

## THE PARTICULAR BAPTIST CONFESSION 1689 AND BAPTISTS TODAY

It is Confession time again! Whether we begin with the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Doctrine and Inter-Church Co-operation, or the next stage of the Faith and Order Commission, 'Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith To-day', which is concentrating on the Nicene Creed, or the implications of the Inter-Church Process, which challenges British Christians to include Roman Catholics in the ecumenical pilgrimage from co-operation to a commitment which enshrines legitimate diversity - it is obvious that Baptists in these islands will have to face the significance of credal statements and consider carefully the relationship between Scripture and Tradition.

Many Baptists today may be surprised to learn that our tradition has within it a very strong and continuing confessional strand, deeply rooted among both General and Particular Baptists. In 1678 the General Baptist Assembly published *An Orthodox Creed or Protestant Confession of Faith, being an essay to unite and confirm all true Protestants in the fundamental articles of the Christian Religion against the errors and heresies of Rome*. A year earlier the Particular Baptists had published the so-called *Second London Confession*, which was revised in 1688 and published in 1689 as the agreed statement of faith of Particular Baptists when over a hundred churches met in Assembly that year in London. This Confession became the doctrinal standard for English Particular Baptists until well into the nineteenth century, and was also the basic American Baptist Confession, agreed at Philadelphia, USA, in 1742. It is this Confession which will be considered within the Particular Baptist framework in this paper.

Before turning to that, it would not be inappropriate to note that the *Orthodox Confession* in Article 38 contained the following statement concerning 'the Creeds':

The three creeds, viz, Nicene Creed, Athanasius' Creed, and the Apostles' Creed, as they are commonly called, ought thoroughly to be received, and believed. For we believe, they may be proved by most undoubted authority of Holy Scripture, and are necessary to be understood by all Christians; and to be instructed in knowledge by them, by the ministers of Christ, according to the analogy of faith, recorded in sacred Scriptures, upon which these creeds are grounded, and catechistically opened, and expounded in all Christian families, for the edification of young and old, which might be a means to prevent heresy in doctrine and practice, these creeds containing all things in a brief manner, that are necessary to be known, fundamentally, in order to our salvation; to which end they may be considered, and better understood of all men, we have here printed them under their several titles...

(Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 1959, p.326)

Although no such affirmation of the importance of early Christian creeds is found among Particular Baptist statements, the General

Baptist interest was one which Particular Baptists would have shared. In today's situation, where the World Council of Churches Faith and Order group are now engaging in a specific evaluation of the Nicene Creed, Baptists should be mindful of this historic connection.

The Faith and Order group of the WCC is asking all churches to move towards a common *recognition* of the Nicene Creed, a common *explication* of the Apostolic Faith expressed in it, so that there might be a common *confession* of the apostolic faith today. For Baptists today the challenge is to give this particular credal statement recognition as an authoritative symbol of apostolic faith. The theology of the Nicene Creed is something which many Baptists could affirm. Yet for Baptists, the primary authority has been in the Word of God not the statements of a Confession or a Declaration of Principle. Baptists are reluctant to give undue emphasis to belief in any written statement since their understanding of faith is a living, personal relationship of trust in and obedience to Jesus, which is expressed most clearly in and through the rite of believers' baptism.

The *Somerset Confession* (1656) put a responsibility upon church members and ministers 'that they be careful that they receive none but such as do make forth evident demonstration of the new birth, and the work of faith with power...'. The concern of those who framed the Confession was that churches might have regenerate, lively congregations, from which they might 'send forth such brethren as are fitly gifted and qualified through the Spirit of Christ to preach the Gospel to the world'. (Ibid., pp.211, 213).

The *1689 Confession* underlined the importance of a regenerate church in these words:

Such is the provision which God hath made through Christ in the Covenant of Grace for the preservation of Believers unto Salvation, that though there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; yet there is no sin so great that it shall bring damnation on them that repent; which makes the constant preaching of repentance necessary. (Ibid., p.270)

The nearest Baptists have come to the use of creeds is through their use of Confessions of Faith. This specific study of the use Particular Baptists make of Confessions of Faith between 1689 and 1910 will seek to provide three areas for discussion by those engaged in the ecumenical dialogue of the Faith and Order programme: 'Towards the common expression of the Apostolic Faith today'.

