1963, primarily over teaching in their seminaries that presumed a different view of the Bible than the majority of Southern Baptists in the pews. An overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists affirmed that all Scripture is God breathed and inspired so that every word is entirely trustworthy. Meanwhile, many of their seminary professors were teaching differently. It was proposed that the *Baptist Faith and Message* should be examined and updated in light of the majority position of Southern Baptists of the day that would then direct them on how to deal with the controversy.

Throughout history, Christians have written what they believe to be an accurate summary of biblical truth in the form of a statement of faith. Many scholars speculate that we even have a biblical example for the use of confessions in Hebrews 13:8. William Lane says “the confession could be an originally independent acclamation.”⁴ It is possible that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) was a very early confession of faith.

Statements of faith have never been comprehensive for all matters of faith, rather, Christians have left this role for the Scriptures alone. Instead, history has shown a pattern of theological controversy answered in the form of a statement of faith. When Arius challenged the traditional understanding of Christ’s two natures, human and divine, the church responded with the *Nicene Creed*. Seventy years later, another error concerning the natures of Christ was being taught and another statement of faith was established by the church, this time it was *The Definition of Chalcedon*.

In 1925, America was in the midst of a general attitude against the supernatural. This was the era of the famous Scopes “monkey trials” in which creation and evolution proponents fought over school curricula. The preamble to the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* includes the following statement describing the need for a confession of faith for Southern Baptist use:

The present occasion for a reaffirmation of Christian fundamentals is the prevalence of naturalism in the modern teaching and preaching of religion. Christianity is supernatural in its origin and history. We repudiate every theory of religion which denies the supernatural elements in our faith.⁵

When the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* was drafted, the committee began with a statement of faith already widely used in Southern Baptist Churches as they explain in their preamble:

In pursuance of the instructions of the Convention, and in consideration of the general denominational situation, your committee have decided to recommend the New Hampshire Confession of Faith, revised at certain points, and with some additional articles growing out of present needs, for approval by the Convention, in the event a statement of the Baptist faith and message is deemed necessary at this time.

This tradition of revising a previous statement of faith goes back further than the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* (1833). The *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* was adopted from the 1689 *London Baptist Confession of Faith*, although in a form far more brief and vague on many points than the 1689 before it. When the framers of the 1689 (Second) *London Baptist Confession of Faith* sought to revise the 1644 (First) *London Confession*, they borrowed and adapted wording from the Presbyterian 1646 *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

The 1963 committee follows a long tradition of revising an existing confession of faith rather than starting from scratch. Further, the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* committee invited later revision:

That we do not regard [the confessions in the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message] as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future Baptist should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time.

Southern Baptists in 1963 found it wise and expedient to adopt a revision of their statement of faith because of a controversy that began two years prior.

In 1961, Ralph Elliott published *The Message of Genesis*. In *The Message of Genesis*, Elliott proposes that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are not actual historical accounts, but rather represent deeper theological facts.⁶ Elliott said he “just cannot buy” that God created the world in seven literal twenty-four hour days.⁷ Elliott also took the position that Adam is not a historical man. Elliott taught that Adam is a metaphor for all mankind.⁸ Elliott was a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, MO. These views were being taught to Southern Baptist seminary students at a school funded with Southern Baptist cooperative program dollars and *The Message of Genesis* was being printed by The SBC’s publishing arm, Broadman Press.

An early response to Elliott’s work came from K. Owen White. In his response, White referred to himself as “a graduate of Southern Seminary and having served as pastor of Southern Baptist Churches for more than 30 years.”⁹ White’s response was titled “There is Death on the Pot!” and it was printed in most state Baptist newspapers.¹⁰ White cited many examples of heterodoxy from *The Message of Genesis*, including statements refuting the common understanding of biblical inerrancy.

