

Sufficiency of Scripture Series

Volume 1 • Issue 4 of 4

September 17, 2020

Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary (MABTS) leadership is frequently approached by concerned students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends regarding current trends. Their questions are about debates, decisions, terms, and biblical interpretations currently ongoing within American churches and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The following document (4 of 4) is part of the MABTS Sufficiency of Scripture Series. The series is written and released by MABTS to provide clarity and a broader perspective to the Mid-America family regarding many of the key debates. These Issues are intended as a starting point for research not as an exhaustive resource.

The goal of the series is threefold: Challenge Christians to utilize the Scriptures as their guide in any debate, encourage trust in God's Word for all areas of faith and practice, and strengthen the faith of the Mid-America family.

The four focus areas in the MABTS Sufficiency of Scripture Series are:

- (1) Understanding the Key Debates
- (2) Deepening Knowledge of Alternate Views
- (3) Forming a Biblically Based Opinion
- (4) The Importance of Baptist Distinctives

For more information visit mabts.edu/sufficiency

Since its founding in 1972, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary (MABTS) has been funded through the generous donations of like-minded believers. The seminary provides master and doctoral level theological training for effective service in church-related and missions vocations. Founded in 2018, The College at Mid-America is the undergraduate school of MABTS and provides associate and baccalaureate degree programs to prepare students to take their place as effective Christian and secular leaders. Both academic institutions guide students into a thorough understanding of the Bible and its relevance to everyday living. Mid-America students volunteer to evangelize and serve the community through the Witness One:Seven and GO! programs. Mid-America is located on an award-winning, 35-acre campus in Memphis, TN. For more information visit www.mabts.edu.

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The Importance of Baptist Distinctives: Equipping Believers with a Proper Understanding, Respect, and Appreciation

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Abstract: Through the first 3 issues of Volume 1 in the Sufficiency of Scripture Series, Mid-America explains the debate around Resolution 9 adopted at the 2019 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, deepens the reader’s knowledge of the alternate views, and provides guidance for forming a biblically based opinion. This issue seeks to provide a proper understanding of Baptist Distinctives to help believers with current debates and prepare them for any future debates which will challenge the sufficiency of Scripture. The author compares and contrasts confessions with creeds, defines and clarifies the common beliefs held as Baptist distinctives, and explains historical examples of the importance of these distinctives to Southern Baptists in the United States. Additionally, the benefits of adopting and holding to a confession of faith are explored and encouraged on the individual, local, national, and global levels.

Introduction

In Issues 1 and 2 of the Mid-America Sufficiency of Scripture series, the concepts of Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality (CRT/I) are introduced and discussed, including key summaries along with origin information. The conclusions of the previous issues in the Sufficiency of Scripture series express the clear and present danger of humanistic philosophies and ideas infiltrating biblical Christianity. The third issue in the series presents a template for dealing with the current CRT debate and any future debates which may seek to influence the believer’s understanding of the Scriptures. This includes a focus on explaining practical steps Christians may follow to form a biblical opinion, and then the application of these steps to a practical example and the debate around Resolution 9 of the 2019 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) annual meeting.

This fourth issue will not focus on a particular ethical issue; rather, it will explain the approaches to confessions of faith and doctrines which are distinctively Baptist. These are often called “Baptist distinctives.” This issue will explain how an understanding of Baptist distinctives can help the believer

approach theological and ethical issues of all types. An understanding of Baptist distinctives can also help the believer avoid veering off the path of correct biblical doctrine and appropriate church practice. The reader might think of Baptist confessions and distinctives as guard rails that prevent one from falling into a chasm of error.

Baptist Confessions and Distinctives

The discussion of Baptist distinctives must wait for an explanation of Baptist confessions. This is because Baptist distinctives are derived from Baptist confessions, which are based on the Scriptures. Some denominations write creeds, but Baptists do not develop creeds. Instead, they write confessions of faith. The late William R. Estep, long-time professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, explains the difference between a creed and a confession. “Creeds are authoritative and often viewed as final, unalterable, and binding statements of faith.” While confessions are “abstracts of biblical truth as the group formulating the confession perceived it.”¹ To express this another way, a creed is binding on all the individuals and churches in a denomination. A confession of faith is not binding on individuals and churches, but the confession does express what a group of Christians believe the Bible teaches. A confession of faith is like an executive summary of the Bible. So, if someone asks, what do Southern Baptists believe, one could refer them to the Baptist Statement of Faith and Message, which summarizes what most Southern Baptists believe.

