

BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE REVIEW

The Baptist College of Florida

Baptist Faith and Message

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Preamble

The Preamble to the Baptist Faith and Message describes in entirely adequate terms both the necessity and usefulness of having a statement or confession of faith. Drawing mostly from the history of the Church and Baptist history in particular, the preamble highlights the tradition of writing up a witness to important theological convictions, both for use internally and externally. The intention is clearly to continually present a faithful summary of what Baptists actually believe is revealed in Scripture, for the teaching and employment of Baptist churches inasmuch as the conscience agrees and for witnessing to the outer world. Despite this, the preamble also makes a strong emphasis on the liberty and autonomy of the churches and believers so that the preamble may benefit many but rule over none, and affirms that neither it nor any other theological articulations outside of the Scriptures can ever be fixed, final, and ultimately binding.

I believe I agree with the basic message and intent of the preamble. Statements and confessions of faith are indeed useful both within the Church and for the Church's witness to the world. Moreover, the emphasis on the provisional and mutable nature of any such statements is one of the greatest strengths of Baptist tradition, or even Protestantism generally. (As a side note, Karl Barth would also heartily agree.)

Section I: The Scriptures

The first section, on the Scriptures, is relatively brief and makes the point succinctly: Scripture is the inerrant, infallible Word of God. This point is made in a variety of terms, each one guarding against some deviant doctrine of Scripture. The change from the 1963 BF&M wording “is a record of God's revelation” to “is God's revelation,” for example, rules out

anything like a Barthian or neo-orthodox view. The purpose shines throughout: uphold the Scriptures as from God's very mouth.

I find myself mostly in agreement with this section with much need for comment on those agreements, but I do have a few reservations. Firstly, I question the placement of this section as the very first. While the Bible does hold an epistemic role as the only certain source for our knowledge of God in Christ and His purposes, it is nonetheless entirely secondary to God Himself. I would rather see a statement of the faith begin with the God of the faith. On a related note, while I am not opposed at all to the change of “record of God's revelation” to “God's revelation,” I do not appreciate that this title is simultaneously denied to Christ, called only the “focus” of divine revelation rather than Himself divine revelation. If Scripture is to be regarded as the word of God, which it must be, then I believe this should be defined in relation to the preceding eternal Word who became flesh.

Section II: God

In this section, the authors intended to present their articulation of a classically Christian doctrine of God. This it seems they have succeeded in doing, as the resulting statements are mostly universally agreed upon within traditional Christianity of all denominations. The basics of the divine nature and character are articulated, followed up by personal details for each of the three Persons of the Trinity. One statement on God's foreknowledge has quite obviously been added to combat open theism.

As a Trinitarian Christian (the only legitimate kind), I whole-heartedly embrace this section and agree with more or less everything it says. If I could find any disagreements, they would have to be minor details of wording. This is the most important part of the faith, and

because the authors have done so well here the Christian nature of this whole confession is secure. My only niggles might be that I would like to see the description of the divine nature interwoven with rather than separated from the description of the Persons of the Trinity, mostly a preference, and I am not entirely certain that the added statement against open theism was well-placed.

Section III: Man

The section of man, originally entitled “The Fall of Man” in the 1925 BF&M, works as something of a bridge between the sections on God and salvation. However, the retitling is significant, because there is more in the present text about basic anthropology rather than simply anthropocentric hamartiology. The goodness and created intention of human gender is affirmed, for example, and the connection between the *imago Dei*, the atonement, and the resulting need to love all people is made. A mostly non-sectarian skeleton of human depravity and original sin is also presented.

I find myself in substantial agreement with this section like the last. The *imago Dei*, the significance of human gender, and the need for human charity are all themes which resonate with me and my own theology. I do, however, wish there was something noted about how, in relation to creation in God's image, Christ is the true “image of...God,”¹ as well as how in His resurrection from the dead He has created a new humanity patterned after and rooted in His own paradigmatic, sanctified human life.