White minced no words, stating: “The book from which I quoted is liberalism, pure and simple! It stems from the rationalistic theology of Wellhausen and his school, which led Germany to become a materialistic godless nation.” Elliott and his defenders clung to a principal of “academic freedom.” White responds to this claim as well:

If the appeal is made for “academic freedom,” let it be said that we gladly grant any man the right to believe what he wants to—but, we do not grant him the right to believe and express views in conflict with our historic position concerning the Bible as the Word of God while he is teaching in one of our schools, built and supported by Baptist funds.¹¹

Prior to the 1962 Southern Baptist Convention, Southern Baptist leaders anticipated a possible “explosion” that they hoped to avoid by devising a plan before the convention. Hobbs invited Porter Routh and Albert McClellan to a meet with him to address this issue.¹² Routh was serving as Treasurer of the Southern Baptist Convention and Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee.¹³ McClellan was serving as program planning secretary for the Executive Committee.¹⁴

In that meeting, Routh said, “Some people feel that Southern Baptists are becoming more liberal in theology. If so, we should know it. It seems that the best way to determine that would be to have a committee study the 1925 statement of ‘The Baptist Faith and Message.’” With Hobbs and McClellan in agreement, they had the beginnings of their plan.¹⁵

Initially Hobbs planned to form a committee consisting of himself as chairman, every state SBC president as a member, and the presidents of the six seminaries as members. Prior to announcing the plan at the 1962 convention, Hobbs met with the editors of the state Baptist newspapers who insisted that the seminary presidents not be involved. They argued that the seminary presidents were under investigation and should therefore not be part of the investigation. Hobbs agreed to move forward with a committee of himself and the state SBC presidents without the seminary presidents, but noted that the purpose was not to investigate the seminaries, but to determine if the current statement of faith is an accurate representation of the convention of its day.¹⁶

At the 1962 convention, Southern Baptists considered a motion to affirm their faith in the Bible and to instruct the Sunday School Board to discontinue printing Elliott’s *The Message of Genesis*. White made this motion, which passed, but was quickly ruled out of order because the matter was not on that session’s agenda. The motion was broken into two by Hobbs and placed on the agenda for the following morning. The motion to “reaffirm their faith in the entire Bible as the authoritative, authentic, infallible Word of God” passed. However, the motion to instruct the Sunday School Board to discontinue printing *The Message of Genesis* failed. Rather than instruct the Sunday School Board, they were asked to consider the matter on their own. In their next board meeting, they decided to discontinue printing *The Message of Genesis*.¹⁷

WHY THIS REVISION?

The purpose of the 1963 revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* was to determine if the theological positions of Southern Baptists remained conservative as stated in the 1925 version of the *Baptist Faith and Message* or, if the convention was in fact becoming liberal. Although the statement being examined had nothing to do with liberalism, the committee also took the opportunity to completely review the statement and update it for clarity. However, they claimed their revisions were not changing any doctrinal beliefs.

Hobbs determined that the men gathered to serve on the 1963 revision committee were conservatives. Hobbs writes to Reverend W. Marion Lewter, moderator of Indian Creek Baptist Association of Tennessee, “Let me assure you that should changes be made in the 1925 statement they will not be toward liberalism ... I do know the tone of the thinking of the brethren. This is a conservative group of men.”¹⁸

Although Hobbs has determined that there has been no shift in the faith, there is no evidence to suggest that simply reaffirming the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* was even considered at this point. Hobbs told one church member concerned about revising the *Baptist Faith and Message* that “this does not mean in any sense that we are changing our faith.”¹⁹

When the committee solicited feedback on the first draft of their revised Baptist Faith and Message, Mercer University’s department of Christianity stated that they were unable to completely review the entire document, but wanted to point out some “especially serious problems.” Among these was “a statement which is Pelegian” according to the letter from Mercer University.

The section of the first draft of 1963 revision in question reads: “VI. Salvation – Salvation involves the redemption of man in his complete being, and is made free to all by the gospel. Nothing prevents the salvation of a sinner except his failure to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”²⁰

In the statement on man, the draft contained a sentence which read “Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the purpose of his creation.” — the final version retains this sentence with only minor editing for readability: “Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God.”

Mercer refers to the sentence from the statement on man as “an accurate statement of justification by grace alone,” however, they say it is “contradicted two sentences later by a statement which is Pelegian by the use of the phrase ‘nothing ... except man’s failure ...’”²¹

The committee did not include this statement in their final revision. However, the inclusion in the first draft shows the committee’s propensity to move away from a more reformed understanding of soteriology. Just as saying man’s failure to accept Christ prevents God’s saving

of men is a Pelegian statement, the denial of the doctrine of imputed guilt is also in agreement with Pelegian and Arminian theologies.

