

***Good Reasons to be Baptist:
No Creed Except the Bible***
Psalm 119:9-16; II Timothy 3:10-17

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Last Sunday morning Kelly, Clara and I worshiped at St. Paul's Chapel in Lower Manhattan. It's the chapel across the street from the World Trade Center site. You may remember that it became a triage center and a place of rest for weary firemen on 9/11. The pews are still scuffed and scared from the boots and rescue equipment worn by the firemen. St. Paul's Chapel is Episcopalian. Mid-way through the worship service last Sunday, Kelly, Clara, and I did something that we don't do here at Weatherly. We stood with all the other worshipers and said these words:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth,
and Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord....*

Those are the opening words to the Apostles' Creed, the creed most commonly used in Protestant churches today. It is based on the old Roman Creed, which dates back to the middle of the fourth century. Today Christians will recite the Apostles' Creed from memory from Lower Manhattan to Seattle, and literally around the world.

Now if you grew up in a Baptist church and have had little exposure to other Protestant worship traditions, you may not have recognized those words. And there is a reason for that. Baptists do not recite the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed or any of the other creeds of the larger church. The reason underlying this strikes at the foundation of who we are as Baptists. This is yet another place where our forefathers and mothers nailed down a stake. As Baptists, we accept no creeds except the Bible. That is, our final authority for faith and practice is not words about the Bible; it is the Bible itself.

From our beginnings in the 17th century, coming out of the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation, Baptists have refused to force their members to subscribe to any creed. Instead, we chose to be a non-creedal people, and here is the reason why. *For Baptists, function—what we do—has always been more important than theological uniformity—what we believe.* We've chosen to find unity in what we do rather than in what we believe. And what do we do? Baptists are drawn together for missions and ministry. Our work at Lincoln, in Kentucky, our work with immigrants and people with disabilities: that is what we do. That is where we link arms with one another and find

unity. Until recently, Baptist churches have been able to say to each other, “Yea, we may disagree about biblical interpretation. We affirm women clergy and you don’t. We may never agree on that issue. And by the way, I’ll meet you at 4 o’clock at the homeless shelter to get dinner ready for the homeless people tonight.” That’s what we do, and that’s where we find our unity.

This intentional downplaying of beliefs does not mean that theology is not important to Baptists. It is important. We have through our recent history embraced what we call confessions of faith. In 1924 in response to the controversy surrounding evolution, the messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention appointed a committee chaired by Dr. E.Y. Mullins, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, to draft a confession of faith for Southern Baptists. The committee took the New Hampshire Confession, added to it, and in 1925 it was adopted as our Baptist Faith and Message. Please note that from our beginning in 1845 until 1925 Southern Baptists had no official statement of their beliefs. I find that amazing! For 80 years theological positioning was of such little importance that we had no approved theological guide. That is hard to imagine today.

In 1962 another committee was appointed, this one to study the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message and recommend revisions. The late Dr. Hershel Hobbs, who was pastor to some of you, chaired this committee. Dr. Hobbs said that they studied the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message word for word. Much of it remained as it was, but revisions were made. Some of the articles were combined. Words were added for clarification. When the first draft was completed, it was sent to all the seminary professors of our six seminaries and all those at the Baptist Sunday School Board who handled the theological writings for the Board. Minor changes were made based on their input. Then it was sent to the editors of state Baptist papers and each state's top executive. At the convention in 1963, after brief debate over one sentence regarding the church, the statement was adopted without any change.

Then in the year 2000, as many of you know, the most recent revision of the Baptist Faith and Message was presented for approval. I was at this meeting. The 2000 revision was met with a firestorm of opposition and controversy. In the original draft, the words “the priesthood of believers” and “soul competency” were deleted. After great protest, they were restored. Women were excluded from pastoral ministry, an assault, many thought, on women and the autonomy of the local church. The year before a statement was added requiring a wife to “submit herself graciously” to her husband. After raucous debate and numerous amendments and failed amendments, the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message passed.

