

# CHAPTER *One*

## *The Bible Is God's Book*

### *What Baptists Believe About Biblical Authority*

**N**EW HOPE BAPTIST CHURCH WAS founded in the rural countryside of Texas in 1885. Located somewhat adjacent to Fort Worth but closer to Mansfield, the church began meeting in the country school that gave the congregation its name. One of the founding families donated land across Dick Price Road from the schoolhouse, and the church built its first sanctuary several generations ago. It constructed its last building in 1971, a structure some older members still call the “new sanctuary.”

Times have changed around New Hope. The area has skyrocketed in growth. The cities of Fort Worth, Arlington, and Mansfield have marched ever closer to the church's property. The more the culture changes, however, the more many church members want their congregation to remain the same. It is an island of tranquility in a sea of chaos. In fact, that is its attraction and value to many of its people.

I started my pastoral ministry when New Hope called me to serve as pastor. Our two sons were born while we lived in the church parsonage, a yellow cottage adjacent to the church parking

lot. Some of the deepest friendships I have ever known remain from those years. I have never experienced a more loving family of faith.

But I nearly didn't become the church's pastor. On the Sunday evening after I had preached "in view of a call" and received a wonderful vote from the congregation, the pulpit committee chairman called me at home. He and the committee had forgotten to mention a problem. The church constitution specified that the pastor must preach from the King James Version of the Bible. I had not done so that day (since I didn't own a KJV translation). Would I be willing to change? If not, the call would have to be rescinded. That week my wife bought me a black leather King James Version Bible, and our ministry began.

For New Hope Baptist Church, the one foundation that had stood solid across more than a century of change was the Bible. Pastors and staff had come and gone; programs and property had changed; but the congregation was committed to the truth of God's word. This was the one priority without which the church would lose its way.

I'm now in my fourth decade of Baptist life and ministry. I have been privileged to teach and preach as part of Baptist work on five continents. The one commonality I have found in every Baptist church and every Baptist ministry, from California to Georgia to East Malaysia, from country churches to city congregations, from rural Bible studies to seminary classrooms, has been our commitment to biblical authority.

Why do Baptists believe the Bible? What exactly do we believe about it? Have our beliefs changed over the generations?

The larger subject of Baptists and the Bible is a topic of far greater history and detail than this book is intended to discuss. For our purposes, we'll focus on the major beliefs about Scripture that Baptists have articulated through their various statements of faith. Then we'll learn why these commitments still matter today.

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## The Nature of God's Word

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The 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* begins with this article about the Scriptures:

*The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.*<sup>1</sup>

As we will discover shortly, the *Baptist Faith and Message* (abbreviated as BF&M)<sup>2</sup> was not intended to speak for all Baptists, or to prescribe personal belief. Rather, it is a compendium of what most Baptists have believed through our history on various subjects. Its description of the Bible is a succinct overview of these beliefs. Consider each of its phrases in turn.

The Bible was “written by men divinely inspired.” Baptists believe in biblical inspiration, in the conviction that the Scriptures come from God. The BF&M does not specify a particular theory of inspiration. Some Baptists believe that God dictated the very words of Scripture to its writers. Others think that God gave them ideas, which they expressed using their own vocabularies. Others believe that God's word is the product of a divine/human partnership that the Holy Spirit protected and led. Baptists have never prescribed a particular approach to this question. But we have always believed that the Bible comes from God.

Scripture is “the record of God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction.” God has revealed himself to us and has recorded this self-revelation in Scripture. The Bible is thus “perfect”; the word translated “perfect” in Scripture means *to be complete or entire, to accomplish its intended purpose* (see Matthew 5:48).<sup>3</sup> Its instructions are “divine,” not human.

The Bible has “salvation for its end.” It is a means to the end of personal faith in Christ. As John wrote in summarizing his Gospel, “these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”

(John 20:31). We are not saved by trusting the Bible, but by trusting the God that Scripture reveals. Baptists read the Bible evangelistically.

