Introduction to the Confession

An Overview of Its History, Contents & Importance

The following is a brief introduction to the historical background and sources of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, as well as its importance. It is my hope that having an understanding of these things will affect within us a deeper appreciation for the Confession, as well as a fuller commitment to it, both in our personal devotion and the devotion of our churches.

I. The History & Signatories of the Confession

It should be made known, first of all, that the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith was first compiled and edited in 1677. However, at this time there was much persecution for those who dissented from the official state church (i.e. union of Church and State), the Church of England (which is Anglican). The Particular Baptists were among those persecuted. Therefore, to publish and sign the Confession at the time of its original compilation would have meant sure persecution. It was not until the Act of Toleration (1689), which provided religious freedom to many Christian sects, that the Particular Baptists were able to officially publish and sign their Confession. This is why the year 1689 is attached to its name, though some people express as 1677/1689.

Why, we might ask, would the Particular Baptist churches of this time desire to have a confession of their own? What propelled them to take up this compiling, writing, and adoption of this Confession? As always, there is a history behind a confession of faith, and we may better understand and appreciate this Confession that we call our own if we rightly understand why the original framers and signatories called it their own.

Thankfully, the framers of the Confession supplied an introduction entitled “To the Judicious and Impartial Reader”. This primary source delineates for us, in no unclear terms, their purpose for compiling this Confession, which expresses what they had become convinced of from the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:14). In reading this epistle to the reader we gather a number of reasons as to why they produced the Confession:

1. They wanted to leave no room for question as to what it was they believed. They, like their brethren before them, were commonly accused of being Anabaptists – that radical party of the Reformation, who held to the Pelagian view of free will and viewed the civil government as a necessary evil, rather than a God-ordained institution. The framers of the 1st London Confession of Faith (1644/46) explicitly stated this purpose of distancing themselves from the Anabaptists in their introduction; and the framers of the 1689 BCF make reference to this, noting the same cause:

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1 The name of the Confession is written in a number of ways: 2nd London Confession of Faith of 1689, London Baptist Confession of 1689, etc. I prefer 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith.

“And this was first put forth about the year 1643, in the name of seven congregations then
gathered in London [referring to the 1st LCF]; since which time divers [sic] impressions
thereof have been dispersed abroad, and our end proposed in good measure answered,
inasmuch as many...were thereby satisfied that we were no way guilty of those heterodoxies
and fundamental errors which had too frequently been charged upon us without ground or
occasion given on our part.”

2. They wished to build upon the 1st LCF for the better establishment and propagation of
their faith. The following quotation gives evidence of this:

“And forasmuch as that Confession [i.e. 1st LCF] is not now commonly to be had, and also
that many others have since embraced the same truth which is owned therein, it was judged
necessary by us to join together in giving a testimony to the world of our firm adhering to
those wholesome principles by the publication of this which is now in your hand. And
forasmuch as our method and manner of expressing our sentiments in this doth vary from
the former (although the substance of this matter is the same), we shall freely impart to you
the reason and occasion thereof [see next point].”

3. They desired to demonstrate their orthodoxy, while at the same time making note of
particular areas of disagreement (e.g. baptism). The last sentence in the above quote tells us
that the framers of the 1689 BCF, while remaining true to the substance of the 1st LCF, did indeed
take a different approach and made notable modifications. What this means becomes clear as one
continues reading the letter to the reader:

“One thing that greatly prevailed with us to undertake this work was (not only to give a full
account of ourselves to those Christians that differ from us about the subject of baptism, but
also)...to fix on such a method as might be most comprehensive of those things we
designed to explain our sense and belief of; and finding no defect in this regard in that fixed
on by the Assembly [i.e. the Westminster Assembly; the Westminster Confession of Faith], and,
after them by those of the congregational way [i.e. the congregational Puritans; the Savoy
Declaration of Faith and Order], we did readily conclude it best to retain the same order in our
present Confession; and also when we observed that those last mentioned did in their
Confessions (for reasons which seemed of weight both to themselves and others) choose
not only to express their mind in words concurrent with the former in sense concerning all
those articles wherein they were agreed, but also for the most part without any variation of
the terms, we did in like manner conclude it best to follow their example in making use of
the very same words with them both in these articles (which are very many) wherein our