### 1. Confessions of Faith and the Centrality of Scripture

'The peril of the creeds', it was stated in a *Baptist Times* editorial in 1965, 'is that they attempt to canalise into a particular form of words, belonging to the age in which they are drawn up, beliefs that cannot be reduced to neat formulae or mathematical equations; and they become instruments of oppression to bind men's minds and consciences in theological chains. As a result creeds nearly always fail in their intentions, and succeed only in dividing instead of uniting'. One correspondent, speaking for Conservative-Evangelicals within the

denomination, pointed out that 'those who advocate a more integrated denominational structure will increasingly encounter a demand... for a more adequate basis of faith upon which to associate than the present Declaration of Principle'. Another correspondent from the other end of the denominational spectrum welcomed the Baptist Church's freedom from formal credal subscription and commended 'endeavours to maintain its purity by seeking for evidence of a transforming experience of God, in the lives of its would-be servants'.

The editor and his two correspondents could each have reached back into Baptist history to find support for their views, albeit at the expense of distorting that Baptist tradition! Baptists in the past have claimed liberty in the Lord for framing their own understanding of the Gospel, Church and Ministry. Baptist Confessions and Covenants were held together until the mid-nineteenth century as a means of affirming what Baptists believed at any given time. But the Confession was never a creed. A creed states what a person must always believe - a Confession relates what Baptists presently believe, and is open to change as 'more light and truth breaks forth from God's Word'. There is a similarity between the two nouns, but the difference is one of significance.

Among Particular Baptists the earliest of the Confessions was issued by seven London Congregations in 1644. They had come under attack 'both in Pulpit and in Print' for advocating, it was claimed, heretical doctrine, disobedience to the civil magistracy, and 'doing acts unseemly in the dispensing the Ordinance of Baptisme, not to be named amongst Christians: All which charges we disclaime as notoriously untrue...'. The full title of the 1644 document makes its purpose quite clear. It is *The confession of Faith of those CHURCHES which are commonly (though falsly) called ANABAPTISTS; Presented to the view of all that feare God, to examine by the touchstone of the Word of Truth; As likewise for the taking off those aspersions which are frequently both in Pulpit and Print (though unjustly) cast upon them.*

The first Confession arose in a period of religious turmoil when there were serious misunderstandings and misrepresentations abroad. It was important to repudiate the smear of those who labelled these seven congregations 'Anabaptist' and thereby implicated them as political anarchists of a most extreme kind. Equally important was the Baptist counter-claim that their churches were upholders of orthodox Christian doctrine on a full Scriptural basis. The Confession stood or fell by the 'touchstone of the Word of Truth'. The centrality of Scripture in the Baptist tradition for faith and order matters was a constant affirmation in all future statements.

The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith and Obedience concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not man's inventions, opinions, devices, lawes, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but onely the word of God contained in the Canonickall Scriptures. (1644, Article VII)

When the much enlarged Confession of 1677 was issued the introduction made it clear that the Biblical references in the margin were anything but marginal.

We have also taken care to affix texts of Scripture, in the margin for the confirmation of each article in our *Confession*; in which work we have studiously endeavoured to select such as are most clear and pertinent, for the proof of what is asserted by us; and our earnest desire is that all into whose hands this may come, would follow that (never enough commended) example of the noble *Bereans*, who searched the Scriptures daily, that they might find out whether the things preached to them were so or not. (1677, To the Reader)

The earlier Confession had begun with affirming belief in God, this later one with the statement that 'The Holy Scriptures is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience...'. The Scriptures designated are those of the Old and New Testament, but not the Apocrypha. The authority of the Scriptures comes from 'the Author thereof; therefore it is to be received Because it is the Word of God'; an authority which is affirmed by 'the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our Hearts'. (1644, p.5)

The Confession continued: 'Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God, to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word, and that there are some circumstances concerning the Worship of God and the government of the Church common to humane actions and societies; which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed'. (ibid., p.6)

Matters which could be dealt with under such a heading were illustrated in the Western Association, which was re-formed in 1732 on the basis of the 1689 Confession. When it was stated that 'every Associating Church do in their Letter every year signify their approbation of the said *Confession*', it was noted that 'They who differ from the *Confession* of Faith with respect to the Time in which the Sabbath is to be observed are not to be understood by this subscription to contradict their particular judgment in this matter'. (C. Evans, *Records Western Association*, p.7)

It was a century later in 1832 that English Baptists came closest to setting aside the essentially Biblical basis of their life. Individual Baptist churches still adhered to local church covenants and Particular and General Baptist Confessions of Faith. But in 1832 the Particular Baptist General Union (the forerunner of the present Baptist Union) dropped the Particular Baptist Confession as a requirement for participating churches and redefined its purpose as:

1st To extend brotherly love and union among the Baptist ministers and churches who agree in the sentiments usually denominated evangelical.

