

The Bible

by **Claude L. Howe Jr.**

*Deceased, was Professor Emeritus
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Baptist Theological Seminary*





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Baptists have mostly opposed sources of authority outside the Bible. Early Baptist leaders challenged the authority of popes and councils as Protestants against Catholics. They defended the right to believe, worship, and share faith as dissenters against an Anglican state church and authoritarian bishops. They affirmed the New Testament concept of a regenerate church maintained by believer's baptism and discipline as radicals against Puritans who stressed the Old Testament concept of covenant people sustained by infant baptism and a state church. They resisted efforts by Congregationalists and Anglicans to perpetuate state churches in America, thus helping to include religious freedom as a basic right in the new nation.

Baptists have continued to reject human authority over spiritual matters, looking rather to God as revealed in Jesus Christ as their supreme authority: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:1-3, NRSV).

Authority has been described as the key issue for Christians of this generation. All acknowledge that God is the ultimate authority, but how this authority is made known and exercised produces a variety of responses. For example, the earliest Baptist confessions of faith began with God; later confessions tended to begin with the Bible.

Some Christians have looked to the church, or ecclesiastical authority, as the channel for divine direction. Others have stressed the scientific method, or deductive reasoning, as the source for truth. Many have called on personal experience, or direct encounter, for knowing and serving God. All of these and others are

valuable, of course, but most Christians, and certainly most Baptists, agree that God is known through divine revelation manifested supremely in Jesus Christ and recorded in Scripture.

In response to all other authorities, Baptists throughout their history have affirmed the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture. They have regarded these twin affirmations as complementary, not contradictory. Jesus Christ is Lord. Scripture is authoritative for faith and practice. “You search the scriptures,” Jesus said, “because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf” (John 5:39, NRSV).

Baptists developed as a distinct fellowship during the seventeenth century in three separate streams: General, Particular, and American. They differed at times from other Christian groups, from one another, and from themselves over certain issues. But each sought solutions in the teachings of Scripture, for they uniformly accepted the authority of the Bible in matters of belief and behavior. They were not unique in this outlook, for Protestants generally looked to *sola scriptura* as their heritage. What Baptists did frequently

question with great effectiveness was whether other Protestant or Baptist groups interpreted properly or applied correctly what they professed, especially about the nature of the church and religious freedom.

General Baptists

General Baptists emerged under the leadership of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys. Smyth, a Cambridge scholar, and Helwys, an affluent English landowner, were drawn together in an effort to understand Scripture and apply it to issues of their day. At Gainsborough in 1606, they covenanted to be the “Lord’s free people . . . to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.”¹

The cost was real, for persecution soon forced the small group from their native land to a freer atmosphere in Amsterdam, Holland. Study of Scripture continued as they formed a small church and sought to apply scriptural teachings to belief and practice. They outlined differences from other churches of the separation, but soon also developed differences in their own group. Because Smyth became more involved with the Dutch Mennonites, Helwys and a few others withdrew and in 1612 returned to London. There they formed the first English Baptist church at Spitalfield.

Shortly before returning to England, Helwys and his followers drew up a confession of faith that is regarded as the first Baptist confession. It was saturated with Scripture references, and Article 23 affirmed that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were written for human instruction and should be searched, for they testify of Christ. They should be used reverently “as conteyning the Holie word off God, which onelie is our direction in al things whatsoever.”² Helwys soon published *The Mistery of Iniquity*, demanding absolute religious freedom based on teachings of Scripture, for which he was imprisoned and died by 1616. But the church survived, and several others were formed within a decade.

General Baptists’ strong view of Scripture varied little as they expanded. *The Standard Confession* (1660), adopted by a large assembly of leaders,

described Scripture as the rule for saints in faith and conversation while the *Orthodox Creed* (1678) asserted that “whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man.”³

Unfortunately, however, this outlook was not able to withstand the religious transition and indifference that pervaded the culture in England following the Act of Toleration (1689). Matthew Caffyn, one of few educated leaders and a prominent messenger to the General Baptist General Assembly, first defended a Hofmannite Christology that compromised the humanity of Christ and then a Socinian view that undercut Christ’s deity. The General Assembly split twice, appealing to the *Standard Confession* and Six Principles of Hebrews 6:1-2, neither of which addressed the issues.

