

**BAPTIST**  
**DISTINCTIVES**  
AND NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ORDER



# BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

AND NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ORDER

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*For Preacher Weekle*

## *Preface*

THE VISION FOR THIS BOOK grew over time. It was originally conceived as a short booklet-length explanation of Baptist principles. Early drafts of the first chapters were written as much as two decades ago. While I was in the process of writing and thinking, however, it seemed useful to include a slightly fuller exposition of the reasons for the unique positions Baptists hold. While the volume is still meant as explanation and not polemic, it now investigates at least the principal evidences and arguments for the Baptist distinctives.

The range of content has also been expanded. When I first outlined the book, I foresaw a format in which a single chapter would be devoted to each of the six distinctives. As these chapters began to unfold, I became aware that certain aspects of Baptist theology would likely be omitted if I consistently followed the original approach. At first, I attempted to correct this deficiency by simply adding discussions to each chapter. For instance, the examination of the Lord's Table became part of the chapter on pure church membership.

Even this approach left some important topics largely unaddressed. One example is the network of problems connected with Landmarkism. Friends who regularly encountered Landmark views encouraged me to provide them with some help by incorporating at least a cursory response. Other practical matters such as interchurch cooperation merited elaboration, but they really deserved chapters of their own.

These considerations were becoming weightier at the very time when Regular Baptist Press agreed to publish the volume. As it happened, Regular Baptist Press wanted a longer work than I had first envisioned. Consequently, I was able to incorporate several chapters that deal with practical questions that confront Baptists.

While I am glad for the expansion that occurred in the process of writing the book, I recognize that there remain in these pages rather more gaps than I would have preferred. As it goes to press, I can already think of ways in which the discussion could be improved. These will have to await a second and expanded edition that, Lord willing, I will have the opportunity to publish in future years.

I frankly acknowledge that this book would be far less useful if not for the generous criticism of friends and colleagues. Drafts of these chapters have, of course, been read by my fellow professors on the faculty of Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis. I am especially grateful to Jeff Straub for his helpful interaction. The entire first draft was also read by Pastor Ralph Warren of Lake County Baptist Church in Waukegan, who provided much useful advice. I am particularly grateful for ~IGrand Bird, my assistant, who has edited the drafts, checked the citations, and done much else to improve the quality of this presentation.

The board of Central Seminary took a bold step when they placed me in a professorship that would be devoted largely to writing. I am grateful for their vision and for the strength of their faith. The arrangement that they created has, from a human perspective, made this book possible.

My first lessons in Baptist distinctives and polity were learned as a boy in a small church plant (First Baptist Church) in Freeland, Michigan. The Fellowship of Baptists for Home Missions provided a man of God, Robert Weckle, as a pastor and church planter. His teaching and ministry were irreplaceable in shaping my understanding of the ideas in this book. Equally important was the instruction of my father, Thomas D. Bauder, who became a Baptist pastor during my high school years. His patient explanations of Baptist ideas are still ringing in my ears. Later professors (George Houghton in college and Robert Delnay in seminary) did much to confirm and build upon the ideas that I learned in my youth.

The above individuals have all contributed to this book, either directly or indirectly. I am more grateful to them than I can say. They have headed off some bad thinking and helped me to repair some broken sections. The remaining flaws, however, are my responsibility alone.

Plymouth, Minnesota

March 20, 2012

# *Introduction*

DENOMINATIONAL LABELS are going out of style. I think that is unfortunate. Those labels are a kind of shorthand. They stand for sets of ideas. When people say, “I am a Lutheran,” or “I am a Presbyterian,” they are not just identifying themselves with an organization or a social group. They are identifying themselves with a combination of convictions. Each of the major denominational labels stands for a set of ideas. At one time, Christians thought that these ideas were so important that they deserved labels. They used the labels to distinguish one set of convictions from another. They wore their labels as the badge that identified their distinctive beliefs.

I am a Baptist. Unlike some denominations, Baptists did not choose their own label. Their opponents gave it to them as shorthand for the doctrines and practices that distinguished Baptists from other Christians. Because Baptists were strongly committed to these ideas, they embraced the label. They were pleased to accept a name that stood for important teachings. Since I agree with those teachings, and since I also think that they are important, I am happy to share the label.

What I have discovered is that most people who wear the name *Baptist* no longer know the ideas it stands for. If asked to name the characteristic teachings of their group, most merely observe that their churches perform baptisms by immersing rather than sprinkling or pouring. Increasingly, church members display an astonishing lack of knowledge about just what Baptists believe.

Sadly, that ignorance is too often shared by Baptist leaders. It is not difficult to find lists of Baptist distinctives, but such lists are often marred by one of two faults. The first fault is that many of the lists were compiled by writers who really did not know what Baptists believe. Consequently, their lists either omit

important teachings, or they add teachings upon which Baptists have never agreed. Sometimes they do both.

The second and more serious fault is that some lists have been compiled by people with theological axes to grind. Some groups would like to claim to be the only true Baptists. They attempt to bolster their claim by trying to define all other Baptists out of existence. Their lists are little more than propaganda tools.

This point was brought home to me when a friend asked me to recommend a current, nontechnical work that would explain what a Baptist is. I teach Baptist polity in a seminary. I ought to know where to find such a work. As I pondered the question, however, I could not think of a single work that I could heartily recommend. Every pamphlet or book that came to mind was one that required, at best, a guarded endorsement.

This came as a surprise to me. Baptists used to publish many good statements of their beliefs. I can think of older works that I could recommend virtually without reservation. But I cannot think of anything that is available now that does not require further qualification or explanation.

A need exists for a short book that will explain Baptist thought and practice to ordinary church members and, perhaps, to those who are training for ministry. The present book undertakes this task. It will answer the question, What is a Baptist? for people who are not theological experts. It will not, however, try to defend all of the distinctive Baptist beliefs in detail, though it will usually indicate where the main proofs lie.

In this book, I wish to explain which ideas and practices set Baptists apart from other Christians. I am addressing this explanation primarily to those who have either grown up in or entered Baptist circles without understanding the beliefs that shape the Baptist mind and heart. Secondly, I am also offering an explanation to non-Baptists who are curious about Baptist beliefs. I do not, however, intend this volume to be a polemic to answer all the arguments of those who disagree. Neither do I intend to treat exhaustively every aspect of Baptist theology. This book is an over-view, not for the theological professional, but for the thoughtful inquirer.