3 “To the Judicious and Impartial Reader,” in The Baptist Confession of Faith & the Baptist Catechism (AL: Solid Ground
4 Ibid. xii.
faith and doctrine are the same with theirs; and this we did the more abundantly to manifest our consent with both in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion, as also with many others whose orthodox Confessions have been published to the world on the behalf of the Protestants in diverse nations and cities. And also to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but do 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. Some things, indeed, are in some places added, some terms omitted, and some few changed; but these alterations are of that nature as that we need not doubt any charge or suspicion of unsoundness in the faith from any of our brethren upon the account of them.  

In short, the framers of the 1689 BCF utilized both the WCF and the Savoy as fundamental guides, both in their structure and content. Their reason for doing so is clearly spelled out: they did not want to be novel (new; different from anything seen before), nor did they want to distance themselves from those of the Reformed tradition, but rather desired that their fellow Puritans would view them as true brethren in the Reformed tradition. They wanted to demonstrate their concurrence with the orthodox confessions of faith.

The Signatories

There were 37 signatories to the Confession, representing upwards of 100 Baptist churches. At least three of these signatories deserve special recognition: William Collins, Hercules Collins, and Benjamin Keach. A brief biography of each follows.

BENJAMIN KEACH (1640-1704) began his non-ordained preaching ministry as a General Baptist. He was imprisoned numerous times for his unauthorized preaching, as well as for his anonymously written book, The Child's Instructor, “which attacked paedobaptism, endorsed lay preaching, and expressed millenarian convictions.” In 1668 he moved to London and became an ordained minister, still within the General Baptist denomination. However, he became influenced by Calvinistic Baptists (e.g. William Kiffin and Hansard Knollys; two other signatories of the Confession), and subsequently declared himself a Calvinist. He became a mighty proponent of Particular Baptist theology and the introduction of hymn-singing (exclusive psalmody was the

5 Ibid. xii-xiii. Emphasis is mine.
6 The sources of the 1689 BCF will be given more consideration in the next section, “The Contents & Sources of the Confession.”
8 Sometimes his name is spelled Hurcules.
9 Nehemiah Coxe is another important figure surrounding the Confession, having assisted William Collins in compiling and producing it; however, he died before its signing in 1689, which is why his name is not found among the signatories. Coxe’s best known work is A Discourse of the Covenants, which presents a case for Covenant Theology from a Baptist perspective (in opposition to paedobaptism). An updated edition of this may be found under the changed title, Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ (CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005).
practice of the day). The Baptist Catechism, which is a modest revision of the Shorter Catechism, is often attributed to Keach (i.e. “Keach’s Catechism”). However, it is likely that the original edition – there were at least 10 editions – of the Baptist Catechism was written by William Collins.\textsuperscript{11}

HERCULES COLLINS (ca. 1646-1702) is best known for his Baptist version of the Heidelberg Catechism (1576), entitled An Orthodox Catechism (1680). He too was an outspoken contender of believer’s baptism. This not only comes out in his Baptist revision of the Heidelberg, but also in his writing, Believers' Baptism from Heaven, and of Divine Institution, Infants' Baptism from Earth, and Human Invention (1691).

WILLIAM COLLINS (d. 1702) is understood to be the primary compiler and producer of the Confession, though it is believed his fellow minister, Nehemiah Coxe, assisted him in the work. Both were ordained elders of Petty France Particular Baptist Church. Collins is known to have received a long and thorough education, as well as to have toured France and Italy.\textsuperscript{12}

II. The Contents & Sources of the Confession

\textit{Contents}

In his commentary on the Confession, Sam Waldron sees a four-part thematic division to the 1689 BCF.\textsuperscript{13} However, I think it's best to see a six-part division to its thematic outline: Part I: Foundational Doctrines: Scripture, God, Man & Christ (CH. 1-8); Part II: Salvation Applied: God’s Work in His People (CH. 9-18); Part III: Law & Gospel: The Nature of the Law & the Necessity of the Gospel (CH. 19-20); Part IV: Religious Principles & Duties: Captive to the Word of God (CH. 21-23); Part V: Sacred Institutions: Society, the Home & the Church (CH. 24-30); Part VI: Last Things: The Judgment of the Wicked & the Hope of Believers (CH. 31-32). This six-part division sums up the articles of faith contained in the Confession. This outline is also the general outline of this teaching series.