Perhaps the more telling evidence explaining the change to the statement on man is the complete lack of any record at all. Mercer University may have made the only objection concerning a move toward Pelegian theology, and they didn't even mention the statement on man, but found a statement on grace in an early draft that was objectionable.

A brief understanding of the committee's theology will shed light on their thought process when revising the confession. The two committee members who exerted the most influence over the committee were Hobbs and Dick H. Hall.

Hershel H. Hobbs

Hobbs was clearly the most influential in writing the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*. In Hobbs' exposition of the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*, he relegates the effect of Adam's sin on his posterity to a single sentence, "The story of Adam and Eve is the history of the human race, because all their posterity inherit the same tendency toward sin."²²

How one understands original sin has a great impact on one's view of the sovereignty of God in salvation. A reformed soteriology starts with man's total depravity or their "bondage to sin" as expressed in the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*. From this flows Man's inability to do good apart from God's grace, which includes choosing to follow Him. Pelegian theology denies that man inherited any sin nature or guilt from Adam. Arminian theology believes that all men are tainted by original sin but have the power to choose to follow God. Therefore, because the understanding of original sin impacts soteriology, we can examine Hobbs' soteriology and work backward to his unstated assumptions on original sin.

When discussing election, Hobbs says, "The tenor of the Bible is that God loves all men and wishes to save as many as possible."²³ Since with God "all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26), this statement could lead to universalism. Hobbs, however, was certainly not a universalist. His understanding of how salvation comes to us explains how he attempts to reconcile God's desire to "save as many as possible" with the fact that not everyone will be saved.

Hobbs explains the use of the term "predestined" in Ephesians 1 to mean that God chose before the foundation of the world the condition of salvation, not whom He would save. That condition according to Hobbs is being "in Christ." For Hobbs, being "in Christ" is a decision any man is free to make of his own free will.²⁴ Therefore, Hobbs rejects the doctrine of total depravity and the 1963 revision to the statement on man in the *Baptist Faith and Message* clearly aligns within Hobbs' theology.

Later, Hobbs makes his intentions in the revision absolutely clear in his 1979 article "Southern Baptists and confessionalism: a comparison of the origins and contents of the 1925 and 1963 confessions:"

Thus the result of the fall is that men inherit, not “a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin” (1925), but a “nature and an environment inclined toward sin” (1963). In the latter “condemnation” comes upon individuals following transgression “as soon as they are capable of moral action.” This, of course, agrees with the position generally held by Baptists concerning God’s grace in cases of those under the age of accountability and the mentally incompetent.²⁵

Here Hobbs makes plain his denial of imputed guilt and his clear intention to soften the effects of Adam’s sin on his posterity in the 1963 revision of the Baptist Faith and Message. The purpose of this revision was none other than to deny imputed guilt. In doing so, the question can be raised as to whether or not people may enter heaven apart from God’s grace. Hobbs clearly states that he believes no man is guilty in Adam, but rather men are guilty once they actually transgress. The implication is given that those not capable of moral action, such as children and people with intellectual disabilities, are deserving of heaven apart from the grace of God. Another implication is that eternal life is owed to this class of people and they can come to the Father apart from Christ.

Hobbs’ denial of imputed guilt seems to go beyond the actual statement added to the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* which reads “only by God’s grace can man be brought into holy fellowship with God and fulfill the creative purpose of God.” Hobbs does not make clear how the innocent would require grace.

