



What's All the Fuss About?

*An analysis of the 'Baptist Faith & Message' statement
and what it could mean for you and your church*



They spoke of freedom in the early days. When those who eventually named themselves Southern Baptists first came together in 1845 at the First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia, they refused to adopt any statement of common doctrinal belief — not even a confession and certainly not a creed. Their stance was based on a “Baptist aversion to all creeds.” For the 80 years from 1845 until 1925, that’s the way it stood — no official statement of belief for those known as Southern Baptists.

This changed in 1925. Out of a reaction to the evolution controversy of the early 20th century, the Southern Baptist Convention appointed a committee chaired by E.Y. Mullins to draw up a recommended statement of the Baptist faith. That statement, largely a recasting of the New Hampshire Confession of 1833, sufficed for 38 years. But then in 1963, again responding to what some saw as the threat of modernism, Southern Baptists revised their doctrinal document to fit the current theological situation.

Significantly, however, the writers of the Baptist Faith & Message of 1963 (and those who adopted it at the annual convention meeting of that year) again made clear that they saw this statement as no creedal formula. As Herschel Hobbs, the chair of the group that wrote the 1963 statement said it, “Baptists have always shied away from anything that resembled a creed or a statement of beliefs to which their people were forced to subscribe.”

That’s the history of Southern Baptists to this point: 80 years without so much as a confession of belief, then the last 75 years with two different statements but never with any desire to force any doctrinal uniformity on churches or individuals. As noted theologian Fisher Humphreys said it, “Baptists do not have creeds. They insist that the only written authority for Christian life and faith is the Bible.”

Now, it is evident that the leadership of the SBC wants to change this historic Baptist rejection of creeds. With the adoption of the Baptist Faith & Message statement at its meeting in Orlando in June 2000, the SBC has in place an instrument that calls for a conformity of doctrine never before seen in Baptist life.

The Baptist Faith & Message, 2000 Version

Most of the media attention to the Baptist Faith & Message focused on its statement that women are excluded from pastoral ministry. This is an important issue and will be addressed in this analysis. At the same time, however, the BFM also raises other issues of concern for Baptists. Of these, two are perhaps most crucial: (1) the place of the doctrine of soul competency in Baptist thought (soul competency defined as a person's right and responsibility to interpret Scripture and practice faith as a distinct individual before God) and (2) the relationship of Jesus and the Bible.

More Authority, Less Freedom

Even a cursory examination makes it clear that the revised BFM seeks to “tighten up” the theological bindings around the hearts and lives of the Southern Baptist faithful. That's evident from two changes made in the statement: (1) a de-emphasis on the doctrine of soul competency and (2) a heightened emphasis on “doctrinal accountability”

The 1963 preamble includes these important words: “Baptists emphasize the soul's competency before God, freedom in religion, and the priesthood of the believer.” In contrast, the 2000 version of the BFM as originally proposed by the SBC review committee didn't even mention “soul competency” or “priesthood of the believer.” After extensive criticism in the weeks prior to the convention, the committee acquiesced, reinserting these hallowed Baptist phrases prior to the vote by SBC messengers. But, even as they did, they subtly de-emphasized them. Instead of the saying that Baptists “cherish” these principles (as the 1963 statement says), the preamble goes only so far as to say Baptists “honor” them. More importantly; the preamble calls for believers’ “accountability to each other under the Word of God.”

The Baptist Faith & Message Statement:

- More authority, less freedom
- More book, less Jesus
- More male, less female

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OTHER VOICES

Note: These quotes are excerpted from previously published articles.

"The revisions seem designed to encourage those who disagree with the authors to leave the SBC. The 1925 and 1963 confessions had a different goal: to unite a diverse people around the large truths of the faith and some shared tasks. The earlier authors got it right. They understood what it meant to Baptists."

— Mike Smith, Memphis, Tenn.
"Real Baptists?"

This is more than a semantic change. Alarming, the very doctrine that F. Y. Mullins called Baptists' "distinctive contribution to the religious life and thought of mankind" has been altered in the document that supposedly defines the theology of Southern Baptists.

