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The Baptist Confession Of Faith Of 1689

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795582430230627

Introduction: A Pillar of Reformed Baptist Identity

For centuries, churches and believers have sought to articulate their core beliefs in clear, concise statements. Among the most significant of these confessional documents stands **The Baptist Confession Of Faith Of 1689** . Often simply called the 1689 Confession, this document is far more than a dusty relic of theological history. It remains a living, breathing guide for Reformed Baptists around the world, shaping their understanding of Scripture, God, salvation, and the church. To grasp the essence of Reformed Baptist theology, one must first understand the substance and story behind this remarkable confession. It represents a careful and deliberate effort to state what Baptists believe the Bible teaches on a wide range of doctrines, presenting a unified and coherent system of Christian truth.

The 1689 Confession did not emerge from a vacuum. It was written during a time of great religious and political upheaval in England. After the tumultuous years of the English Civil War and the Interregnum, the monarchy was restored under King Charles II in 1660. This period, known as the Restoration, brought with it a renewed persecution of those who dissented from the established Church of England. Baptists, along with other Nonconformists, faced severe restrictions, imprisonment, and fines for holding their own worship services. In this climate of opposition, it became profoundly important for Baptists to clearly, publicly, and courageously state what they believed. They needed to demonstrate that their doctrines were not novel or heretical, but were firmly rooted in the historic Christian faith, particularly the Reformed tradition.

The decision to publish the confession in 1677 (a first edition) and then more formally in 1689 (after the Toleration Act granted a measure of religious freedom) was a strategic and theological masterstroke. The framers used the **Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)** and the **Savoy Declaration (1658)**as their primary sources. This was a deliberate choice. By closely following these respected Presbyterian and Congregationalist confessions, the Baptists were declaring their fundamental agreement with the broader Reformed theological consensus. However, they made crucial changes, most notably on the subjects of baptism (believer's baptism by immersion) and the nature and governance of the local church (a regenerate church membership and congregational polity). The result was a document that was both broadly Reformed and distinctively Baptist.

Historical Context: Forging a Confession in a Time of Trial

Understanding the historical setting of **The Baptist Confession Of Faith Of 1689**illuminates its purpose and character. The latter half of the 17th century was a crucible for English Particular Baptists. "Particular" refers to their belief in particular redemption—the doctrine that Christ died specifically for the elect. These were Calvinistic Baptists, distinct from General Baptists who held to Arminian theology. The Particular Baptists were heirs of the English Puritan movement, sharing a deep commitment to the sovereignty of God, the authority of Scripture, and the need for a personally experienced conversion.

A Statement of Unity and Defense

The persecution under the Clarendon Code (1661-1665) made it dangerous to be a Nonconformist minister. Preachers were banned from coming within five miles of any town or parish they had previously served. Conventicles (unauthorized religious meetings) were illegal. In the face of such hostility, unity among the scattered and persecuted Baptist churches was essential. The confession served as a rallying point, a public declaration that they were not a fringe sect but a legitimate part of the universal church, holding to orthodox, Reformed doctrine. It was a document of identity and defense.

Debt to Westminster and Savoy

The theological brilliance of the 1689 Confession lies in its structure and substance. The authors did not start from scratch. They took the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration and revised them. Approximately 95% of the 1689 Confession's content is directly drawn from these earlier documents. By doing this, the Baptists were saying, "We agree with you on the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, justification by faith alone, and the sovereignty of God in salvation." The changes they did make were surgical but significant, designed to correct what they saw as errors in ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) and sacraments. This approach gave the confession immense credibility within the Reformed world. It was not a novel statement but a faithful adaptation.

Structure and Content: A Systematic Theology in 32 Chapters

The Baptist Confession Of Faith Of 1689is a masterwork of systematic theology. It is divided into 32 chapters, each addressing a specific doctrinal locus. The chapters proceed in a logical and organic order, moving from the foundation of all knowledge in God's revelation to the final state of the blessed and the damned. This structure itself makes a theological statement: that Christian doctrine forms a coherent and interconnected system, with each part relating to the whole.

The confession covers a comprehensive range of topics, including:

- Chapter 1: Of the Holy Scriptures
- Chapter 2: Of God and of the Holy Trinity
- Chapters 3-5: God's Decree, Creation, and Providence
- Chapters 6-7: The Fall of Man and God's Covenant
- Chapters 8-11: Christ the Mediator, Free Will, Effectual Calling, and Justification
- Chapters 12-15: Adoption, Sanctification, Saving Faith, and Repentance
- Chapters 16-18: Good Works, Perseverance of the Saints, and Assurance
- Chapters 19-20: The Law of God and Christian Liberty
- Chapters 21-22: Religious Worship and Lawful Oaths
- Chapters 23-26: The Civil Magistrate, Marriage, the Church, and Communion of Saints
- Chapters 27-29: Baptism (distinctively believer's baptism by immersion), the Lord's Supper
- Chapters 30-32: Church Censures, Synods, and the State of Man After Death

Key Doctrines: The Heart of the Confession

While every chapter of the confession is important, several key doctrines particularly define its theological character.