Baptists have written many confessions through the centuries. The London Confession of 1644 represents one of the early British Baptist confessions. The Philadelphia Baptist Association wrote a confession in 1742 that influenced many Baptists in the United States. Perhaps, the most important Baptist confession for early Baptists in America was the New Hampshire Confession (1833).² Surprisingly, the SBC did not adopt a confession of faith for eighty years. The SBC was organized in 1845, but the messengers to that first convention did not formulate a confession of faith. The SBC eventually did adopt a confession in 1925. The committee who wrote that confession testified they leaned heavily on the New Hampshire Confession. They also wrote a Preamble in which they explained how they viewed confessions of faith:

- (1) That they constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us. They are not intended to add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament, viz., repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
- (2) That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future, Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time.
- (3) That any group of Baptists, large or small, have the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of their faith whenever they may think it advisable to do so.
- (4) That the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old

¹ William R. Estep. “Baptists and Authority: The Bible Confessions, and Conscience in the Development of Baptist Identity.” *Review and Expositor*, 84, No. 4 (Fall 1987): 600-601.

² For copies of these confessions and information about their composition, see William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969).

and New Testaments. Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience.

(5) That they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life.³

The Southern Baptist Convention adopted revised statements of faith in 1963 and 2000, but both of the formulation committees affirmed the preamble from 1925.

It is important to understand Baptists view the Bible as primary and statements of faith as secondary. Indeed, under every article of faith in the Baptist Faith and Message one can find the list of Scriptures that support the beliefs expressed in the article. Dr. Stan Norman has been a prominent writer on Baptist doctrine in recent years. He comments on Southern Baptists and their fidelity to the Bible:

Baptists, along with other Christian denominations, appeal to the Bible as their ultimate or sole source for religious authority. Baptists distance themselves from other denominations, however, by claiming a complete dependence upon Scripture as the principal foundation for their beliefs and practices. Whereas certain other Christian groups incorporate extra-biblical sources such as tradition for religious authority. Baptists in their distinctive writings contend that they alone consistently and exclusively hold to the Bible exclusively as their religious authority.⁴

Before explaining Baptist distinctives, the reader should understand that the Southern Baptist Convention does not impose its Statement of Faith and Message on its member churches. Rather, the SBC commends the Statement to the churches for their approval and use. To be sure, many SBC churches have adopted the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M) statement as their statement of faith. Beyond that, the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board require their missionaries to sign a pledge to preach and teach “in accordance with and not contrary to” the 2000 BF&M statement of faith. This is also true at the SBC-owned seminaries, excepting The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, which have their own confessions of faith. These two seminaries affirm the 2000 BF&M statement, but they continue to prioritize their historic confessions. For The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the oldest SBC seminary, the confession is called The Abstract of Principles. Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary has its own statement of faith (The Articles of Belief) written in 1972 which is quite similar to the 2000 BF&M statement.

In a university course on world religions, the unit on Christianity would note that Christianity can be divided into three main branches: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants. For its part, Protestantism can be divided into three divisions: Mainline, Evangelical, and Charismatic/Pentecostal. Southern Baptists are included among the Evangelical churches. Certainly, Southern Baptists share many beliefs with other denominations: The Holy Trinity, virgin birth of Christ, Christ’s atoning death on the cross, Christ’s bodily resurrection, and many others. For example, if one studied the beliefs of the Evangelical Free Church or a local Bible church, their statements of faith would be similar to the 2000 BF&M statement in most respects. Still, there are certain doctrines that Southern Baptists hold or emphasize that are distinctive. Mid-America’s Articles of Belief contains an article on

³ Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971), 2-3.

⁴ R. Stanton Norman, “Southern Baptist Identity: A Theological Perspective.” In David S. Dockery, *Southern Baptist Identity*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), 44-45.

Baptist distinctives which states: “We are Baptists because we believe that Baptists stand for distinctive truths to which other denominations do not adhere. We believe that we cannot compromise these truths without being disloyal to our Lord and to His Word. We do seek to cooperate with all others who are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord.”⁵ What are those distinctive doctrines?

