

SBAOC Weekly Update

NEWS & PRAYER REQUESTS

If you have any news, prayer requests, or events that you would like to have included in this update, please email the information to spurgeonassociation@gmail.com or call us at 785-456-8513.

FINDING THE RICHEST CONFESSIONAL TREASURE

By Mark Dever

This article considers the question *What confession of faith is best for a congregation to use as a basis for membership?* It has been occasioned by an article by Shawn Wright in the *9Marks e-newsletter* in which Shawn concludes that the 1689 Confession is not the best confession for a congregation to use. While I agree with many of Shawn's points (as you'll see in this article) I regret needless division over this. I love and appreciate the 1689 Confession, and the sister churches who use it; and I would not want to discourage them in their God-glorifying work in any way. This is a discussion which should be had between brothers, and in a way which encourages us all to get on with the work according to the best light we have.

My Discovery

When, in the autumn of 1994, I was first handed the original set of minutes for our congregation, I was excited! I had in my hands the actual volume in which a brother 116 years earlier recorded the congregation's first acts. I admit that I was nervous as I considered the consequences for opening and reading this book.

Let me back up. I was the new pastor of the then-called Capitol Hill Metropolitan Baptist Church (now Capitol Hill Baptist Church) in Washington, DC. The congregation had enjoyed the privilege of having faithful, Bible-believing pastors preaching to them throughout their history. Over the previous year and a half I had met with members of the congregation, prayed and finally concluded (with them) that it was the Lord's will for me to serve as their pastor. I had done this, however, without having ever seen their church's statement of faith.

It may be that some reading this aren't even aware that churches have such documents. But, historically, the first thing a congregationally-governed church would do is to set out its understanding of the message that they were together

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PURPOSE STATEMENT:

We unite as an association of Southern Baptist churches in order to manifest the glory of God above all. We purpose to do this by seeking spiritual awakening and revival by intense prayer and earnest obedience to Scripture. We covenant to strengthen and support one another, motivated and guided by the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, by facilitating faithful preaching of the Word of God, proclaiming the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to all, making and gathering disciples, planting churches and coordinating unified missions efforts.

"If there is no church... should you not commence one?" C. H. Spurgeon

COMMENTS ON OUR PURPOSE STATEMENT

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“When I seem to you at any time to be intoxicated as it were by the hurry, the business, or the dissipation of life, spare not the best offices of friendship; recall me to that sobriety and seriousness of mind, which become those who know not when they may be called away: place before me the solemn triumphs of which you have been a spectator, and animate me to press forward in emulation of so glorious an example. To die the death, we must indeed live the life, of Christians. We must fix our affections on things above, not on things on the earth. We must endeavor habitually to preserve that frame of mind, and that course of conduct, with which we may be justly said to be waiting for the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. I know not any description of a Christian which impresses itself so forcibly as this on my mind.”

The Life of William Wilberforce, 1838

Check out the [SBAOC YouTube channel](#) to watch the Reformation Weekend Conference sessions.



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proclaiming. Sometimes this would simply be by simple statements at the beginning of their church covenant (the document that described how they would live); but in Baptist churches, it would usually include a separate statement of faith. In fact, this statement of faith came to have a literal priority over the church covenant, just as in the individual Christian's life, what we believe determines how we live. Our agenda (things we will do) is determined by our credenda (things we believe).

So, I had accepted the call to be the pastor of this church without knowing what the church officially believed. This caused me some pauses in my conscience, but realizing that I had asked for their statement of faith, and was told that there was none, I knew that at least it was no longer a living document. Therefore the congregation would have little loyalty toward any old statement of faith we might find in their records. Furthermore, I had a good idea any church constituting in 1878 would have certainly begun with a statement of faith. I now wanted to find those original minutes, and see if they contained a statement of faith.

It was with great anticipation that probably around August of 1994 our church's retired secretary told me that she knew where the original minutes were. I asked her if she could get them. She promptly did, and in just a little while, had brought them to me. So, we're back to where this article began.

There I was, sitting at the desk, the large, old book awaiting my inspection. I paused. I thought of the advantages of ignorance, in case the confession was bad. But some combination of integrity and curiosity drove me to press ahead. I opened the book and began to read the hand-writing. And what I found both pleased and disappointed me.

Let me be honest. As a hearty believer in the doctrines of grace, I had hoped that the Philadelphia Confession would be there (the 18th century American version of the Second London Confession of 1689, the Baptist version of the Westminster Confession). I knew my history well enough to know that by the second half of the 19th century, this confession had fallen into disfavor and disuse among most Baptists, but I had lingering hopes for an exception.