### *The Baptist Distinctives*

Baptists are defined by their characteristic beliefs. Taken together, these beliefs are called the *Baptist distinctives*. Before we actually begin to explore these distinctive teachings, I need to say a word about how they function.

The distinctives, taken together, are what set Baptists apart from other Christians. Therefore, no belief that is held universally by Christians can qualify as a Baptist distinctive. Some teachings set all Christians apart from other religious people. These “Christian distinctives” are known as essentials, or fundamentals. All true Christians affirm the fundamentals. Because Baptists are Christians, they also believe the fundamentals. A person who denies one of the fundamentals cannot be a Baptist because that person is not a Christian (though too often such persons dishonestly continue to call themselves Christians and even Baptists). By the same token, Methodists and Presbyterians affirm the fundamentals, for they, too, are Christians. A person who denies a fundamental doctrine cannot rightly be called a Methodist or a Presbyterian. The fundamentals are the common property of all true Christians, whether Baptist, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Wesleyan. Therefore, a fundamental doctrine is not really a Baptist distinctive, even though all genuine Baptists believe it.

On the other hand, we must not say that *only* Baptists hold *any* of the Baptist distinctives. Baptists are characterized by several beliefs. Not one of those beliefs is absolutely unique to Baptists. No matter which one you choose, you can find other Christians who acknowledge it. No single distinctive *by itself* is sufficient to distinguish Baptists from all other groups of Christians.

What makes Baptists different is that they alone hold the combination of beliefs that are known as the Baptist distinctives. Each individual belief is held by some other group, but no other group holds the whole bundle. Baptists are distinguished, not by the individual teachings, but by the combination of teachings that make up the Baptist distinctives.

While each of the Baptist distinctives is held by *some* other Christians, no Baptist distinctive is held by *all* other Christians. Therefore, each one of the distinctives sets Baptists apart from some other Christian group. When all of the distinctives are added together, the combination ends up setting Baptists apart from all other Christians.

The purpose of this book is both to articulate the Baptist distinctives and to discuss some of the practical issues that arise from applying them. Consequently, the book is in two parts. In the first part, each chapter takes up and discusses one Baptist distinctive, for a total of six in all. The second part deals with the application of these distinctives to practical problems that Baptists face. In the second part, each chapter deals with a particular problem.

## *Handling Scriptural Evidence*

Before moving into the actual discussion of the Baptist distinctives, I should say something about how I will be handling the Scriptures. It can be perplexing to see how Christians of goodwill, all of whom acknowledge the authority of Scripture, can come to such different conclusions regarding denominational distinctives. Such realities force us to ask what is unique about the Baptists' way of handling Scripture that leads to their conclusions.

This question has several answers. One is that Baptists appeal specifically to the New Testament as their authority for the faith and order of the church. In fact, this appeal is really the first and most important Baptist distinctive. The first chapter of this book will discuss it in detail.

A second answer lies in the way that Baptists bring the Bible to bear on doctrinal questions. Different denominations draw contrasting conclusions partly because they employ distinct methods when handling the Scriptures. Baptists tend to read the Bible differently than other groups, though their starting place is the same as other gospel-believing denominations. With many other Christians, Baptists presuppose that Scripture interprets Scripture. This principle is crucial for churches that do not recognize an authoritative leader or church court to tell them what the Bible means. We allow the Bible to interpret itself by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

How does this principle work in practice? The answer to this question is the point at which the denominations begin to diverge. Unfortunately, many Bible teachers do not take time to make their method clear. Perhaps they simply assume an answer to the question.

Choices at this point will guide doctrinal and practical decisions later on. For this reason, I think that those who teach the Bible should describe their method up front. People ought to know how one reads the Bible and why one reads it that way.

Even Baptists differ to some degree in their method of understanding Scripture, though they are similar in most important respects. While I may not be able to speak for all Baptists at this point, I can at least state my own assumptions. In the main, these assumptions appear to be implicit in mainstream Baptist thought. These assumptions take the form of three rules for evaluating Biblical evidence when allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.

The first rule is that teaching (didactic or doctrinal) passages should interpret historical passages. Historical passages tell us what happened, but by themselves

they do not tell us what ought to happen. On the other hand, teaching passages are designed to instruct us in what to do.

The New Testament churches attempted a variety of practices. In at least one instance, the members of a church held all goods in common (Acts 2:44). All of the apostolic churches read the New Testament documents in Greek. These churches also met for prayer, preached the Word, and supported their widows (Acts 2:42; 6:1).

Which of these practices are churches obligated to adopt today? Unless we have clear teaching to tell us, we do not know. Holding all goods in common was practiced by some churches but not by others. Reading the New Testament in Greek was practiced by all churches, but may have been coincidental. Meeting for prayer, preaching the Word, and supporting widows were practiced by all apostolic churches—but were these practices coincidental or normative? Is a modern church sinning if it allows its widows to draw upon other sources of support? What if it has no widows at all?

The example of the early church may sometimes show us what is permissible. From the example of the Jerusalem church, we can probably infer that it is not *wrong* for a church to hold goods in common. By itself, however, the example does not show us what is required (e.g., that all churches *must* hold all goods in common). Teaching passages generally tell us what we ought to do, while historical passages illustrate how it was done.

Admittedly, distinguishing teaching passages from historical passages is not as easy as simply pointing out the difference between narratives and epistles. The epistles contain many personal references that are meant only for a particular time and place. For example, in 2 Timothy 4:16–21, the apostle Paul provides details about his trial, expresses his confidence that the Lord will bring him safely into the heavenly kingdom, extends greetings to several individuals, and tells Timothy to come before winter. Even though 2 Timothy is generally a teaching book, this passage is definitely historical in nature.

The opposite may also be true. Narrative may contain editorial comments or other indications that a passage is meant to be didactic. For example, Peter draws a doctrinal inference about Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:44–48, which he defends before the Jerusalem congregation in Acts 11:15–17. This inference is accepted by the church in Acts 11:18 and becomes the basis of advice in Acts 15:7–11 and 14–21.

While Acts is a narrative, its handling of the episode with Cornelius leads us to believe that an important doctrine is being communicated. Distinguishing historical passages from teaching passages sometimes requires skillful

judgment, and occasionally a point of doctrine or practice will depend upon that judgment.

