ASSOCIATED CANADIAN THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

APOLOGETIC CONFESSIONS OF CREEDAL BAPTISTS:
The London Baptist Confessions of Faith of 1644 and 1677 in Their Historical Contexts

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HIS 610: BAPTIST HISTORY AND THOUGHT

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OUTLINE:

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The Particular Baptists in England in the 17th century were a creedal people. But the fact that their many confessions of faith and doctrinal publications were developed in order to publicly articulate the specific, creedal, content of their faith to non-baptistic Christians suggests that 17th century Particular Baptists produced their creeds not as prescriptive standards but as descriptive statements. After briefly surveying the historical events leading up to and surrounding the publication of the Second London Confession of 1677 and 1689, I will show that the signators of those confessions did not seek to distinguish themselves in a retreating posture from other English Protestant congregations. Rather their aim was to produce a winsome apologetic in the tradition of the 1644 Baptist confession in order that other streams of Reformed Christianity would be encouraged and reassured of a broad common faith with Particular Baptists.

A study of 17th century English Baptists must properly take into account the developments within English Protestantism as a whole during the same period. The movement that became known as “Particular Baptist” did not, of course, exist in a vacuum. It is not an easy matter to know where to begin in the task of tracing the emergence of the Baptists in England. Various attempts at recording this history offer various conclusions. Some have even suggested that since Baptists are uniquely a people of the Bible, with specific practices and theology, their roots can be traced to the earliest churches. For example, Joseph Ivimey, in his 1811 A History of the English Baptist, traces the beginnings of the English Baptists to the year 45 A.D.¹ But because of the limited scope of this paper, and because the subject at hand is specifically concerning the Confession of 1677 and 1689,

for the sake of argument I will begin by considering the impact of Elizabethan Protestantism on the later Baptists.

Elizabeth was Queen of England from 1558 to 1603, a time that has been called, “one of the most glorious eras in English history”. Her measures affecting the religious life of the country were not perfect, but they seemed to be have been born out of sincere concern for the nation’s welfare. Unfortunately certain elements in the general population were not satisfied.

…She wished such an ordering of the Church of England as would satisfy as many of her subjects as possible. Therefore she sought to make it include both Catholic and Protestant elements. She could not hope to please both Roman Catholics and extreme Protestants, but she could and did achieve a settlement which proved acceptable to the vast majority of the Englishmen of her day and which, without basic alterations, was to characterize the Church of England from then onward.

Complimentary legislation in the form of “The Act of Supremacy” and the “Act of Uniformity” lent muscle to her religious reforms. The effect of these acts was royal control over institutional religion. Common liturgy and regulation of clergy and public worship were enforced, and as a result, “about two hundred [clergy] lost their posts” due to nonconformity.

Elizabeth’s settlement, the heritage of the Anglican Church as it is known today, was a middle-road that excluded both Roman Catholics and nonconforming Protestants. Roman Catholicism was persecuted and punished under law, leading to the establishment of a Catholic seminary in nearby Douai, and later moved to Rheims. There Catholics trained in that seminary often returned to England as missionaries. Catholicism even saw something of a revival as early as the late 16th century. The scholarship of the Roman Catholics in Rheims provided a foundation that would occasionally swing English politics in the 17th century in

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 810-811.
the direction of Rome. One key contribution of the Rheims scholars to the English political milieu was the publication of the Douai-Rheims Bible, a literal translation of the Latin Vulgate into English in the year 1610—one year before the completion of the famous King James Bible.\(^5\)

The excluded Protestants were much greater in both strength and numbers than their Catholic countrymen. They were convinced that the Protestant Reformation was not yet nearly complete in England and sought to “purify” the Church on their soil.\(^6\) Yale historian Kenneth Scott Latourette notes that these like-minded British Reformers “were made up of various kinds of Puritans and, near the far extreme, of Independents and Separatists.”\(^7\) Four decades after the death of Elizabeth and the ascension of James I, the Puritans would offer the world the now famous Westminster Confession of Faith. The Confession was essentially binding, a governing document for the Church of England adopted by Parliament in 1646.\(^8\)

The assembly of the Westminster Divines, consisting of English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians, as well as a very few Independents, was probably made possible by the events set in motion under the rule of James I (1603-1625). Presbyterian himself in outlook, he tried to enforce the ecclesiology of the Scots upon the English Church. While this certainly created tension between the two groups of Protestants, it also greatly increased English and Scottish dialogue and interaction in religious affairs.\(^9\) In spite of James’ conciliatory efforts with Catholics, he actually succeeded in provoking further hostility with the English followers of

\(^5\) Ibid., 812-813.
\(^6\) Ibid., 813.
\(^7\) Ibid., 812.
the Roman church, possibly paving the way for another Rome-ward swing of the political pendulum under his son, Charles I.  