I was pleased to find that the first act the congregation took at its constituting meeting in February of 1878 was to adopt a statement of faith. This to me seemed good and right and honest and straightforward. I appreciated the self-consciousness of setting forth publicly what the church believed. I thought such a document would help make the gospel central to the church. It would give a center and a circumference theologically to the congregation. So the fact that they had done this pleased me (and relieved me!).

I was disappointed by the fact that the confession was evidently too short to

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UPCOMING CONFERENCES & EVENTS

Southeast Founders

Conference—December 5-7.

Grace Baptist Church, Cape Coral, FL. Speakers: Tom Ascol, Jared Longshore, Tom Nettles, Tom Hicks. Theme: Law & Gospel.

True Church Conference—

February 20-23, 2020. Speakers: Justin Peters, Tom Nettles, Tom Ascol, David Miller, Jono Sims, & Jeff Noblit. "The Pretenders: Unmasking the Tragedy of Unregenerate Church Membership."

truechurchconference.com

Midwest Founders Conference

25th Anniversary—"Union with Christ". February 25 & 26, 2020.

First Baptist Church of Fenton. Speakers: Dr. Greg Gilbert, Dr. Curtis McClain, Dr. Terry Chrisope, Dr. Bob Curtis. Register online at: <http://sbfcmw.com>

2020 Saved By Faith Youth

Camp—June 15-19. Webster

Conference Center, Salina, Kansas. [https://](https://www.sbfyckansas.com/)

www.sbfyckansas.com/



Check out the "SBFYC Official" YouTube channel to watch the 2019 sessions.

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be the Philadelphia Confession or 1689. There were only 18 articles, and these were fairly brief. Reading over it for a few minutes, I realized that what this church had done was what most Baptist churches in America were doing at the time. They had simply adopted the New Hampshire Confession of Faith as their own local church's statement of faith. I immediately realized that here I was, a Calvinistic pastor, pastoring a less than fully Calvinistic church.

I read the statement first carefully making sure that at least I could affirm it (even if there is more I would like the document to say). I was relieved when I realized that I could. That meant that at least there would be no question of integrity. I would not be leading the congregation astray, at least not in the eyes of the human founders of the work.

Over the next few weeks and months, I came to appreciate our statement of faith even more; but I also used the 1689 for various purposes. I ordered copies of the 1689, and I used it, with both young Christians to disciple, and with older Christians to teach. I even remember sitting on my church's front steps talking with a non-Christian about the gospel, using the 1689's statements on justification to explain the gospel. It was and continues to remain a gloriously useful part of the ministry. The Westminster Divines are my teachers. And their Baptist revisers only improved the document. I continue to stand in their debt as a pastor, teacher and evangelist.

"The True Centre of Christian Union"

But I came to appreciate the New Hampshire Confession more and more as I began to do membership interviews for those who wanted to join the church. By early 1996 we were asking all those who were members to sign the church's statement of faith. Both for existing members, and for those new friends who were coming to Christ, the New Hampshire Confession's brevity, the brevity that I had first looked down on, I began to admire. Here were 18 straightforward articles. They were clothed in 19th century language, but that language was often stronger and more reflective of Scripture than some more modern 20th century statement. And it was closer to their language than the 17th century language of the 1689 Confession. The concision of the articles focused the conversations and questions of the new Christians and would-be members. Instead of getting lost in the finer points of theology-points that we did not have to agree upon in order to be a local church together-we could deal with the main points of doctrine.

True, there was no necessity to affirm definite atonement in the document, but the New Hampshire drafters had cleverly muted that disagreement by using the first person plural approach, making statements about "we" and "us." This is how we sing in our hymns. We assume that the Christian

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gathering is for believers to sing God's praises. We know the unregenerate will be singing, too. There will be hypocrites, and the self-deceived, and non-Christian visitors. But still it is appropriate that we sing about "our great God" and "our salvation," because it is the time and place set aside for public Christian praise of God.

So this is the statement made about Christ's work on the cross:

IV. Of The Way Of Salvation

We believe that the salvation of sinners is wholly of grace; through the mediatorial offices of the Son of God; who by the appointment of the Father, freely took upon him our nature, yet without sin; honored the divine law by his personal obedience, and by his death made a full atonement for our sins; that having risen from the dead he is now enthroned in heaven; and uniting in his wonderful person the tenderest sympathies with divine perfections, he is every way qualified to be a suitable, a compassionate, and an all-sufficient Saviour.