Dick H. Hall

Dick H. Hall was also an influential member of the committee who also wrote an exposition of the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* after serving on the committee. Understanding his theology will add to understanding the revisions in the confession. Hall says that in the fall: “man became contrary. He listened to the slanderer of his creator and willfully disobeyed his orders. And the first child born on earth became the murderer of the second. Thus man’s progeny had and has the bent toward sin.”²⁶ Hall does not discuss imputed guilt, but does give an explanation in line with the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*’s statement on man’s nature inherited from Adam.²⁷

For Hall, the human will is not totally depraved. Hall explains election as the Holy Spirit putting “the thought” on man’s heart.²⁸ Hall implies that all men have been elected, attributing election to even Jesus’ betrayer, Judas, “Surely Judas was called elected.” Hall said of Judas: “Jesus gave him every chance to put faith in Himself. He cast out many devils, but Judas chose to keep his, and finally betrayed Him.” Of this example of Judas, Hall extrapolates “Nothing could better illustrate Divine respect for our right of choice than Jesus’s dealings with Judas.”²⁹

Hall explicitly rejects the sovereignty of God in salvation by saying: “But to think of His fore-ordaining that some are to perish, while others are to be saved, is inconsistent without our concept of God as a gracious Father who is love personified.”³⁰

Hall summarizes his position by saying: “We must conclude that God has made in Christ’s atonement adequate provision for salvation of all men. But the acceptance of that salvation—the fearful responsibility of it—rests with each individual. Jesus knocks at the door. He never breaks in.”³¹

Although Hall does not clearly explain his position on imputed guilt or the extent of man’s bondage to sin as a result of the fall, we can see his position in his soteriology. Hall states that all men have the ability to choose to follow Christ. Thus, he must either deny the 1925 statement on man or believe in a prevenient grace that reduces depravity in all men to a point where they can freely choose God.

The 1963 revisions to the *Baptist Faith and Message* on the Fall are in line with Hall’s soteriology. Based on the theological climate of the day, it is likely that all seven of the subcommittee members who drafted the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* would agree with Hall and Hobbs when they deny the doctrine of total depravity in the form it was confessed in the Baptist tradition that traces from 1644 (*First London Confession of Faith*) to 1963.

The shift in Southern Baptist understanding of the fall of man and its effect on mankind did not happen overnight. Rather, the shift came slowly without much notice. Smith quotes Mark Coppenger, who sees the long trend this way:

Could it be that the perception of lost mankind's character and capability are improving in our preaching, much as they have in our doctrinal statements? Could it be that the unregenerate are being progressively perceived as less depraved? The evidence indicates that there has been an ascent of lost man in the thinking of Southern Baptists over the course of their history.³²

This shift had slowly worked into the convention and the Southern Baptist understanding of the fall of man and its effect on mankind had eroded so far by 1963 that nobody noticed the change.

CONCLUSION

If this change were proposed in 1925, it would have been defeated because the denomination had a clearer understanding of and belief in a reformed soteriology. If this change were proposed today, it would be very divisive because there is a large number of Southern Baptists with a reformed soteriology. However, by 1963 the denomination had made a swing so far away from reformed soteriology that the change simply was faithful in representing the vast majority of Southern Baptist Baptists’ beliefs—such a majority in fact that not a single letter to the editor or editorial can be found in any state Baptist newspaper objecting to the change or even mentioning it following either the proposed statement published by nearly every state Baptist paper or following its adoption at the 1963 Southern Baptist Convention.

It is tempting to attribute the revision to intentional ambiguity for the sake of inclusivity. Ted B. Moorhead, Jr., Pastor of Central Baptist Church in Melbourne, Florida, thanks Hobbs for his “reassurance that the committee will seek to make the statement not too tight for our brethren to conscientiously live within and at the same time not compromise on the truth.”³³ However, considering the theological temperament at the time and Hobbs’ own words, this is unlikely. Rather the committee attempted to make the statement clearer and in agreement with the vast majority of Southern Baptists.

Hobbs made many statements that the committee was not altering the faith confessed in the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*. Hobbs stated “In no sense did it delete from or add to the basic meaning of the 1925 statement.”³⁴ Therefore, giving Hobbs’ the benefit of the doubt, he must have sincerely believed that the intent of the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message was to deny imputed guilt.

By the content of the State Baptist Newspapers leading up to and immediately following the 1963 convention, it appears that Southern Baptists of the day had three issues in mind: communism, race and liberalism. The chief of these was liberalism; so much so that it appears they would have accepted nearly any change to the Baptist Faith and Message, so long as the only place they were looking was well written: the statement on the authority of the Bible.

