

No Creed but the Bible

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Some have argued that confessions of faith undermine the authority of Scripture. While this danger may exist, the greater benefit of confessions and creeds far outweigh the dangers. Confessions are designed to state clearly what one believes that the Bible teaches. Simply stating that one's only creed (from *credo*, meaning "I believe") is the Bible can also be very dangerous because all false teachers and apostate churches claim to believe only the Bible.

For example, one writer proclaims: "To arrive at the truth we must dismiss religious prejudices . . . We must let God speak for himself . . . Our appeal is to the Bible for truth."

All alleged Bible-believers could make the above statement, could they not? However, this particular avowal comes from a tract entitled "Let God Be True," published by the Jehovah's Witnesses, who believe the Bible to be their authority for faith and practice.

Obviously the Bible cannot teach what everyone claims it does. So how do we sort out those who believe as we do from those who do not? We could read their literature and attend their meetings and services, which would be time-consuming and counterproductive. Or we could read a brief statement of their position on important doctrines. A succinct assertion on the person of Christ, for example, would immediately alert us that, for all his denial, the writer of the above reference has not dismissed his religious prejudices. He may have traded old ones for new ones, but he has not appealed to the Bible for truth.

Even those who bark the loudest about their not trusting any "man-made" creed still find it valuable to summarize their beliefs for the benefit of either attracting fellowship or warning off nonconformists. They usually call these "statements of faith," which are usually worded, "we believe . . ." (*credo*).

It is true that Baptists in general have never been a "creedal" people in the sense that (1) they have ever opposed state-imposed religious conformity, and (2) they are loathe to put any human construct in the position of final authority above the Bible. However, Baptists have never been shy, until recent history, of adhering to explicit confessions of faith when such statements were revisable by Scripture.

The first Particular Baptist congregations in England were the objects of considerable suspicion and targets of open criticism. To bring them into popular disfavor, they were charged with being continental Anabaptists and holding false doctrines. Among the doctrines with which they were falsely charged were free will, falling from grace, rejecting original sin, and violating the administration of baptism. In order to hush these false rumors and to demonstrate their common doctrinal harmony with the major churches, the First London Confession of Faith of 1644, containing 53 articles, was adopted. The confession is prefaced:

The Confession of Faith, of those churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists: presented to the view of all that fear God, to examine by the touchstone of the Word of Truth: As likewise for the taking off those aspersions which are frequently both in pulpit and print, (although unjustly) cast upon them.

The First London Confession established the Particular Baptists as holding to the high predestinarian doctrines of unconditional election and particular redemption (hence the name, Particular Baptists), but in no way absolving humans of responsibility to God. Their Calvinism has become known as "evangelical Calvinism."

Later, in 1677 and 1689, the First London gave way to the larger Second London Confession of Faith. For the most part, this confession is an adaptation of the Westminster Confession of the Scottish Church and the English Presbyterians. It also contains adopted language from the Congregational Savoy Declaration, while, of course, rejecting the infant baptism of both confessions in favor of believer's immersion.

American Baptists published the 1689 version as the Philadelphia Confession in 1742. The first edition of the confession, by the way, was printed in 1743 by Benjamin Franklin, whose own religious views were far different.

Sadly, these early confessions gave way to shorter and shorter versions so that today the average Baptist statement of faith is seldom longer than a single page. This trend has also been accompanied by doctrinal decline. Rarely today does one find Baptists who could unconditionally embrace the doctrines set forth in the confessions we have discussed above. Perhaps the slow departure of Baptists from their early heritage, which came by subtle degrees, required the promotion of the less specific doctrinal statements to cloak their apostasy. Perhaps apostasy is too strong a term; however, history clearly demonstrates that Arminian doctrine inevitably leads to doctrinal liberalism. Even general observation will reveal that most fundamental Baptists today, while affirming loyalty to the Bible, demonstrate very little understanding of it.

While we remain a non-creedal people, Baptists must return to the longer and stronger confessions of faith of our forefathers if we are to remain true to our standard that the Bible is our only rule of faith and practice.

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