The second rule for Scripture interpreting Scripture is that clear passages should interpret obscure passages. One old Baptist confession puts it this way: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture which is not manifold, but one, it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.”<sup>1</sup> This principle is widely recognized, but its results are often disputed. The trick is determining which passages are clear and which passages are obscure. In view of this difficulty, I would like to restate the principle: a passage that can mean only one thing should be used to interpret a passage that could possibly mean several things.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:29, the apostle Paul refers to the custom of being “baptized for the dead.” What is baptism for the dead? Guesses abound, meaning that this verse is capable of a variety of more-or-less plausible interpretations. Latter-day Saints believe that baptism is necessary to be admitted into the kingdom of God, and they understand this verse to teach that living Mormons can be baptized for their dead relatives. This understanding of baptism for the dead, however, contradicts clear passages that base salvation entirely upon personal faith in the cross work of Christ (e.g., Rom. 3:23–26) in the absence of any work or merit on the part of the one being saved (e.g., Eph. 2:8, 9). We reject the Mormon interpretation because it is ruled out by the obvious teaching of other Scriptures.

When we are dealing with passages that could be interpreted in multiple ways, we are not free to choose whatever interpretation appeals to us. We are free only to choose those interpretations that do not contradict other Scriptures. When a text could mean either A or B, but a second text allows only B, we must not use the first text to justify a continuing belief in A.

The third rule is that deliberate passages should interpret incidental passages. The principle here is that the Bible speaks more clearly and directly when it is trying to answer a specific question than when it is talking about a different topic. Consequently, if we can find a passage that actually aims to answer the question that we are asking, that passage will be of greater value to us than a whole list of passages that touch on our question only incidentally.

For example, suppose we want to understand water baptism. We need to find passages that aim to teach us about water baptism. Granted, we will be

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1. Baptist Confession of Faith (1689), 1.9.

interested in passages that mention baptism even when they are not aiming to teach us about it (e.g., Acts 22:16), but we will not base our doctrine on those passages. We will also hesitate to base any conclusions upon references that may not even be associated with baptism (e.g., the “washing of regeneration” in Titus 3:5 or being “born of water” in John 3:5). Instead, we will look for a passage that specifically aims to teach us about water baptism (such as 1 Pet. 3:20, 21).

We cannot demonstrate the truth of our doctrine and practice simply by listing Scripture references. That is called proof-texting. Instead, we must demonstrate how the Scriptures answer the question that we are asking. Consequently, in the following chapters we will sometimes take the time to examine specific passages in greater depth rather than simply listing Biblical citations.

These three rules will guide the handling of Scripture throughout this book. When we weigh Biblical evidence, some evidence weighs more than other evidence. Teaching passages weigh more than historical passages. Passages that can mean only one thing weigh more than passages that could mean multiple things. Deliberate passages weigh more than incidental passages. I shall occasionally refer to these rules in order to explain the distinctive beliefs of Baptists and to show where and how these beliefs arise from the text of the Bible. Our next task then is to discover what those beliefs are. What is a Baptist? The following chapters will answer that question.

*Part One:*

*The Baptist Distinctives*

# 1 *The Authority of the New Testament*

MANY OF THE PAMPHLETS and books that have been written about the Baptist distinctives over the past half-century use the same approach. They take the word *Baptist* and turn it into an acrostic. Each letter of the word becomes the first letter of one distinctive. In this scheme, the initial *B* is always made to stand for *Biblical authority*.

This acrostic has helped many people gain a better idea of what a Baptist is, but it is a bit misleading. While Baptists certainly do recognize Biblical authority, it is not really a Baptist distinctive. Instead, the belief that sets Baptists apart from other Christians is their recognition of the absolute authority, not simply of Scripture in general, but specifically of the New Testament, in all matters of church faith and order. Let me explain what I mean.

## *Baptists and Biblical Authority*

First, I certainly recognize that Baptists affirm the authority of the Bible. All genuine Christians acknowledge the authority of Scripture as the Word of God. This recognition of Biblical authority is one of the marks that distinguish Christians from non-Christians. It belongs to a class of ideas that is even more serious than the Baptist distinctives. Biblical authority is a fundamental of the Christian faith.

No one who denies the authority of the Bible is truly a Christian. Inasmuch as Baptists are true Christians, they do indeed acknowledge Biblical authority. If they did not, they would be neither Christian nor Baptist. Baptists, however, are not alone in affirming Biblical authority. True, historic Lutherans, Methodists,

Presbyterians, and others also recognize the authority of the Bible. Therefore, even though all real Baptists do acknowledge the authority of the Bible, Biblical authority is not properly a Baptist distinctive.

If Biblical authority is not specifically a Baptist distinctive, why do so many Baptists claim it as one of their distinguishing marks? The answer to this question has two parts, both of which are related to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, which took place in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Modernists were theologians and churchmen who professed to be Christians but who denied the authority of the Bible. Some of these modernists (also called liberals) gained power in the major Baptist fellowships, especially in the North. Within these fellowships they were opposed by Baptists who still affirmed the fundamentals. These “fundamentalists” (as they were called) maintained that people who denied Christian distinctives (i.e., fundamental doctrines) should not be recognized as Christians at all. Obviously, if modernists were not Christians, they were not Baptists either. Thus Baptist fundamentalists insisted that anyone who denied the authority of the Bible was not a real Baptist.

As we have already seen, they were right. Modernists (liberals) who denied the authority of the Bible were neither Christian nor Baptist. Naturally, Baptist fundamentalists stood up to defend the fundamentals. The fight that ensued, however, was over a fundamental of the faith, not a Baptist distinctive. During this great battle, the Baptist distinctives tended to get lost in the scuffle. That is part of the reason that some current Baptists see Biblical authority as a Baptist distinctive.

The other reason that Biblical authority has come to be viewed as a Baptist distinctive is related. The modernists captured most of the Baptist seminaries during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Because they rejected the teachings of these denominationally controlled institutions, many Baptists were forced to attend inter- or nondenominational schools. Those schools, though strong on the fundamentals, did not emphasize the Baptist distinctives. Consequently, an important fundamental of the faith (Biblical authority) slowly began to edge out an important but more nuanced and baptistic understanding of the Bible’s authority. Many of these Baptist leaders embraced a view of Biblical authority that was solidly fundamental but not distinctly Baptist.

As a result of these two historical forces, many contemporary Baptists believe that Biblical authority is a Baptist distinctive. To make their case, they may even go to great lengths to show how other denominations somehow infringe

upon Biblical authority. The fact is, however, that all genuine Christians make the Bible their final court of appeal for doctrine and life.