What are the various sects or theological systems that the Confession responds to throughout its articles? Knowing this gives us further insight into the Confession itself as to its historical context, and why it emphasizes certain doctrinal truths and denounces certain other beliefs and practices. One should consider these things as they read and study the Confession. The following is a very brief consideration of some of these denouncements found in the Confession:

In Response to Roman Catholicism: The Confession emphasizes the sole infallible rule of Scripture in opposition to Roman Catholic Tradition and its view on the authority of the Church (see Ch. 1).

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. 386-389.
It likewise denounces the Pope as the head of the Church, and instead views him as the antichrist (see Ch. 26.4).

In Response to Anabaptists: Anabaptists were known for their belief in continual revelation. The Confession stresses the sufficiency of the Scriptures and the denial of any new revelation (see Ch. 1.6).

In Response to Arminianism: The Confession is in line with the *Canons of Dort* (1618-1619), which articulate the Doctrines of Grace. Many chapters of the Confession emphasize the depravity of mankind and the sovereignty and sufficiency of God’s grace (see Chs. 9-18, 20).

In Response to Paedobaptism: Although the Baptists agreed much with their paedobaptist brethren (e.g. Presbyterians), they nonetheless strongly disagreed on the mode and proper subjects of baptism (see Ch. 29).

Sources
Earlier I mentioned the three main sources of the Confession: 1) the *Westminster Confession of Faith*; 2) the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*; and 3) the *1st London Confession of Faith*. It is often thought that the *WCF* is the sole source of the *1689 BCF*, and then necessary modifications were made from there in order to fit Baptist theology. This is not entirely accurate. Sam Waldron explains:

“The great mass of the materials found in the 1689 Confession are originally derived from the Westminster. This has prompted many interpreters to assume that the Westminster was the direct and immediate document which [William] Collins was revising. Actually this is not quite the case. There is conclusive evidence that it was the Savoy which was the direct and immediate document on which Collins was working. It is very likely that the Westminster language which dominates the 1689 Confession comes exclusively, or almost exclusively, through the sieve [a strainer] of the Savoy. After thorough study of these documents I am aware of no instance in which the language of the Westminster is preferred over that of the Savoy…. Only fourteen out of the 160 paragraphs contained in the 1689 Confession are not derived from the Savoy. More importantly, the structure is that of the Savoy and the thirty-two chapter titles are consecutively and precisely those of the Savoy.”

In other words, the *Savoy* made its own changes or modifications to the *WCF* – the major changes being in the area of church polity – and where those changes were made the *1689 BCF* made use of them. Collins, however, did not slavishly utilize these sources, but also made use of the *1st London Confession of Faith*, which predated the *WCF* by a couple of years, as well as his own theological insight. Waldron concludes, “Of the 160 paragraphs found in the 1689 Confession 146 are derived from the Savoy (which reflects at many points the Westminster), eight are derived from the First

14 Ibid. 428-429.
London, and six from Collins.”\(^\text{15}\) Therefore, in an accurate, though incomplete way, we may refer to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith as the child of the WCF (the father) and Savoy (the mother).

III. The Importance of the Confession (and of Confessions in General)

Finally, we take up a consideration of the importance of the Confession (and of confessions in general). The following is not meant to be an exhaustive list and explanation.\(^\text{16}\) I have in mind here, when speaking of the importance of confessions, a local church adhering to and utilizing a confession as their standard of faith (i.e. what they believe the Bible teaches).

