Building Unity Around Historic Confessions of Faith

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“Doctrine divides.” Such has been the accusation of liberals for many years now. “Doctrine divides; service unites!” was the rallying cry of the early 20th-century ecumenical movement, and liberals of various sorts have long claimed that an emphasis on doctrine creates unnecessary divisions among Christians.

Rather famously, at the 1922 meeting of the Northern Baptist Convention in Indianapolis, W. B. Riley (1861–1947) expressed his concern about “doctrinal defection” within the convention and proposed that the NBC recommend the New Hampshire Confession (1833) to its churches. Cornelius Woelfkin (1859–1928), a liberal pastor from NYC, countered Riley’s proposal with one of his own. Woelfkin rather craftily suggested that the convention approve a substitute motion: “The Northern Baptist Convention affirms that the New Testament is the all-sufficient ground of our faith and practice, and we need no other statement” (Annual of the NBC, v. 15 [1922], pp. 129–33). The following year, the Baptist Bible Union would be formed in Kansas City as a conservative alternative to the NBC. And in the years to come, numerous other groups would break off from the NBC.

I. What Do We Mean by Unity within and among Baptist Churches?

A. What Do We Mean by “Unity”?

“The quality or condition of being one in mind, feeling, opinion, purpose, or action; harmonious combination together of the various parties or sections (of the Church, a state, etc.) into one body; concord or harmony amongst several persons or between two or more” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “unity,” II. 3).

1. Unity within a Local Church

Unity within a local church does not mean that church members look the same, talk the same, and live in the same kind of housing.

When we talk about unity within a church, we’re talking about people worshipping God, evangelizing the lost, and edifying one another—together in agreement over shared truth.
2. Unity among Local Churches

Unity among local churches does not mean that their church services look and sound exactly like one another.

Unity among a group of local churches means that churches are willing and able to work together for outreach and church planting/missionary efforts without compromising their doctrinal beliefs. It also means that they provide mutual accountability and advice.

B. Christian Unity is Very Desirable

How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down on the collar of his robe. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore (Ps 133:1–3).

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 15:5–6).

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought (1 Cor 1:10).

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace (2 Cor 13:11).

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).

…make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind (Phil 2:2).

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble (1 Pet 3:8).

II. Confessions of Faith as a Source of Unity within Baptist History

A. London Baptist Confession (1644)

1. Background to the London Baptist Confession
Particular Baptists arose in England during the 1630s. By the early 1640s, there were seven Particular Baptist churches in London, and in 1644, these churches met together to discuss and affirm what would become known as the London Baptist Confession.

John Spilsbury (1593–c. 1668) likely authored the LBC along with William Kiffin (1616–1701) and either Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691) or Samuel Richardson (fl. 1640s). Fifteen men signed the original confession—two from each of the seven churches plus a third from Spilsbury’s church.

2. Purpose of the London Baptist Confession

a. Particular Baptists wanted to articulate what they believed.

Surely, if ever people had cause to speak for the vindication of the truth of Christ in their hands, we have, that being indeed the main wheel at this time that sets us a work; for had anything by men been transacted against our persons only, we could quietly have sat still, and committed our cause to him who is a righteous Judge…but being it is not only us, but the truth professed by us, we cannot, we dare not but speak (preface to the LBC).

b. Particular Baptists wanted to distinguish themselves from both the Anabaptists and the General Baptists.

…which they have done both in pulpit and print, charging us with holding free will, falling away from grace, denying original sin, disclaiming of magistracy, denying to assist them [civil authorities] either in persons or purse in any of their lawful commands, doing unseemly acts in the dispensing the ordinance of baptism, not to be named amongst Christians: all which charges we disclaim as notoriously untrue (preface to the LBC).

c. Particular Baptists wanted a doctrinal basis for their united fellowship.

We do therefore here subscribe it, some of each body in the name, and by the appointment of the seven congregations, who though we be distinct in respect of our particular bodies, for convenience sake, being as many as can well meet together in one place, yet are all one in communion, hold Jesus Christ to be our head and Lord; under whose government we desire alone to walk, in following the Lamb wheresoever he goes (preface to the LBC).

3. Key Features of the London Baptist Confession

The London Baptist Confession was a fairly detailed expression of Particular Baptist beliefs. Composed of more than 50 articles, this confession included a number of
important landmarks for Baptists. For example,

a. The LBC was the first confession of faith to clearly affirm baptism of believers by immersion.

The way and manner of dispensing of this ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water. It being a sign, must answer the thing signified (art. 40).

b. The LBC affirmed particular redemption and the universal preaching of the gospel.

That Christ Jesus by his death did bring forth salvation and reconciliation only for the elect, which were those which God the Father gave him; and that the Gospel which is to be preached to all men as the ground of faith, is, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the ever-blessed God, filled with the perfection of all heavenly and spiritual excellencies, and that salvation is only and alone to be had through believing in his name (art. 21).

c. The LBC called on magistrates to extend religious liberty to Baptists.