### *Baptists and New Testament Authority*

Baptists do affirm a distinctive that seems similar to Biblical authority, but the difference is significant once understood. Catching the distinction is fairly important, because this particular Baptist teaching is crucial for several of the others. The genuine distinctive that sets Baptists apart from many other groups of Christians is this: Baptists consistently affirm the absolute authority of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order.

What does this mean? How is it different from the Christian fundamental of Biblical authority? Perhaps I should answer these questions first by saying what this first Baptist distinctive does *not* mean.

When Baptists affirm the authority of the New Testament for the faith and order of the church, they are *not* rejecting or ignoring the general authority of the Old Testament. Baptists agree with other Christians that *all* of the Scripture—Old and New Testaments alike—is both inspired (God breathed) and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Baptists hold the Old Testament in high esteem indeed.

The Bible is divided into two sections for a reason. In the outworking of God's plan, a new stage began when God the Son was born as a human being, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into Heaven. Something has changed in the way that God is dealing with the human race.

Baptists insist that the present form of the church is uniquely a New Testament institution. The church may or may not have been present in the Old Testament—Baptists disagree about that point. Dispensational Baptists, such as those of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, affirm that the church began on the Day of Pentecost. Even Baptists who believe that Israel was the Old Testament church, however, agree that the form and order of the church changed significantly with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even if the church existed in the Old Testament, its pattern of organization and mode of operation were dramatically altered by events that stemmed from the ministry of the Lord Jesus.

Where should we look to discover the church's nature, mission, and order? Baptists insist that the only divinely inspired textbook on the church is the New Testament. Only the New Testament tells us what the church is. Only the New

Testament tells us what the church is supposed to do. Only the New Testament tells us how the church is supposed to be organized. In fact, when Baptists speak about the church, they often specify that it is the “New Testament Church” that they have in mind.

Although the sole authority of the New Testament for church faith and order is the first principle of the Baptists, they are not the only ones who have acknowledged it. Ulrich Zwingli was led to begin the Reformation in Zurich after a careful study of the Greek New Testament. He also taught younger men like Conrad Grebel and George Blaurock to study the Greek New Testament, and it was this study that led them to perceive inconsistency in Zwingli’s view of baptism. These young men became the fathers of the Anabaptist movement.<sup>1</sup> The authority of the New Testament has also been a guiding principle of the Stone-Campbell movement, which consists of the Churches of Christ, the Independent Christian Churches, and the Disciples of Christ (though because of their insistence upon baptismal regeneration, these groups should probably not be classified as Christian denominations). Baptists, however, have made the authority of the New Testament for church faith and order the key to their understanding of the church.

A few citations will help to evidence how widespread this belief is among different groups of Baptists. For example, J. M. Carroll, a leading voice of the Landmark Baptist movement, wrote in his famous booklet, *The Trail of Blood*, that the church has for “its laws and doctrines: the New Testament and that only.”<sup>2</sup> While the Landmark movement has never included a majority of Baptists, Carroll’s views on New Testament authority are very much in keeping with the mainstream.

Francis Wayland, one of the most famous Baptists in nineteenth century America, exerted exceptional influence among Baptists in the North. On the question of authority, Wayland wrote, “What is the creed, and what are the acknowledged standards of the Baptist churches in this country? To this, the general answer has ever been, ‘Our rule of faith and practice is the New Testament.’ We have no other authority to which we all profess submission.”<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Wayland was not disputing the value of confessions, but he was exalting the role of the New Testament as the authority for church faith and order.

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1. This story is told briefly in William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 9–28.

2. J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood* (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931), 55.

3. Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, 1857), 13.

Another northern Baptist who articulated this principle was W. H. H. Marsh. Marsh was a generation or so removed from Wayland, but he, too, recognized the importance of New Testament authority.

The constituency of the New Testament church should be determined by the New Testament itself. This accords with the facts of the case. True, the Old and New Testament together are the word of God. But the former was first given to the descendants of Abraham after the flesh. The New Testament was given to the constituencies of the churches established by the preaching of the gospel, and as an *ex post facto* [after the fact] interpretation of the Old. Therefore we must look into the latter, not the former, for the definition of the constituency of the New Testament church. Here is the real controversy between Baptists and evangelical Pedobaptists. The former as tenaciously hold the Old Testament to be part of the word of God as do the latter. The latter agree with the former, as we shall see, that the New is an *ex post facto* interpretation of the Old. We submit therefore, that while the Old Testament defines the constituency, government, and mission of the Hebrew Commonwealth, the New defines each and all of these for the visible Church of the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

Southern Baptists have affirmed this principle with as much vigor as those in the North. One of the great Baptist theologians of the South was B. H. Carroll. Concerning the first Baptist distinctive, Carroll wrote:

All the New Testament is the Law of Christianity. The New Testament is all the Law of Christianity. The New Testament will always be the Law of Christianity. This does not deny the inspiration or profit of the Old Testament, nor that the New is a development of the Old. It affirms, however, that the Old Testament, as a typical, educational and transitory system, was fulfilled by Christ, and as a standard of law and way of life was nailed to the cross of Christ and so taken out of the way. The principle teaches that we should not go to the Old Testament to find Christian law or Christian institutions. . . . This is not a question of what is the Bible. If it were, Baptists would not be distinguished from many Protestants in rejecting the apocryphal additions incorporated by Romanists in their Old Testament. Nor is it a stand with Chillingworth on the proposition, "The Bible, and the Bible alone, the religion of Protestants." If it were, Baptists would not be distinguished from

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4. W. H. H. Marsh, *The New Testament Church* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1898), 20.

many Protestants in rejecting the equal authority of tradition as held by the Romanists. But when Baptists say that the New Testament is the only law for Christian institutions they part company, if not theoretically at least practically, with most of the Protestant world, as well as from the Greeks and Romanists. . . .

