

THE 1689 BAPTIST
CONFESSION OF FAITH
IN MODERN ENGLISH



Founders Press

Cape Coral, Florida

Published by
Founders Press

P.O. Box 150931 • Cape Coral, FL 33915
Phone (239) 772-1400 • Fax: (239) 772-1140
Electronic Mail: founders@founders.org
Website: <http://www.founders.org>

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Originally published as *Confessing the Faith:
The 1689 Baptist Confession for the 21st Century*

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-943539-04-8

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FOREWORD

Historically, Baptists have been, and thankfully many still are, a confessional people. Yes, they are supremely a people of the Book, the Holy Scriptures. But confessions have been central to their experience of the Christian life. The twentieth-century attempt to explain Baptist life and thought primarily in terms of soul-liberty seriously skews the evidence. Of course, freedom from external coercion has always been a major concern of Baptist apologetics. But up until the twentieth century, this emphasis has generally never been at the expense of a clear and explicit confessionalism.

Of the many confessions of faith that Baptists have produced—and they have produced a goodly number—none has been more influential than the *Second London Confession*, popularly known as the *1689 Confession*. It was not only the confession of faith adopted by the majority of Baptists in the British Isles and Ireland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, but it was also the major confessional document on the American Baptist scene, where it was known as the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* (1742) and which added an article on the laying on of hands and also one on the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Among Southern Baptists this confession played an influential role as *The Charleston Confession* (1767),¹ which became the basis of the *Abstract of Principles*, the statement of faith of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary that was drawn up in 1858 by Basil Manly, Jr. (1825–1892).²

The truths that this confession promoted fell out of favor for much of the twentieth century, but in the last fifty years there has been a great recovery of gospel truth among Evangelicals and once

¹ The sole area of difference between the *Philadelphia Confession* and the *Charleston Confession* was the latter's omission of the article on the laying on of hands. The 1767 *Charleston Confession* was reprinted in 1813, 1831, and 1850.

² For details of the links between the *Charleston Confession* and the *Abstract of Principles*, see Michael A.G. Haykin, Roger D. Duke and A. James Fuller, *Soldiers of Christ: Selections from the Writings of Basil Manly, Sr., & Basil Manly, Jr.* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2009), 36–40.

again there are those deeply committed to the doctrines of this confession. The English language, however, has changed over time, and just as there are phrases in the Authorized Version (1611), also known as the King James Version, that are no longer as clear as they once were due to linguistic change, so it is the case with the 1689 *Confession*. For this reason, this new rendition of the confession by Dr. Reeves is indeed welcome. He has sought to render it readable by the typical twenty-first-century Christian reader, but with minimal change and without sacrificing any of the riches of the original text. I believe he has succeeded admirably in both of these aims. With confidence, then, we can say of this version of the 1689 *Confession* what the Victorian preacher C.H. Spurgeon (1834–1892) once said with regard to the confession when he had it republished in 1855:

This little volume is not issued as an authoritative rule, or code of faith, whereby you are to be fettered, but as an assistance to you in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness. ... Cleave fast to the Word of God which is here mapped out for you.³

Michael A.G. Haykin
Dundas, Ontario

³ Cited in the “Foreword” to *The Baptist Confession of Faith with Scripture Proofs* (Choteau, MT: Gospel Mission, n.d.), 6.

INTRODUCTION

Those of us who love the *1689 Confession* love it because we love the Scriptures. Far from denying or competing with the authority of Scripture, a historic biblical confession such as the *1689* actually promotes and confirms the Scriptures as our final authority. If there is any doubt in our minds, the confession removes it in the very first line: “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.” But the confession affirms more than the authority of Scripture. It affirms that these authoritative Scriptures actually teach specific doctrines. The authoritative Scriptures will do us no good if we cannot say what they actually teach. The confession expresses the conviction that the Scriptures deliver to us a coherent, life-altering body of teaching—the *faith* (Jude 3).