The Bible is “truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.” This phrase, “without any mixture of error,” goes back to the New Hampshire confession of 1833 and was included in the 1925 BF&M as well. It does not prescribe a particular definition or theory of inerrancy (see chapter ten of this book), but clearly affirms that the Bible is trustworthy and authoritative.

God’s word is the “true center of Christian union,” calling Baptists to unity without uniformity. We are united in the clear teachings of Scripture, not the various interpretations and convictions of men and women. We are not a credal people. Rather, we find our unity only in divine revelation. Indeed, we believe that Scripture is “the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.” We want to be like the Bereans, who “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

Finally, “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.” This crucial phrase means that we interpret all of God’s written word in light of God’s living Word (John 1:1, 14). Jesus is the “Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). God’s plan before time began was to bring his Son to save the world (John 3:16). All Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, concerns this salvation strategy and its implications for our lives.

The Bible was not intended to discuss every dimension of knowledge and interest, but those issues that affect our relationship with our Father. Scripture is not written as a book of science, history, or logic. Rather, it is the means by which our Creator has revealed himself to his creation, so that we might be restored to relationship with him.

As a result, we are to ask of every passage in Scripture: *How does this reveal God in Christ? What does this text tell us about our relationship with our Redeemer?* Based on this revelation, what can I know about myself and my Father?

So Baptists believe that the Bible is the divinely inspired self-revelation of God to us, truth without mixture of error, calling us

to salvation and union in Christ. Most Christians would agree with these affirmations. Are there convictions regarding biblical authority that are more distinctively Baptist?

## What Baptists Distinctively Believe

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Baptist historian Walter Shurden has articulated succinctly the “four fragile freedoms” Baptists embrace: Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom, and religious freedom. He states that we are free *under* the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and we insist on freedom of biblical interpretation because the Scriptures are the way we each come to Christ. We insist on freedom of access to the Bible *for* the purpose of developing a living faith in continuing obedience to God’s revelation. We want to be free *from* all other religious authorities but Scripture. Too, we stand for freedom *of* interpretation, as we study God’s word under the guidance of his Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Baptists believe that we are each free to interpret the Scriptures for ourselves. However, we must interpret the Bible under the Lordship of Jesus, for the purpose of obeying God, free from human control or authority, but guided by the Holy Spirit. When we understand and study God’s word in these ways, we approach God’s word as Baptists.

This position leads to the following practical conclusions.

### Creedalism

A very significant issue regarding biblical authority is creedalism, approaching the Bible through the authority of church and tradition (see chapter two). Baptists have stood throughout our history for the conviction, “no creed but Scripture.”

When people join my church from other denominations, they often ask to see our creed. I show them a Bible. A confused look crosses their face, and I explain that Baptists have no statement of faith they must sign. We do not recite the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed in worship. We do not insist on the Westminster

Confession of Faith as basic to our theology. We consider all creeds made by human beings to be secondary to biblical authority.

What about our own confessions of faith? The preamble to the 1963 BF&M sets out the view the authors of the BF&M took of their statements:

- (1) *That they constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us. They are not intended to add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament, viz., repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.*
- (2) *That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time.*
- (3) *That any group of Baptists, large or small have the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of their faith whenever they may think it advisable to do so.*
- (4) *That the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience.*
- (5) *That they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life.<sup>5</sup>*

To summarize: the *Baptist Faith and Message* does not add conditions to salvation, state unchangeable theology, or limit interpretation or conscience. Clearly, “the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures.” We don’t sign anyone’s faith statement, not even our own.

When I joined the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1987, I was surprised to learn that I would be required to sign the 1963 BF&M, and to agree to teach “according and not contrary to” its teachings. Knowing our historical aversion to creeds, I was surprised by this requirement. The administrator with whom

I spoke explained the requirement this way: sign the document, but interpret it according to your convictions. That was a good Baptist decision.