2nd To provide unity of exertion in whatever may best serve the cause of Christ in general and the interests of the Baptist denomination in particular.

(E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*, 1958, p.61)

Payne commented: "Fullerism" had provided a bridge between the Particular Baptist Churches and those of the New Connexion of the General Baptists. By omitting the older theological formula and speaking only of 'the sentiments usually denominated evangelical', the way was opened for the adherence to the Union of churches belonging to the New Connexion'.

That which seemed so logical and brotherly in 1832 came to a head in 1887 with the outbreak of the so-called 'Down-grade controversy' which had as its storm centre not only the centrality, but the interpretation, of Scripture in matters of Faith and Order. The lack of a Confession posed serious questions for Baptists in 1887.

In 1873 no less a Particular Baptist veteran than Charles Stovel had advocated and secured the removal of the Baptist Union reference to evangelical sentiments and in its place had proposed a Declaration of Principle which boldly stated: 'In this Union it is fully recognised that every separate church has liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ, and that immersion of believers is the only Christian baptism'. (ibid. p.109) Such slackness over doctrine and polity was challenged increasingly by C. H. Spurgeon. However, in April 1888 the Baptist Union Assembly adopted a six point statement of 'facts and doctrines... commonly believed by the churches of the Union' which began by affirming: 'The Divine Inspiration and Authority of the Holy Scriptures as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice: and the right and duty of individual judgment in the interpretation of it'. (ibid. p.271) The following year, the Baptist Union responded to the Archbishop of Canterbury's invitation to consider unity upon the basis of the Lambeth Quadrilateral, the first part of which affirmed Scripture as 'containing all things necessary to salvation' and as 'the rule and ultimate standard of faith'. Baptists replied by affirming 'the supreme authority of Holy Scripture in matters of religious faith and duty as a cardinal principle underlying our Church organization and individual life'. (ibid., p.272-3)

When the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle was formulated in 1904, and the pressures of 'Down-grade' were less acute, there was an important shift in emphasis which has not always been appreciated. Authority was no longer placed solely in the Bible, it was placed in the authority of Christ as revealed in Scripture, which is a thoroughly Biblical position, but represents a major shift in understanding. 'The basis of this Union is that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice as revealed in the Holy Scriptures...'

This principle has held Baptist Christians together in mission and service through the Baptist Union, and has demanded from the individual churches comprising the Union restraint, charity and loyalty in respect of differing views among Baptists about Biblical inspiration and interpretation, while keeping Scripture central to the Baptist understanding of doctrine and polity.

## 2. Confessions of Faith and Catechisms: A Tool for Christian Education

It is not surprising that Baptist Churches which adopted a Confession of Faith as a basis for local churches and Association life also

developed the use of a catechism based upon the Confession as a means of Christian education within the churches. The Westminster divines had adopted such an approach producing both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms in the conviction that they contained 'nothing contrary to the Word of God' and were in 'nothing contrary to the received doctrine, worship, discipline and government of the Kirk; a necessary part of the intended uniformity in religion, and a rich treasure for increasing knowledge among the people of God... a Directory for Catechising' (in respect of the Larger Catechism) those who have 'some proficiency in the knowledge of the grounds of religion', and (in respect of the Shorter Catechism) 'such as are of weaker capacity'.

From the mid-seventeenth century onwards Baptists had catechisms in print. Vavasour Powell had produced *The Scripture Concord or Catechism* as early as 1646. This 'résumé of salvation' was in its fifth edition by 1673. Christopher Blackwood, a General Baptist, published *A Soul Searching Catechism wherein is opened and explained ... the six fundamental points, Heb vi.1* in 1644. William Kaye, of Stokesley, published in 1658 *The Reformed Protestant's Catechism... in which the Apostles Creed is unveiled as comprehending the mysteries of salvation, the Lord's Day and private worship*.

The Particular Baptist Assembly in 1693, held at Bristol, minuted for the attention of its churches: 'That a Catechism be drawn up, containing the substance of the Christian Religion, for the instruction of children and servants, and that Brother William Collins be desired to draw it up'. (*Narrative*, 1694, p.8) A very popular Catechism was drawn up by Benjamin Keach in the 1690s, which attracted the name of *The Baptist Catechism*, because, as Keach wrote to the Reader:

We have some years since put forth a Confession of our Faith, almost in all points the same with that of the Assembly and Savoy... and do now put forth a short account of Christian principles, for the instruction of our families, in most things agreeing with the Shorter Catechism of the Assembly. And this we were the rather induced to, because we have commonly made use of that Catechism in our families, and the difference being not much it will be more easily committed to memory.