4. Use and Importance of the London Baptist Confession

It appears that the Confession was received with enthusiasm by London Particular Baptists as a worthy doctrinal standard and as a basis for church co-operation (Lumpkin and Leonard, Baptist Confessions of Faith, p. 134, emphasis added).

Perhaps no Confession of Faith has had so formative an influence on Baptist life as this one. [Henry] Vedder calls it one of the chief landmarks of Baptist history (Lumpkin and Leonard, Baptist Confessions of Faith, p. 140).

B. Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689)

1. Background to the Second London Baptist Confession

Renewed persecution in the mid-seventeenth century caused Baptists and Congregationalists to seek closer identification with the Presbyterians. The Congregationalists adopted a slightly modified version of the Westminster Confession in 1658, and in the wake of the renewed implementation of the Clarendon Code, Baptists too saw the wisdom of doing something similar.

Particular Baptists called a meeting of English and Welsh ministers to discuss a new confession of faith. Elder William Collins had already made a revision of the Westminster Confession suited for Baptists, and this,
with some amendments, was adopted in 1677.

The Second LBC was re-issued in 1688 with a few minor changes. Then following the Glorious Revolution in England (1688) and the Act of Toleration (1689), about one hundred Particular English and Welsh churches adopted the confession at the first English Particular Baptist General Assembly in September 1689.

2. Purpose of the Second London Baptist Confession

The foreword to the confession outlined three reasons for its production:

a. Baptists wanted to produce “a testimony to the world of our adhering to those wholesome principles.”

   They largely followed the wording of the Westminster Confession (1646) and the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration (1658), as they put it, “the more abundantly to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion, as also with many others whose orthodox confessions have been published to the World.”

b. Baptists also wanted to “give a full account of ourselves to those Christians that differ from us about the subject of baptism.”

c. They wanted to produce a teaching tool for the “many others who have since embraced the truth which is owned therein.”

3. Key Features of the Second London Baptist Confession

a. The Second LBC is more Calvinistic than the earlier LBC, particularly in the area of perseverance, due largely to the influence of the Westminster Confession.

b. In contrast to the Westminster Confession, the duties of the civil magistrates in church affairs are not delineated.

c. The Second LBC also included some other significant changes when compared to the Westminster Confession.

   It included new or expanded statements concerning the obligation to preach the gospel to all nations and the baptism of believers by immersion. It eliminated the term “sacraments” and the Presbyterian definition of sacraments. And it included a provision for lay preaching and a statement concerning the local church as autonomous.

   Interestingly, unlike the 1644 LBC, the newer confession did not include a
statement restricting the Lord’s Supper to scripturally baptized people.

4. Use and Importance of the Second London Baptist Confession

   a. The Second LBC is the master model for subsequent Baptist confessions in England and America.

   In 1697, Benjamin Keach and his son Elias Keach issued a slightly condensed version of the Second LBC. Although overall a bit shorter, Keach’s Confession included two new articles on the singing of psalms in public worship and the laying on of hands.

   Beginning in the early 1700s, Baptists in America employed the Second LBC or more often Keach’s revision of the confession. And in 1742, the Philadelphia Baptist Association adopted Keach’s version of the Second LBC. This edition became known as the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742).

   b. The Second LBC became a very useful tool for teaching and edification.

   When Charles Spurgeon republished the Second London Baptist Confession for his own church in 1855, he prefaced it with the following words:

   This ancient document is a most excellent epitome of the things most surely believed among us. By the preserving hand of the Triune Jehovah, we have been kept faithful to the great points of our glorious gospel, and we feel more resolved perpetually to abide by them.

   This little volume is not issued as an authoritative rule, or code of faith, whereby you are to be fettered, but as an assistance to you in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of edification in righteousness. Here, the younger members of our church will have a Body of Divinity in small compass, and by means of the Scriptural proofs, will be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in them.

   Be not ashamed of your faith; remember it is the ancient gospel of martyrs, confessors, Reformers, and saints. Above all, it is the truth of God, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail.

   Let your lives adorn your faith, let your example adorn your creed. Above all, live in Christ Jesus, and walk in Him, giving credence to no teaching but that which is manifestly approved of Him, and owned by the Holy Spirit. Cleave fast to the Word of God which is here mapped out to you (Spurgeon, Autobiography of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 2:160–61).

   c. The Second London Baptist Confession, then, was something of a map for believers. It outlined the boundaries of belief and pointed them in the right
direction according to the compass of Scripture.

C. New Hampshire Confession (1833)

1. Background to the New Hampshire Confession

With the growth of Free Will Baptists in New England beginning around 1780, New Hampshire Baptists desired a doctrinal statement that would be acceptable to people holding a broader range of theological opinions than those reflected in the Second London Baptist Confession and the Philadelphia Baptist Confession.

According to Lumpkin and Leonard, “On June 24, 1830, the Baptist Convention of New Hampshire appointed a committee to prepare and present at the next annual sessions ‘such a Declaration of Faith and Practice, together with a Covenant, as may be thought agreeable and consistent with the views of all our churches in this state’” (Lumpkin and Leonard, Baptist Confessions of Faith, p. 376).