Back in 1911, historian W. J. McGlothlin made clear our relation to creeds and confessions:

*Being congregational and democratic in church government, Baptists have naturally been very free in making, changing, and using Confessions. There has never been among them any ecclesiastical authority which could impose a Confession upon their churches or other bodies. Their 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 to be considered a Baptist. In the latter sense there has been no Baptist creed.*<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the *Baptist Faith and Message* is more properly titled “A Statement of the Baptist Faith and Message.”<sup>7</sup> It is not *the* statement or a creed we must believe. Jesus claimed, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). If Jesus has *all* authority, then we have none. Baptists believe in no creed but Scripture.

### To be interpreted personally

W. B. Johnson was the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1846 he published a book that opposed confessions of faith as a basis of Baptist union. In the introduction to his book, he listed five specific convictions he stated that Baptists in the South held at that time, as follows: “(1) the sovereignty of God in salvation; (2) ‘the supreme authority of the scripture’; (3) ‘the right of each individual to judge for himself in his views of truth as taught in the scriptures’; (4) democratic church government; and (5) believers’ baptism.”<sup>8</sup>

Later in the same century, the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland affirmed their faith in “the Divine Inspiration and Authority

of the Holy Scriptures as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice: and the right and duty of individual judgment in the interpretation of it.”<sup>9</sup>

From our beginnings, Baptists have maintained that each believer has the right and responsibility of personal biblical interpretation. Growing out of our refusal to affirm creeds, we believe that God’s Spirit is our sufficient guide in understanding the truth God inspired.

So we encourage every believer to study Scripture personally. Contrary to the institutionalism of the Roman Catholic Church, we have stood for the priesthood of every believer (see chapter two). We do not believe that the church determines the meaning of the Bible, or that church teachings and traditions are on a par with biblical authority. We do not submit to the dictates of denominational officials or decisions. Whenever a Baptist body takes a position on a particular theological subject, it speaks only for those present when the vote was taken. Its resolutions and decisions have no binding authority over any other person or church.

We do not require our members to obtain seminary degrees or acquire ministerial credentials before they interpret Scripture. We do not insist that they agree with their pastor or church leaders theologically. Our churches do not make binding decisions regarding matters of spiritual or theological conviction. There is no particular view of Genesis or Revelation you must affirm to teach the Bible at my church.

### Authority relates to salvation and faith

Hugh Wamble was a highly respected church historian at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. In the July 1963 issue of *Foundations* he published one of the most heavily researched articles I have discovered on the subject of Baptists and biblical authority (reprinted in the book, *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Bible*).<sup>10</sup> One hundred and twenty-eight endnotes document every reference from a myriad of Baptist confessions of faith, beginning with the earliest (1610) and extending to the 1963 BF&M. I will not reproduce his citations but will allow his research to guide our own.



Dr. Wamble's article summarizes Baptist confessions regarding three subjects of interest to us here. First, he makes clear that Baptists view biblical authority within the context of salvation and faith. We do not approach Scripture as intending to speak with authority on every subject of human inquiry. We do not see the Bible as God's final word on matters of science, geography, or history. Rather, we view God's word as a means to the end of our personal relationship with him. As we see in the 1963 BF&M, Scripture has "salvation for its end."<sup>11</sup>

Wamble affirms that, "With few exceptions, all of them coming from modern confessions issued by Fundamentalists and Landmarkers, Baptist confessions specify that religion is the area of the Scripture's authority. They do not claim for it authority and infallibility in other areas, nor do they claim that man is able to understand Scripture fully."<sup>12</sup>

This authority is authenticated by "the inward work of the Holy Spirit," as the Holy Spirit bears witness by and with the word in our hearts. This authority does not depend on human testimony, but wholly on God. Neither can this authority be proven by numerous arguments regarding its internal qualities.<sup>13</sup>

Wamble states that biblical authority relates to salvation, as the following phrases from various Baptist confessions indicate:

*all things "necessary for us to know, and to believe to salvation"; whatsoever is "needfull for us to know, believe, and acknowledge" concerning Christ; "necessary to be known, believed, and observed for Salvation"; "all things necessary to be known for the salvation of men and women"; "all things necessary for salvation"; "all things necessary for his [God's] own Glory, Man's salvation"; "to make men wise unto salvation"; "a sufficient and infallible rule and guide to Salvation"; "salvation for its end. The Scripture's infallibility relates, therefore, to salvation."<sup>14</sup>*

In addition to its authority regarding salvation, the Bible possesses authority in all matters of faith and practice. Again, Wamble states, our confessions make clear our stance:

*“its [it is] the Scriptures of the Prophets and Apostles that we square our faith and practice by . . . the rule of . . . faith and practice”; “a rule and direction unto us both for faith and practice”; “the rule whereby Saints both in matters of Faith and conversation [conduct] are to be regulated”; “the only rule, and square of our sanctification and obedience in all good works, and piety”; “serving to furnish the man of God for every good work”; “the rule of Faith and Life”; “the . . . only rule of faith and practice”; “the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice”; “the infallible rule of faith and practice”; “the sole authority for faith and practice.”<sup>15</sup>*

Included in “practice” are “such things as moral conduct, ‘the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties,’ and walking ‘together in particular societies, or Churches.’”<sup>16</sup>

We believe the Bible to be our only authority for salvation, faith, and practice. But we do not seek to make it a compendium on science, history, or geography. We know that any book must be interpreted according to its authorial intent. If I use a cookbook to repair a car, I’ll not make much progress. The fault is not with the book but its reader.

### Primary authority with the New Testament

Dr. Wamble’s extensive research summarizes a second area of interest to us: biblical authority rests first with the New Testament. It is not that Baptists consider the Old Testament inferior in any way. Rather, it is completed and fulfilled in the New. So we will read and interpret the Old Testament in light of New Testament revelation. We will seek principles in the Old Testament that are repeated or amplified in the New, and we will resolve to live by their truth. Our primary authority for salvation and faith is the New Testament.

Dr. Wamble states:

*Primary authority rests with the New Testament. The earliest Baptist confession (1610) says that the proper Christian doctrine for the government of Christ’s spiritual kingdom, “so much as is needful for us to*

*salvation,” is written “in the Scripture of the New Testament, whereto we apply whatsoever we find in the canonical book of the Old Testament, which hath affinity and verity.” Evidence for Baptists’ acceptance of the superior authority of the New Testament may be found in Scripture references, inserted in text and margin, with which confessions are supported.<sup>17</sup>*

Thus, we are New Testament believers. We judge the unclear in light of the clear, and we judge earlier biblical truth in light of later revelation. We believe in *progressive revelation*, the idea that God has progressively revealed himself to us. As a student learns arithmetic before geometry, and trigonometry before calculus, so God revealed himself first in the law and history, then in the prophets, and finally in Christ and the New Testament.

### Biblical authority supreme over all others

Dr. Wamble’s research speaks with assurance to a third subject: Baptists view biblical authority as preeminent. Citing Baptist statements of faith, Wamble summarizes: “The authority of Scripture means, therefore, that all religious beliefs and practices, whatever they may be and wherever they may be found, must stand under judgment of Scripture.”<sup>18</sup>

Baptists view “doctrines of men” as secondary and subsidiary to the truths of Scripture. No person or theological statement can be as important to us as God’s revealed word. Baptists have historically stood firmly on this affirmation of biblical authority, and we hold it at the center of our faith and practice.

### Statements by Baptist Theologians

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A brief survey of renowned Baptist theologians makes clear the consensus Baptists hold on the subject of biblical authority. Let’s begin with E. Y. Mullins, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1899 to his death in 1928. He taught systematic theology

during his tenure as president; served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921 to 1924; and chaired the committee that drafted the first *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1925.