*The Baptist Catechism* was in regular circulation till the mid-nineteenth century in both Britain and America. Catechisms were used to meet the need for strengthening what the 1677 Confession's preface to the Reader called 'the worship of God in families'. It claimed that 'Parents and Masters' had all too often 'neglected those frequent and solemn commands which the Lord hath laid upon them 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'. This would redress 'the decay of religion' and be a useful tool for remedying 'the neglect of the worship of God in families'.

*The Baptist Catechism* was reproduced by a variety of editors over the next 150 years, including John Rippon in 1793 and the Sunday School Union in 1826, who sold one edition at 7s 4d per 100, and another at 12s per 100. There were two broader based catechisms

which had some support. In 1780 John Fellows published *A Protestant Catechism*; and in 1823 William Newman published *The Protestant Dissenters Catechism* which went through nineteen editions in four years. At Serampore the missionaries favoured Isaac Watts' *New Testament Catechism*, which was translated and printed in several Asian languages. There were also catechisms aimed specifically at children. *The First Principles of the Oracles of God*, published by John Sutcliff of Olney in 1783 was still in print into the middle of the next century.

The Catechisms used by the Baptists usually had Scriptural proof texts and explanations. Richard Wright of Liverpool had considerable success with his *Catechism in which the most important parts of religion are taught in Scripture Language only* (1813, fourth edition by 1821). But one of the most popular editions of *The Baptist Catechism* was that produced by Benjamin Beddome in 1752, with a second corrected edition in 1776. It was still being published in London as late as 1839 and in America there was an edition published at Richmond, Virginia, in 1849, with an introduction by J. O. Reynolds. Benjamin Beddome's *A Scriptural Exposition of the Baptist Catechism by way of Questions and Answers* for 'those of the Baptist persuasion' was 'in imitation of Mr [Matthew] Henry's, which was published with great Acceptance several years ago. When we consider the melancholly State of those Churches and Families, where catechising is entirely thrown aside, how much many of them have degenerated from the Faith, and others from the Practice of the Gospel; little needs to be said in the vindication of this exercise to those in whom a zeal for both still remains'.

Beddome left out the first two questions of the Shorter Catechism, choosing not to begin with 'What is the chief end of man?', but rather the being of God. The series of questions and answers discuss belief in, and knowledge of, God's work in creation and providence; humanity's fall into sin through moral disobedience; and the consequent introduction of Christ as Redeemer, who by his ministry as Prophet, Priest and King is first humiliated and finally exalted as Saviour and Lord. The effectual calling of Christians was elaborated by a discussion of the words justification, adoption and sanctification. The benefits for believers of Christ's death and resurrection were then clearly established. Man's responsibility in this new life was to follow the moral code outlined in the commandments, which were considered in turn. This new life was possible by repentance for sin and trust in Christ's atoning work. The crucial work of the Holy Spirit was in the provision of moral power, which came by the Spirit's work through the Bible, the sacraments, and prayer. The final section dealt with the teaching of the Lord's Prayer. Within the answers to the 114 questions Baptist identity was established. Beddome's scriptural comments in answer to further questions provided the Baptist distinctives.

Beddome occasionally introduced his own question, answer and comments: for example, in question 101: 'What is the duty of such who are rightly baptized? Ans. It is the duty of those who are rightly baptized to give up themselves to some particular and orderly church of Jesus Christ, that they may walk in all the commandments and

ordinances of the Lord blameless'. It is when Beddome provides further questions and appropriate Biblical answers that Baptist convictions appear clearly.

Is there an invisible church of Christ? YES. *The general Assembly and Church of the First-Born* Heb 12.23. Doth this consist of all the elect? YES. *Which are written in Heaven*, *ibid*. Is there a visible church of Christ on earth? YES. For we read that *Saul made havoc of the Churches* Acts 8.3. Does this consist of professing Believers? YES. *They that gladly received the Word were added to the Church*, Acts 2.41...

Doth a particular Gospel Church consist of as many as can comfortably meet together in one place? YES. *When they had gathered together the Church they rehearsed all that God had done*, Acts 14.27. Is it a voluntary society? YES. *They first gave themselves to the Lord and unto us by the will of God*, 2 Cor 8.5. And an authoritative one? YES. *When ye are gathered together with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ to deliver such an one to Satan*, 1 Cor 5.5. And should it be an orderly one? YES. *Joying and beholding your order*, Col.2.5...