Dan Taylor, a convert of the evangelical awakening led by John Wesley, identified with General Baptists in 1763. Their archaic practices and deviant Christology soon repulsed Taylor, however, who in 1770 led in forming the New Connexion of General Baptists composed of his and a few other evangelical churches. Older General Baptist churches that did not unite with the New Connexion for the most part became Unitarian. This group flourished under the leadership of Taylor, numbering about seventy churches before his death in 1816. They defended by Scripture the deity and humanity of Christ, who died for all persons and offers salvation to any who repent and have faith in him. John Clifford became their major spokesman, and the fellowship merged into the British Baptist Union in 1891.

Particular Baptists

Particular Baptists began in London also, but from an independent church formed by Henry Jacob in 1616. A series of pastors guided the church through persecution and debate for several decades. Henry Jessey, a prominent Puritan clergyman, became pastor in 1637; but the next year, six persons withdrew over the matter of infant baptism and joined with John Spilsbury to form a church based on believer’s baptism. The issue at that time was the candidate, not the mode, but soon Richard Blunt convinced them that the New Tes-

tament taught the immersion of believers; so they adopted this form, as did the General Baptists soon after. They sought to follow Scripture as they understood it.

By 1644, seven Particular Baptist churches existed in London. Spilsbury and William Kiffin, a prosperous merchant, were the major leaders. In an effort to define who they were, representatives from these churches drew up and adopted the *First London Confession*, a Calvinistic statement of faith. The confession set forth clearly their view of Scripture, not only providing biblical references alongside every article, but stating in Article VII that “the Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not mans inventions, opinions, devices, lawes, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but onely the word of God contained in the Canonical Scriptures.”⁴

Particular Baptists increased in strength and influence during the Commonwealth period of William Cromwell, fighting in his New Model Army and evangelizing throughout the British Isles. But persecution returned with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and for three decades non-Anglicans struggled for existence. Major dissenting groups, especially Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, drew closer together in a fellowship of suffering.

Particular Baptists reflected this unity through the *Second London Confession* (1677) modeled after the *Westminster Confession* accepted by the other bodies. It contained ten lengthy statements about Scripture, which is “the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience.”⁵ Its authority depends totally on God and is to be received as the word of God. Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture and is the final court of appeal in all religious controversies. Scripture should be translated into the language of the people and is most necessary, for former ways of God’s revealing God’s will have now ceased.

As slightly revised in 1689, this became the most widely used confession among Baptists for the next 150 years. The Philadelphia Association in America published it with two additional articles in 1742 as the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith*. All Baptist confessions to that point had relied on and cited Scripture

extensively, but the *Second London Confession* was the first to begin with an article on Scripture and discuss how it should be understood and applied.

Baptists in America

Baptists in America were no less committed to the primacy of Scripture for their sole written authority. Roger Williams gathered a small church at Providence in 1639 based on believer’s baptism and religious freedom. He grounded his repeated denunciations of persecution in sound biblical exegesis, and his later debates with Quakers stressed the written word properly interpreted as the source for knowing and worshipping God. John Clarke formed and served as pastor of the Baptist church at Newport for more than three decades. Imprisoned with Obadiah Holmes at Boston in 1651, he asserted and defended by extensive biblical evidence the Lordship of Christ, believer’s baptism by immersion, the priesthood of all believers, and freedom of conscience.

Late in life, Obadiah Holmes penned his last will and testimony. “I believe the Holy Scriptures which testify of Christ in dark shadows and types, and all that was written of Christ in the prophets and psalms,”⁶ he wrote, and urged his children to “carefully read the Scriptures and mind well what is therein contained for they testify of Him.”⁷ The Baptist church at Boston formed by Thomas Gould in 1665 adopted a confession of faith with an article on Scripture similar to the *First London Confession*. Persecution and debate followed, in which Gould responded to his opponents that “many answers are given but no Scripture given.” He then held up his Bible and said, “We have nothing to judge but this.”⁸

The Boston church in 1682 baptized William Screven, who soon started a congregation at Kittery, Maine. Screven later moved to Charleston, South Carolina, and formed the first Baptist church in the South, serving as its pastor until his death. He advised the church to call a successor who accepted the 1689 *Second London Confession*. The first association formed at Philadelphia in 1707 likewise accepted this confession, and major leadership for Baptists developed in that area for the next century.

Baptists did not initiate the First Great Awakening led by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, but they certainly profited most from it. For half a century, the Awakening encouraged personal conversion, biblical preaching, lay witnessing, and benevolent activities. Baptists from the Philadelphia Association strengthened and extended churches in New England and the southern colonies. Oliver Hart served the church at Charleston for a quarter century. The Charleston Association, formed in 1751, encouraged evangelical preaching, education, and mission activity and also adopted the *Philadelphia Confession* (1767) with its strong statement on Scripture. Richard Furman followed Hart at Charleston and became the foremost advocate and example of biblical preaching and denominational statesmanship.