The politics of religion during the reign of Charles were increasingly hostile toward Puritanism within the Church of England and toward Independents. Charles reigned from 1625 until 1649, a period in England’s history that saw the gulf between the Anglican Church and the extreme Protestants widen. The result was disaster. Charles allied himself with William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633-1645, and with most of the nobility who “stood staunchly for episcopacy and against the Puritans.” The alienation of the Puritans, the middle and lower classes, Parliament and the lower gentry made it difficult for Charles to govern. 

The King tried to avoid dealings with Parliament but three times he felt it necessary to convene the House only to dissolve the assembly. After ruling without Parliament for an eleven-year stretch, he convened a meeting of the Lower House because he was in desperate need of funds that only Parliament could approve. The religious sympathies of Parliament for his enemies in Scotland forced Charles to disband the “short Parliament” in 1640. When the Scots got out of hand Charles, was again forced to recall the Lower House and this time they passed legislation requiring Parliament’s own approval in order for the King to dissolve a session.  

The House of Commons succeeded in passing a law, together with the Upper House, excluding Episcopal influence in the House of Lords. This was a historic move that tipped

10 Ibid.
11 Latourette, 819-20.
13 Ibid., 156.
14 Ibid., 157.
the people’s government in favour of the Puritans. Meeting in London, the Parliament of England had the support of the population against their King. The end result was civil war lasting from 1642-1646. Seemingly acting on the adage that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Parliament courted the favour of the Scottish Presbyterians. There was substantial disagreement on ecclesial matters between some of the English Puritans and the Presbyterians but their essential Calvinist theology was similar. In 1643, Parliament called together an assembly of theologians who would forever leave their mark on the Christian Church.

The Westminster Assembly steered the nation toward official adoption of a Presbyterian style of church government for the Church of England. Because of the present crisis of civil war, many Congregationalists and Independents agreed to the proposal and it was passed into legislation. The army led by Oliver Cromwell consisted largely of Independents. Before long, worsening trouble between the army and Parliament led to a purge of Parliament by the army, creation of the “Rump Parliament” and the execution of King Charles. Extremist groups emerged from this climate, such as the Fifth Monarchists who had millennial ambitions for the nation’s government. For the sake of the nation, Cromwell himself took control of England’s government and ruled as Lord Protector until 1658.

With no able successor to rule in Cromwell’s place, Parliament exalted Charles II to the throne of England. He reinstituted traditional anglo-catholicism throughout the nation,

15 Ibid., 158.
16 Ibid., 159.
17 Ibid., 160-161.
restoring the episcopacy, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and penalties for nonconformity. On May 19, 1662, Charles pushed through to law an “Act of Uniformity”, instigating systematic persecution of non-Anglican Protestants. The Act of 1662, led to the “Great Ejection” of about 2000 Presbyterian, Independent and Baptist ministers from service as ministers in English churches. The suspicion entertained by many of his opponents, that he was a secret Roman Catholic, was confirmed upon his deathbed conversion in 1685.

Charles’ brother, James II, determined to restore full Roman Catholicism to the English Church, but desired to take a tolerant stance toward non-Catholics. However, in Scotland he enforced catholic worship with the death penalty. Hence, English Protestants were not ready to accept a Roman Catholic monarchy described by the Westminster Confession of Faith as belonging to “Antichrist”. England rebelled against the short rule of James II and invited Prince William of Orange and his wife Mary, James’ daughter, to the throne.

William and Mary were tolerant monarchs. They brought back the Protestant “Articles” to the English Church, granted toleration to Puritans, Presbyterians and Independents on the sole condition of loyalty to the Crown. In Scotland, they raised the Westminster Confession to become the normative standard for doctrine and restored Presbyterianism to the Scottish Church. Throughout the long period of political and moral turmoil in 17th century England, “…dissenting congregations persisted and men and women of outstanding Christian character appeared in both the Church of England and non-

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19 Gonzalez, 162-163.
21 Gonzalez, 163.
23 Gonzalez, 163.
24 Ibid.
conforming Protestantism.” Historian Justo L. Gonzalez noted the positive legacy of Puritanism in England:

… After the restoration, … the Puritan ideal lingered on, and deeply influenced the British ethos. Its two great literary figures, John Bunyan and John Milton, long remained among the most read of English authors. Bunyan’s most famous work, generally known by the abbreviated title of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, became a popular book of devotion, the subject of much meditation and discussion for generations to come. And Milton’s *Paradise Lost* determined the way in which the majority of the English-speaking world read and interpreted the Bible.