Pastors are called to preach the Word—to restate, interpret and apply God’s Word—and not merely to read it. A creed or confession of faith is little different from a sermon in this sense. It is a restatement of the Word for a particular purpose—in this case to summarize the overall teaching of that Word on various topics. To the degree that it expresses the doctrines of Scripture accurately, it is an expression of the Word just as accurate preaching is said to be an expression of the Word (2 Timothy 4:2). In fact, the impulse to compose confessions of faith finds biblical encouragement by the example of brief confessions quoted in Scripture itself (1 Corinthians 15:3ff; Ephesians 4:4–6; 1 Timothy 3:16). Though similar to a sermon in one sense, a confession has at least one important difference. It is usually produced by many godly minds deliberating over a long period, and it has been further reviewed and accepted by a group of churches. As a result, a confession is often more precisely crafted and more thoroughly examined for accuracy than an individual sermon.

A confession is a tried and true teaching tool. It lays out the faith in a clear, systematic way and shows the connections among doctrines. It also serves as a standard by which teaching in the church can be measured. An overseer “must be able to give instruction in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9), and a deacon “must hold the mystery

of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Timothy 3:9). Hearing an officer merely quote the Bible does not tell us whether he understands the overall teaching of Scripture on a subject. A confession gives us a tool for evaluating his understanding and teaching in summary form.

Though we may agree that confessions in general are useful, why would we use this particular confession? Why not a freshly written statement instead of a dusty old confession that is over 300 years old? First, the age of a confession should commend it rather than condemn it. Truth does not change. If the confession was accurate when it was composed, then it is accurate now. Those who hammered out the confession were men of a different day—men who had been refined by the fires of persecution. These were no arm-chair doctrines to them but a living faith that had stood up under trial. The men who first owned this confession were not those who were likely to bow to the spirit of the age—not their age and certainly not ours—either in their doctrine or their lives.

We now have the advantage of over 300 years to have examined the doctrines of the *1689 Confession* and to see its outworkings in the lives of churches and individuals. This confession more than any other in Baptist life has stood the test of time. The *1689 Confession* is the most mature statement of theology that has found broad acceptance among Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists. It is based broadly on the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF). The WCF was hammered out by 121 divines who labored daily for two years (1644–1646) to express the doctrines of Scripture as understood in the light of the Reformation. The Independents followed in 1658 with the *Savoy Declaration*, a revision of the WCF that reflected their independent form of church government along with a few other changes and additions. The Baptists, finding the Savoy to be closer to their views of church government, modified this confession in the area of baptism and made further refinements. Their confession was composed and published by the Particular Baptist churches of England in 1677. It was subsequently adopted by a national assembly of Particular Baptists in 1689, giving it the nickname that is often used today. Thus, this confession had the privilege of standing on the shoulders of the giants of the Reformation and Puritan eras and the advantage of 31 intervening years for its authors to study and refine the statements of the WCF. This confession was able to express the common faith Particular Baptists

shared with others having a Reformed heritage and also articulate their distinctive doctrines.

The *1689 Confession* has been in continuous usage since it was written. It was used widely not only in England but in America, beginning with the Philadelphia Association. The same confession was used in the South, and with one additional paragraph it became known as the Charleston Confession. The *1689 Confession* was the confessional statement of the church or association of every one of the 293 delegates who gathered in Augusta, Georgia, to organize the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. It was also the doctrinal statement that Charles H. Spurgeon used in his church. At one time, it was so widely used that it was referred to simply as *The Baptist Confession*. The *Abstract of Principles* of two SBC seminaries is self-conscientiously an abstract or summary of this confession.

Such a time-tested statement of biblical doctrine can give us clarity beyond our present level of study. Here is how it works. As we study the various doctrines articulated by the confession, we find that the confession faithfully summarizes the teaching of Scripture in these areas. Then we realize that countless godly pastors, theologians, and churches sharing these same convictions through the centuries have held that they are part and parcel of a biblical system of doctrine that is summarized by the confession. Through this process we become increasingly confident that the parts we do not yet understand are just as biblical and mesh well with the parts that we do understand! This is a wonderful blessing to impart to new believers and those who are still investigating some aspects of our doctrine. There is safety and wisdom in beginning with a theological foundation reflecting the tried and proven faith of a large body of God's people rather than the relatively untested opinions of private individuals.