The New Testament is the law of Christianity. All the New Testament is the law of Christianity. The New Testament is all the law of Christianity. The New Testament always will be the law of Christianity. Avaunt, ye types and shadows! Avaunt, Apocrypha! Avaunt, O Synagogue! Avaunt, Tradition, thou hoary-headed liar. Hush! Be still and listen! All through the Christian ages—from dark and noisome dungeons, from the lone wanderings of banishment and expatriation, from the roarings and sickening conflagrations of martyr fires—there comes a voice—shouted here, whispered there, sighed, sobbed, or gasped elsewhere—a Baptist voice, clearer than a silver trumpet and sweeter than the chime of bells, a voice that freights and glorifies the breeze or gale that bears it. O Earth, hearken to it: *The New Testament is the law of Christianity!*<sup>5</sup>

Probably no handbook on Baptist polity has been more widely used than Edward Hiscox's *New Directory for Baptist Churches*. It has served as a guide for millions of Baptists in the United States. Hiscox affirmed the absolute authority of the New Testament in the following words: "The New Testament is the constitution of Christianity, the charter of the Christian Church, the only authoritative code of ecclesiastical law, and the warrant and justification of all Christian institutions."<sup>6</sup>

Piling up so many quotations from old Baptist theologians may seem a bit pedantic, but it serves a purpose. These Baptists of yore represent very different branches of Baptist thought. They disagreed among themselves over several rather important issues. They all agreed, however, that the New Testament is the final and absolute authority in all matters related to church faith and order.

Their emphasis upon the New Testament does not mean that these Baptists ignored or depreciated the Old Testament in any way. Baptists continue to believe that *all* Scripture—Old and New Testaments alike—is both inspired and profitable. Many doctrines are revealed in the Old Testament with great clarity.

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5. B. H. Carroll, *Baptists and Their Doctrines: Sermons on Distinctive Baptist Principles* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1913), 10–14.

6. Edward T. Hiscox, *New Directory of Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1894), 11. This volume has been reprinted as *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1980).

Baptists rely upon the Old Testament to help them understand the nature of God, the depth of human sinfulness, and the necessity of redemption. The New Testament church, however, is *not* revealed in the Old Testament. The doctrine and order of the church is revealed only in the New.

As we have seen, the inspiration and authority of the Bible is one of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Baptists hold this doctrine in common with all true Christians of whatever denomination. Christians from other denominations, however, frequently argue that some aspect of church polity or doctrine can be found in the Old Testament. Quite often they base this argument on the observation that Israel was the church of the Old Testament.

Some Baptists (I am among them) are dispensationalists who see a sharp distinction between Israel and the church. Others (perhaps the majority) believe that Israel was the church of the Old Testament. Even they agree, however, that something changed with the cross and resurrection of Jesus and with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. That change deeply affected the constitution, purpose, membership, and order of the church. Therefore, one cannot simply appeal to God's people in the Old Testament to establish the pattern for the church in the New Testament.

Baptists insist that only the New Testament may be used to establish the doctrine and structure of the church. Thus Baptists are different from most other Christians because they restrict their doctrine of the church to the New Testament. They also differ from many other Christians in the way that they apply the teachings of the New Testament to church faith and order.

### *The Sufficiency of Scripture*

To understand how Baptists bring the New Testament to bear upon church life, we need to revisit a dispute between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, leaders of distinct branches of the Reformation. The two men agreed that Roman Catholic beliefs and practices had corrupted the existing churches. To amend matters, both began a process of removing the most blatantly anti-Scriptural doctrines and forms. They disagreed, however, about what to do with Romanist doctrines, forms, and customs that, while not authorized by the Bible, did not obviously contradict Biblical teaching.

Luther argued that these teachings and customs could be retained as long as they did not directly violate Biblical doctrine. He recognized that ordinary church members had become used to these customs and rituals. The sudden

removal of these teachings and practices might prove unnecessarily upsetting. Therefore, to avoid controversy and to deflect the charge of extremism, Luther allowed some Roman customs to persist even though he could find little direct Biblical support for them. If those practices did not contradict any Biblical teaching, he reasoned, then they would do no harm, and they might even do some good.

Zwingli gave just the opposite answer. He insisted that Christ is the Lord of the church and the Bible is the church's law. Zwingli believed that Christians have no liberty to introduce teachings or customs into the ministry of the church unless Christ authorized them. Therefore, if a ritual or observance (i.e., an element of worship) is not authorized in the Bible, the church must regard it as forbidden.

The principle that motivated Zwingli is called the sufficiency of Scripture. The idea is that Scripture reveals everything necessary to life and godliness. The New Testament reveals everything that is necessary to the right order of the church. Since Christ has addressed the question of how He wants His people to live and worship, and since He has (through His apostles) revealed how He wants His churches to be ordered, Christians do not have the liberty to invent these things.

The interesting thing about the dispute between Luther and Zwingli is that both of them wanted to reject ecclesiastical innovation. Both were prepared to insist that it is not up to Christians to redefine what the church is, what its mission might be, or how it ought to be ordered. Luther was willing to keep some of the older Roman teachings and practices in order to avoid the appearance of innovation. Zwingli insisted that, because these Roman customs and teachings were not grounded in Scripture, they were themselves innovations. Essentially, he took the position that even an old innovation is still an innovation.

In general, Baptists have taken Zwingli's side in this argument. One Baptist writer has expressed the principle in the following words.

[I]t is assumed that the outward institutions of the Christian religion are of God, and that, therefore, their form and order as delineated in the New Testament, are of divine obligation. The Bible presents a definite and final constitution of the church, the ordinances, and the ministry, and is on these subjects the sufficient guide and the only authority; no man may set aside, alter, or supplement the divine model there given.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Hezekiah Harvey, *The Church: Its Polity and Ordinances* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1879), 13.

The above quotation is typical of the older Baptist theologians. In their attempt to formulate the doctrine and order of the church, they faced a double challenge. From Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Lutheranism they were confronted with the problem of ecclesiastical tradition as a source of authority for doctrine and practice. From sects like the Quakers, they were confronted with the problem of divine-light mysticism, in which religious teachers assumed the initiative to decide what teachings and practices ought to be acceptable to God. The Baptist response to both problems was identical.

In the worship of God there cannot be either obedience or faith, unless we regard the divine appointments. Not *obedience*; for that supposes a precept, or what is equivalent to it. Not *faith*; for that requires a promise, or some divine declaration. If then, we act without a command, we have reason to apprehend that God will say to us, as he did to Israel of old, “Who hath required this at your hand?”<sup>8</sup>

The challenges that these early Baptists faced were not only theoretical, but also practical and numerous. Could churches be governed by monarchical bishops? Could the office of presbyter be divided between teaching and ruling elders? Could churches receive unimmersed members? Could ordinances other than baptism and the Lord’s Table be recognized and practiced? Could church services include elements such as the burning of incense and the ringing of sanctus bells as part of their worship? Could deceased saints be asked to intercede on behalf of the living? Could the practice of auricular confession be maintained as part of the church’s discipline? None of these doctrines or practices was specifically forbidden by the New Testament. The real question was whether churches were restricted to what the New Testament requires for their worship and practice, or whether they were permitted to adopt whatever ideas and practices seemed useful to them.