The Bible

Article 1 in the 2000 BF&M statement of Faith and Message is The Holy Scriptures. The article reads thus:

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

The founders of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary adopted Articles of Belief and an additional position paper on the Scriptures. The position paper asserts these important points:

- (1) God is the ultimate author of the Bible. Because God is the author, the Bible is authoritative. It is the words of God for mankind.
- (2) God inspired the Bible. God used human writers, but He inspired them to write “exactly what God intended to be said.” For this reason, the Bible is infallible. That means the Bible does not contain mistakes.
- (3) The Bible is inerrant. That means the Bible does not contain errors of any type.
- (4) The Bible is the sufficient guide for the individual Christian’s belief and behavior. The Bible is the sufficient guide for church life. It provides guidance for doctrine, ethics, and church administration.⁶

More than one Baptist preacher has used a four-point, alliterated outline to present the doctrine of the Bible: The Bible is inspired, infallible, inerrant, and irresistible. Indeed, King David wrote that God’s Word is irresistible three thousand years ago: “More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (Ps 19:10, NKJV).⁷

The Priesthood of All Believers

The New Testament teaches this doctrine in 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” The Criswell Study Bible lists four truths about this doctrine:

⁵ Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary’s Articles of Belief. Accessed on September 7, 2020. <https://www.mabts.edu/why-mid-america/about-mid-america/articles-belief>.

⁶ Mid-America Seminary Catalog 2020-2021. pp 11-12. Access September 9, 2020. <https://www.mabts.edu/sites/all/themes/midamerica/uploads/FINAL%202020-2021%20Seminary%20Catalog%20.pdf>.

⁷ All scripture references are from the New King James translation of the Bible unless otherwise noted.

- (1) Every believer has direct and immediate access to God the Father through Jesus Christ.
- (2) The believer's access to God is made possible by Jesus Christ's death on the cross.
- (3) Believers have the privilege and responsibility to intercede for each other in prayer.
- (4) Christians serve as priests of the New Covenant, representing God to the people by witnessing and teaching.⁸

This New Testament doctrine fell into neglect during the Middle Ages, but Martin Luther revived its teaching during the Protestant Reformation. Luther rejected the sacerdotalism (priestism) of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholics taught that people could not confess their sins directly to God; instead, the church required its members to confess their sins to a priest. The priest would absolve (forgive) their sins on God's behalf. The Catholic Church also warned the people not to read the Bible, reserving the Bible for priests and nuns. Further, the Catholic Church taught the pope was the ultimate interpreter of Scripture. Luther insisted believers could pray directly to God and could read the Bible for themselves. To encourage Bible reading, Luther translated the Bible into German. Luther taught that the Holy Spirit would illuminate the Bible so lay persons could understand it. Therefore, pastors today teach their members they need no mediator other than the Lord Jesus (1 Tim 2:5), and they can understand the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:13).

Individual Soul Liberty

The doctrine of soul liberty or soul competency is related to the priesthood of the believer. In fact, the two are inseparably joined. Norman Cox explains this doctrine as follows:

The Bible positively affirms that God in creation invested man with the privilege, ability, and responsibility of choice. He is competent to obey or disobey God. Man can adore or scorn the Creator. God has given every man the right of spiritual self-determination. He is free to choose, but he is bound by the consequence of his choice. By his right of choice man is divinely clothed with the dignity God has given him. Each individual possesses it as a gift for which he is responsible...According to the Scriptures, each one, within the privileges of the gospel, is competent to seek and find salvation in Christ, apart from the authority of church, pope, prelate, or sacrament.⁹

Adrian Rogers phrases individual soul liberty in the following way when he discusses the principles of choice: "You are free to choose...You are not free not to choose...you are not free to choose the consequences of your choice."¹⁰ To summarize, God gives humans the freedom to choose what they believe is good for them every day. Choosing not to choose is a choice, and whatever humans choose, they must be ready and prepared to accept the consequences of their choice.

The Autonomy of the Local Church

The official website of the SBC has posted a statement on local church autonomy:

We recognize that in the New Testament there was no centralized ecclesiastical authority over the churches that forced the churches into any form of compliance. There was encouragement,

⁸ Note on 1 Peter 2:9. The Believer's Study Bible (formerly Criswell Study Bible). (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 1767.

⁹ Norman W. Cox, *We Southern Baptists*. (Nashville: Convention Press, 1961), 15.

