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

Congregationalists, Baptists, and Quakers. This new

fiercely persecuted English Presbyterians,

confession was a Baptist revision the Westminster Confession of Faith (Presbyterian, 1644) and the Savoy Declaration (Congregationalist, 1660). The purpose of this new confession was to show how much the Particular Baptists had in common with other Calvinists in England. It is notable for being the first Baptist confession to begin with an article on the doctrine of Scripture, which became the norm for most subsequent Baptist confessions.

As part of the Glorious Revolution (William and Mary) in 1688, the Act of Toleration was adopted in England that same year. With their newfound freedom, the Particular Baptists held a general assembly in London in 1689 and publicly adopted the Second London Confession. This is why it is also sometimes called the 1689 Confession. Second London remained the most influential Baptist confession into the nineteenth century, and unlike Helwys's Declaration or First London, it is still widely used by some Baptist churches today.

Early American Baptist Confessions

The first Baptist churches in the American colonies were founded in Providence, RI (1639) and Newport, RI (by 1644). Other early Baptist churches were founded in Swansea, MA (1663), Boston, MA (1665), Woodbridge, NJ (1682), and Kittery, ME (1682). In 1696, the Kittery church relocated to Charleston, SC, becoming the first Baptist church in the South. Some churches (Newport, Boston) considered themselves to be part of the Particular Baptist movement, while others (Providence, Charleston) included both Calvinists and Arminians within their membership.

In 1707, five churches in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware formed the Philadelphia Baptist Association. The association eventually served nearly all Baptists in the Northeast before the Warren Baptist Association (MA) split off in 1767. The Charleston Baptist Association (SC) was founded in 1751. Most Baptist churches remained very small until the time of the First Great Awakening in the 1740s and 1750s. This revival led to dramatic growth and the increase in the number of Baptist churches and associations along the Eastern Seaboard.

In 1742, the Philadelphia Association published a lightly revised version of the Second London Confession with the new title Philadelphia Confession of Faith. In 1767, the Charleston Baptist Association republished the Philadelphia Confession as the Charleston Confession of

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

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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

Church of Oklahoma City. The BF&M (1963) was not an improvement over the first edition. While it remained conservative overall, the statement on Scripture claimed the Bible is a "record of God's revelation of Himself" to man, and it stated that "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." While these phrases sounded fine to most Southern Baptists, they actually echoed Neo-Orthodox jargon. The result was that the confession affirmed the full authority and trustworthiness of Scripture, but it also included a "loophole" that some scholars and pastors would continue to exploit. As with 1925, however, the 1963 confession was mostly symbolic, and it was not implemented in any SBC entities.

By the mid-1970s, it was clear to a growing number of conservatives that further steps must be taken to prevent the SBC from drifting into open theological liberalism and going the way of the mainline Protestant denominations. Beginning in 1979, the SBC conservatives launched a movement to take control of the convention's entities through the trustee selection process. By 1993, every entity had a conservative board. By 1996, a conservative president led every entity. The time was ripe to revisit the BF&M to make it more consistently conservative.

The first step was an amendment in 1998, which added an article that affirmed a traditional Christian understanding of the family and its role in human society. The most controversial line stated, "A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ."

In 1999, a committee was appointed to draft a full revision to the BF&M. The chair was Adrian Rogers, the pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church. The primary wordsmith was Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary. The BF&M (2000) was adopted overwhelmingly. The revised confession represented a more consistently conservative statement of faith. It spoke with far greater clarity about a number of theological controversies among evangelicals. We will discuss these in turn as we work through the document in the coming months.

Unlike with 1925 and 1963, the BF&M (2000) has become more widely adopted in Southern Baptist life. Within a couple years of its adoption, every seminary professor, curriculum writer, and missionary had to affirm the BF&M as a condition of employment. Over time, some state Baptist conventions and their entities have also adopted

the statement. For example, at North Greenville University the board of trustees, senior administration, and faculty in the College of Christian Studies must affirm the BF&M (2000).

Because of the principle of local church autonomy, no church is required to adopt the BF&M (2000), though many have done so. However, in 2014 the SBC changed its bylaws to state that a cooperating church must have "a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention's adopted statement of faith." Over the last decade, the SBC has disfellowshipped churches that are not aligned on such issues as homosexuality, racism, sexual abuse, and female pastors. A century after the first edition of the Baptist Faith and Message was first adopted, the SBC is more confessional today than it has ever been in its 180-year history.

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