Section IV: Salvation

The section on salvation appears to give a very basic, introductory *ordo salutis*, as well as some definition to what salvation actually means. The language shows that the authors took this

1. Colossians 1:15. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the HCSB.

section seriously as involving some core theology, and they present a pretty standard Protestant portrait, one with just enough wiggle room to accommodate Calvinists, Arminians, and Molinists, along with those ambiguously in between, though not open theists or hyper-Calvinists, without sacrificing doctrinal depth. A dual concern with safeguarding both justification by faith alone and the necessity of a deep and committed conversion can be seen. The message might be partially reducible to the Biblical statements that one is saved by grace through faith and genuine repentance.

While I would be hard-pressed to pick out more than one or two statements in this section with which I specifically disagree, I also do not find it satisfying as a whole. Without a word of justification, the section starts speaking of salvation purely in individual terms, as though the salvation of particular persons were not at its defining core part of the wider salvation of humanity as a people and the entire cosmos. To be a bit picky, as well, the statement that there is no salvation apart from personal faith in Christ is understandable, and clearly intends to repudiate inclusivism, pluralism, and universalism, but to most Baptists and other Christians is still flatly wrong. Almost all Christians agree that infants who die while yet unable to produce what would generally be recognized as personal faith are still saved by Christ, making one important exception which statistically affects an exceedingly large portion of the human race throughout history. For a couple final notes, the historic link in Christian thought between baptism and regeneration is missing from the regeneration part, the once-for-all past dimension of sanctification at the atonement is underemphasized, and the section on glorification is woefully truncated, not even mentioning the resurrection, which is the Biblical essence of salvation.

Section V: God's Purpose of Grace

In the tradition of Protestant confessions, the authors here include a section discussing the election of grace. The primary purposes of this section appear to be recognizing the sovereignty and providence of God in salvation and promoting the doctrine of eternal security. Election is said to cover the entire sweep of salvation from beginning to end, including all means and contingencies. The believer is said to be secure from the moment of salvation, not because of anything in himself but because God will both enable and cause him to persevere in the faith without falling away.

I personally find this section mostly unnecessary. In attempting not to take sides in the Calvinist/Arminian debate, the paragraph on election is left, it seems to me, mostly saying nothing at all. The authors use words that mostly all sides use in a way compatible with how all sides use them, but basically leaves their meanings blank, to be filled in by the theology of the readers. I think it would be more productive to speak of election in relation to Christ as the Elect One of God,² how He is the firstborn over creation and set forth as the slaughtered Lamb from before for the foundation of the world to become all and in all.³ As regards the eternal security of the believer, I am still conflicted on this matter, but I do wish that the authors would have allowed this statement to accommodate both camps.

Section VI: The Church

This section is one of the more distinctively Baptist ones, and the authors clearly intended such distinction to be visible here. In contrast to most other denominations, this sections affirms that each congregation is autonomous, individually under the Lordship of Christ rather than at

2. Luke 23:35

3. This is synthesized from Colossians 1, Revelation 13:8 (KJV), and 1 Corinthians 15:28.

the bottom of a hierarchy which leads up to Him. The only church offices acknowledged are pastor and deacon, and in accord with Christian tradition women are excluded from the pastoral office, though only that office. The Reformed view of the Church is contradicted by the statement that the Church consists only of genuine believers, not actually including the tares.

I am somewhat ambivalent about this section, as I have not yet made up my mind about my views on polity and such. That said, much of it I can affirm without any trouble at all. I have, however, two primary concerns. The first is the specification of democratic processes as the right way for a local church to operate. While this may be perfectly legitimate, I see no special warrant from Scripture for it, nor do I necessarily see any inherent virtue in democratic processes when compared to certain others. The only other notable point I would contest is that I believe there is a valid office of “elder” which is not always identical to what we consider a “pastor,” though the issue there may not be deep.