¹⁰ Adrian Rogers. "It is Decision that Determines Destiny" Accessed September 7, 2020. <https://www.lightsource.com/ministry/love-worth-finding/articles/it-is-decision-that-determines-destiny-12940.html>.

exhortation, and admonition, but there was never enforcement. We strongly adhere to that principle. Jesus Christ is the head of the local church—we are not. Each church is responsible before God for the policies it sets and decisions it makes.¹¹

In practice, this means the SBC cannot dictate to the local churches. The SBC does not rule the churches; rather, the churches rule the SBC. The SBC can make recommendations to the churches, but the individual churches will decide for themselves what to do. For example, the SBC Executive Committee recommends that each church give 10 percent of its budget to the Cooperative Program, but many churches do not give that much.

Autonomy also applies to the various levels of Baptist organization: local associations of churches, state Baptist conventions, and the national Southern Baptist Convention. These entities are autonomous and cannot dictate to each other. Each of these levels is composed of Southern Baptist churches that voluntarily join them. The member churches send messengers to the annual meetings of all three to vote on budgets, motions, and resolutions.

Regenerate Church Membership

The distinctive of regenerate church membership holds that only born-again people should be accepted as members. Norman Cox explains this: “The New Testament clearly shows who should constitute the membership of a local church. It should be composed only of regenerated, baptized believers.”¹² Why does Cox write so definitively? Acts 2 describes the first church in Jerusalem. Notice Acts:40-41: “And with many other words he [Peter] testified and exhorted them saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’ Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” Acts 2:47 reiterates the truth: “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

These verses reveal the practice of the New Testament church. People heard the proclamation of the Gospel and trusted in Christ for salvation. After they expressed their faith, the church baptized them into the fellowship of believers. The baptized believers diligently learned the doctrines taught by the apostles. They also joined in fellowship, corporate prayer, and observance of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42).

Many Protestant denominations practice infant baptism. Baptists reject this practice absolutely. One would search in vain for any reference or mention of infant baptism in the New Testament. In the New Testament accounts, all those who received baptism expressed faith in Christ as a prerequisite for baptism. The Ethiopian eunuch serves as a prime example. Luke recounts his salvation and baptism in Acts 8:36-38, “Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?’ Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.”

The Ordinances of the Church

The article in the 2000 BF&M statement on The Ordinances of the Church reads thus:

¹¹ “Why is the SBC so committed to the autonomy of the local church?” <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/faq/>.

¹² Norman Cox, *We Southern Baptists*. (Nashville: Convention Press, 1961), 54.

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.¹³

Southern Baptists insist that a correct baptism requires the correct candidate, the correct meaning, and the correct mode. The correct candidate is a person who has professed faith in Jesus Christ. The correct meaning is that baptism does not save a person; rather, baptism demonstrates the obedience of the new believer. Baptism is an "acted testimony" because through baptism the candidate testifies to belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Besides being a testimony about Christ, through baptism the candidate testifies that he or she has died to self, been buried with Christ, and is now risen to walk in new life in Christ. Baptists insist on the correct mode of baptism—baptism by immersion. Baptists believe in baptism by immersion for two main reasons. First, the Greek word for baptism is baptizo, which "literally means to put or go under water."¹⁴ Second, immersion is clearly the mode of baptism employed by the New Testament church.

Separation of Church and State

Baptists have always held strongly for the separation of church and state. The article in the 2000 BF&M statement on separation reflects this:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends. The state has no right to impose penalties for religious opinions of any kind. The state has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion. A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.

Baptists have consistently objected to any type of state church, like the Church of England. Also, Baptists have objected to government interference in church matters. Baptists demonstrate strong feelings about the separation of church and state for good reasons. Our spiritual ancestors, the Anabaptists and English Separatists, suffered much persecution at the hands of state churches in Europe.

¹³ Baptist Faith & Message 2000. Accessed September 7, 2020. <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>.

¹⁴ William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 52.