Baptists gave a uniform answer to this question. For example, one of the earliest Baptist confessions of faith was called the “Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations.” It was prepared in 1651 as an associational document of the General Baptists, one of two large groups of early Baptists. This confession states, “That whosoever shall preach, teach, or practise any doctrine in the worship of

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8. Abraham Booth, “Vindication of Baptists from the Charge of Bigotry,” in *The Baptist Manual: A Selection from the Series of Publications of the American Baptist Publication Society, Designed for the Use of Families; and As an Exposition of the Distinguishing Sentiments of the Denomination* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1849), 17. The chapters in this book are separate works that had been published independently. Each chapter retains its own pagination in the collected volume.

God, pretending it in the name of Jesus Christ, which is not to be heard or read of in the record of God, which was given by inspiration of the holy Ghost; such teachers are lyable to the curse of God, howsoever, countenanced by men, Gal. i. 8, 9” (article 46). Clearly, the General Baptists restricted themselves to the sufficiency of Scripture in all matters of belief and practice.

The Particular Baptists were the other large group of early English Baptists. Like the General Baptists, they adopted a series of confessions, the most prominent of which was the Baptist Confession of Faith (1689), popularly known as the Second London Confession. This confession states that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (22.1).

Over fifty years later, Baptists in America adopted the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742). This American confession was a close copy of the Second London Confession. It used exactly the same language in restricting the acceptable way of worshiping God to what has been instituted by His own revealed will, and in excluding human “imagination and devices.”

The Baptist position is really rather straightforward. Since Christ is the head and Lord of the church, He alone has the authority to define its nature, mission, constitution, order, membership, ordinances, offices, and worship. He has not left us to wonder about these matters, but has addressed them through His apostles in the New Testament. Since Christ has given us the authoritative word on these matters, we do not have the prerogative to introduce new doctrines, offices, ordinances, or forms of worship on our own initiative. If we do, then we are usurping a right that belongs to Christ alone. We believe that Scripture has given complete and sufficient guidance in all of these areas.

Hebrews 8:5 has often been a text from which Baptists and others have derived their understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture. The verse says, “Who [the Levitical priests] serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.” Commenting upon this verse, Baptist theologian John Gill offered the following observations.

It may be gathered from hence, that whatever is done in a way of religious worship, should be according to a divine rule; a church of Christ ought to be formed according to the primitive pattern, and should consist, not of all that are born in a nation, province,

or parish; nor should all that are born of believing parents be admitted into it; no unholy, unbelieving, and unconverted persons, only such as are true believers in Christ, and who are baptized according as the word of God directs; the officers of a church should be only of two sorts, bishops, elders, pastors or overseers, and deacons; the ordinances are baptism, which should only be administered to believers, and by immersion, and the Lord's supper, of which none should partake, but those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious; and this should be performed as Christ performed it, and as the Apostle Paul received it from him; the discipline of Christ's house should be regarded, and all the laws of it carefully and punctually put in execution; and a conversation becoming the Gospel should be attended to.<sup>9</sup>

The principle that Gill saw in Hebrews 8:5 is that God alone has the right to define what His people should believe and practice. Gill understood this principle to entail the sufficiency of Scripture. For Gill, whatever was not authorized in Scripture must never be introduced into the faith and order of the church.

### *The Sufficiency of Scripture and the Colossian Heresy*

The principle of the sufficiency of Scripture draws upon a variety of Biblical evidences. One of the most direct arguments comes from Paul's response to the so-called Colossian heresy in Colossians 2. The heresy at Colosse was an odd mixture. It contained early elements of the religious philosophy that would eventually become known as gnosticism, but it also included Judaizing elements. It drew upon pagan philosophies while simultaneously attempting to introduce Old Testament rituals into New Testament worship.

Paul wrote to the Colossians to rebut this heresy. His refutation consisted largely in a focus upon the person and work of Christ. By explaining clearly who Christ was and what He had done on the cross, Paul was able to cut the ground out from under both the Judaistic and the proto-gnostic elements of the heresy.

While both sides of the heresy relied upon some form of tradition, the gnostic side was more creative in its doctrines and practices than the Judaistic side. The Judaizers restricted themselves to importing Old Testament patterns into the church. The gnostics, however, simply made up their doctrines and

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9. John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (1853; repr. Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1960), 2:721.

practices as they went. The church father Hippolytus, writing in the third century, described gnostic rites in painful detail.<sup>10</sup> Hippolytus depicted more than thirty branches of gnosticism, some of which went to extremes of asceticism and others of which went to extremes of libertinism. To Hippolytus's portrait of the gnostics, the church fathers Irenaeus and Tertullian also offer confirming evidence.

The many versions of gnosticism all had one thing in common. Their doctrine and practice were sheer invention, employing sophisticated philosophies and often bizarre rites that were nowhere authorized in the New Testament. Given that the Colossian heresy represented an early prototype of gnosticism, it almost certainly incorporated at least some of the intellectual and liturgical inventions that characterized later gnostic worship.

For the Christians at Colosse, this heresy created a double problem. First, it introduced doctrines that were nowhere authorized in the Scriptures or the apostolic teaching (though gnostic teachings did not always explicitly contradict Biblical revelation). Second, it introduced rites of both Judaistic and gnostic origin that had no basis in the apostles' doctrine.

Paul's response to this religious amalgamation was a radical exaltation of the risen Christ. He opened Colossians 2 by asserting that all the treasures of wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge (*gnosis*) are found in Christ. *Sophia* and *gnosis* both became code words within the gnostic heresy, and Paul was here co-opting those terms for Christ Himself. With respect to spiritual things, no true wisdom or knowledge can be found outside of Christ. Paul warned the Colossians against being deluded by pithy arguments (v. 4). Furthermore, he commanded them to walk "as ye have therefore received Christ Jesus," in other words, as Christ was announced and taught through the apostolic witness (v. 6).