Is it the duty of Baptized Believers... to join themselves to some particular Church of Christ? YES. *Paul essayed to join the Disciples*, Acts 9.26. And should they do this soon after their baptism? YES. *They were baptized and the same day were added to them about three thousand souls*, Acts 2.41. Is Christian fellowship necessary for the glory of God? YES. *That we may with one mind and one mouth glorify God*, Rom. 15.6... (p.162-3)

Catechising of this nature was a very formative influence among eighteenth-century Baptists and provided a Baptist identity which was set securely within Reformed and Evangelical orthodoxy. Bernard Foskett was one who introduced regular, weekly catechising of the children at Broadmead Baptist Church, Bristol, as early as 1726. At first it was on a Tuesday evening prior to the weekly 'conference', but then he introduced it before the afternoon service at Broadmead. In the *Western Association Letter* of 1742 Foskett commended the practice to the churches of the Association, urging them to catechise children and young servants both at home and in the church. In 1754 Beddome mentioned his catechetical programme in the *Midland Association Letter* stating that he had taught it 'with advantage to the children and to many grown persons who attended thereon'. It was an important aspect of the programme of church growth at Bourton-on-the-Water, where almost two hundred members were received between 1740 and 1765, and four men were sent for training at Bristol Academy and then into the ministry.

Baptist identity until the 1850s was affirmed within the classic statement of Reformed theology and practice as published in the *Baptist Confession* and the various editions of the *Baptist Catechism*. Once the Confession was set aside in 1832 it was inevitable that the Catechism would begin to lose its influence in local churches as an educative tool. The revolution in Biblical scholarship encouraged the Catechism's demise since it brought not only Beddome's, but also every other Baptist's, simple Biblicism into question. Anything resembling a



credal statement was suspect in an age in which the liberty of the individual and his conscience was dominant, and separation of church and state, together with the polarisation of evangelical and catholic, prominent. It was a profound loss for Baptists, since the failure to teach the Christian faith in the broader context of the Confession and Catechism seriously weakened life in the local churches, which in its turn has affected Baptist involvement in ecumenism in the present time. There are New Testament, historic Baptist, and rational considerations, as well as contemporary ecumenical demands, for believing that the retreat from the Confessions (if not the creeds) has now gone too far.

### 3. Confessions of Faith and Covenants: Co-operation to Commitment

The earliest *Baptist Confession* (1644) was drawn up to express a unity in doctrine and practice of seven independent yet interdependent churches in London. It was expressly stated that the Confession was not the work 'of some particular Congregation more refined than the rest'; it had been affirmed 'by some of each body in the name, and by the appointment of seven Congregations, who... are all in one Communion, holding Jesus Christ to be our head and Lord...'

#### Article 33 affirmed

That Christ hath here on earth a spiritual kingdome, which is the Church, which he hath purchased and redeemed to himselfe, as a peculiar inheritance: which Church, as it is visible to us, is a company of visible Saints, called... to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptised into that faith, and joynted to the Lord, and each other by mutual agreement...

#### Article 47 expressed the interdependent nature of churches

Although the particular Congregations be distinct and severall Bodies, every one as a compact and knit Citie in itselfe: yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the counsell and help of one another in all needfull affaires of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their onely head.

The 1677 Confession had more to say about the Church in Chapter 26 than the earlier Confession, but the basic stance was the same. While affirming the local independent nature of each congregation, it affirmed also the interdependency of churches.

The members of these Churches are Saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing... their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ giving up themselves to the Lord and to one another by the will of God...

As each Church, and all the Members of it are bound to pray continually, for the good prosperity of all the Churches of Christ, in all places; and upon all occasions to further it... so the Churches... ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.

In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of

Doctrine or Administration; wherein either Churches in general are concerned, or any one Church... or members... it is according to the mind of Christ that many Churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the Churches concerned... (pp.93-4)

The 1689 Confession follows the 1677 Confession closely in its presentation of the local church and its interdependency as a gathered fellowship of visible Saints who enjoy the privileges of Gospel ministry and ordinances together with total responsibility for all that happens in the congregation. The Congregational Way expounded here diverges significantly from the Westminster Confession at this point.

When the Assembly met in 1689, one of its first acts, which gave it definition, was the commitment of each church to the doctrine and polity of the Confession. Association was upon the agreed Confession and its acceptance was required by participating churches.

