

Transcriber's Preface to An Orthodox Creed: An Unabridged 17th Century General Baptist Confession

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The seventeenth century in England was confronted with a plethora of political and religious problems. With the rise and fall of Oliver Cromwell's protectorate, and the subsequent institution of many restrictive Parliamentary Acts that attacked those who would not conform to the Church of England, threats of a Roman Catholic resurgence, and issues of heresy within and without, Dissenters, especially Baptists, found themselves in a very precarious situation. In an effort to show agreement and find unity with other Protestants, especially with Presbyterians and Congregationalists, lengthy confessions were published by both General Baptists and Particular Baptists. The most famous of these confessions, for the Particular Baptists, is the *Second London Confession* of 1677, subsequently revised in 1689. The *Second London Confession* was modeled after the *Westminster Confession* in hopes of presenting a unified Protestantism. However, some General Baptists also attempted to model a confession after the Westminster Confession, and the result of that attempt is *An Orthodox Creed* of 1679.

Origins

An Orthodox Creed was written, as stated in the "Advertisement to the Reader," for the General Baptist churches in the counties of "Bucks, Hertford, Bedford, and Oxford." However, it was never adopted by the General Assembly of the General Baptists, the national organization, which is why it may not have enjoyed as wide a popularity among General Baptists as the *Second London Confession* enjoyed among Particular Baptists. In 1660 the General Baptists had already adopted *A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith*, in order to "set forth by many of us, who are (falsely) called

Ana-Baptists, to inform all Men (in these days of scandal and reproach) of our innocent Belief and Practise; for which we are not only resolved to suffer Persecution, to the loss of our Goods, but also Life it self, rather than do the same.”¹ With this political and theological purpose in mind, why would the Assembly, or churches affiliated with it, feel a need to establish a new document?

The answer to this question is twofold. First was the political reason. Shortly after the presentation of the 1660 confession, under the leadership of Thomas Venner, the Fifth Monarchists broke into rebellion and caused dissenters and especially Baptists to be looked upon with greater suspicion.² B.R. White suggests that “Fifth Monarchy views were regarded as politically dangerous and that the authorities did not attempt to make any distinction between those who were relatively harmless Bible students and those who were potential or actual revolutionaries.”³ This hazardous situation created a bond between the dissenting factions, and with the Act of Uniformity in 1662 adding Presbyterians to their ranks, an increased opposition to the state Church gained prominence.⁴ This newly enlarged conglomerate of opposition led the Baptists to seek uniformity with other factions who were fighting not only against the Church of England but also against the threat of Popery from King Charles II.⁵ In 1677 the Particular Baptists presented their *Second London Confession*. Then in 1678, when “an ebullition of anti-Roman wrath swept through the nation,”⁶ the General Baptists of the Midlands followed what the Particular Baptists had done the year previous, and presented a creed. The subtitle of this creed, as contrasted with the previous one, was simply, “An Essay to Unite, and Confirm all true Protestants in the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Religion, against the Errors and Heresies of the Church of Rome.”

Unity was one of the main purposes of *An Orthodox Creed*. William H. Brackney, in discussing the desire to present more mediated positions of thought amongst General Baptists, calls it “The capstone document of the mediating confessions.”⁷ Following the form of the Westminster Con-

¹William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1959), 224.

²W.J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 122.

³B.R. White, *English Baptists of the 17th Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996), 102.

⁴A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1947), 97.

⁵*Ibid.*, 105.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 22.

fession, and subsequently that of the Particular Baptists, was not the only way in which a sense of community with other dissenters was sought in this confession. As Underwood says, "its articles on Election, Reprobation, Original Sin, and Perseverance were nothing like as Arminian in tone as John Smyth or Thomas Helwys would have made them."⁸ In fact these Baptists sought a unity beyond that of the Calvinist/Arminian divide. Their scope was to reconnect with "The truly Ancient and Apostolical Faith, that was once delivered unto the Saints, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and miraculously confirmed unto us, by Signs, and Wonders, and divers Gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to the good pleasure of Almighty God." With the inclusion of the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and Athanasius' Creed this creed's writers were also claiming unity with the heritage of ancient Christianity.