Surely, Baptists believe we are accountable in the sense that we should test our beliefs by what we learn from other Christians, whether they are Sunday School class members, our pastors or our other Christian friends. But Baptists have believed that ultimately a person is accountable only to God. To suggest anything else allows for the possibility of a human tribunal set up to determine the quality of one's Christian faith and belief.

Why this de-emphasis on "soul competency" and "priesthood of the believer?" A glance at recent history suggests one answer: those currently in power in the SBC are deliberately attacking this basic principle of Baptists in order to increase the authority of the pastor and the national denomination. Consider these recent developments:

- In an analysis of Mullins' writings published by Broadman and Holman in 1997, Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary and one of the architects of the BFM, described soul competency as "an acid dissolving religious authority, congregationalism, confessionalism and mutual theological accountability."
- At the 1988 meeting of the SBC, messengers passed a resolution on pastoral authority that claimed that the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer was a relatively "recent" development in Baptist life, and that "the pastor is the ruler of the church."
- Now, the Baptist Faith & Message de-emphasizes this historic doctrine in favor of a doctrine of accountability.

Consider what's left out of the 1963 version and what's added to the new model. The 1963 preamble said this about Baptist confessions: "Such statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority." Though the new statement does admit that it has no "quality of finality or infallibility," it no longer contains the language that clearly says it isn't a creed. To the contrary, it now includes words that effectively call for it to function as exactly that. The 2000 version's preamble speaks of confessions of faith "as instruments

of doctrinal accountability,” and states that the doctrines voiced in the BFM are “essential to the Baptist tradition of faith and practice.”

One doesn’t have to look too deeply to see the implications of such statements. “An instrument of doctrinal accountability” sounds a lot like a test of what one believes — in other words, a creed. Hobbs himself, speaking of the statements about soul competency and freedom in the preamble of the 1963 document, said if these words “be denied or ignored, then the statement becomes a creed.”

Recent history suggests the Baptist Faith & Message may be used to “disfellowship” or exclude church members from local congregations or churches from associations, state conventions or national SBC participation. Significantly, one state convention, New Mexico, already has a committee charged with studying the possibility of making adherence to the 1998 BFM the criterion by which it allows churches to remain in good standing with the convention and to participate in its annual meeting. As fundamentalists consolidate control in other states, they no doubt will want “accountability” in their churches also. And that affects every Baptist in the pew.

More Book, Less Jesus

Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, noted that the Baptist Faith & Message “elevates the Bible above Christ.” Tony Cartledge, editor of the *Biblical Recorder*, the state Baptist paper of North Carolina, said, “The changes put into writing a shift from the Living Word to the written word as the Christian’s supreme authority, diminishing the role of a believer’s personal experience with Christ as a guide for faith and practice. Christ is no longer seen as the pinnacle of God’s self-revelation, but as the focus of God’s written revelation.” For a Baptist, any document that elevates anything — even the Bible — above Jesus should be a matter of deep concern.

In the “Scripture” section of the BFM, three changes were made. First, the reference to the Bible as “the record of God’s revelation” was changed to say the Bible is “the revelation.” Second, the phrase,

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“God has called and will continue to call whomever God chooses, male and female. The challenge for Baptists is to ... recognize that each person is ultimately responsible to God and God alone for the call they hear.”

— Donna Forrester, Greenville, S.C.
“Attempting to Limit God’s Call”

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OTHER VOICES

“So, the SBC leaders — who trumpeted ‘biblical inerrancy’ as a battle cry to gain and implement control of the convention for the past 20 years — have a high view of Scripture, after all. In fact, it’s higher than we thought. Rather than a Trinity, they worship a defacto Quartet: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Holy Bible, with the Bible acting as the arbiter of the other three.”

— Marv Knox, Dallas, Texas

“Debate Distills Decades of Division”

“therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy” was added. Third, the phrase, “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ,” was altered to say, “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.”

Obviously, such theological subtleties are easily lost in the midst of daily struggles to live the Christian life. After all, what does it mean to most people to say the Bible is the “revelation,” instead of the “the record of” revelation? And why does it matter that the statement removes the words regarding Jesus as the “criterion” for Bible interpretation?

