

Baptist Confessions of Faith in the Twenty-First Century

“Very noisy”—that’s the way eighteenth-century Virginia Baptist pastor John Leland, described the activities of the revivalistic Separate Baptists of his day.¹ He was right. Indeed, “very noisy” may be an appropriate designation for much of Baptists’ four-hundred-year history. Amid the current loss of denominational identity and the increasing disengagement of many people from religious communities, a surprising number of Baptists remain passionate about ideas and issues that both unite and divide.

BAPTIST IDENTITY: CONSTRUCTING CONFESSIONS

In 1959, when Judson Press published the first edition of William L. Lumpkin’s *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Protestant denominations were thriving, at least in North America and much of the West. During the decade after the Second World War, a wide variety of churches and religious groups experienced significant increases in church attendance, financial contributions, and building programs. Denominational seminaries, publications, and mission programs flourished, and it seemed that almost everyone attended Sunday school in one church or another. As the largest Protestant communion in America, Baptists were

¹Keith E. Durso, *No Armor for the Back: Baptist Prison Writings, 1600s–1700s* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 226, citing John Leland, “The Virginia Chronicle,” 105.

a case in point. Denominational and congregational ties were deep, so confessions of faith were important tools for distinguishing one group from the other, while clarifying historic doctrines amid internal struggles over theology, polity, and overall religious particularity. Such confessions, used by Baptist groups since the early seventeenth century, were a way of connecting with the Baptist past and surveying ecclesiastical distinctiveness for the future. Baptist denominational groups and their respective confessions helped burgeoning Baptist communions know who they were and what they believed.

Such denominational successes did not endure indefinitely, however. Martin E. Marty observed of the years after World War II: “Mainline Protestantism, acculturated, accommodated, acclimatized, after experiencing almost artificial prosperity in the 1950s, suffered relative losses ever after.”² Thus, more than half a century after the publication of Lumpkin’s first edition, denominations across the theological spectrum in North America and Western Europe seem to be struggling for survival amid decreasing statistics, declining revenues, and a mounting indifference to “brand name” Christianity even by people in the pew. As fewer Protestants understand their religious identity in terms of denominational identity, confessional statements may seem archaic at best, divisively sectarian at worst. In describing the religious context in America in the early twenty-first century, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell write that, “Americans overwhelmingly, albeit not universally, identify with a religion. Identity, however, does not necessarily translate into religious activity, because not all who identify with a religion frequently attend religious services, or engage in other religious behavior.”³ They note that although religious identity remains strong in the United States when compared to that found in other Western nations, declines are slow but steady. Declines are evident in many segments of the churchgoing population.

² Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Behavers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 70.

³ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 8.

For example, evangelicals, present in various denominational and nondenominational groups, constitute some 30 percent of the population, and their numbers expanded considerably in the 1970s and 1980s. However, “their proportion of the population has been slowly declining since about 1990.”⁴ Likewise, Putnam and Campbell acknowledge that after evangelicals and Roman Catholics, “the third largest ‘religious’ group in the United States is actually defined by the absence of a religious affiliation—the ‘nones.’” This faction reflects some 17 percent of the population, larger than “mainline Protestants” at 14 percent.⁵ Globally, Baptists manifest varying degrees of growth and stagnation, with numerical increases in certain regions of Africa, India, Eastern Europe, and Asia, but steady declines in Western Europe. Of the roughly 40 million Baptists in the world, some 30 million live in North America.⁶ Nonetheless, recent transitions in church life suggest that Baptists need to revisit their confessions of faith, not simply to know who they have been, but as one vehicle (out of many) for determining who they will be.