¹ A. J. Smith, *The Making of the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message* (PhD diss., Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004), 202–203

² George Thomas Kurian, *Nelson’s New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

³ Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999–2003), 2:319.

⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47B (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 529.

⁵ Preamble to the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*.

⁶ Carl L. Kell, *Against the Wind: The Moderate Voice in Baptist Life* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 28.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Herschel H. Hobbs, *My Faith and Message: An Autobiography* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman), 1993, 235.

- ¹¹ Kell, *Against the Wind: The Moderate Voice in Baptist Life*, 34.
- ¹² Hobbs, *My Faith and Message*, 236.
- ¹³ Resolution on Appreciation for Porter Wroe Routh” (June 1979), <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=396> (accessed June 18, 2013).
- ¹⁴ Inventory of the Albert McClellan Collection AR 610 Prepared by Michelle Herr Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives” (October, 2011) <http://www.sbhla.org/downloads/610.pdf> (accessed June 18, 2013).
- ¹⁵ Hobbs, *My Faith and Message*, 236.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 236–237.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Hershel H. Hobbs, letter to Reverend W. Marion Lewter (Moderator of Indian Creek Baptist Association, TN, SBC), October 5, 1962 as found in the “Baptist Statement of Faith and Message, 1962-63 Committee Files” (Nashville, TN: Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1963).
- ¹⁹ Hershel H. Hobbs, letter to Mrs. Marjorie Dean Dockery of Colorado Springs, CO (Member of First Southern Baptist Church in Colorado Springs, CO.), September 13, 1962 as found in the “Baptist Statement of Faith and Message, 1962-63 Committee files” (Nashville, TN: Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1963): “Through the centuries Baptist from time to time have drawn up statements of what they believe.” ... “This does not mean in any sense that we are changing our faith. Indeed the New Testament is our one rule of faith and order as it has always been. The Statement of Faith will simply be to set down in orderly fashion some of the basic things which we believe, and which are taught in the New Testament.”
- ²⁰ Draft revision of *The Baptist Faith and Message* as found in the “Baptist Statement of Faith and Message, 1962-63 Committee files” (Nashville, TN: Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1963).
- ²¹ Letter from Mercer University to Baptist Faith and Message committee as found in the “Baptist Statement of Faith and Message, 1962-63 Committee files” (Nashville, TN: Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1963).
- ²² Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1971), 54.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ²⁵ Herschel H. Hobbs, “Southern Baptists and Confessionalism: A Comparison of the Origins and Contents of the 1925 and 1963 Confessions,” 76 *Review and Expositor* (1979), 63.
- ²⁶ Dick H. Hall, “Bedrock Beliefs of Baptists,” *The Christian Index* (1979), 15.

²⁷ Ibid., 14–16.

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² A. J. Smith, *The Making of the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message*, 201, quoting Mark Coppenger, “The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching,” 25 *The Founders Journal* (Summer 1996), 5.

³³ Undated letter in the 1963 committee papers from Moorehead to Hobbs as found in the “Baptist Statement of Faith and Message, 1962-63 Committee files” (Nashville, TN: Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, 1963).

³⁴ Herschel H Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, “The People Called Baptist and the Baptist Faith and Message: The Herschel H. & Frances J. Hobbs Lectureship in Baptist Faith and Heritage at Oklahoma Baptist University” (Shawnee, OK: Oklahoma Baptist University Press, 1981), 30.

News

National Founders Conference 2014

Make plans now to join us in historic Charleston, SC October 16-18, 2014. It has been several years since we have had a national conference. We are pleased to announce the 2014 National Founders Conference will be hosted by the First Baptist Church of Charleston. The theme of the conference will be: "Confessional Power and Gospel Advance: The Second London Confession at Home and Abroad." Mark your calendars and watch for more information forthcoming.

Founders Study Center

This fall we are celebrating a milestone at the Founders Study Center. We are pleased to announce that on November 18, 2013 we enrolled our 1000th student.

Our congratulations to R. Petty from Ohio for being our 1000th student and winning our book giveaway. He is receiving our "By His Grace" bundle from Founders Press (two books: *By His Grace and For His Glory* by Tom Nettles and *Ministry By His Grace and For His Glory*, essays in honor of Tom Nettles, edited by Tom Ascol and Nathan Finn).