Section VII: Baptism and the Lord's Supper

This section shows off the namesake distinctives of Baptist identity, as well as covering the closely related matter of the Supper. The authors word it plainly to show that Baptists view baptism as a symbolic, post-salvation action exclusively following conscious faith which can only validly be done by immersion. All of these details are unique to Baptists and their closely related cousins (e.g. Pentecostals). The Supper is also presented as simply symbolic in opposition to the views of more “high church” traditions, and allowance is made in the wording for the practice of substituting the Biblical wine with grape juice.

I actually disagree with the majority of this section, as I do not hold to a Baptist view of either baptism or the Lord's Supper. I agree with the majority Church consensus throughout the

ages that baptism is rightly administered to the children of professing believers, and that baptism is to be understood as integrally related to regeneration. Rather than an “act of obedience,” I would characterize baptism as a gift of God to be received by faith. Of course, I still do affirm that baptism also symbolizes that which the authors here state it symbolizes, such as Christ's death and resurrection and our existential union with Him in those realities in our own lives. My stance on the Supper is similarly different. I do not hold to transubstantiation, but I do hold to an undefined form of the Real Presence of Christ, a view that it is meaningful and legitimate to say that in the Supper we partake of Christ's flesh and blood as we consume the bread and wine.

Section VIII: The Lord's Day

The section on the Lord's Day appears to be primarily concerned with honoring Sunday as is traditional in the Church since Christ's resurrection, but without taking a stance on the controversy involving the Sabbath in the New Testament. There are, in the Baptist world, plenty of people who think Sunday is the Sabbath and many who believe that the Sabbath law is no longer in effect, as well as people somewhere in between, and this section steers clear of a commitment either way, leaving the matter to conscience. Nonetheless, the authors remain keen to affirm that Sunday is special and should be honored as a special day for worship, devotion, and Christian fellowship, in keeping with the practice of the apostolic Church,

I agree with this section entirely. I do not believe, like many of the Reformed churches say in their confessions, that the Sunday carries on the Sabbath, and I am quite glad that the Baptist Faith and Message does not affirm that stance. However, since many Baptists do seem to hold that view or a view like it, I am happy to see this matter left to conscience rather than ruled on one way or the other. I also agree strongly with sanctifying Sunday for worshipping the risen

Christ, even if I do not identify that as continuous with the Sabbath.

Section IX: The Kingdom

Perhaps because of its prominence in the preaching of Christ, a section is included on the kingdom of God. The authors seek to show what this means from a Baptist perspective, and the result is fairly general. The section affirms that the kingdom includes God's general sovereignty as well as His personal rule over His Church, being primarily identified with the world of salvation through Christ, which is slowly advancing over the earth at God's behest and awaits consummation at Jesus' return. The authors encourage us to pray and labor for the full arrival of this kingdom on earth.

I think that most of what this section says is technically correct, but I am not sure that it reflects a strong grasp of how the term “kingdom of God” is actually used in Scripture. Instead, the section feels like it is reaching for a definition without a comprehensive underlying concept of the kingdom. I would prefer to define the kingdom of God as His gracious and saving kingly rule breaking into the world under the sway of the kingdom of Satan. General sovereignty is not necessarily in view, but God's advance in reclaiming the world under His will rather than that of the evil forces at work. Alas, time does not allow for much elaboration on this point.

Section X: Last Things

The first priority noticeable in this section on last things is Christian unity, as the articulation of eschatology given here does not say anything specific for or against any eschatological views within orthodox Christianity. The authors encourage us to affirm that God is wise and knows His own way to bring history to its appropriate end. The statements made in this section, for the most part, do not go beyond the content of the great ecumenical creeds. The only

exception would be that purgatorial universalism is apparently ruled out in the description of Hell.

There is not much room for orthodox Christians of any denomination to disagree with this section, so for the most part I can offer a hearty “amen.” I strongly affirm the intention to leave eschatological matters not strictly defined for Southern Baptists as a whole, something which I cannot take for granted given the powerful role of Dispensational Premillennialism in Baptist thought. My only quibble is the statement that we will spend eternity in heaven, which does not seem strictly correct, since the Scriptures teach that God will recreate the *earth* for us, and that heaven and earth will be united into one new creation. The New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth, and we will dwell there on the earth, remade after fire.