Milton was a Puritan and an Independent. Bunyan, however, was a Baptist pastor who spent a great deal of time in prison for his beliefs. He sought to live a life marked by holiness and faithfulness to the Word of God, and he did this in such a way that he left an example to later generations of Christians, especially Baptists, who desire to maintain a positive witness for Christ in the face of opposition. Much of his writing was done while in prison. But even from his hardship he offered a public witness of the faith he professed, a faith that he commended to all Christians should be governed by the Spirit through the Scriptures:

“Preposterous are our Spirits in all things, nor can they be guided right but by the word and spirit of God: the [sic] which the good Lord grant unto us plentifully, that we may do that which is well pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Having surveyed the historical backdrop of the London Baptist Confessions of Faith (1644, 1677 and 1689) it is possible at this point to turn to consider the discernible purpose and aims of those documents. It should become evident that the Baptist confessors who lived, worked, studied, preached and served in 17\textsuperscript{th} century England had no intention of retreating

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\item[25] Latourette, 824.
\item[26] Gonzalez, 163.
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from their social contexts. Like John Bunyan, Baptists of that period—especially Particular Baptists—evidenced through the confessions they published that their wish was to publicly testify to the Biblical faith they professed.

17th century English Baptist confessions were never applied as binding creeds or as tests of orthodoxy. The London Confession (1644) and the Second London Confession (1677, 1689) were, nonetheless creedal statements. It is important at this point to distinguish between creedalism and the use of descriptive creeds.

A “creed” is a “…concise formal and authorized statement of important points of basic Christian doctrine.” From the Latin word meaning, “I believe,” the earliest creeds described via a published document the essential content of the writer’s faith and doctrine. Creeds, however, also gradually came to be used as a definitive standard, or rule of orthodox belief. The Baptist Confessions produced in 17th century London conform to the former sense of a “creed” but not to the latter, which might be termed, “creedalism”:

Historically, Baptists have built their theology from a strong foundation. Holy Scripture was taken to be God’s infallible revelation in words. What God said, Baptists believed. No creed held them together, though Baptists never hesitated to write and affirm their doctrinal confessions. No church covenant was mandatory for all Baptist churches; yet hardly a church has not adopted strongly worded covenants. Scripture has been the cornerstone, the common ground, the point of unity.

The above brief survey of the historical context of the London Baptist Confessions should be sufficient to raise the possibility of a direct correlation between the emergence of the first great Baptist confession in 1644 and the contemporaneous English Civil War.

During that time, as was noted earlier, Independents, including Baptists, were becoming

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
prominent because of their numerical strength in Cromwell’s army. Probably because of the political rising star of the Calvinistic Particular Baptists, ill-wishers apparently began to spread rumours associating the English Baptists with extreme and unorthodox Anabaptists across the English Channel.

In order to protect the reputations of their congregations and to forestall a public outcry in reaction to the reports of heresy and immorality, it was prudent at that time to provide an accounting of the doctrinal beliefs of the Particular Baptists. “The publication of this confession, with its sane orthodoxy and Calvinistic theology, surprised many people in London.”

The great Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter seems to have believed some of the unfounded slander and actually propagated erroneous reports himself. “One specific accusation put to flight by the 1644 confession was the rumor spread by Richard Baxter that the Baptists baptized women naked.” One example from the 1644 confession, directly responding to accusations of this nature, will suffice to demonstrate the apologetic flavour of the document. “The word Baptizo, signifying to dip under water, yet so as with convenient garments both upon the administrator and subject, with all modestie.”

The tone and the specific arguments of the 1644 confession contradict any attempt to read that document as a binding rule or normative delineation of acceptable Christian belief.

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33 Ibid., 30.
36 Ibid.
37 London Confession (1644) XL, margin note; cited in Lumpkin, 167.
Another example of this is the substantial difference between this confession and that upon which it appears to have been loosely based: “A True Confession” (1596).38

To be sure, the large section of the 1596 document dealing with the means of reforming the Church of England along Separatist lines is absent from the London Confession, for the Baptists did not think of reforming the National Church but of building an entirely new structure on the New Testament pattern.39

The absence of this material speaks volumes about the purpose behind the 1644 confession. The Baptists wanted to be free to worship and believe according to each person’s conscience, rather than make theirs the required norm for England. As Bush and Nettles explain in their historical survey of Baptist bibliology, the 1644 confession was produced out of a “concern to be counted orthodox”.40