There was nothing in this I disagreed with. Christ did make a full atonement for our sins. Now I knew that some would be affirming this, thinking Christ also made a full atonement for the sins of the non-elect, but they also believed this. I have never thought that affirming definite atonement is necessary for salvation. Though I think it is biblical, I think I understand how many friends on this very point may believe in substitution as fully as I do, affirm that Christ's death is the only way to salvation, and yet think that in some way there is a secondary, non-salvific effectiveness latent in Christ's death, even worked by it, that is for all people. I am not persuaded that this opinion is correct. I will not have that opinion preached from our pulpit. We will not have an elder who wants to make a point of this. But I have come to think that our congregation is both richer and more useful by not requiring agreement on this point at the time of entering our congregation. And the New Hampshire Confession gives us the freedom to have a wider evangelical-membership, who then are led and taught by those who, like myself, have a more clearly and consistently biblical understanding of the atonement.

Christ's prayer for the unity of the church in John 17, Paul's pleas for it in Ephesians, the careful work of the

apostles in Acts 2, all have led me to value the unity of Christians in a local congregation more highly than I may have in the early days of my Christian life. Surely, as the New Hampshire Confession says, Scripture "is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true centre of Christian union", but it is up to us in our statements of faith to define this in ways that are useful for this end. We must balance the need for completeness of statement with comprehensiveness of inclusion.

My experience here has been that people join our congregation sometimes because they recognize that the preaching is clearly reformed. Other times, probably more often, they join simply because they've been converted here, or they've come from elsewhere, unaware of these debates, and they find the preaching to be biblical. Over time, this latter group comes to trust the leadership of this church. They get to know both our lives and our doctrine. And they come to affirm the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humanity, the sufficiency of grace—all of which is affirmed in the New Hampshire Confession. An Arminian could not honestly sign it. But they also become used to the effectual language about Christ's atonement. The authors we read, the studies we have, the sermons they hear—all affirm and define more fully our faith than any confession, regardless how full, ever could. Our elders will be more mature than the average member. They will have a better understanding of theology. And as our elders nominate new elders, we will, I pray, continue to be faithful in requiring of them an understanding of and a rejoicing in the doctrines of grace. And that brings up one last point to be made in this discussion.

Polity Matters

Polity effects what statement of faith is used. The Westminster Confession was written to be used by a national, established church, with a final centralized authority and no real personal statement of doctrine (other than those made by participation in baptism and the Lord's Supper). When it was baptistified in Restoration England, their purpose was at least as much to show that Baptists were not like the Continental Anabaptists—they were just like the reformed Episcopalians who had written it, the Presbyterians and

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Congregationalists-as it was to be used as a local congregation's statement of faith. The more congregational a church is in its polity, the more it needs to have a simpler, statement of faith.

When our friends join a Presbyterian church, they confess that their hope is in Christ alone for their salvation, and that they will submit to the authority of the church (meaning the teaching and discipline of the elders). Only the elders in a Presbyterian church need to affirm their statement of faith, because only they are the ones who will normally vote on and decide matters.

But when someone joins a congregationally driven church, like Baptists, the bar must be a little higher for the general membership, because that statement comprises all that we think we need and should agree on in our setting to be a functioning congregation. And that individual, once voted into membership, will have a vote in the final adjudicatory body of the congregation-the congregation as it meets for church business. That means we want to have enough in the document to be essential for us to be a biblically-faithful church, and yet not so much that we needlessly divide, or cause young Christians to stumble.

Pastors and church leaders need wisdom and prudence to know where this balance is. Many men I know, love, respect and learn from would say that the 1689 Confession is the best to do this. I once thought so. Now, having pastored a congregation for a little more than 10 years, and, by God's grace, having seen evangelicals move to become members and become more clearly biblical in their understanding in the context of the congregation's life and preaching, I think the New Hampshire Confession actually serves us better.

"But are you a Calvinist?"

I don't shrink from the label "Calvinist." In fact, in personal conversation I've often introduced myself as "a slobbering five-point Calvinist"! But in my public teaching and my writing, I try to use "biblical" as an adjective. And I do so not to say less than "Reformed" to my Arminian friend, but to say more. I do so to get in what they perceive to be their territory. If I say that our position is "Reformed," Arminian or Wesleyan friends can simply dismiss me, thinking that I'm on the other side in an

ancient battle, and am about to do no more than rehearse old disagreements. But if I call freshly on that which claims the allegiance of all evangelical parties-the Bible-and I work from there, I require their attention.