Section XI: Evangelism and Missions

In this section I believe a hint of serious Baptist passion comes through the text, as the authors seek to state in the most emphatic terms the important of evangelism and missions to the life of the Christian and the Church. There is no allowance that evangelism can be optional or only for a few, but rather the clear statement that every believer has this duty. Evangelism is described as flowing from the love of new birth and the desire of obedience to Christ. No one reading this section could get any mistaken impression that evangelism is considered less than entirely necessary in Baptist thought.

I agree completely and entirely with this section, and I wish that what is said in it was better emphasized in many other confessions and statements of faith throughout the Church. The call to disciple all nations is essential to the obedience of faith. The section is also quite right to acknowledge that an exemplary witness is not enough, but it must also be verbal. The Gospel

does involve, to quite an important degree, a changed life, but a changed life does not automatically make Jesus visible without a changed message.

Section XII: Education

The education section seems to be intended almost as an answer to the question, “Why do Baptists have schools?” The answer comes as an affirmation that Scripture teaches the importance of knowledge and learning to the Christian faith. Christianity is a religion of a faith with doctrines, truths to be understood. From this it is argued, in combination with the push of mission work and the work of the Church as seeking to serve people, that schooling is rightly an activity of the Church. The point is also made that academic freedom, while important, cannot allow members of a Christian learning institution to turn back upon the Gospel and harm it. This presumably is intended to defend the right of SBC schools to restrict the propagation of liberalism or other such problems in their midst.

I also find myself in pretty comfortable agreement with this section. We need schools for practical reasons and they are useful for spiritual ones, and for that reason the Church is entirely warranted in seeking to provide sanctified education. Christianity already has a legacy of learning inherent: the disciples learned from Jesus for over three years, and Paul's theology is clearly influenced (despite its radical redrawing around Christ) by his years under Gamaliel. I will make one amusing note, though. The opening phrase “the faith of enlightenment” struck me as funny just because it sounds so Gnostic, even though it is entirely clear that this is not the intention.

Section XIII: Stewardship

Martin Luther said that a man is not truly converted until his wallet is, and this section

seems intended to address just that point. The authors here affirm that all we have, not only money and possessions but personal abilities and opportunities as well, rightly belong to God and are intended to be used for the sake of His kingdom in redeeming and blessing the world. Thus they make the bold claim that Christians ought to be hardcore givers for the faith. This concept in terms of stewardship in particular seems to be especially emphasized in Baptist thought over other traditions, and it shows here.

I cannot but strongly agree with this section as well. The Christian is obligated to give everything he has for the kingdom's cause, even if he technically might retain possession of some of it. He is to own as though he did not own, and give generously to the poor and the needy, first within the Church but also without. If I could fault this section at all, it would only be for not pounding the point through out heads even more forcefully or providing the stinging rebuke to American culture which trains us to regard our stuff as first and foremost our own and to use it for luxury and personal advancement.

Section XIV: Cooperation

The purpose of this section mainly seems to be to show the reasoning and Scriptural support for moving from “a Baptist church is autonomous” to “churches should work together for the kingdom of God.” Since Baptist churches are autonomous and submit to no authority but Christ Himself, for cooperation to take place requires wider, non-church organizations of a voluntary nature. These organizations are commended for the sake of service and mission so long as their boundaries are recognized. A statement is also made allowing for interdenominational cooperation so long as the spiritual gulf is not too wide.

On this section, I am hardly ready to decide since I, as mentioned above, am not settled

on the question of ecclesiological structure yet. Nonetheless, I certainly agree that churches can and should work together for the sake of the Gospel, especially to send out missionaries and perform socially redemptive work in local communities. I do question the “voluntary” nature of such cooperation, though. To me, it seems that being one body in Christ means that the Churches are called forcefully to be and function as one. How can cooperation be a matter of choice rather than command if we share one Head and one Spirit and are called to have one mind? While I can understand saying that any particular program, organization, or method of cooperation is not mandatory, I would rather see it stated clearly that churches must cooperate by absolute command. Also, I would make a much more positive statement on interdenominational cooperation, at least noting that cooperation with all Trinitarian churches should be a normal goal.