I have long wanted to update the language of the *1689 Confession* to make its blessings more accessible to modern readers. I am thankful for other modern versions, but I have also wanted to produce a version that is at the same time affordable, consistent and modern in style, and meticulously careful in preserving the meaning of the original. I have approached this effort with fear and trembling. Above all, I have wanted to preserve the doctrine

and maintain the clarity of the original. I have circulated this effort widely and received helpful suggestions and corrections from many people, for which I am grateful. This has not been a solo effort.

My goal has been to maintain the structure and language to the extent that these lend themselves to clarity for the modern reader. When the structure or language was archaic, only then did I consider modern equivalent terms or rephrasing. In more difficult cases, I reworked the structure of a paragraph when it could be stated in a significantly more natural way in modern English without compromising the meaning. I don't pretend that the result is readable on a sixth-grade level. The concepts in the confession simply don't lend themselves to such simplistic expression. Furthermore, I have avoided changing well-established theological terms unless I judged that they were obscure and could be greatly clarified by a modern expression. In a few cases the meaning of the original term was unclear, or the term could not easily be rendered by an equivalent modern term. In these cases, I used footnotes. Footnotes in italics indicate the original term. Non-italic footnotes clarify the meaning.

I commend this modern-language version in the words of the preface to the original:

We shall conclude with our earnest prayer, that the God of all grace, will pour out those measures of His holy Spirit upon us, that the profession of truth may be accompanied with the sound belief, and diligent practice of it by us; that His name may in all things be glorified, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Stan Reeves
Auburn, Alabama

I THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

1:1 The Holy Scriptures are the only sufficient, certain, and infallible standard of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.¹ The light of nature and the works of creation and providence so clearly demonstrate the goodness, wisdom, and power of God that people are left without excuse; however, these demonstrations are not sufficient to give the knowledge of God and His will that is necessary for salvation.² Therefore, the Lord was pleased at different times and in various ways to reveal Himself and to declare His will to His church.³ To preserve and propagate the truth better and to establish and comfort the church with greater certainty against the corruption of the flesh and the malice of Satan and the world, the Lord put this revelation completely in writing. Therefore, the Holy Scriptures are absolutely necessary, because God's former ways of revealing His will to His people have now ceased.⁴

¹2 Timothy 3:15–17; Isaiah 8:20; Luke 16:29, 31; Ephesians 2:20. ²Romans 1:19–21; Romans 2:14,15; Psalm 19:1–3. ³Hebrews 1:1. ⁴Proverbs 22:19–21; Romans 15:4; 2 Peter 1:19, 20.

1:2 The Holy Scriptures, or the Word of God written, consist of all the books of the Old and New Testaments. These are:

THE OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

THE NEW TESTAMENT: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation.

All of these are given by the inspiration of God to be the standard of faith and life.⁵

⁵2 Timothy 3:16.

1:3 The books commonly called the Apocrypha were not given by divine inspiration and so are not part of the canon or standard of the Scriptures. Therefore, they have no authority for the church of God and are not to be recognized or used in any way different from other human writings.⁶

⁶Luke 24:27, 44; Romans 3:2.

1:4 The authority of the Holy Scriptures obligates belief in them. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any person or church but on God the author alone, who is truth itself. Therefore, the Scriptures are to be received because they are the Word of God.⁷

⁷2 Peter 1:19–21; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 John 5:9.

1:5 The testimony of the church of God may stir and persuade us to adopt a high and reverent respect for the Holy Scriptures. Moreover, the heavenliness of the contents, the power of the system of truth, the majesty of the style, the harmony of all the parts, the central focus on giving all glory to God, the full revelation of the only way of salvation, and many other incomparable qualities and complete perfections, all provide abundant evidence that the Scriptures are the Word of God. Even so, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Scriptures comes from the internal work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.⁸

⁸John 16:13,14; 1 Corinthians 2:10–12; 1 John 2:20, 27.