Consider this: if the Bible is “God’s revelation of Himself to man,” then where does that leave Jesus? Don’t most Baptists believe that Jesus is God’s revelation of Himself to humanity? Yes, the Bible transmits the story of that revelation. Out of the pages of the Bible walks this person who is none other than the Word made flesh. But to say the Bible is the “revelation” elevates it above Jesus Christ. And that is contrary to what Baptists have historically believed. Though Baptists look to Scripture as the primary guide for faith and practice, we are first and foremost a Jesus people who believe that everything before and after Christ must be interpreted through the lens of Christ’s life and teachings. Therefore, to call the Bible “God’s revelation,” and then refer to Jesus only as the “focus of divine revelation,” makes it sound like the written word is the revelation itself while the Jesus on which it focuses is simply the centerpiece of the mosaic. It makes the Bible the criterion by which Jesus is judged instead of the other way around. Thus, it elevates the Bible to a level above Jesus.

But no one is saved simply because they have read a Bible. They are redeemed only by a personal relationship with a Living Lord. After all, what about early believers who trusted Jesus before the Bible as we have it came into existence? Or those believers in earlier centuries who trusted Christ in an age when only priests had Bibles? And what about those today (in cultures other than American) who might hear of Jesus but who have never seen nor heard of a Bible?

As Charles Wade said it, “Every method of interpreting the Bible needs a guiding principle. And Baptists should make it clear that guiding principle is Christ. The Christological principle of hermeneutics is vitally important and the committee took that out. I deeply regret that.”

More Male, Less Female

As noted earlier, most news articles regarding the revised BFM have focused on the “Church” section where the writers exclude women from the possibility of serving as pastors. The statement says, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of the pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

No one can argue that those who believe this can make a biblical case for it. By the same token, however, those who disagree with this position can also use Scripture to defend their viewpoint. For example, in I Corinthians 11: 5, the Apostle Paul speaks of prophesying. He encourages men to prophesy with their heads uncovered and women to prophesy with their heads covered.

A double point can be made. One, not even the most ardent Southern Baptist demands bonnets in church anymore! But, two, and more seriously, “prophesy” literally means “preach,” and it refers here to both men and women. Yes, it’s true that in I Corinthians 14:34, Paul calls for women to keep silent and in I Timothy 2:12, he forbids a woman to have authority over a man. Yet, in Romans 16:2, he commands the church at Rome (that included men) to “assist” Phoebe (a woman) in “whatever business she has need of you, for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.” Paul instructs the church to do what Phoebe asked. He gives a position of authority to a woman because she had been a “helper” to him.

Additionally, Luke 2:36 speaks of Anna as a “prophetess,” as one who “spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.” That sounds a lot like Anna was a preacher!

It’s true that these passages don’t necessarily refer to the pastoral office. But these and other scriptures can be used to make an important point: The Bible displays an internal tension over the issue of women in ministry; we, therefore, should take care when we try to use it to prove our particular case. Just as the Bible leaves room for interpretation here, so also should we.

Ironically, on the same day that the SBC committee published its proposed revisions to the Baptist Faith & Message, *USA Today* carried an article about Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of the famous evangelist Billy Graham. In that article, Graham called her the “best preacher in the family.” Though the leaders of the SBC have every right to state their opinions regarding the roles of women in the

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OTHER VOICES

“The real sadness of it is the underlying sense ... of a deep desire to manage and manipulate people’s faith according to a disturbingly narrow interpretation of Holy Scripture.”

— Julie Pennington-Russell,
Waco, Texas

“Walk This Way — Or Else!”

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church, it seems these men may be trying to recapture a past age more than they're trying to do a thorough exegesis of scripture. Furthermore, to declare their particular interpretation as “the” biblical position for Baptists is to trample upon the notion of the local church making decisions for itself on matters such as this.

One other point can be made here. By referring only to pastors, is the SBC leadership leaving open the possibility that women can serve as ordained deacons or as ordained associates in other ministry roles? If so, this might be seen as progress since most of these leaders have consistently denied the validity of such ordinations in the past. But it also raises another vital issue: why is the pastor-preacher role the only place of ministry elevated to a status unattainable to women? What is so special about that position? Is the ministry of the pastor being elevated to a position above all others? If so, this is a foreign concept for Baptists who have believed that all people have the right and the responsibility to hear from God and to serve God.