Surely God will be more glorified in this world as more people come to acknowledge the sovereignty and sufficiency of His grace. This is what we all desire. And I think that at this time in our setting, the New Hampshire Confession can better help men committed to the doctrines of grace and expositional preaching to lead our churches to grasp more fully the glories of God's grace, and at the same time, allow people with questions to be a part of our congregations on the way there. Just as young pastors learn that by asking for too much too soon, they can lose a whole congregation, whereas patience can lead the whole congregation into a fuller appreciation of God's truth, so with individual Christians, they can so often be led to understand God's grace more fully if we don't wrongly screen them out by asking too much, too soon.

Norton and Lloyd-Jones

In the 500th issue of the *Banner of Truth* magazine, Iain Murray, its founding editor, makes the observation of two different ways leaders in England were approaching the propagation of the reformed faith in the 1950's. One was typified by Mr. Norton, a friend and co-laborer of Murray's in starting *Banner of Truth*. He deliberately used "Calvinist" and "Arminian" a lot, even wanting to offend, in order to be clear, and to avoid the danger of compromising the truth. Another approach Murray says, was to stand clearly for the truth, but to do so often without the 17th century labels, to center on the biblical truths themselves. Murray observes that this was the way of Dr. Lloyd-Jones: "Dr. Lloyd-Jones preferred to teach the meaning of the words rather than to use the labels," (*Banner of Truth*, #500 [May 2005] p. 10).

Honorable men are on both sides of this question. Their doctrine and goals are the same. There are risks on both sides. We must choose. I perceive the issues in the discussion of which statement of faith to use to be similar. And I'm with Dr. Lloyd-Jones on this one.

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**SPURGEON
BAPTIST
ASSOCIATION
OF CHURCHES**

**PO Box 155
Wamego KS 66547**

Phone: (785) 456-8513

Email:
spurgeonassociation@gmail.com

Contact Us:

Administrative Council:

J.W. Glidewell
Moderator
Phone: (785) 772-1176
jwglidewell@gmail.com

Tony Mattia
Corresponding Secretary
Trinity Baptist Church
Wamego, Kansas
Phone: (785) 456-3796
spurgeonassociation@gmail.com

Ken Jorgenson, At Large
kjorg@hotmail.com

Robin Jackson, At Large
jacksonrobin@gmail.com

Bill Ascol, At Large
bascol@sbcglobal.net

Paul Walker, At Large
pastorpaul@elmavenuebaptist.org

Lyn Hansen, At Large
pastorlyn@insidenp.com



WWW.SBAOC.ORG

MEN AVAILABLE FOR PULPIT SUPPLY

Kevin Berens
Colby, Kansas
Email: berens.kevin@gmail.com
Cell Phone: 785-332-7184

Nathaniel Penland
Lawrenceville, Georgia
Email: n8penland@gmail.com
Phone: 678-925-7024

Tim Lambert
Lindsborg, Kansas
Email: tlambert@smokyvalley.org
Phone: 785-614-3651

Bake Ottogy
St. Louis, Missouri
Email: bakeottogy@gmail.com
Phone: 636-467-7446

Brad Richardson
Lawrence, Kansas
Email: richbud@hotmail.com
Phone: 785-766-7268

John Grove
Ocala, FL
Email: trsjwg@gmail.com
Phone: 352-286-5494

PRAYER MEETINGS FOR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AND REVIVAL

- Fellowship Baptist Church in Onaga, Kansas—5:00 pm on Sundays
- Trinity Baptist Church in Wamego, Kansas—8:00 pm on Saturdays

The Spurgeon Baptist Association of Churches is an association of Southern Baptist Churches that are united to manifest the glory of God above all. We set out to do this by seeking spiritual awakening and revival by intense prayer and earnest obedience to Scripture. As an association of churches we are bound in mutual covenant to strengthen and support one another - motivated and guided by the authority and sufficiency of Scripture - by facilitating faithful preaching of the Word of God, proclaiming the gospel of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to all, making and gathering disciples, planting churches and coordinating unified missions efforts.

We are a non-geographic association seeking to include any like-minded body of believers so that together we might better fulfill the great commission of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our intent is to lean on His instruction and not our imaginations so that He is honored in all that we do. We welcome churches who adhere to the confessions of faith accepted by Southern Baptists throughout their history, including, but not limited to, the Second London Confession (1689) and the Baptist Faith and Message.



Baptist Association of Churches