1. A confession connects the church with historical-biblical Christianity. A good, sound confession will place a church in line with historical-biblical orthodoxy (i.e. the fundamentals of the Christian faith as taught throughout Church history and in the Bible). It shows that a church does not seek to develop some new doctrines or practices, but to stand on the shoulders of those who demonstrated soundness in the faith before them. As Reformed Baptists who hold to the 1689 BCF, we are connected to those Particular Baptists who came before us, and they likewise are connected to those who came before them. While a confession may have its own distinctive (e.g. WCF; Savoy; 1689 BCF), there should still be that catholic (i.e. universal) core or nucleus (Heb. 2:1; Jude 3).

2. A confession serves as a useful means for delineating and defending key biblical doctrines, or for instruction in biblical truth. Proclaiming and defending the truth of Scripture is a central duty of the church (1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 3:15-4:5; Tit. 1:9). A good, sound confession will teach the fundamentals of the faith (and often then some) and supply key Scriptures in its defense. This serves to instruct the church in the doctrines of Scripture, and to equip them in its articulation and defense.

This is especially needed in our homes (i.e. family worship). I find it exceptionally interesting that the introduction to the Confession emphasizes the great importance of family worship, and the “decay of religion” by its neglect. I quote,

“And verily there is one spring and cause of the decay of religion in our day which we cannot but touch upon and earnestly urge a redress of, and that is the neglect of the worship of God in families by those to whom the charge and conduct of them is committed... so to catechize and instruct them that their tender years might be seasoned with the knowledge of the truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures.”\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^{15}\) Ibid. 429. For an in-depth analysis of the places where each source is used in the Confession, see Alan J. Dunn. The London Baptist Confession of 1689: With a Key to its Sources, (unpublished, 1988).

\(^{16}\) I have greatly benefited from Robert P. Martin’s “The Legitimacy and Use of Confessions,” in A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (1989). 9-23. The reader is encouraged to read it for further content.

\(^{17}\) “To the Judicious and Impartial Reader,” in The Baptist Confession of Faith & the Baptist Catechism (2010). xv.
This fact tells me that these Baptist churches saw their Confession as a means of instruction in the home, to be used, of course, in connection with the catechism. Whether in the home or in the corporate gathering of God’s people, a confession proves to be thoroughly useful for these things.

3. A confession serves as a standard of membership and discipline. A church that takes seriously the Bible will have particular beliefs about what the Bible teaches. This statement of faith or confessional standard serves as a guide for incorporating others into, and excluding others from, its fellowship. While there is certainly room for minor disagreement among its members – less so with its teaching personnel – there nonetheless needs to be a standard that is used to discern membership. This is especially important when it comes to the leadership of the church. The elders and lay-teachers of the church need to be evaluated as those who are in keeping with historical-biblical Christian doctrines and the distinctives of the particular church. They must not only be able to teach sound doctrine, but defend it (1 Tim. 3:2; 2:2, 15; 3:15-4:5; Tit. 1:9). A confession serves as an extremely useful guide in this. Further, those members who demonstrate a break from a fundamental doctrine or practice communicated in its confession (e.g. the Trinity; the need for holiness), will be subject to disciplinary measures of the church. Such members have no excuse, as they formerly agreed upon the confession. In short, this point stresses the doctrinal unity of the church, for the sake of the truth and peace.

These are just a few important uses of confessions. As Reformed Baptists we take seriously God’s word, the historical-biblical teachings of the Church throughout the centuries, and the need to proclaim and defend these truths. Further, we have high standards of those who will lead our people in the way of the gospel. We likewise expect the lay-members of the church to agree with the fundamentals of the faith and continually grow in their knowledge of the Scriptures. For at least these reasons we hold to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith as our confessional standard, having become convinced of what we have read and studied in the Scriptures, which is “the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience” (Ch. 1.1).

I can think of no better way to conclude this introduction than with the same conclusion in the Confession’s introduction (“To the Judicious and Impartial Reader”):

“We shall conclude with our earnest prayer that the God of all grace will pour out those measures of His Holy Spirit upon us, that the profession of truth may be accompanied with the sound belief and diligent practice of it by us, that His name may in all things be glorified through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Like our brethren before us, let us not merely profess the truth contained within this Confession, but let us whole-heartedly believe it and faithfully practice it, to the praise and glory of God.

18 Ibid. xvi.