At the end of the seventeenth century, after thirty years of persecution which on occasion was very severe, the Western Association comprised both Particular and a few General Baptist churches. The churches, when they met in Association gatherings, affirmed a number of so-called 'Preliminaries', but not specifically the 1689 Confession. Bernard Foskett's leadership in the Western Association proved decisive. In 1723 Foskett proposed an additional 'Preliminary':

That seeing many errors have been broached, and ancient heresies revived, of late, in the world, no messenger shall be received from any church whose letter don't every year express, either in the preamble or body of it, that they of the Church do approve the Confession of Faith put forth by above a hundred Baptist Churches (Edit, 3rd, AD 1689) and do maintain the principles therein; such letter being signed at a church meeting, in the name and by consent of the whole.

(J. G. Fuller, *A History of the Western Association*, 1845, p.30)

The debate at Salters' Hall had ripples which reached out into the provinces, not least in the west country. Caleb Evans wrote a manuscript record of the Western Association from 1732 onwards, beginning his account thus:

The Western Baptist Association was for many years kept up by the Baptists as such, without regard to their different principles in other respects. The consequence of this was these annual meetings were found to be rather pernicious than useful, as there was scarcely a meeting of the kind but some unhappy differences arose betwixt the Calvinistic and Arminian Ministers. In the year 1731 their annual meeting was to have been held at Tiverton but an awful Fire abt that time... prevented it... In the following year an invitation was sent to the respective churches by the Church in Broadmead, Bristol, desiring them to renew their former meeting upon the foot of

their agreement in the Baptist Confession of 1689.  
(Caleb Evans, *MSS Records of the Western Association*, p.1)

A new set of Preliminaries was drawn up, omitting the one which left 'every church to their own liberty, to walk together as they have received from the Lord' and replacing it with one which required an annual re-affirmation of the 1689 Confession as a basis for faith and fellowship.

Joseph Stennett, in a lengthy sermon to the recently re-organised Association in 1734, gave some reasons for its new stance. The first urged that 'no Christian society can usefully and comfortably subsist' without such doctrinal unity. A general acknowledgment of the Scriptures was insufficient since it 'would be no bar to hinder... Romanists... from journeying with us, who own the Scriptures but wrest them to their own corrupt sense'. A *Confession* was Scriptural in that Christ required it (Matthew 10.33) and we should be prepared to speak it (Psalm 119.46), and subscribe it with our signature (Isaiah 44.5) because we believe it in our hearts (Romans 10.9-10). It linked Baptists with the Reformed Churches, and exposed the 'modern artifice' of blending theology, as an error which 'had done incredible mischief'. Anyone who considered 'the flood of Arian, Socinian, Pelagian and Arminian corruption that has overspread the land and broke in upon our churches' would recognise the necessity for the new doctrinal foundation. Co-operation between churches could be on a very superficial level. Commitment to each other required a shared understanding of the essential doctrines and practice of the churches.

Within local churches the emphasis upon commitment rather than mere co-operation, was presented in the unique linking of the 1689 Confession with a covenant between the members. The 1689 Confession has some paragraphs on God's dealings with humanity 'by way of a Covenant of Grace wherein he freely offers to sinners Life and Salvation by Jesus Christ'. But in the local church, covenant signified something different. Dr G. F. Nuttall (*Visible Saints: The Congregational Way 1640-60*, 1957, p.77) has written about the use of a covenant document in the local church: 'Along with its binding and voluntary aspects, both of which were regarded as vital, in church circles the covenant did express, almost before all else, the entering into fellowship, the giving of themselves up to God and to one another intended by those who took part in it... The drawing up of a covenant and committing it to writing added to its solemnity; while the appending of signatures (or marks) of those who entered into it, both underlined its binding character and satisfied their self-consciousness as individuals.'

Among Baptist churches there was a distinctively Baptist use of the covenant, which Thomas Collier termed the 'heart confession'. As early as 1654 a query was put to the Western Association at Taunton 'whether any are to be received into the Church of Christ only upon a bare confession of Christ being come in the flesh and assenting to the doctrine and order laid down by him?' The answer was unequivocal: 'They may not be admitted on such terms without the declaration of experimental work of the Spirit upon the heart, through the word of the Gospel and suitable to it, being attended

with tokens of conversion to the satisfaction of the administrator and brethren or church concerned in it'.

The word 'experimental' indicated the charismatic and personal nature of conversion and it was a distinction of consequence for Baptists. Prebyterian churches using the same word only required a simple subscription to the doctrines for admission to membership. This was never so among Baptists.