I'll tell you the question my former Presbyterian wife asks: "What's the difference between a confession of faith and a creed? Isn't it really a creed by another name?" Not at all. This is what Fisher Humphries says in his book *The Way We Were*. He says that confessions are *descriptive*, while creeds are *prescriptive*. Confessions describe generally the beliefs of a people. Creeds prescribe what one must believe to belong to a particular church (p. 52). A confession of faith is a declaration of one's faith made freely and without any coercion. These words are in the preface to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message:

- (4) *That the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over conscience.*
- (5) *That they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life.*

That is the role of a confession of faith. It is to have no binding authority over the conscience. It is not to hamper freedom of thought. In 1969 and again in 1970, the messengers to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention *refused* to make acceptance of the Baptist Faith and Message mandatory for our institutions and agencies and those who worked for them. However, the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message quickly became mandatory belief in the Southern Baptist Convention. Even down to the associational level, many now are required to sign a document stating that their beliefs are consistent with the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message.

Now I must raise a question. Why not do that? It seems consistent with what other denominations do. Why not require that all our employees sign a document stating that they believe everything in 2000 Baptist Faith and Message? Why stop there, though? Why not require that the members in the pews sign the same document? Why? *Because Baptists are non-creedal. Because Baptist believe that our final authority for faith and practice is not words about the Bible. Our final authority, our only creed, is the Bible itself!* Instead of demanding theological uniformity, we have affirmed your right and responsibility to interpret the Bible for yourself. And if we disagree with each other, that is okay because we find our unity in what we do, not what we believe.

This is what the Bible says about itself. This, I tell you, is our creed:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

The key phrase in this passage is "inspired by God," which is just one word in the Greek language. It is a word comprised of two Greek words. The first is *theos*, the Greek word for God. The other word is *peno*, the Greek word for "breathe." So how do you translate that kind of word into English? The word "inspired" seems inadequate to me, for the Greek language says, "God breathed." It conjures up images of creation when God breathed into a mud ball and it became a living being bearing the very nature of the God who breathed into it. Adam and Eve were not made divine at creation. We are not gods, but we do carry within us the spark of the divine. So it is with the Bible. It is inappropriate to call the Bible divine, for it is not a god. But the Bible is a dynamic, living Book, carrying within its message the mark, the breath, of Almighty God. It is because of that quality, Paul says--that it is inspired, God breathed--that the Bible is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, so that the people of God can be complete. We need nothing more than the Bible itself. And that is why Baptists have no creeds except the Bible.

Many of you will know the name Grady Cothan. He is a past president of the Baptist Sunday School Board and a church historian. He and James Dunn wrote a little book a few years ago titled *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry*. They reprinted part of an article in that book. It was written by a woman named Margaret Caldwell who used to be a curriculum writer at the Sunday School Board. She wrote for children with mental retardation. This is what she wrote:

Today I spoke with my long-time friend and editor at LifeWay Christian Resources (formerly Baptist Sunday School Board). I asked if she planned to use me as a special education curriculum writer again this year. She asked me, as she is now required to do, whether I belonged to a church affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

....

"Yes," I replied to my editor, as tears filled my eyes....

My friend was apologetic as she explained that I could no longer write curriculum for Southern Baptists. I do not blame my editor; this is not her doing....

The irony is that I wrote on a 2.5 grade level, simply telling the Bible story...I challenge any fundamentalist, moderate or liberal to find anything in my...writing with which they would disagree.... Of course,

my friends with [mental] retardation do not care about theological correctness. It only matters that I love them and share Christ. (p. 97)

That is why many Baptists, though not all, still believe in having no creeds except the Bible. Our final authority for faith and practice is not words about the Bible; it is the Bible itself. And you have the right and responsibility to sit down with your own Bible and read it, struggle with it, wrestle with it until you work out what you believe. And that is where I leave you this morning: you before your open Bible exercising your right and responsibility. Don't relinquish that right and responsibility to anyone else!

Closing Prayer

Freedom granting God, for the freedom we have in Christ, we give you thanks. Keep our hearts and minds free from the tyranny of those who would have us conform to their understanding of truth. Amen