Continuing his argument in verse 8, Paul warned against people who want to carry Christians into spiritual captivity (a clear reference to the heretics of Colosse). According to Paul, this captivation could take three forms. The first is through "philosophy and empty deceit," by which Paul meant philosophical and theological speculations carried beyond the warrants of revelation. The second is "the tradition of men," or rites, forms, and customs that people have made up for themselves. This is a reference to the gnostic side of the heresy and its invented liturgies. The third is the "rudiments [elements] of the world," a

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10. The chief work in which Hippolytus discussed gnosticism is *The Refutation of All Heresies*, which can be found together with his other extant works in ed., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1886; repr. Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1994), 5:1-259.

controversial expression that is connected in Galatians with the transmission of Judaistic forms into Christian observance. In sum, Paul was warning that when doctrine and order go beyond what is revealed, this excess brings Christians into captivity—whether the imported teachings and customs arise from deceitful speculation, from human invention, or from Judaistic retention.

In verse 9 Paul stated his reason for restricting faith and order to what is revealed: the entire fullness (*pleroma*) of the Godhead dwells in Christ bodily. The term *pleroma* was also a gnostic code word. It stood for an entire series of divine beings called *eons*. Paul's use of the term *pleroma* constituted a direct assault upon gnostic doctrine. Against the gnostic view of many divine beings, Paul asserted that Christ Himself contains the entire Pleroma, that is, the entire fullness of the Godhead. What all the *eons* together were to gnostics, Christ alone is to Christians. This observations implies that Christians are complete (the word *complete* is *pleroma* turned into a verb) in Christ. In other words, Christians need nothing and can have nothing outside of Christ, Who is the head of all principality and power (two key gnostic terms that denote spiritual authorities).

The upshot of Paul's argument is that all spiritual authority resides in Christ. Christ's absolute authority provides a basis for critiquing both proto-gnostic and Judaistic doctrines and practices. Those forms do not have to be directly forbidden within special revelation. Since Christ is the center and sum of spiritual authority, He alone can authorize the doctrines that Christians must believe and the practices that Christians must employ in their churches. In matters of the church's faith and order, whatever Christ has not commanded is forbidden.

In fact, Christ has completely triumphed over every other pretender to spiritual authority (v. 15). This triumph is most likely a reference to the resurrection, and is parallel to the assertion in Ephesians 4 that Christ "led captivity captive" (or "led captive a captive multitude"). He has completely vanquished and despoiled every alternative spiritual authority, and His resurrection proves His unconditional victory. No one and nothing can be set alongside Christ, Who is the absolute master of all things spiritual.

What this means for the individual Christian is that no one but Christ has the authority to bind the conscience (Col. 2:16, 17). Only He has the power to forbid or to command. No mere human has authority to establish moral standards for any Christian. Only Christ can do that. Church authority consists only in the announcing of the standards that Christ has revealed.

By the same token, no human has the right to introduce new doctrines or practices (v. 18). Here Paul mentioned specifically the gnostics' habit of

humbling themselves before the *eons* or angels, rendering veneration to them. Paul's intention, however, was not merely to forbid this one custom. On the contrary, he based his exclusion of this custom upon the supremacy of Christ, Who alone has the authority to impose patterns of worship. He argued that humans lack both the authority and the knowledge to specify how they ought to behave in the face of things they have not seen. He implied that people who think they can please God by making up new doctrine, practices, or forms of worship on their own initiative are "vainly puffed up" by their "fleshly mind." To make up new doctrines or modes of worship is to reject ("fail to hold firmly to") the Head, namely, Christ.

Concluding his argument in verses 20–23, Paul was evidently viewing both the Judaistic and gnostic sides of the heresy together. He presupposed that, in Christ, believers have died to the elements of the world (possibly a reference to the old Jewish rituals). Why, then, would Christians ever subject themselves to decrees that have been authorized by mere human beings?

In the context, these decrees work in two ways. Some decrees restrict the individual Christian where Christ does not. Other decrees introduce doctrine, order, or elements of worship that Christ does not. Paul saw these as two results of the same abysmal heresy. He denounced both as will-worship, that is, as the assertion of the depraved human self against the authority of Christ. Such ordinances, he declared, are utterly without spiritual value. There is no redemptive quality to them, wise though they may appear to be.

This passage contains two enduring lessons. The first is that Christians do not have freedom to make up moral rules for other Christians. If a requirement is not revealed in or cannot be soundly inferred from the Word of God, then it cannot be a matter of binding morality. The second is that Christians do not have freedom to make up their own doctrines, order, or worship. If a doctrine or practice is not revealed in or cannot be soundly inferred from the Word of God, it must not be introduced as an aspect of the Christian faith.

To reject either of these lessons is directly to assault the Lordship of Christ. Paul did not grant the Colossians permission to retain any element of Judaistic or gnostic ritual on their own initiative. Quite the opposite. He restricted the faith and order of the Colossian church to those doctrines, customs, requirements, forms, and elements authorized by Christ Himself through the apostolic testimony.

Today the apostolic testimony is mediated to God's people only through the written Scriptures. Consequently, the principle that Paul articulated in Colossians 2 entails the sufficiency of Scripture. Whatever we need for faith and life

must be found in the Bible, and in the case of church doctrine and practice, it must be found in the New Testament. Any offices, ordinances, teachings, practices, or elements of worship that cannot be authorized from Scripture itself must not be adopted as part of Christian faith and order.

### *Parameters of the Sufficiency of Scripture*

Baptists believe that the church's nature—its mission and ministry, its organization, officers, membership, ordinances, and worship—must be defined by the positive teachings of the New Testament. When it comes to operating their churches, Baptists do not ask, Does the New Testament forbid this practice? Instead, they ask, Does the New Testament authorize this practice? If it does not, they almost always regard it as forbidden.

I say “almost always” because there are one or two important exceptions to this rule. First, Baptists recognize that the New Testament does not always specify every means by which its own requirements are to be fulfilled. Second, Baptists acknowledge some administrative latitude in arranging the details of church life, even where Scripture is silent. Therefore, even though the New Testament does not specifically authorize church buildings (for example), it does require churches to meet, and the choice to construct a building is allowable as a means of expediting effective church meetings. Since the New Testament does not specify a time at which churches will meet, we assume that the congregation has a certain amount of liberty in determining the hour: after all, the church has to meet at *some* time. The distribution of gospel tracts is not specifically authorized, but Christians are commanded to evangelize, and handing out written messages is consistent with New Testament patterns of evangelization.