Differences over Baptist identity were there from the beginning. While the earliest Baptists quickly developed a shared set of distinguishing marks, they often disagreed over the boundaries of their rather broad spectrum of beliefs. They were second-generation Protestants, born almost a century after Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-five Theses* on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. The Baptist movement began in 1609 amid the religious upheavals that included Puritans, Separatists, Independents, Anabaptists, Levellers, Ranters, and other sectarians. From their passionate commitment to a believers’ church, the idea that all who claimed membership in the body of Christ should attest to an experience of grace, early Baptists created a spectrum of ideas that at best were balanced by congregations and individuals, and at worst fostered continuing

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ Albert W. Wardin, *Baptists around the World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 473. These figures are a bit dated but indicate that these general statistics are viable.

debate, even schism. The continuum of Baptist identity includes the following:

- **Biblical authority and liberty of conscience.** Perhaps the genius of the Baptists is the idea that the people can be trusted to interpret Scripture aright in the context of community, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- **Priesthood of all believers within a community of faith.** Baptists affirmed Martin Luther's idea that "we have no priest save Christ himself," that each person may come directly to Christ for salvation. Such faith was confirmed in the community of believers, the church. Early on, new converts were required to testify to their experience of grace, which was then voted on by the congregation, a community that could also vote to dismiss those believers whose postconversion behavior seemed scandalous or unrepentant.
- **Congregational autonomy and associational cooperation.** Baptists insisted that the authority of Christ was mediated through the believing community. Each congregation was responsible for the direction of its ministry and the extension of its Christian identity. Yet congregational autonomy did not mean independence. Early Baptists soon formed associations of churches for spiritual fellowship, doctrinal mediation, and interchurch cooperation.
- **Theological identity: diversity and contradiction.** Baptists share many common doctrines and practices: believers' church, baptismal immersion, congregational polity, associational cooperation, and religious liberty. Yet their theological diversity is extensive. Historically, General and Free Will Baptists stress Christ's death for all persons (a general atonement) and the "cooperation" of saving grace with individual free will in the process of salvation. Particular and Primitive Baptists emphasize election and predestination, insisting that Christ's death applies only to the elect, chosen by God before the foundation of the world. From the beginning, Baptists have maintained contradictory theologies inside a set of common beliefs and practices.

- **Religious liberty and loyalty to the state.** A believers' church is the foundation of Baptist affirmation of freedom of conscience and religious liberty. Faith must remain uncoerced by state or state-privileged religion. God alone is judge of conscience. Baptists long affirmed the importance of national citizenship but reserved the right to dissent should the state require an obedience that contradicted faith and conscience. The separation of church and state is centered in the necessity of religious freedom for orthodox believer, heretic, and atheist alike.
- **Inevitably confessional and selectively creedal.** Many seventeenth-century Baptist groups wrote confessions of faith to set forth their views on Christian doctrine and Baptist principles. Other groups have drafted similar documents across the years, often differing on how to apply such confessions. Some utilize them to set boundaries of faith and practice; others see them as guides for shaping Baptist identity. Some hesitate to use them at all lest they convey an authority beyond Scripture or substitute doctrinal assent for a personal experience of grace. Others suggest that Baptist tradition is "confessional, not creedal," meaning that confessions are guides to beliefs while creeds were imposed, a clear interference with freedom of conscience. Most Baptist groups find ways to articulate basic beliefs, sometimes pressing certain doctrines in ways that seem decisively creedal.⁷

BAPTIST CONFESSIONS: CONTINUING SIGNS OF DIVERSITY

As the twenty-first century moves on, Baptists themselves are, as usual, divided over the need for and application of confessions of faith. Some insist that "confessionalism" is more important than ever given the decline of denominations, the growth of a generic Christianity with limited doctrinal specificity, and the increasing popularity of a nebulous "spirituality."

⁷ Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2003), 1-15.

Yet now as never before, Baptists must be clear on doctrinal specificity. William Brackney notes that among certain Baptist groups, “some confessions became universally recognized as acceptable versions of the beliefs and ethics of a group. This was the case of the early London confessions among Baptists.”⁸ They clarified dogma and established boundaries for both admission to and dismissal from the churches. More recently, Southern and Independent Baptists in the United States have reasserted this principle for defining Christian orthodoxy for their respective groups. L. Rush Bush and Tom J. Nettles write, “Baptist confessions do not have as their primary purpose the setting forth of ‘Baptist’ distinctives; their primary purpose is the setting forth of true doctrine. . . . They are expressions, declarations, or affirmations of the Christian faith as Baptists understand it.”⁹

Others suggest that Baptist confessions should be read in light of larger “catholic” traditions dating to patristic Christianity. These advocates include the late professors Stanley Grenz and James McClendon, who urged “their fellow Baptists to acknowledge the authority of tradition and to explore the implications of the catholic tradition for Baptist faith and practice.”¹⁰ Thus, ancient Christian approaches to doctrine and authority help inform Baptist confessionalism.

