

THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Baptist Beliefs

Topic: Historical Overview of Baptist Confessions

Fall 2025

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and his Word for the sake of living rightly before God in his world. The topic tonight is a brief overview of Baptist confessions.

English Baptist Confessions

The first permanent Baptist church was established in 1612 by Thomas Helwys in the village of Spitalfields. The year prior, in 1611, Helwys wrote a *Declaration of Faith*, which became the church's confessional statement. The *Declaration* distinguished Helwys's church from two groups: Puritans and Anabaptists. It argued for basic Baptist distinctives, though without specifying that biblical baptism entails immersion. It also affirmed what would soon be called Arminianism, including the ideas that election is based on God's foreknowledge of our free belief, that Jesus died for all people with the same intent, and that true Christians can fall from grace and be damned eternally. The movement that arose from Helwys's church became known as the **General Baptists** because of their belief in a general atonement.

In 1644, seven churches in London adopted the *First London Confession* as their shared consensus of beliefs. Like Helwys's *Declaration*, *First London* distanced the churches from the Puritans and especially the Anabaptists. Unlike the General Baptists, these churches made clear their belief in believer's baptism by immersion. They also retained a Puritan understanding of salvation, which was more Calvinistic. They held to divine predestination, believed Jesus's atonement was intended for the elect alone, and affirmed eternal security. Their movement became known as the **Particular Baptists** because of their belief in a particular (or limited) atonement.

In 1677, a group of Particular Baptist churches secretly began to circulate a *Second London Confession*. This was during the reign of Charles II, a Roman Catholic who fiercely persecuted English Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers. This new

Faith. While there were other confessions of faith used by individual churches or newer associations, most Baptists on the East Coast into the mid-1800s either affirmed some version of the *Second London Confession* or they published a condensed “abstract” of the confession.

In 1833, the New Hampshire Baptist Convention adopted the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith*, written by J. Newton Brown. *New Hampshire* was much shorter than *Second London* or its copycats. It was also less overtly Calvinistic. *New Hampshire* was silent of predestination and the intent of the atonement, hoping to draw some Free Will Baptists into the fold. In 1853, Brown published *The Baptist Church Manual*, which is still in print today. The book included *New Hampshire*, which introduced it to churches all over the country. By the turn of the 20th century, *New Hampshire* was probably the most widely used confession in America, especially by local churches. Brown's Baptist Church Covenant, which was included in *The Baptist Church Manual*, also became popular.

Early Southern Baptist Confessions

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) didn't adopt a confession at its founding in 1845. All 293 delegates to the founding meeting of the SBC represented either a church or association that affirmed some version of *Second London*. By the mid-1850s, some Southern Baptist churches began adopting the *New Hampshire Confession*, especially outside the Southeast.

The first confession approved by Southern Baptists was the *Abstract of Principles* (1858). John A. Broadus and Basil Manly Jr. wrote this confession for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which was established in 1859 in Greenville, SC. Broadus and Manly lifted elements from both *Second London* and *New Hampshire*. The result was a shorter confession that was moderately Calvinistic, but one that could still be affirmed by nearly any Southern Baptist at the time. When the SBC chartered the seminary, they affirmed the confession for use at the school.

When Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary was founded in 1908, it adopted *New Hampshire*. In 1918, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary wrote its own *Articles of Faith*, which was a short, minimalist statement. In 1920, the Foreign Mission Board adopted a short *Articles of Faith* that echoed *New Hampshire* in most of its articles. Most churches founded before 1850 included

some version of *Second London*, or an abstract of it, in their foundational documents. Nearly all churches founded since about 1880 adopted *New Hampshire*.

The Baptist Faith and Message

There have been three major editions of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (BF&M), in addition to two other minor revisions. The first edition of the BF&M was adopted in 1925. Many Southern Baptists believed that the time had come for a convention-wide confessional statement. One reason was the growing acceptance of Darwinian evolution in American society. A second reason was the encroachment of modernist theology within some denominations, especially in the North. While these trends were far less common in the South than the North, Southern Baptists wanted to be proactive.

In 1924, a committee was tasked with drafting a confessional statement. The chair was E. Y. Mullins, the president of Southern Seminary. The template was the *New Hampshire Confession*, though with several new articles. The result was a confession that was thoroughly conservative theologically, moderately Calvinistic in its view of salvation, and thoroughly Baptist in its view of the church. The BF&M (1925) was adopted overwhelmingly, but it was mostly a symbolic gesture. No seminary, mission board, or other convention entity mandated affirmation of the BF&M.

By the late-1960s, the postwar generation of Southern Baptist professors and some influential pastors, were attracted to Neo-Orthodoxy, a movement that was ascendant in the theological academy. While Neo-Orthodoxy was more conservative than modernism, it did not affirm the full authority and trustworthiness of Scripture, especially in matters of history and science. Most Neo-Orthodox theologians affirmed theistic evolution. Some of them spiritualized biblical miracles and psychologized biblical exorcisms, denied the Virgin Birth, and redefined the resurrection as a spiritual rather than a bodily event. Between 1958 and 1966, professors at five of the six Southern Baptist seminaries were either terminated or encouraged to depart because of their sympathy to Neo-Orthodoxy.

In 1963, Southern Baptists adopted a revised edition of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. The committee was chaired by Hershel Hobbs, the pastor of First Baptist

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