2. Purpose of the New Hampshire Confession

In light of the modified Calvinism of many New Hampshire Baptists, the state convention wanted a shorter, less Calvinistic doctrinal statement around which NH Baptists could unite.

3. Key Features of the New Hampshire Confession

a. Not surprisingly, the New Hampshire Confession reflects a moderate version of Calvinism.

In point of fact, the theological views of Calvinistic Baptists in the New Hampshire area had been considerably modified after 1780 by the rise of the Free Will Baptists…. The New Hampshire Convention thus sought to restate its Calvinism in very moderate tones (Lumpkin and Leonard, Baptist Confessions of Faith, pp. 376–77).

Similarly, the Handbook of Denominations states that “The Philadelphia Confession is strongly Calvinist, the New Hampshire Confession only moderately so” (Mead, Hill, and Atwood, Handbook of Denominations, 12th ed., p. 182).
b. Interestingly, the New Hampshire Confession does not say anything about the universal church. Because of this, Landmark Baptist churches and associations have often embraced the New Hampshire Confession.

4. Use and Importance of the New Hampshire Confession

The New Hampshire Confession has been adapted and/or adopted by a number of Baptist groups. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention significantly modified the New Hampshire Confession before adopting it as the convention’s first official doctrinal statement: the Baptist Faith and Message (1925).

A few years later, when a group of about fifty churches withdrew from the Northern Baptist Convention to form the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC) in 1932, they adopted the NHC with a premillennial interpretation of its last article on end times.

The Independent Fundamental Baptist Association of Michigan (IFBAM) does or at least did require member churches to affirm the New Hampshire Confession.

III. How Might a Church or a Group of Churches Foster Unity around Historic Confessions of Faith

A. Historic Confessions of Faith Can be Used as an Introduction to Your Church (or Group of Churches).

1. If you’ve never read through the London Baptist Confession, etc., doing so would be a good introduction to what our Baptist forebears believed.

2. You could provide links to one or more historic confessions of faith on your church’s website.

3. You could mention one or more historic confessions of faith in your New Members’ class.

B. Historic Confessions of Faith Can be Used for Education within a Church.

1. Consider teaching through a historic confession of faith in an ABF class.

2. Consider implementing a catechism to be used with children and/or new believers in the church.
a. Catechisms are a practical means of communicating truth in a systematic way that is both memorable and understandable.

b. Although exact memory of a catechism is helpful, the goal of a catechism is not mere rote memory but rather understanding that will hopefully lead to heartfelt belief.

c. Catechisms in which the answers are complete sentences that are not dependent on the question in order to make sense are generally best.

For example, Q: Who made you? A: God or God made me.

A Few Quotes about Catechisms:

Concerning the importance of catechizing, Calvin once wrote to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset (England):

Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never preserve itself without a Catechism…. And therefore, if you desire to build an edifice which shall be of long duration, and which shall not soon fall into decay, make provision for the children being instructed in a good Catechism, which may show them briefly, and in language level to their tender age, wherein true Christianity consists. This Catechism will serve two purposes, to wit, as an introduction to the whole people, so that every one may profit from what shall be preached, and also to enable them to discern when any presumptuous person puts forward strange doctrine…to take away all ground of pretense for bringing in any eccentricity or new-fangled doctrine on the part of those who only seek to indulge an idle fancy (Calvin to Somerset, October 22, 1548, in Selected Works of John Calvin [7 vols], 5:191).

To preach and not to catechize is to build without foundation (Thomas Watson, c. 1620–1686).

Catechizing does to the preaching of the word the same good office that John the Baptist did to our Saviour; it prepares the way, and makes its paths straight, and yet like him does but say the same things (Matthew Henry, 1662–1714).

I am convinced that the use of a good Catechism in all our families will be a great safeguard against the increasing errors of the times, and therefore I have compiled this little manual from the Westminster Assembly’s and the Baptist Catechisms, for the use of my own church and congregation. Those who use it in their families or classes must labour to explain the sense; but the words should be carefully learned by heart, for they will be understood better as years pass (Charles Spurgeon, 1834–1892).

3. Consider including articles from a historic confession or catechism in a bulletin insert.
4. Consider reading part of a historic confession or catechism aloud in a church service.

C. Historic Confessions of Faith Can be Used to Help Facilitate Cooperation among Churches.

1. Churches that are in essential agreement with one another could affirm (or perhaps modify and affirm) one or more historic confessions as reflecting their doctrinal agreement.

   *Ideas?*

   2.

   3.

   4.

IV. Closing Thoughts

A confession of faith is only useful when people are committed to upholding it.

While historical confessions of faith have great value, there are also good reasons for updating our confessions of faith from time to time.

A confession of faith is not a cure-all, but greater familiarity with our historic confessions may help our churches, both individually and collectively, move toward greater unity in the truth.
Selected Bibliography (*recommended as a good place to begin reading)