Implications for the Local Church

At first glance, it might seem that the revisions noted above don't make much difference in the life of a typical Baptist. After all, most people are too busy trying to do their jobs and raise their families to pay much heed to something that happens somewhere off in a denominational land they seldom experience. And most pastors are too busy preparing sermons, visiting hospitals and leading deacons' meetings to get too involved in theological hairsplitting. Yet, on closer inspection, documents like this deserve our focus because they threaten the very nature of what it means to live our Christian faith as a Baptist.

Our assumption is that such statements can't and won't be imposed on us. After all, each church voluntarily associates with associations, state conventions and national denominations, and each church member voluntarily associates with each church. So, we can cooperate with Baptist bodies or we can choose to walk away from such associations whenever we want.

OTHER VOICES

“I say, leave it to the churches to decide whether or not women will be allowed to do their prophesying behind their pulpits. After all, that always has been and always will be the true Baptist way.”

— Doug Dortch, Tallahassee, Fla.
“Leave It to the Churches to Decide”

While this is true, it is also true that incredible pressure is placed on church members and churches to conform to the majority. If the SBC adopts a particular viewpoint at its annual convention, if that viewpoint is taught in the seminaries the SBC owns and controls, if it is communicated in the Sunday School materials the SBC produces, and if it is expounded on the television talk shows by SBC leaders who imply “this is what Baptists believe,” then it becomes extremely difficult for most Baptists to reject the teachings so offered. Similarly, a state convention may adopt the national stance as its own (as New Mexico illustrates), an association may bring the national issue into the local arena, or a pastor may harp on the issue from the pulpit. In the process, what was “way out there” comes home to roost.

Some churches already refer to the Baptist Faith & Message as their doctrinal statement. But which one — 1963, 1998 or the 2000 version? Laypersons and clergy alike should take extreme care lest what was voted in Orlando in June 2000 soon becomes the standard by which they and their church are tested as orthodox and acceptable or not.

In fact, each local church should consider doing the following:

- 1) Check your governing documents to see if you as a church have adopted any form of the Baptist Faith & Message as your confession of faith. If so, you may need to make sure it has a date on it so you're not tied to this new formulation.
- 2) Consider the possibility of forming a Denominational Relations Committee to study your church's relationships with other Baptist bodies, particularly the Southern Baptist Convention.
- 3) Ask yourself if you and/or your church want to continue to participate in and fund a denomination that discourages, distorts or even seeks to deny the doctrine of soul competency or priesthood of the believer even as it elevates the authority of the pastor.
- 4) Examine your budget to see how much money you send to support institutions and agencies that will now have to subscribe to this new doctrinal stance. (Note: while it's true that no one can force such beliefs on churches, it's also true that all of the seminary professors, missionaries and denominational workers employed by the SBC do have to pledge allegiance to this document. So, when you fund the SBC through the Cooperative Program, you're helping to pay for the theology

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OTHER VOICES

“The dominant ideology of freedom championed by Mullins and Hobbs is no longer the order of the day. The emphasis is now on purity. The theological tent is not as broad, freedom is not a good word any more, and a select few determine how doctrinal purity is to be defined today.”

— David Hull, Huntsville, Ala.

“Baptists: Understanding Our Faith and Message”

Related Resources

***A Baptist's Theology* by R. Wayne Stacy, ed. (Smyth & Helwys, 2000).**

Contributors offer traditional Baptist perspectives on major theological themes. A helpful Baptist apologetic that serves as a good resource for individual reference and small group study.

***Against Returning to Egypt: Exposing and Resisting Creedalism in the Southern Baptist Convention* by Jeff Poole (Mercer University Press, 1998).** Documents the clear move toward creedalism within the SBC.

***Four Fragile Freedoms* by Walter B. Shurden (Smyth & Helwys, 1995).**

Still the single best volume dealing with Baptist distinctives. Excellent resource for small group study. Teaching guide also available.

***Being Baptist: A Resource for Individual and Group Study* by Eileen Campbell-Reed (Smyth & Helwys, 1998).** Designed as a four-week study on what it means to be Baptist.

Especially helpful for persons who come from non-Baptist backgrounds. Good bibliography. Also serves as a discussion guide for CBF's "Being Baptist" video series (see below).

of the Baptist Faith & Message to be spread).