1:6 The whole counsel of God concerning everything essential for His own glory and man's salvation, faith, and life is either explicitly stated or by necessary inference contained in the Holy Scriptures. Nothing is ever to be added to the Scriptures, either by new revelation of the Spirit or by human traditions.⁹

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for a saving understanding of what is revealed in the Word.¹⁰ We recognize that some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church are common to human actions and organizations and are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian wisdom, following the general rules of the Word, which must always be observed.¹¹

⁹ Timothy 3:15–17; Galatians 1:8,9. ¹⁰John 6:45; 1 Corinthians 2:9–12.

¹¹1 Corinthians 11:13, 14; 1 Corinthians 14:26, 40.

1:7 Some things in Scripture are clearer than others, and some people understand the teachings more clearly than others.¹² However, the things that must be known, believed, and obeyed for salvation are so clearly set forth and explained in one part of Scripture or another that both the educated and uneducated may achieve a sufficient understanding of them by properly using ordinary measures.¹³

¹² Peter 3:16. ¹³Psalm 19:7; Psalm 119:130.

1:8 The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the native language of the ancient people of God.¹⁴ The New Testament was written in Greek, which at the time it was written was most widely known to the nations. These Testaments were inspired directly by God and by His unique care and providence were kept pure down through the ages. They are therefore true and authoritative,^a so that in all religious controversies the church must make their ultimate appeal to them.¹⁵ All God's people have a right to and a claim on the Scriptures and are commanded in the fear of God to read¹⁶ and search them.¹⁷ Not all of God's people know these original languages, so the Scriptures are to be translated into the common language of every nation to which they come.¹⁸ In this way the Word of God may dwell richly in all, so that they may worship Him in an acceptable manner and through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures may have hope.¹⁹

^a*authentic*. ¹⁴Romans 3:2. ¹⁵Isaiah 8:20. ¹⁶Acts 15:15. ¹⁷John 5:39.

¹⁸1 Corinthians 14:6, 9, 11, 12, 24, 28. ¹⁹Colossians 3:16.

1:9 The infallible rule for interpreting Scripture is the Scripture itself. Therefore, when there is a question about the true and full meaning^b of any part of Scripture (and each passage has only one meaning, not many), it must be understood in light of other passages that speak more clearly.²⁰

^bsense. ²⁰2 Peter 1:20, 21; Acts 15:15, 16.

1:10 The supreme judge for deciding all religious controversies and for evaluating all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, human teachings, and individual interpretations^c, and in whose judgment we are to rest, is nothing but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit. In this Scripture our faith finds its final word.²¹

^cprivate spirits. ²¹Matthew 22:29, 31, 32; Ephesians 2:20; Acts 28:23.

II GOD AND THE HOLY TRINITY

2:1 The Lord our God is one, the only living and true God.¹ He is self-existent² and infinite in being and perfection. His essence cannot be understood by anyone but Him.³ He is a perfectly pure spirit.⁴ He is invisible and has no body, parts, or changeable emotions.^a He alone has immortality, dwelling in light that no one can approach.⁵ He is unchangeable,⁶ immense,^{b,7} eternal,⁸ incomprehensible, almighty,⁹ in every way infinite, absolutely holy,¹⁰ perfectly wise, wholly free, completely absolute. He works all things according to the counsel of His own unchangeable and completely righteous will¹¹ for His own glory.¹² He is most loving, gracious, merciful, and patient. He overflows with goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. He rewards those who seek Him diligently.¹³ At the same time, He is perfectly just and terrifying in His judgments.¹⁴ He hates all sin¹⁵ and will certainly not clear the guilty.¹⁶

^apassions. ^btranscends all space. ¹1 Corinthians 8:4, 6; Deuteronomy 6:4. ²Jeremiah 10:10; Isaiah 48:12. ³Exodus 3:14. ⁴John 4:24. ⁵1 Timothy 1:17; Deuteronomy 4:15, 16. ⁶Malachi 3:6. ⁷1 Kings 8:27; Jeremiah