Again as a result of then-current developments in English ecclesial relations, an important edition of the 1644 confession was published in 1651. Various specific errors of the Quakers were addressed in an article attached to the 1651 edition of the first London Confession. The basic motivation was to pre-empt any suspicion that Baptists agreed with the unbiblical professions of the Quakers. In the article the exact wording of the Westminster Confession, concerning the infallibility of Scripture is reproduced, showing the continued desire of the Particular Baptists to be identified as Reformed and Orthodox instead of being mistakenly identified with heretical fringe elements.41

The 1644 confession was designed with an apologetic purpose in mind. Each article is supported with relevant references from the Bible. The strong leaning on the Bible is consistent with the confession’s statements on the supreme authority of Scripture. The intent

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38 For this argument and a brief discussion of the other documents that may have influenced the shape and content of the Baptist Confession of 1644, see Lumpkin, 145-146. A strong argument against an implicitly divisive theology in the confession is the use, even of “exact wording”, from other prior documents and confession (see Bush and Lumpkin, 31).
39 Lumpkin, 146.
40 Bush and Nettles, 30.
41 Ibid., 37.
of this strong theme in the confession was to persuade readers that the Baptists were a biblical and orthodox people. Sound interpretation of Scripture was their bedrock. In fact, the attached article in the 1651 reprint implicitly contrasts the exegetical method of the Baptists with the spurious proof-texting of the Quakers. Baptists existing in London during the fifth and sixth decades of the 17th century were, above all, people of the Book: The “serious reader cannot escape the startling and positive dependence of each statement upon a Scripture assumed to be true”.

The Second London Confession of Faith was first published in 1677. It bears so much similarity to the Westminster and Savoy confessions, that it is rightly called “a version” of the Presbyterian Westminster Confession. The anonymous framers of the second great Baptist confession were explicit about affirming the common faith and doctrine they shared on many points with the Puritans and Presbyterians. In the attached letter “To the Judicious and Impartial Reader”, it is clearly stated that they had,

“no itch to clog religion with new words, but to readily acquiesce in that form of sound words which hath been, in consent with the holy scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring before God, angels, and men, our hearty agreement with them, in that wholesome protestant doctrine, which, with so clear evidence of scriptures they have asserted.”

The occasion for this second Baptist confession in the city of London only 33 years after that of 1644 was, therefore, not the result of any significant changes to Baptists’ theology.

The same letter to the reader, mentioned above and prefaced to the confession of 1677, recalls to the readers’ attention the false representations of Baptist belief and practice that necessitated the 1644 confessional, public response from like-minded congregations of

42 Ibid., 38.
43 Ibid., 37.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 39.
46 Lumpkin, 245.
Particular Baptists. The letter continues to observe the wide and positive reception and acceptance of the orthodoxy of the Particular Baptists by Christians of other persuasions in the years that followed. It does not seem that the 1677 confession was the result of any new particular rumour or slanderous report. Rather, it seems likely that two specific developments compelled the framers of the 1677 confession to draft a new document. These developments were essentially the increased popularity of the Westminster Confession approved by Parliament in 1646, in spite of the policies of the Crown, and the scarcity of copies of the 1644 confession in the years just prior to 1677.

It could well be argued that since no new rumour-mongering had become a problem, a new confession was unnecessary. But it should be remembered that the king reigning in 1677 was Charles II—suspected by many of being a secret Roman Catholic. The suspicions were strengthened by Charles’ systematic persecution of Scottish Presbyterians and his intolerance of non-conforming ministers in England, exemplified by the long imprisonments of John Bunyan and others. Thomas Watson, another Puritan of that period, obeyed the restrictions imposed by Charles and lost his pulpit and his church but with no less suffering than Bunyan. Many nonconformists found brief relief upon the legislation passed by Charles in 1672 for the relief of Catholics, known as “The Declaration of Indulgence”. But the Indulgence was repealed the following year by a strict Anglican Parliament.

The effect of the years under Charles’ harsh measures against non-Anglicans and the even harder line taken by his Parliament surely motivated Puritans, Independents, Baptists

47 Ibid., 244.
48 See above; Gonzalez, 163.
50 Latourette, 824.
51 Ibid.
and other Congregationalists to seek common ground and support. Indeed, while the 1677 confession was primarily, “geared to disarm the opposition in its immediate context”, it manifested an intentional conciliatory stance toward Presbyterians and Congregationalists. This latter group had followed the example of the Presbyterian Westminster Confession and offered a confession of their own in the year 1658 at the Savoy Conference. When the Particular Baptists followed suit in 1677, it “was judged necessary by [them] to joyn together in giving a testimony to the world; of [their] firm adhering to those wholesome Principles, by the publication of this which is now in your hand.” Therefore it was written in keeping with the apologetic tradition begun in 1644.