Even in colonial America, Baptists experienced persecution in Virginia, where the Church of England was the “state church.” Government authorities in Virginia refused to grant Baptist pastors a license to preach. When the pastors preached anyway, they were arrested. For example, James Ireland was arrested in Culpepper County in November 1769 and held in jail without trial until April 1770, when a friendly attorney secured his release.¹⁵ Virginia Baptists, especially John Leland, lobbied James Madison for his support of separation of church and state. With Leland’s support James Madison was elected to the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Madison repaid the support of Leland and the Baptists of Virginia by introducing the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”¹⁶

The Importance of Baptist Distinctives

The first Southern Baptist Statement of Faith and Message resulted from a doctrinal crisis in the United States of America. In the early twentieth century, theological liberalism and the higher criticism of the Bible began to infiltrate the seminaries in America. Many American professors went to Europe for doctoral or post-doctoral studies. These professors brought back ideas that alarmed Bible-believing Christians in America: that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, that the miracles of the Bible did not happen, and that Jesus did not rise bodily from the grave.

A key factor in these theological changes was the theory of evolution. Charles Darwin’s book, *The Origin of the Species* (1859), popularized evolution. Soon, the theory of evolution began to be applied to all academic disciplines from science to religion. The theory of evolution influenced theology and biblical study in Europe to a great extent. As evolutionary “science” gained influence, many pastors and professors sought to reconcile evolutionary science with the Scriptures. Generally, the Scriptures came out badly.

Evolutionary science taught life on earth developed through evolution not by the direct creation of God. Therefore, the teaching of Genesis 1-2 had to change to be acceptable to the modern mind. Those who embraced this approach were called “Modernists.” Of course, many conservative Christians opposed this new teaching, and they were called “Fundamentalists.” That name came from a set of books that were published to oppose Modernism. The publisher called the books “*The Fundamentals*,” and those who agreed with the books’ teaching became known as “Fundamentalists.”¹⁷

The Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy raged in the USA from 1910-1940. The controversy caused splits in denominations and seminaries. For example, J. Gresham Machen resisted the liberalization of Princeton Seminary, a famous seminary owned by the Northern Presbyterian Church. In 1929, he led several conservative faculty members away from Princeton Seminary and founded Westminster Theological Seminary. He also played a key role in the organization of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. Northern Baptists also experienced a split when the General Association of Regular Baptists broke with the Northern Baptist Convention in 1932.

¹⁵ Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People 1607-1972*. (Nashville: Broadman, 1974), 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁷ The five key fundamental doctrines were: the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the verbal inspiration of the Bible, the substitutionary theory of the atonement, and physical second coming of Christ. See Robert Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People*, 397.

The American public learned about the controversy through the famous “Scopes monkey trial.” In 1925, the Tennessee legislature passed a bill that outlawed the teaching of evolution in Tennessee’s public schools. John Scopes, a young teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, was arrested for teaching evolution. While the Scopes trial pertained to Scopes’ violation of the new law, it quickly became a clash of cultures—a clash between traditional Christian beliefs and the progress of modernism in the South. The trial gained national attention when William Jennings Bryan, a former Democratic candidate for president, was appointed as the special prosecutor, and Clarence Darrow, a famous trial lawyer, was appointed as the counsel for the defense.¹⁸

The Scopes trial soon devolved into a media circus with newspaper reporters from around the country filling the courtroom. William Jennings Bryan proclaimed in his opening statement: “My only purpose in coming to Dayton was to protect the word of God against the greatest atheist or agnostic in the United States!” In reply Clarence Darrow stated, “After a while, your Honor, it is the setting of man against man and creed against creed until with flying banners and beating drums we are marching backwards to the glorious ages of the Sixteenth Century when bigots lighted fagots to burn the men who dared to bring any intelligence and enlightenment and culture to the human mind.”¹⁹

At the end of the trial, the jury found John Scopes guilty, and he was assessed a small fine. The verdict was almost anticlimactic. Scopes himself was a minor figure in a massive cultural conflict. Of course, Southern Baptist leaders like E. Y. Mullins, then president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, were aware and alarmed by the conflicts among Christians in the North and their incursion into the South. The public furor about evolution prompted the leaders of the SBC to propose to the 1925 annual meeting the approval of a confession of faith. Ninety-five years ago, the messengers who gathered in Memphis, Tennessee approved the confession hoping it would protect the SBC from theological division. Though the SBC approved the confession, many Southern Baptists desired a strong, specific statement against evolution. This led George McDaniel, the president of the SBC, to declare in his 1926 presidential address: “This Convention accepts Genesis as teaching that man was the special creation of God, and rejects every theory, evolution or other, which teaches that man originated in, or came by way of, a lower animal ancestry.” The SBC adopted this statement as its official position and required all SBC entities to follow it.²⁰