Benjamin Keach towards the close of his life produced, alongside a reprint of the 1689 Confession, a church covenant which was the basis of the Horsly Down members agreement together. He described the life-style of a covenanted church:

We believe a true church of Christ is not National or Parochial but doth consist of a number of godly persons who upon the Profession of their Faith and repentance have been baptized and in solemn manner have in a Holy Covenant given themselves up to the Lord and to one another, to live in love and to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; Among whome the Word of God is duly preached; Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper and all other ordinances are duly administered according to the Word of God and the institution of Christ in the primitive Church; watching over one another and communicating to each others necessities, as becometh saints; living Holy lives, as becomes their sacred profession and not to forsake the assembling of themselves as the manner of some is; or to take leave to hear where they please in other places when the Church is assembled, but to worship God and feed in that pasture or with that Church, with whome they have covenanted and given themselves up as particular members thereof.

There was an ambiguity about the link between the Confession of Faith adopted by a church and its covenant document. At Frome, Somerset, for example, the Church Book begins with a Calvinist confession of Faith. This is followed by a statement of three things which members are asked to accept. These are (i) to be regular in worship; (ii) to care and be cared for in the Lord; and (iii) to accept financial responsibility for the ministry. Then it continues:

Now upon these conditions:

Q.1. Do you solemnly give yourself up to the Lord and to the Church to watch over and be watch'd over, to perform all the dutys, and enjoy all the priviliges of the House of God?

Qu.2. Do you solemnly agree to receive this person as a member of the Society, to watch over... in the Lord and to be watch'd over according to the Gospel Rule?

At Alcester, in Warwickshire, members who were 'baptized by immersion upon a personal profession of faith' first declared their assent to a Confession of Faith compiled by their minister, of a basically Calvinistic nature, and then signed a thirteen point covenant agreement mutually accepted by members. Following these two statements in the church book, members as they joined signed the following: 'In testimony that we do own and firmly believe all the forementioned articles of faith, and that we do desire and design (by the assistance of grace) to practice according to this our mutual agreement, we have put our hands at our Church Meeting'.

(see also K. Clements, ed., *Bound to Love*, pp.26-7)

Co-operation which was to become commitment to Christ, to fellow-members, required from all concerned a commitment to shared understanding of the essential Gospel, as expressed in the Confession.

#### 4. Conclusion

In a recent paper given by Keith Clements at the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Doctrine, he urged Baptist participation in the Faith and Order Commission's project 'Towards the common expression of the Apostolic Faith To-day'. He wrote:

To be apostolic has commonly been assumed to mean 'faithful to what the Apostles taught', and so it is - and more. It is to be faithful to what they did and were sent to do, namely to be witnesses of Jesus to all people and all creation... each generation is to be apostolic in this journeying, witnessing sense. Being apostolic is a continuing open-ended affair... not remaining still, but being sent... to the end of time... Baptists have a major contribution to make in asserting within the ecumenical movement that understanding of the apostolic faith [which] springs from their *missionary* endeavours.

The static givenness of the Scriptures is foundational for Baptists, but they have always wished to be open to the dynamic of the Word as released into the missionary situation in each generation. When the *Baptists and Unity* report was issued, Baptists affirmed that it would be impossible for the Baptist Union to use an already existing statement, citing the Nicene Creed as one such impossibility, believing it would be unfortunate and reactionary were creeds again to become the tests of orthodoxy. Present developments in the Southern Baptist Convention, where the Statement of Faith is being used as a tool in heresy hunts, underlines the significance of such an opinion.

But would not Baptists be willing to explore the ecumenical use of the Nicene Creed as a tool for expressing and declaring the Christian faith within and between Christian communities? Would not such a common declaration by Christians of the things most surely believed be a weapon of importance in confidence building measures between Christians as well as in the churches' missionary endeavours?

In a series of articles in the *Baptist Times* of April 1965 Leslie Wenger, writing out of his experiences in Asia, pleaded for a Confession of Faith amongst Baptists as an educational tool, vital for the mission of the Church in a non-Christian environment, and not least because of its ecumenical usefulness in declaring a common faith. There is an essential element in the gospel which each person who joins the church needs to understand before affirming Jesus is Lord. It is not used as a shackle to bind Christians, but an acceptable statement of what each Christian is summoned to make their own in their own way. The primary purpose of a creed is not as a test to keep people out, though it may do that, 'it is to help those who are within... In our days we need a creed that will make explicit what is

implicit in the simple confession Jesus is Lord'. There is certainly overwhelming evidence from our past that the Confession together with the catechism has been used as a major teaching tool within the church, and as unifying force within and beyond the denomination's boundaries.