Spring 2014 Registration Opens December 13, 2013.

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Upcoming Conferences

Deep South Founders Conference

January 16–18, 2014

On the Reformed Theological Seminary campus in Jackson, MS

Theme: Christ the Mediator

Featured Speakers: Geoffrey Thomas and Erroll Hulse

Midwest Founders Conference

February 25-26, 2014

At the First Baptist Church

St. Peters, Missouri

Theme: Necessary, Sufficient, Effective and Irresistible

Look for Founders Ministries at the [2014 G3 Conference](#)

Enter the discount code "Founders" when you register.

Theme: The Church: From a Biblical Perspective

January 23-25, 2014

At Pray's Mill Baptist Church in Douglasville, GA (near Atlanta)

Speakers include: Voddie Baucham, Conrad Mbewe, Steven Lawson, Tim Challis and David Miller

[One Passion Conference](#) with Steven Lawsen

At RTS Orlando

Theme: Preaching with Precision and Power

January 28-30, 2014

Should We Be Creedalists?

A Book Review of

*Carl Trueman's **The Creedal Imperative***

Tom Hicks

With Christianity on the wane in Western culture, some leaders have urged Christians to deemphasize secondary doctrines in order to stand united on gospel essentials. Our numbers are too small, they say, for Christians to continue nit picking at each other on long disputed matters of theology. Let me suggest, however, that doctrinal minimalism is the wrong approach, especially at this time. While all true Christians should stand united for the advancement of Christ's kingdom and against the rising specter of secularism, this is not the time to sideline secondary doctrines of the faith. Now, more than ever, we need robust, thoroughly biblical expressions of Christianity. We need an encyclopedically confessional faith.

Consider briefly three reasons this is true. First, when Christianity was small and under pressure in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote the church of Rome a detailed theological letter that included carefully articulated secondary doctrines. Paul believed that rich theology is needed for healthy Christians and churches during troubled times. Second, because the culture continues to assault the gospel, we need the Bible's whole theological support structure, if the gospel is to remain intact. Secondary doctrines provide the necessary intellectual and ecclesiastical supports of the gospel. Third, when the surrounding culture is most decidedly opposed to the faith, evangelism and disciple making must be theologically robust, if conversions are to be sound, since converts will be coming from worldviews that are radically different from that of Scripture. These converts will also need well-developed theologies to think and live Christianly in our post-Christian society.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I offer the following review of Carl Trueman's book, *The Creedal Imperative*. Trueman's work summons the churches, particularly the churches of the Protestant and Reformed tradition, to embrace thoroughgoing creedalism. This delightful volume is well-written, witty, historically precise, and deeply applicable to our contemporary situation. While Trueman's book is full of cultural commentary, historical perspective and theological discussion, here are some of his arguments for creedalism that I found most helpful.

1. Creedalism confronts our culture's suspicion about words. We live in a culture in which pictures, feelings and sound bites are often believed to convey more meaning than carefully crafted words. Our postmodern age doubts whether words can carry objective meaning.

But God chose to reveal Himself by the inscripturated words of the Bible. Like the Bible, confessions of faith convey God's truth through words. Creeds insist that words are suitable vehicles for the communication of objective truth.

2. Creedalism confronts our culture's anti-historical bent. Because Western culture is so deeply influenced by evolution, it is reluctant to value the wisdom of ages past. Westerners believe that new ideas are better than old ones. But creedalism asserts that true wisdom is as old as God's own mind and that the sages of the past have more to offer than the innovators of the present. Another reason for Western culture's anti-historicism has to do with the fact that Westerners don't view human nature as constant across time. What does someone in the 17th Century have in common with me? But Scripture teaches that human beings have the same fallen nature across time and that the same old gospel reconciles us to God.