Section XV: The Christian and the Social Order

The section on the social order seems intended basically to sketch out what a Baptist Christians think that the social order should look like and to affirm the acceptability and even necessity of Christian efforts towards the realization of that order. The traditional Christian stances on several issues, such as marriage and family, abortion, and sexual morality, are all affirmed. The separation of Church and state seems to be assumed, as nothing in this section indicates that Christians are to be able to promote this order from a position as supreme authority. Finally, the cooperation of Christians with non-Christians with similar social views is affirmed as useful and permissible.

This section I also agree with in its entirety. I believe that the traditional Christian conception of the right social order, while always needing some degree of reformation as the

voice of Christ continually calls us to account though the Scriptures, is basically correct, especially as it relates to the controversial issues of our day. I also agree that we have a responsibility to work towards the realization of this order as part of our kingdom mandate and for the sake of general benevolence, since this order is conducive to human flourishing. My only possible quibble would be the rooting of social improvement in specifically the “regeneration of the individual.” While individual new life is essential, I would rather see even the regeneration of the individual as but a part of Christ's regeneration/recreation of the cosmos as a whole.

Section XVI: Peace and War

The authors follow up the section on the social order with a Christian statement on war and peace. Naturally, in accord both with good reason and the Scriptures, they affirm that war is bad and peace is good. Christians, they also affirm, are called to promote peace and seek to rid the world of war. This is said to be done primarily through the work of the Gospel as it liberates people from bloodthirst and turns them towards love of neighbor. This section does not make any explicit statements on the questions of pacifism and Christian military service.

Because of its basic simplicity, I find myself entirely in agreement with this section as well, as I hope and expect any Christian would. Our Lord is a Prince of Peace, and though He did come to bring a sword, this was ironically the sword which persecutes His people rather than any sword that we are called to bear. I think it was probably a wise decision, as well, not to make a statement for or against pacifism. On the other hand, I would also not have been unhappy with an articulation of just war theory.

Section XVII: Religious Liberty

The section on religious liberty is certainly another instance of the authors articulating

distinctive Baptist theology, for though while many other groups have started to take after Baptists on this issue in American (probably due to the First Amendment), such theology has always been Baptist. This section declares a strict separation between Church and state so that the Church is not permitted to use the state and the state is not permitted to control the Church. The ideal is clearly identified as a free church in a free state, with no barriers to or requirements of Christian practice.

I find this section also very agreeable, and in fact believe a robust separation between Church and state is one of the most valuable contributions of Baptists to Christian theology generally. Both the Catholic Church and the early Reformation churches failed to see the Biblical rule for the Church and its authority, but in Baptist theology it was fully restored. A church with power over the state cannot help but share the corruption of worldly power, and a state with power over the Church cannot help but be a hindrance to the Gospel and an enemy of Christian liberty.

Section XVIII: The Family

The section on the family describes a traditional Baptist/historically Christian view of the family as a blessed institution of God and the basis for natural human society. A conservative view of marriage is given in which it consists strictly of one man and one woman for life. The paragraph on the roles of the husband and wife promotes a basic skeleton for complementarianism, without being too specific or detailed. Children are also recognized as nothing less than a blessing from God, and the obligation of parents to raise them well is affirmed.

Without much fanfare I also agree with the substance of this section. Newer, more

progressive views of the family do not strike me as Biblical, even the more balanced egalitarianism of many modern conservatives. I do not think this either goes too far or leaves too much unsaid on the husband/wife relation, either. I would, however, prefer two additions, namely one on the calling of celibacy as an alternative to married family life (though perhaps this would require an extra section) and the eschatological relativity of natural family, and one cautioning against, though not condemning, the general use of birth control, as a moderate warning from Christian tradition and Scriptural teaching.