In an article for Dr Dakin's festschrift, *The Communication of the Christian Faith Today*, Bernard Green, after arguing that the study of the creeds correctly arose from Bible study (of such passages as I Corinthians 12.3; Philippians 2.5-11; Romans 10; I Corinthians 15.3f; I Timothy 3.16 and Jude) he noted two elements in them. 'First there is the confession of faith, and then there is the summary of things most surely believed. The second element developed into what has been called the Rule of Faith... or statement of apostolic faith which was taught to all members of the catechumenate... [There was] a third element in creed-making, namely, the defence against heresy which led the church to use creeds as the authoritative test of orthodoxy... Some of us shy away from any suggestion that subscription to the creeds should be a test of church membership'. He then writes: creeds 'serve to remind us that faith is never purely an individual matter. The collective experience of the church and the ongoing life of its worship and tradition are vital factors guarding against the errors of personal judgment'. (pp.30-2)

The present demands of international and national ecumenism require Baptists to overcome their reluctance to look seriously at the creeds with fellow Christians. There is much in our Baptist tradition which affirms their usefulness both within and between Christian churches. If Baptists are to move from co-operation to commitment in ecumenical affairs in England, then we need to reflect upon the place of confessions in our Baptist life, affirming the dynamic of the Word in the church's life and mission as we discover how to declare the things most surely believed among us with all Christian believers.

At the first Baptist World Alliance meetings, held in London in 1905, Alexander McLaren was searching for a unifying action which would unite the very diverse meeting of world Baptists. He invited all present 'as a simple acknowledgement of where we stand and what we believe' to repeat with him the Apostles Creed. It much moved that glad ecumenist, J. H. Shakespeare, who wrote in his report of the Assembly: 'Never has there been an act of such inspiration or a moment so historical with us'. (BWA, 1905, p.viii,20) Perhaps P. T. Forsyth, writing in 1909, judged it better when he wrote in his book *The Work of Christ*:

We are in a time when spirituality without positive content seems attractive to many minds. And the numbers may grow of those favouring an undogmatic Christianity which is without apostolic or evangelical substance, but cultivates a certain emulsion of sympathetic mysticism, intuitional belief and benevolent action... Upon such undogmatic, undenominational religion no Church can live... The Church betrays its trust and throws its life and its Lord away when it says: 'Be beautifully spiritual and believe what you like... or, Do blessed good and think as you please'... Deep Christianity is

that which not only searches us but breaks us. And a Christianity which would exclude none has no power to include the world.  
(pp. xxxii and 62)

## NOTES

This paper was first given as the Annual Lecture of the Baptist Historical Society 1988.

The text of the Baptist Confessions of Faith will be found in the two collections by W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, London, 1910 and W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Judson Press, 1959. The *Baptist Times* editorial was for 11 February 1965 and the E. L. Wenger articles, 'Confesions, Creeds and Covenants', appeared on 15, 22 and 29 April 1965. The MSS *Records of the Western Association*, commenced by Caleb Evans, are in the Bristol Baptist College Library. The Baptist Catechisms are all listed in E. C. Starr, ed., *A Baptist Bibliography*, and those quoted are held in either the British Library or Bristol Baptist College Library. The extensive quotation from my essay, in K. Clements, ed., *Bound to Love*, is reproduced with permission. Keith Clements' contribution to the BWA Doctrine Commission was made available to me by the author and the text will subsequently appear in the *Baptist Quarterly*. The report *Baptists and Unity* was published by the Baptist Union, London, in 1967.

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Edward Royle, *Nonconformity in Nineteenth-Century York*, Borthwick Papers, No. 68. St Anthony's Press, York, 1985, 39 pp, fl-80.

The Cathedral City of York was no appanage of the Church of England, for in 1837 over half the church attendances were at Nonconformist places of worship. Edward Royle, Senior Lecturer in History at the University of York, having previously written on the Church of England in Victorian York, in this succinct study turns from church to chapel. Two statistical surveys of religion in the city undertaken in 1837 and 1901 enable him to supplement the 1851 religious census with an illuminating analysis of the main changes in denominational strength. The Unitarians enjoyed the distinguished ministry of Charles Wellbeloved (1792-1858), the Independents that of James Parsons (1822-70). The Quakers, with Tukes then Rowntrees prominent, were strong, but the Methodists, who built some grand edifices, were strongest. After some small and transient causes, Baptists established themselves more firmly in 1862. Under F. B. Meyer, the evangelist D. L. Moody, in his first mission in Britain, brought about a 70% membership increase in two years. A second Baptist Church that existed briefly in York from 1880 is omitted from this booklet, but in general it is an unusually well researched and authoritative study of provincial Nonconformity.

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