A second theological controversy caused the SBC to reassess its confession and distinctives. In 1961, Ralph Elliott, a professor of Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Seminary, wrote a book, *The Message of Genesis*, published by Broadman Press the book publishing arm of the Baptist Sunday School Board (now Lifeway). In his book, Elliott held that the first eleven chapters of Genesis were non-historical. As his views became known, conservative Southern Baptists reacted quickly and intensely. K. Owen White, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Houston, wrote that the book was “death in the pot” and “liberalism, pure and simple.”²¹

The trustees of Midwestern Seminary stood by Elliot as did Broadman Press and the trustees of the Sunday School Board. However, at the SBC annual meeting in 1962, the Genesis Controversy dominated the proceedings. K. Owen White made two motions at the meeting. The first declared

¹⁸ Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 259.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁰ Robert Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention*, 399.

²¹ James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*. (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1991), 30.

“faith in the entire Bible as the authoritative, authentic, infallible Word of God.” That motion passed unanimously. His second motion called on the messengers to express “abiding and unchanging objection to the dissemination of theological views in any of our seminaries which would undermine such faith in the historical accuracy and doctrinal integrity of the Bible.” The messengers passed this motion, also. A motion to instruct Broadman Press to stop selling Elliot’s book failed, but Broadman did stop selling it. The Midwestern Seminary trustees instructed Elliot to cease teaching his higher critical views and to not submit his book to another publisher. When he refused, the trustees fired him for insubordination. Eventually, Elliott accepted a pastorate in an American Baptist church (Northern Baptist).²²

The Genesis Controversy troubled the leaders of the SBC. They feared the Convention might split into two along theological lines. To remedy this dire situation, they decided on two actions. First, they decided to facilitate the election of Herschel H. Hobbs as president of the SBC. Herschel Hobbs served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City and as the preacher on the Baptist Hour radio program. His articles and Bible lessons were published in the Baptist state papers. Southern Baptists knew him as a conservative, and they trusted him. Second, the leaders decided a revision of the 1925 Southern Baptist Statement of Faith and Message might allay the doctrinal concerns of the conservatives. The SBC elected Hobbs in its 1963 meeting and also approved the revised Statement of Faith and Message. The statement retained the wording about the Bible from the 1925 Statement and the New Hampshire Confession—The Bible has “truth without any mixture of error for its matter.”²³

Sadly, the adoption of the 1963 Statement of Faith and Message did not lay to rest the theological controversy. It continued to simmer for years, occasionally coming to a boil. One boil also involved a book about Genesis—the volume on Genesis in the Broadman Commentary. When this commentary was published in 1969, conservatives immediately challenged it. At the 1970 meeting of the SBC, the messengers voted to ask Broadman to withdraw the volume. Eventually, this was done, and another writer was secured. This controversy and other issues in the SBC seminaries and agencies led to the beginning of the Conservative Resurgence in the SBC in 1979.²⁴

The examples cited above show how Baptist confessions and distinctives affect denominational life. The reader, though, should not think that statements of faith and distinctives are only important on a national scale. Baptist confessions and distinctives are also critically important to the local church.

Baptist Distinctives in the Local Church

Every Southern Baptist Church should adopt a statement of faith. Why so? Imagine a situation in which an adult Sunday school teacher begins teaching false doctrine. If the church has no statement of faith, there is no objective standard to judge the doctrine being taught. The teacher might say, “Who says my teaching is incorrect?” However, if the church has a statement of faith, the pastor can point to the differences between the statement and the teacher’s lessons. Further, in rare cases, a church’s deacons have had to confront a pastor who began teaching false doctrine. Again, an objective standard helps the church avoid an “I say it is correct, but you say it is wrong” situation.

²² James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*. (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1991), 30.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Robert Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People*, 416.

An example of a local church issue is the baptism controversy that developed at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. John Piper, the well-known pastor of the church, persuaded the elders of the church to recommend a change to the church's by-laws. The recommended change would have permitted persons who had not been immersed to join the church. When the news of this spread, many Baptists spoke out against John Piper's position including Albert Mohler, the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a friend and supporter of John Piper. In the end, the congregation rejected the proposed change. Those who opposed the change cited their statement of faith and Baptist distinctives.