The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture (Chapter 1)

The confession begins with a robust declaration of the authority of the Bible. It affirms that the Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience. The books of the Old and New Testaments are "given by the inspiration of God" and are the final court of appeal for all religious controversy. This emphasis on **sola Scriptura**(Scripture alone) is the foundational principle upon which every

other article of the confession rests.

The Sovereignty of God in Salvation (Chapter 3 and Chapter 10)

The 1689 Confession is unashamedly Calvinistic. Chapter 3, "Of God's Decree," teaches the doctrine of predestination: that God, from all eternity, has chosen some unto everlasting life and passed over others for the demonstration of His justice. This is not presented as a cold, fatalistic idea, but as a cause for humility and praise. Chapter 10, "Of Effectual Calling," explains how God sovereignly and powerfully draws His elect to Christ, not by force or violence, but by a supernatural, gracious work of the Holy Spirit that renews their wills. This is the heart of the **Doctrines of Grace**, often remembered by the acronym TULIP.

Justification by Faith Alone (Chapter 11)

In a clear echo of the Protestant Reformation, chapter 11 declares that those whom God effectually calls, He also justifies freely. Justification is a legal act where God, for Christ's sake alone, declares a sinner to be righteous. This pardon and acceptance are received by faith alone, and not by any works of the law. Faith itself is not counted as righteousness; it is the instrument by which the righteousness of Christ is received and rested upon. This doctrine was the **articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae**(the article by which the church stands or falls) for the Reformers, and the 1689 Confession upholds it with clarity and force.

Baptism and Church Membership (Chapter 29)

This is the most distinctive and, for its time, controversial part of the confession. The confession explicitly rejects infant baptism as a corruption of the ordinance. It affirms that only those who make a credible profession of faith in Christ and obedience to Him should be baptized. Furthermore, the mode of baptism is specifically immersion, as it is the act that best symbolizes the believer's union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. This chapter is inextricably linked to the confession's doctrine of the church. The local church is to be a **regenerate church membership**, composed only of those who have made a credible profession of faith. This stands in sharp contrast to the parish church system of the time, which encompassed everyone in a given geographical area.

The Perseverance of the Saints (Chapter 17)

This chapter provides immense comfort to believers. It teaches that those whom God has accepted in the Beloved and effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit can never totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace. They will certainly persevere to the end and be eternally saved. This security is not based on the believer's own strength, but on the unchangeable love of God, the efficacy of Christ's intercession, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It assures believers that God who began a good work in them will carry it on to completion.

The Influence and Legacy of the 1689 Confession

For over three centuries, **The Baptist Confession Of Faith Of 1689**has served as a theological touchstone for Particular and Reformed Baptists. Its influence waned somewhat during the 19th century with the rise of new theological movements, but it experienced a powerful resurgence in the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly through the ministry of figures like Dr. John Gill, Dr. Charles H. Spurgeon (who republished the confession), and more recently through Reformed Baptist networks and churches.

Today, the 1689 Confession is the official statement of faith for countless Reformed Baptist churches across the United Kingdom, North America, and around the world. It is used for several critical purposes:

- Teaching and Catechesis: Many churches use the confession as a basis for membership classes, Sunday school curricula, and new believer's studies. Its clear, question-and-answer format (in some editions) makes it an excellent teaching tool.

- Church Unity: The confession provides a common doctrinal foundation for churches and pastors, facilitating fellowship, cooperation, and accountability. Churches that share the 1689 Confession know they share core convictions.
- Pastoral and Personal Edification: The confession is not just a cold legal document. It is a warm, pastoral guide that expounds the riches of God's grace. Many Christians use it for personal study and devotion to deepen their understanding of their faith.
- Protection from Error: In an age of theological confusion and drift, a clear, historic, and scriptural confession serves as a guard against false teaching. It helps churches and individuals identify when a new teaching or idea departs from the historic Christian faith.

Modern Relevance and Application

Some might ask: Is a 17th-century document still relevant for the 21st century? The answer is a resounding yes. The core issues it addresses—the nature of God, the authority of Scripture, the way of salvation, and the life of the church—are timeless. The cultural pressures facing Christians today may look different from those of 1689, but the underlying spiritual challenges are the same. Worldliness, doubt, doctrinal error, and a low view of God are perennial threats.

The 1689 Confession speaks powerfully to our age by:

- Affirming Absolute Truth: In a postmodern world that denies the existence of objective truth, the confession boldly declares that God has spoken in Scripture, and His Word is truth.

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