Like others who affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, Baptists occasionally disagree about whether a particular activity falls within the purview of New Testament church order. For example, we have sometimes debated whether instrumental music should be allowed in church services. We have also disagreed about whether we are permitted to sing nonbiblical hymns (as opposed to the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs found in Scripture itself). Even where we have disagreed on the particular applications of the principle, however, Baptists have agreed about the principle itself.

Baptists are distinguished from some other groups of Christians by their authority for church faith and order. While some other groups of Christians find the church in both Testaments, Baptists find it only in the New. While some

groups of Christians are willing to superimpose their church faith and order upon the silences of the Bible, Baptists insist that the doctrine and practice of the church must be derived from the positive teaching of the New Testament itself. Baptists believe strongly in the sufficiency of Scripture as their textbook for faith and practice.

### *Creeds and Confessions*

The first Baptist distinctive is the absolute authority of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order. Baptists appeal to the New Testament, and to the New Testament alone, as their authority for the doctrine and practice of the church. They also share with all other Christians a firm commitment to the Bible as their authority for all areas of belief and life. This leads to another important question. What is the appropriate role, if any, for creeds and confessions?

One might think that Baptists, with their emphasis upon the sufficiency of Scripture, would reject any authoritative role for creeds and confessions. A glance at Baptist history, however, reveals that wherever Baptists have existed, they have busied themselves with drafting confessions of faith. How can this incessant creed-making be reconciled with the Baptists' profession that they derive their faith and conduct from the Bible alone? The answer to this question lies in the nature of creedal authority, or in the way that Baptists use confessions.

For Baptists, creeds and confessions are simply summaries of what they believe the Bible teaches. Accepting the Bible's authority does little good if one misunderstands its teachings. Some cults even claim to accept the authority of the Bible while denying fundamental doctrines. For this reason, Christians have often developed short summaries of important Biblical teachings. That is what creeds and confessions are: summaries of what we believe the Bible teaches. All Christian confessions articulate teachings that distinguish Christians from non-Christians. Often, they also enumerate teachings that distinguish their adherents from other groups of Christians.

Some Baptists have tried to distinguish creeds from confessions. They have insisted that Baptists are confessional but not creedal. Confessions, they say, are merely descriptive, while creeds are prescriptive. In other words, a confession of faith is a summary of what the members of a church or denomination actually do believe. A creed, on the other hand, is a statement of what the members

of the group must believe in order to be received into fellowship. Creeds are normative, while confessions are simply expressive.

Many Baptists have rejected this distinction between creeds and confessions, and for good reason. The distinction is neither useful nor convincing. What good does it do for an organization to describe its most important beliefs if it does not intend to maintain those beliefs? And how is an organization supposed to maintain its beliefs unless it intends to keep out (or put out) people who refuse to affirm those beliefs? Unless a church or denomination intends to enforce its confession (i.e., to make it prescriptive), the confession will likely cease to be descriptive in a very short time.

Some Baptists have argued that an authoritative confession violates the principle of Biblical authority. They ask how the Bible can be one's sole authority if one's confession is authoritative. The solution to this problem is to remember that the confession is simply a summary of what one (or one's group) believes that the Bible teaches. A confession has no authority of its own. Its only authority derives from Scripture, which is the true and only standard for doctrine and life. An organization may rightly enforce belief in a confession only insofar as the teachings of the confession come from Scripture itself.

Suppose that a member of your church is caught embezzling. When challenged with his sin, he replies that he believes the Bible permits some forms of stealing, and actually commands Christians to embezzle under some circumstances. He claims to acknowledge the authority of the Bible, but he understands the Bible to authorize him to embezzle. Furthermore, he insists that the church's stand against stealing is only descriptive and not prescriptive. He says that if the church actually tries to keep him from stealing, it is usurping the authority of Scripture. Therefore, he intends to keep right on embezzling, and there is nothing the church can do about it.

Of course you would be incredulous, and so would all the other members of the church. You would not see any difference between enforcing the Bible's commands and enforcing the church's standard. You would insist that they were one and the same: "Thou shalt not steal." You would argue that the whole reason the church stands against stealing is precisely because the Bible forbids it.

If a church can enforce practical standards without violating the absolute authority of the Bible, it can enforce doctrinal standards as well. We insist that church members must not steal just because the Bible forbids stealing. Similarly, we insist that they must not deny the deity of Christ just because the Bible teaches that Jesus is God. When we adopt a confessional affirmation of the deity of Christ, our confession does not take the place of Scripture. It simply states

what we understand the Bible to teach. In no way does this diminish the Bible's own authority, and in no way does it make the confession a separate authority alongside the Scriptures.

Therefore, confessions may legitimately function to repel (or expel) those who do not share a group's view of what the Bible teaches. This is the negative function of confessions: they keep some people away. Confessions also have a positive function, however. While they keep out those who do not share an organization's beliefs, they also attract those who do share the beliefs.

A well-written confession serves as an advertisement of a group's doctrinal commitments. As such, it constitutes an invitation to others who share those commitments. Christians who hold substantially the same beliefs as the confession will often be drawn to the organization that adopted it.

In other words, the confession specifies the organization's basis of fellowship. We usually think of fellowship as an activity, perhaps centered on eating and drinking. However, the actual meaning of *fellowship* is that something is held in common. In Christian organizations, one of the things that must be held in common is a body of true and important beliefs that have been drawn from the Bible. Those who hold these beliefs are appropriate subjects of fellowship, while those who deny the beliefs are not. The function of a creed or confession is to enumerate the beliefs, thought to be Biblical, that are held in common by all the members of a given organization.

Baptists have adopted creeds and confessions from their very earliest days. Sometimes these confessions have been individual statements of belief. Sometimes churches have issued them. Often they have been adopted by associations, conventions, conferences, and other organizations. Moreover, Baptists have regularly used their confessions as a way of determining who could fellowship with the group and who could not.

The presence of these creeds and confessions in no way contradicts the first of the Baptist distinctives. Baptists affirm the absolute, final authority of the New Testament in all matters of church faith and order. They appeal to the New Testament alone to determine the nature, mission, polity, and ordinances of the church. Because they believe that Scripture is sufficient, they build their theory of the church from the positive statements of the New Testament rather than superimposing their own ideas upon its silences. They regard the New Testament as the constitution of the church, and that is the commitment from which all of their other distinctives flow.