- 5) Carefully watch your state convention and local association to make sure they don't try to use this document as a litmus test for fellowship and mutual work with other churches.
- 6) Examine other Baptist groups, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, that do missions and ministry to see if they adhere more closely to authentic, historic Baptist beliefs. Consider working with these groups as you find yourself in kinship with them in terms of polity, theology and mission.

Concluding Questions

Many Baptists see the Baptist Faith & Message as the next step in the ongoing effort of the SBC to impose creedal doctrine on Baptists in the pews. As Charles Wade said, "This document has become a creed."

The outcome ultimately rests in the hearts and minds of Southern Baptists. Will those who worship in SBC churches and give their money to SBC causes continue to insist on a freedom from creeds? Or will they continue to pay for and participate in a denominational system that has strayed so far from its Baptist heritage? Will they quietly accept the subtle but apparently inevitable yoke of doctrinal conformity the SBC leadership seems intent on placing upon them? Or will they look closely, think independently, pray fervently and act courageously?

The future beckons. May each of us face it as authentic Baptist Christians — free in Christ to worship and serve as God calls us.

This analysis was prepared by Gary E. Parker, former coordinator for Baptist life and leadership at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, as a resource for Baptist churches. The list of related resources was compiled by Terry Hamrick, CBF's coordinator of leadership development.

For a free introductory packet about the mission and ministries of the Fellowship, call toll-free, (800) 352-8741. Or visit our web site at www.thefellowship.info.

Endnotes

- ¹ Robert Baker, editor, *A BAPTIST SOURCE BOOK* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), P. 120
- ² Herschel Hobbs, *THE BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE STATEMENT* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971) P. 13
- ³ Hobbs, p. 13
- ⁴ Fisher Humphreys, *THE WAY WE WERE: HOW SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGY HAS CHANGED AND WHAT IT MEANS TO US ALL* (New York: McCracken Press, 1994), p. 52
- ⁵ Hobbs, p. 4
- ⁶ Quoted in *BAPTISTS TODAY*, November 20, 1997, p. 2
- ⁷ Hobbs, p. 4
- ⁸ Hobbs, p. 12
- ⁹ Quoted in Associated Baptist Press story, May 25, 2000
- ¹⁰ Quoted in “Freedom is a Major Casualty in the Revised Baptist Faith and Message,” Tony Cartledge, May 24, 2000
- ¹¹ Quoted in Associated Baptist Press story, May 25, 2000
- ¹² *USA TODAY*, May 18, 2000
- ¹³ Quoted from Baptist Standard, June 19, 2000

Related Resources

Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty (Smyth & Helwys, 1997); ***Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Bible*** (Smyth & Helwys, 1994); and ***Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Priesthood of All Believers*** (Smyth & Helwys, 1993). This series, edited by Walter B. Shurden, is a must for anyone interested in Baptist identity.

Electronic Media

www.thefellowship.info. Web site of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. A downloadable version of “What’s All the Fuss About?” is available. The site also includes links to each of CBF’s partner organizations. A variety of resources may also be ordered online at the CBF Store.

OTHER VOICES

"I envision the Church of Jesus Christ a discipleship of equals — a community in which all members are given equal opportunity for the full expression of all their spiritual gifts. Anything less is a continuation of the crippling of the body of Christ that has characterized the church throughout history."

— Anne Thomas Neil, Raleigh, N.C.

"Must We Continue to Cripple the Body of Christ?"

"Baptists who value freedom in Christ above conformity to denominational orthodoxy will find little to cherish to the BF&M."

— Tony Cartledge, Raleigh, N.C.

"Freedom is a major casualty in the Revised Baptist Faith & Message"

"One problem with the recent change in the Southern Baptist doctrinal statement is that it claims the Bible teaches only men should be pastors. It is possible to interpret Scripture and come to that conclusion; but that's not the only way to interpret Scripture. Yet this document is written in a way that if you don't interpret Scripture as forbidding women to serve as pastors, then you don't believe Scripture. This places a man-made interpretation of Scripture over Scripture itself. CBF is made up of Bible-believing folks who also believe in the freedom and right of every individual to interpret scripture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit."

— Daniel Vestal

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