3. Creedalism confronts our culture's anti-institutionalism. Western society is basically anti-authoritarian and therefore distrusts all institutions, including the institution of the church. Our society tends to trust, not those who are actually skilled and knowledgeable to speak to important issues, but those who are young and popular, like Lady Gaga. But the Bible clearly declares that the church is a "pillar and buttress of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), and that it supports the truth by way of confession: "great indeed we confess is the mystery of godliness" (1 Timothy 3:16). God calls pastors and churches to teach the whole counsel of God and enforce orthodoxy by way of their God given authority under Christ and His Word.

4. Creedalism is required by the Bible. In 2 Timothy 1:13–14, Paul says, "Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." Commenting on these verses, Carl Trueman writes, "Conspicuously, Paul does not simply say to Timothy, 'Memorize the Old Testament or the Gospels or my Letters' any more than he ever defines preaching as the reading of the same. The form [pattern] of sound words is something more [that is: a pattern of words that explains the content of Scripture, as in creeds]. Anyone who claims to take the Bible seriously must take the words of Paul to Timothy on this matter seriously. To claim to have no creed but the Bible, then, is problematic: the Bible itself seems to demand that we have forms of sound words, and that's what creeds are" (75–76).

5. Creedalism prevents innovative and inferior theological formulations. Some pastors and teachers, who call themselves "biblicists," approach the Bible independently and innovatively without consulting the careful work of historical theology. They do this, even though teachers and pastors have been hard at work formulating doctrine, throughout the history of the church, so that the full meaning of Scripture is clear while errors are avoided and excluded. Trueman wisely warns the "biblicist" pastor, "Do not precipitately abandon creedal formulations which have been tried and tested over the centuries by churches all over the world in favor of your own ideas. On the whole, those who reinvent the wheel invest a lot of time either to come up with something that looks identical to the old design or something that is actually inferior to it. This is not to demand capitulation before church tradition or a rejection of the notion of Scripture alone. Rather, it is to suggest an attitude of humility toward the church's past which

simply looks both at the good that the ancient creeds have done and also the fact that they seem to make better sense of the testimony of Scripture than any of the alternatives” (107).

6. Creedalism alone allows for the most open critique of theology. Those who claim to have “no creed but the Bible” actually do have a creed. They have an opinion about what the Bible teaches on doctrines such as predestination, the will of man, assurance, baptism, the nature of the church, etc. The only difference between someone who claims “no creed but the Bible” and a “creedalists” is that the creedalist writes his creed down so that it can be examined and critiqued by Scripture. Trueman writes, “What he [the non-creedalists] really should have said was: I have a creed but I am not going to write it down, so you cannot critique it; and I am going to identify my creed so closely with the Bible that I am not going to be able to critique it either” (160).

7. Creedalism avoids authoritarianism. According to Trueman, non-creedalists “biblicists” are actually “more authoritarian than the papacy” (161). Since non-creedalists pastors and teachers will not write down what they believe so that their beliefs can be critiqued, they may teach their churches whatever they personally come to believe the Bible says even if that changes over time. For non-creedal teachers, primary authority is located in their own personal interpretation, rather than in the church’s written and agreed upon creedal interpretation, which is open to public scrutiny.

8. Creedalism is in the best position to guard the supreme authority of Scripture. Orthodox creeds assert the Scripture’s supreme authority, which protects the church from elevating a creed to the level of Scripture. Anyone who attempted to give the creed more authority than Scripture could be corrected both by the Scripture and by the creed itself. Moreover, “once the creed or confession is in the public domain, mechanisms can be put in place to allow for it to function in a subordinate role to Scripture” (161).

9. Creedalism is a biblical basis of congregational worship. Because creeds are concise and careful summaries of biblical teaching, they are foundational to worship. A church must be accurately instructed about the nature of God and His works in order to praise Him properly. Trueman writes, “The identity of God has priority over the content of Christian praise” (143). A congregation that knows an orthodox creed is well-equipped for praise. Creeds may also be recited and sung in corporate worship services.

For further reading on creeds and creedalism:

William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Judson Press, 2011).

Stan Reeves (ed.), *Confessing the Faith: The 1689 Confession for the 21st Century* (Founders Press, 2012).

Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Evangelical Press, 2013).

Samuel Miller, *The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions* (1824).

David W. Hall, ed., *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Covenant Foundation, 2001).

John Skilton, ed., *Scripture and Confession* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973).