By the year 1660 there were an estimated 200 – 300 baptist churches in London, the Midlands, and the south. The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith provided a testimony, widely published and well received, of the biblical and orthodox, Calvinistic faith of the Particular Baptist congregations in that city and its surrounds. “The authors believed that the truth of any article wad directly dependent on its correspondence with the clear teaching of Scripture.” In this conviction they stood shoulder to shoulder with the great number of non-Anglican Protestants in England in the mid-to-late 17th century.

The London Confessions were not defensive in the sense of being protectionist or exclusivist. Instead they were documents offered to the public as a witness of orthodoxy to correct certain rumours and negative opinion. The purpose of the London Confession of 1677 was apologetic in nature. It was an offering to the world, in which those Christians lived, to

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52 Bush and Nettles, 50-51.
53 Ibid., 39.
54 Lumpkin, 244.
56 Bush and Nettles, 41.
boldly testify their allegiance to the Lord Jesus and His Word, the holy Scriptures, and the doctrines and convictions they found in that sacred book.

Twelve years later, after the death of Charles II, and after the “Glorious Revolution” that saw the invitation of William and Mary to the throne, free from persecution at the hands of their government and greatly increased in popular support, “upwards of one hundred baptized congregations in England and Wales (denying Arminianism)” were represented by a new edition of the 1677 confession. These Particular Baptists prefaced their exemplary 1689 Second London Confession of Faith with these words:

[We] have thought meet (for the satisfaction of all other Christians that differ from us in the point of baptism) to recommend to their perusal the confession of our faith, which confession we own, as containing the doctrine of our faith and practice, and do desire that the members of our churches respectively to furnish themselves therewith.

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57 Gonzalez, 163.
59 Ibid.
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In fact, the creeds of the two denominations are nearly identical. However, there are key differences between Orthodox Christianity and other Christian denominations. Here are five ways Eastern Orthodox differs from other Christian denominations: 1. The Authority of the Pope: Unlike Catholics, Orthodox Christians reject the authority of the pope as Christ's representative on earth. They see the pope as no greater than nor less than any other bishop (the pope is the bishop of Rome). However, this also sets them apart from Protestant denominations, who reject the notion of apostolic succession. Baptist Confessions of Faith 1. Introduction A. A Survey of Selected Confessions B. Not a Detailed Theological Study C. Creeds vs. Confessions D. A Reminder about Baptist Theology E. On Rejection of Confessions. Confessions are bridges, not walls. Leon McBeth "A creed excludes, and a confession includes. A creed tells you what you must believe, and a confession affirms what you do believe." William L. Lumpkin The Baptist Movement has traditionally been non-creedal in the sense that it has not erected authoritative confessions of faith as official bases of organization and tests of orthodoxy (Baptist Confessions of Faith 16). Further, no confession has ever permanently bound individuals, churches, associations, conventions, or unions among Baptists. Some of the Most Important Creeds and Confessions of the Church. However, the history of the church and the creedal formularies they have made were never thought to be inspired in the first place, but rather to define and express cogently what the Bible taught which is, in fact, inspired. If the Bible teaches that all men must wear white shirts, then the creedal statement of faith which explains this succinctly is attempting to teach Christians what the Bible says concerning this, and that any false teaching (such as all men must wear black shirts) is erroneous. The inspired Scriptures are commented on by every able and true minister of the Word each Lord A creed, also known as a confession, symbol, or statement of faith, is a statement of the shared beliefs of (an often religious) community in the form of a fixed formula summarizing core tenets. The earliest creed in Christianity, "Jesus is Lord", originated in the writings of Saint Paul.[1] One of the most widely used Christian creeds is the Nicene Creed, first formulated in AD 325 at the First Council of Nicaea. Whether Judaism is creedal has been a point of some controversy. Although some say Judaism is noncreedal in nature, others say it recognizes a single creed, the Shema Yisrael, which begins: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." [4] Contents. 1 Terminology. 2 Christian creeds. 3 Christian confessions of faith. 4 Christians without creeds. Baptists and Creeds: Baptists adopted confessions of faith as essential to opposing false doctrine. They adopted confessions in their churches and in their associations. Many adopted the Second London Confession of Faith (1689). Many others adopted a two-page summary of the Second London Confession. After its publication in 1833, the so-called New Hampshire Confession slowly gained popularity. Southern Baptist Convention: Adopted no confession at its founding in 1845. Due to precedent of the state conventions, which had no creeds. Due perhaps also to William B. Johnson's opposition to c...