The Awakening also produced a new group of Baptists in New England as converts withdrew from the Congregational state church and formed Separate Baptist churches. Shubal Stearns with several families migrated southward and in 1755 settled at Sandy Creek, North Carolina. There, Stearns formed the Sandy Creek Church and then an association. The Separates at first were suspicious of confessions; but in 1816, the Sandy Creek Association approved ten articles, the second of which declared “that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the word of God, and only rule of faith and practice.”⁹

The Separates preached an emotional and simple gospel, focusing on personal conversion, biblical teaching, and lay involvement. Along with Regular Baptists, they supported the colonies at the outbreak of the American Revolution. Regulars and Separates merged toward the close of the century, combining the strengths of each group into a body of evangelical churchmen. The Regulars contributed concerns for organization, education, and cooperation; the Separates contributed zeal for freedom, evangelism, and biblicism. The terms of union that brought the groups together in Kentucky in 1801 were firm about biblical authority. The first article stated “that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the infallible word of God and the only rule of faith and practice.”¹⁰ By that time, Baptists were the largest Christian group in America.

This sketch of Baptist sources indicates that William Brackney was correct in stating that “for the first 250 years of denominational history, the Bible was for Baptists a certain authority.”¹¹ Scripture was studied seriously and applied specifically. That outlook provided a firm foundation for debating issues and stating conclusions, but did not resolve all the differences about many matters. Questions remained:

- Was the atonement limited to the elect or general for everyone?
- Was laying on of hands for all believers or for pastors and deacons only?
- Should the church engage in singing hymns or use only the psalms?
- Is the Sabbath on Saturday or Sunday?

Baptist designations such as General, Particular, Seventh Day, Six Principle, and others reflect the results of some of these questions.

None of these groups challenged the authority and inspiration and trustworthiness of the Word of God. They were aware that the original autographs no longer existed but supported efforts to provide the most reliable texts in Hebrew and Greek. “Greek and Hebrew are the two eyes of a minister,” Morgan Edwards observed, “and . . . translations are but commentaries, because they vary in sense as commentators do.”¹² But Baptist educators encouraged precise translations to provide the Bible in the language of the people. They rejected creeds as timeless statements of faith but did not hesitate to formulate confessions as individual or corporate statements for a particular time or body. Educators never equated these with Scripture, but thought they were based on Scripture.

A commitment to biblical authority shaped Baptist origins and development. Baptists were and are people of the Book and often affirm: “God said it, we believe it, and that settles it.” But interpretation and application were matters for persuasion, not coercion, as Baptists sought to maintain the proper relationship between freedom and authority.

Later Developments in Baptist Life

Baptists, for the most part, have not shifted their views about the inspiration and authority of Scripture during the past two centuries, but the challenges addressed have changed dramatically. Some questions addressed in past years include:

- Does Scripture authorize the establishment of missionary societies, Sunday schools, and theological seminaries?
- Should musical instruments be used in worship?
- Should the Lord's Supper be observed every Sunday?
- Should communion be restricted to members of the local church only?
- Should wine and unleavened bread be required at the Lord's Supper?
- Does Scripture condemn or approve slavery?

Such questions frequently brought debate and fragmentation. Some forbade only what Scripture expressly forbade, while others approved only what Scripture expressly approved. At times, Baptists accused one another of being unfaithful to biblical revelation, and the number of Baptist denominations multiplied.

Frequently, debates have focused not only on what one should believe in the Bible but also on what one should believe about the Bible. Scientific and historical movements, especially evolution and critical study of the Bible, appeared to challenge traditional interpretation. Some Christians, including some prominent Baptists, adjusted or even accommodated to the new intellectual currents, seeking to avoid conflicts between religion and science or faith and history. Others resisted the more radical implications and conclusions of these movements, often identifying them as unproven theories. Advocates of a more conservative approach branded opponents as liberals, while the latter characterized the others as fundamentalists.

Northern Baptist pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick created much attention with his sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Conflict for a time in the

Northern Baptist Convention centered around adopting the New Hampshire Confession as its statement of faith, but delegates finally voted to affirm the New Testament as their all-sufficient ground for faith and practice.