His systematic theology notes comprised the most formative textbook of its era: *The Christian Religion In Its Doctrinal Expression*. Dr. Mullins concludes his discussion of biblical authority thus:

*It is a vital and living authority, and not a mechanical and ecclesiastical one. It is our authoritative source of information as to the historical revelation of God in Christ. It is regulative of Christian experience and Christian doctrine. It is the instrument of the Holy Spirit in his regenerative and sanctifying influences. As regulative and authoritative it saves us from subjectivism on the one hand and from a bare rationalism on the other. . . . It is final for us in all the matters of our Christian faith and practice.*<sup>19</sup>

A younger contemporary of Dr. Mullins became the best-known theologian at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. Dr. W. T. Conner's *Christian Doctrine* was considered normative in its field for many years. Dr. Conner, who retired from Southwestern's faculty in 1948, spoke with a definitive voice on all subjects theological.

Dr. Conner made clear his convictions regarding biblical authority. Scripture, he wrote,

*is authoritative as the voice of God is authoritative to the soul of man. It finds man, searches him, makes him realize his need of spiritual help. If God speaks to man, he must speak in the tones of authority. . . . The God of the Bible is a God of holiness who speaks to man by way of command.*<sup>20</sup>

One of the best-known Baptist theologians of our generation is Millard J. Erickson. His massive *Christian Theology* is required reading for many seminary theology classes. His statement of biblical authority is clear: "Scripture is our supreme legislative authority. It gives us the content of our belief and of our code of behavior and practice."<sup>21</sup> Erickson sees biblical authority as normative for every area of faith and life.

Stanley Grenz, another prolific Baptist theologian, wrote *Theology for the Community of God*, a widely respected textbook in the field. He viewed Scripture as foundational to all theological reflection:

*In engaging in the theological task, we may simply assume the authority of the Bible on the basis of the integral relationship of theology to the faith community. Because the Bible is the universally-acknowledged foundational document of the Christian church, its message functions as the central norm for the systematic articulation of the faith of that community.*<sup>22</sup>

Russell Dilday, the long-time president of Southwestern Seminary, published in 1982 an outstanding book on the question of biblical authority. In its introduction he describes in pictorial terms the nature of biblical authority for Baptists:

*The Bible is a factor so central in this denomination's history that Southern Baptists cannot be understood adequately apart from the Book. It is no surprise then that Southern Baptists have traditionally located the pulpits in their churches in the center of the platform, symbolizing the priority given to the proclamation of God's Word. In fact, in some recent church buildings, architects have creatively designed the pulpit to represent the open Bible as the source of the sermon.*<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the pulpit of the Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, where I am privileged to serve as pastor, is designed as an open Bible. The Scriptures are also pictured on the central column of the pulpit, with a gold cross laid across them. Each Sunday I am reminded to stand "in the word" as I preach the crucified and risen Lord. Our church has made graphically clear its commitment to the centrality of biblical authority. Every Baptist church I know would agree.

## Conclusion

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If you're a Baptist, you stand with a large multitude of people who say with Paul: "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). We

hearken back to a day when no creeds made by human beings existed, when no ecclesiastical authorities or hierarchies had been developed, when churches had no buildings or “clergy”—when we had no authority but God’s word.

In the remainder of this book, we’ll examine and address the challenges made today to this view of biblical authority. But let’s begin by giving thanks for who we are—people of the Book. We stand on the rock of biblical authority, for all other foundations are sinking sand (Matt. 7:24–27).

A boy was fishing early one morning in a dense, cold fog when his boat capsized. In desperation, he spied a rock protruding from the middle of the lake; he swam to it. He huddled on that rock in the bitter cold and fog for more than an hour. Finally a passing fisherman found him. “Weren’t you afraid?” he asked the boy. “Yes, sir, I sure did tremble and shake,” he admitted, “but the rock never did.” It never does.