Practical Application

Every essay and sermon should answer the "so what?" question. If this is all true, then what should be done? Every Baptist church member should learn Baptist distinctives. This is not knowledge necessary just for pastors. Churches should include teaching on Baptist distinctives in their discipleship instruction. Certainly, deacons and Sunday school teachers should learn Baptist distinctives, but the controversy at Bethlehem Baptist Church demonstrates the need for all church members to have this knowledge. Beyond that, every church should adopt a statement of faith and publicize it. A congregation may choose to use the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message statement, or the church may choose to write its own. Some churches do one and some the other; the main thing is to clarify the church's beliefs.

At Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, the administration takes doctrinal integrity very seriously. They begin every year with a Bible conference called Founders' Days at which the seminary's faculty members sign the Articles of Belief and promise to teach in accordance with them. This practice shows the value Mid-America places on doctrinal fidelity and integrity. It also serves as a good example to local congregations. It would be appropriate for all the church leadership and Sunday school teachers to sign a similar covenant and keep an annual check to monitor and require compliance.

Conclusion

This issue has explained the nature and history of Baptist confessions of faith. It also provides a brief summary of doctrines which are distinctive to Baptists. Such knowledge is important because every generation has to refight the "Battle for the Bible." The issue also shows how Baptist confessions and distinctives have influenced both national and local controversies.

The first volume of the Mid-America Sufficiency of Scripture series ends with this issue. The first two publications speak to a current debate regarding Resolution 9 "On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality." The third issue provides a template for dealing with future ethical controversies. This final issue provides essential information on how the Scriptures have shaped our Baptist beliefs and how Baptists have expressed their beliefs historically.

Navigators use latitude and longitude to identify their position on the ocean. Similarly, the Bible and Baptist confessions can help both pastors and lay persons to arrive at correct doctrinal and ethical positions--to understand correct doctrine and to discern false doctrine. All believers, regardless of their position in the church, should follow the Apostle Paul's instruction to Timothy: "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Tim 4:16).

Whether adopting the SBC Baptist Faith & Message 2000 or creating a similar confession that aligns with these beliefs and with Scripture as Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary did when they wrote their Articles of Belief, a personal confession of faith assists believers both individually and corporately. Confessions of faith provide confidence to the individual believer and allow one to make a defense for the faith as needed. Local churches stay doctrinally true by holding church leadership, Sunday school teachers, and community group leaders to a shared confession. The SBC navigates cultural and internal debates through adhering to the predetermined confession of faith, based on the unchanging truth of the Bible. Believers and converts around the world are blessed, benefitted, and guided to the truth of Scripture through the Baptist confessions that drive the International Mission Board and the missionaries it sends. Therefore, the importance of Baptist distinctives affects every level – from individual believer and church member to global missions.

Baptist confessions and the distinctives they contain are meant to be tools for sanctification. They spur believers to study the Scriptures more since the Bible is the basis of all Baptists confessions. Enhanced biblical knowledge grows a believer's prayer life along with the ability and desire to disciple other believers and evangelize the lost. These confessions should also motivate one to be more involved in his or her local church both in leadership and serving roles.

Confessions of faith helped solidify and coordinate the early Baptist movements around central doctrines. In the 20th century, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted formal confessions of faith to combat the liberalism creeping into both society and the church, and the Lord blessed them richly for their obedience as the SBC is the largest protestant denomination in the United States. The SBC's future will be determined by its continued commitment to Baptist distinctives and the clear teachings of Scripture. As for Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, it will continue to stand on the sufficiency of Scripture and Baptist distinctives to achieve its goal: "That in all things He might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18).



Since its founding in 1972, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary (MABTS) has been funded through the generous donations of like-minded believers. The seminary provides master and doctoral level theological training for effective service in church-related and missions vocations. Founded in 2018, The College at Mid-America is the undergraduate school of MABTS and provides associate and baccalaureate degree programs to prepare students to take their place as effective Christian and secular leaders. Both academic institutions guide students into a thorough understanding of the Bible and its relevance to everyday living. Mid-America students volunteer to evangelize and serve the community through the Witness One:Seven and GO! programs. Mid-America is located on an award-winning, 35-acre campus in Memphis, TN. For more information visit www.mabts.edu.