When Baptists of the South gathered in 1845 at Augusta, Georgia, to create the Southern Baptist Convention, they affirmed that they had an "aversion for all creeds but the Bible."¹³ For their first eighty years, Southern Baptists did not adopt a formal confession, but the prevalence of evolutionary thought and critical study of the Bible convinced many that a statement was needed. In 1925 an SBC committee led by E.Y. Mullins presented the *Baptist Faith and Message*, based on the *New Hampshire Confession* (1833) but with ten additional articles. A lengthy preface explained that confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over conscience, and that the sole authority among Baptists for faith and practice is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Following the earlier confession, the first article on Scripture declared that the Bible was written by men divinely inspired and has "God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter."¹⁴

The 1925 SBC also approved the Cooperative Program that linked churches together voluntarily, aiding them to struggle through the Depression and into a new era of expansion and mission support. Avid fundamentalists such as J. Frank Norris and John R. Rice continued to attack the orthodoxy of the SBC but with little success. Colleges and seminaries multiplied, and churches were formed throughout the nation. Professors, pastors, and members took for granted the divine inspiration and unique authority of Scripture, which was studied devotionally in Sunday schools and analytically in classrooms.

But the atmosphere shifted in the 1960s, especially after seminary professor Ralph Elliott provided a theological interpretation of Genesis that was published by Broadman Press. Widespread controversy erupted and climaxed at the 1962 SBC, which affirmed faith in the entire Bible and appointed a committee to draw up a new confessional statement. Chaired by pastor Herschel Hobbs, the committee presented the

new document in 1963. A preface similar to the earlier one was included, affirming the supernatural elements in religion, repeating the function of confessions, and emphasizing basic Baptist beliefs about soul competency, freedom, and the priesthood of all believers. The first article on Scripture was altered somewhat, adding that the Bible is the record of God's revelation of God to humanity and that the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.

Conclusions

Affirming strong statements about the Bible or adopting confessions of faith have seldom resolved conflicts among Baptists. Uniformly, they have accepted that the Bible is inspired, but most have hesitated or refused to regard one theory of inspiration as essential. All have insisted that the Bible is authoritative for faith and practice, but few have denied some flexibility in interpreting the faith or describing the practice.

Some Southern Baptists formed a fellowship to defend and enforce the 1963 confession, while others appealed to the freedom of interpretation. Numerous controversies erupted, and conflict was openly politicized until the most conservative leaders gained control of the SBC and its agencies.

A major revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* was proposed and adopted at Orlando in 2000. Because many Baptists were disturbed over the initial proposal to delete statements about soul competency and the priesthood of all believers from the preface, the SBC committee reinserted these emphases prior to the SBC vote. The article on Scripture was also revised, removing references to the Bible as record of revelation and identifying it as God's revelation. The statement about Jesus Christ as the criterion for interpretation was also removed to declare that Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is the focus of divine revelation. The word "inerrant" was not used but implied by the assertion that all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy.

Utilizing the *Baptist Faith and Message* in a creedal fashion or administering denominational decisions in an authoritative manner has become acceptable for some. While many Baptist churches strongly object to these approaches to authority, most care little about

these matters and focus rather upon the central task of promoting world mission and evangelization.

Biblical inerrancy as defined by earlier fundamentalists has become a badge of orthodoxy at times, but many Baptists simply accept the total trustworthiness of the Bible as the word of God in spiritual matters and recognize that it is the words of writers inspired by the Holy Spirit. They know assuredly that the Bible reveals what every person needs to know regarding the character of God and the salvation of persons in Jesus Christ.

The Bible should be studied reverently and followed completely with an open mind, an attentive heart, and a responsive will. That is the Baptist style in doing authority.



Notes & Questions for Discussion

Notes

1. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 34.
2. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 122.
3. Ibid., 325.
4. Ibid., 158.
5. Ibid., 248.
6. Edwin S. Gaustad, ed., *Baptist Piety* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1994), 89.
7. Ibid., 103.
8. William L. Lumpkin, *Colonial Baptists and Southern Revivals* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 111.
9. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 358.
10. Ibid., 359.
11. William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 26.
12. Claude L. Howe Jr., *Glimpses of Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 22.
13. Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Source Book* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 120.
14. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 393.

Questions for Discussion

1. What Baptist confession first began with an article on Scripture, and how did this article impact Baptists?
2. Has the pattern of biblical authority at times given way to other patterns in Baptist life?
3. Why did the Southern Baptist Convention finally adopt a doctrinal statement?
4. Is the Baptist way of biblical authority unique?
5. How do freedom and authority relate in Baptist life?
6. What are the roles of human reason and the leadership of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation?
7. In what sense is the local church the final interpreter of biblical authority?

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