

The Baptist Faith and Message: Introduction

Around 30 AD, Jesus Christ ascended to heaven in a shekinah cloud and the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh not many days later. The Spirit inspired some of the Apostles and eye-witnesses of all that Jesus began to do and to teach to write infallible words, which would be preserved to this day, as the New Testament. To the best of our knowledge, all of these inspired writings were completed by the end of the first century, but they were not yet a closed collection of “books.” In the first century of the church, the fundamentals of the Christian faith were communicated orally by the reading and exposition of these letters in the churches. By no means did early Christians have well-defined, unified views of what it meant to be a Christian. The New Testament is filled with warnings from Jesus and the apostles about false teachers and false doctrine. However, as “orthodox” theology began to emerge, written statements of belief appeared in the form of creeds, named from the Latin word “credo” meaning ‘I believe.’ Creeds are, for the most part, short statements because they were intended to be recited by the believer.

The earliest known statement is the *Apostles Creed* which dates back to the third century. Although it was not written by the twelve Apostles, as legend would have it, the creed surely captured their fundamental teaching. Most of the early creeds, such as the *Apostles Creed*, the *Nicene Creed* and the *Athanasian Creed* were largely developed to combat fundamental errors pertaining to the nature of God, the person of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity. Since the days of the early creeds until now, much has happened in the history of the church, yet they still stand to this day as mileposts of orthodox beliefs.

Since those early days of the church, many statements of faith, often called “confessions”, have been penned by godly persons as a means of proclaiming clearly and succinctly what they and their followers believe. Most of these confessions were drawn up by “protestants” during and following the Reformation begun in the 16th century. Many of them are used to this day as denominational statements of faith and practice among the more conservative groups in those denominations. As some examples, Presbyterians have the *Westminster Confession*, the Lutherans have the *Augsburg Confession*, the Anglicans have the *39 Articles* and the Reformed Baptists have the *2nd London Confession*, which is also known as *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*. It is important to recognize that the content of these confessions is grounded in Scripture and they agree much more than they disagree. Catechisms are another tool used by the church over the centuries to help Christians learn doctrine. They are in the form of questions and answers that are intended for memorization. A great representative of a reformed catechism is *The Heidelberg Catechism*.

When the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in the 1850’s, the confession of faith used by many American Baptists, particularly those in the south, was the *Philadelphia Confession*. This confession was almost identical to the *2nd London Confession*. These and the *New Hampshire Confession* (ca 1830) continued to be used in SBC churches until 1925 when the Cooperative Program was started. The *New Hampshire Confession* was decidedly less Calvinistic than its predecessors due to the influence of the Free Will Baptists in New Hampshire and the northeast who were semi-Arminian in their doctrine

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of salvation. (For those unfamiliar with Calvinism and Arminianism, I will explain those terms in later postings. In order to be historically accurate and to provide commentary, it is necessary to use these important descriptive theological terms. Actually, attempting to avoid these would be like trying to have a political discussion without using “republican” and “democrat”.) Later, based on the personal preference of their respective authors, several Baptist “Church Manuals” were published that promoted *The New Hampshire Confession*. Thus, in the same way the Scofield Bible helped to spread dispensationalism, the publishing of church manuals spread *The New Hampshire Confession*.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, many theologians, who attempted to reconcile Darwinism and other “scientific” observations with the Bible, embraced evolution and began to teach that the creation story and other miracles in the Bible were not literal but symbolic or figurative. This movement, which came to be known as “higher criticism”, swept through Europe and then America. In response, a national ground swell of Bible-believing Christians in America arose to resist the great threat to orthodox Christianity. The main denominations of the day, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Baptists set aside their differences to stand together for certain “fundamentals of the faith” which all agreed were essential to orthodox Christianity. The movement came to be known as (you guessed it) the Fundamentalist movement. While there were several fundamental tenets, they all really rested on one issue: inerrancy of Scripture. The Fundamentalist movement and Southern Baptist involvement with it had a substantial influence on *The Baptist Faith and Message*. In the inter-denominational alliances forged to fight the common enemy, “modernity”, Southern Baptists began to drift from their doctrinal roots and this is reflected in significant differences between their earlier confessions and the 1925 BF&M. The drift is even more pronounced in the 1963 and 2000 BF&M revisions.

After World War I ended, the SBC desired to reach out to Baptists worldwide. The leaders of that day thought it well to prepare a statement of faith to carry abroad in missionary efforts and trips of good will to re-establish Baptist relationships in Europe hurt by higher criticism and world war. Possibly, due to anti-credal sentiment among some Southern Baptists, the statement was not referred to as a “confession”, but called *The Baptist Faith and Message*. Also, as compared to the other confessions, it was briefer and designed, as alluded to earlier, to have some latitude to accommodate some of the differences of opinion in doctrine that had developed during the 19th century.