Still other Baptists argue that the movement has been and should remain “confessional but not creedal,” affirming W. J. McGlothlin’s assertion that confessions “are, strictly speaking, statements of what a certain group of Baptists, large or small, did believe at a given time, rather than a creed which any Baptist must believe at all times in order to hold ecclesiastical position or be considered a Baptist.”¹¹ In this view, confessions

⁸ William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 10.

⁹ L. Rush Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 372.

¹⁰ Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 6.

¹¹ W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1911), xii, cited in Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 16. McGlothlin’s work antedated Lumpkin’s. Both seemed to share this understanding of the nature of Baptist confessions.

are statements of belief shared by a Baptist constituency at a particular historical moment. They reflect communal consensus while allowing for individual conscience as the final arbiter (at times not without considerable controversy).

As the documents provided in this volume illustrate, even the briefest survey of Baptist confessions of faith reveals the continuing diversity of such documents in content and interpretation. A new chapter, added for this edition of Lumpkin's work, illustrates the way in which Baptist groups share common ideals but also vary as to specific issues of doctrine, ethics, and identity. For example:

- The Confession of the Nigerian Baptist Convention details basic Christian doctrine with extensive emphasis on the Spirit-filled life, Satan, demons, and “deliverance,” issues that are significant in Nigerian religion and culture.
- The Baptist Union of Southern Africa uses a 1924 confession with eleven statements on classic Christian doctrine. In 1987 the Union approved a “Statement of Baptist Principles,” including the priesthood of all believers, the Lordship of Christ, congregational autonomy, believer's baptism, and religious liberty. A statement added in 2000 reads: “That God has ordained marriage as a heterosexual relationship between a natural man and a natural woman.”
- In 2001 the Japan Baptist Union approved a brief statement of basic doctrine on God, church, salvation, and Scripture that concludes with these “additional remarks”: “The Japan Baptist Union is a body which respects the independence of each local church. Therefore, this Declaration of Faith does not intend to limit the autonomy of local churches. We pray that the local churches, by sharing this Declaration, will confirm for each other what JBU stands for and where it is going, and that the fellowship among churches will be deepened.”
- The preamble to the Statement of Faith of the Hong Kong Baptist Seminary describes the use of confessions of faith, noting that, “Historically Baptists have opposed creeds, but have through the years issued a number of confessions of

faith. The basic purpose of a confession of faith is to express what one group of Baptists believes at a given time. . . . Individual freedom and congregational church government lie at the heart of this refusal to impose an external authority.”

- The Baptist World Alliance has sometimes used the Apostles’ Creed in worship services, but not in its statement of faith and identity. That document, approved at the Baptist World Congress in Birmingham, England, in 2005, surveys traditional dogmas related to Christian and Baptist ideals, and concludes: “Now, at this centenary gathering these things we declare, affirm and covenant to the Lord Jesus Christ and to each other, believing the truth found in Him and revealed in the Scriptures. We, recognising that this is a partial and incomplete confession of faith, boldly declare that we believe the truth is found in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Because we have faith and trust in Him so we resolve to proclaim and demonstrate that faith to all the world.”

Contemporary confessions clearly demonstrate similarities and differences among twenty-first century Baptist groups. As Baptists write and utilize confessions, questions abound:

- What types of confessional statements are needed to clarify Baptist identity in a postmodern era?
- How will confessional documents be used by Baptist groups, churches, and individuals?
- What kind of dissent will be possible for those who disagree with certain elements of any confession?
- Who might adjudicate differences of opinion over doctrine or practice?
- What options might be available for remaining in cooperation amid sincere differences between collective confessional identity and personal conscience?
- What is the relationship between conscience and civility of discourse? Can differing approaches to common identity be pursued without the language of suspicion, accusation, or violence?

- Like their “noisy” forebears, twenty-first-century Baptists face the challenge of saying what they believe and then living out those beliefs individually and communally. When certain confessions will not hold, or become increasingly divisive, Baptists may even follow their ancestors in another timeless Baptist tradition: multiplying by dividing.

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