Second, *An Orthodox Creed* was aimed at correcting a theological heresy which had arisen in the Midlands. The confession of 1660 is unclear as to who was directly responsible for its inception, but two men, Thomas Monck and Matthew Caffyn, probably contributed to the debate.⁹ These two men were local farmers of the Midlands and messengers of General Baptists. Sometime after the 1660 confession Caffyn began to teach a view that Christ's flesh was not that of the Virgin Mary, thus reintroducing the heresy of the continental Anabaptist Melchior Hoffman. Baines points out that in conversation with Caffyn and his followers, "Monk found worse heresies than this. 'They deny (or at least doubt of) God's omnipresence; and, with the Anthropomorphites, think of God as if he were some old Man sitting in some place on a Throne.'"¹⁰ In response to these teachings Thomas Monck, who had a practice of instructing his church in systematic theology,¹¹ wrote his second work, *A Cure for the Cankering Error of the New Eutyrians: Who: (concerning the Truth) have erred*. This led him to move his church and encourage other churches to remain true to the Orthodox faith. Caffyn did not back down from Monck and asked the General Assembly to censure the Midlands leader, which they denied.¹²

Despite the efforts of Monck and others to stop the spread of this heresy, it still persisted. According to Baines, in 1677, after Monck failed to secure a declaration concerning the Trinity, an Arian church was es-

⁸Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 106. Cf. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 123; Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 296.

⁹Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 221.

¹⁰A.H. Baines, "Signatories to the Orthodox Confession," *The Baptist Quarterly* 27 no. 1 (January, 1957), 39.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Jim Spivey, "Caffyn, Matthew," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press 2004-7, www.oxforddnb.com/view/printable/4332 (accessed 24 July 2004).

tablished with the assistance of Caffyn. “Monk thereupon drew up his fifty Articles, which were signed by the leading General Baptists in and around Buckinghamshire in January, 1679 and published later the year.”¹³ Whether this is the exact order of events that led up to the writing and adoption of this creed is uncertain. Other scholars do note that the Hoffmanite heresy was an impetus for Monck to lead these churches to write this document.¹⁴

One can easily see the emphasis on the Person of Christ in *An Orthodox Creed*. Whereas the 1660 confession had devoted a few lines on Christ, the creed has devoted the entirety of articles IV–VII to a discussion of Jesus Christ. In note 13 of the Preface of the following reproduction one can see an explicit desire to refute this particular heresy, “For we are sure that the denying of Baptism is a less evil, than to deny the Divinity, or Humanity of the Son of God.” This provides evidence that the Caffyn controversy was not merely a peripheral matter for the Orthodox Baptists of the Midlands.

The lack of adoption by the General Assembly does not diminish the importance of this document, for it is a clear representation of the beliefs and practices of an important group of seventeenth-century General Baptist churches in England. In fact, Spivey points out that it was only through the convincing of Caffyn in the General Assembly that the document was never widely adopted.¹⁵

Notes on This and Previous Editions

The following reproduction of *An Orthodox Creed*, for the first time since it was originally published, includes the Preface, the Advertisement to the Reader, containing the signatures, and the Postscript. These three pieces are integral for a correct understanding of the document, for in them, especially the Preface, one sees the underlying reasons for the following 50 articles. The Preface also makes clear the attempt of these General Baptists to align themselves religiously and politically with other “orthodox” Protestants seeking acceptance in the kingdom.

So why have these three pieces not been included before? The answer to that question resides with the publishing of Thomas Crosby’s *History of the English Baptists* in 1738–1740. It is in the third volume of Crosby’s seminal history that *An Orthodox Creed* was first reprinted.¹⁶ Moreover, it

¹³Baines, “Signatories to the Orthodox Confession,” 41.

¹⁴Cf. White, *Early English Baptists of the 17th Century*, 120; Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 295; Underwood, 106.

¹⁵Spivey, “Caffyn.”

¹⁶Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists From the Reformation to the Beginning of the Reign of King George I*, Vol. 3 (London: 1739), Appendix.

is from Crosby's work that all subsequent editions—including Underhill,¹⁷ McGlothlin,¹⁸ Lumpkin,¹⁹ and George²⁰—of the Creed have been copied. Crosby only reprinted the 50 articles of the piece, and subsequent editors, relying exclusively upon Crosby, also reprinted only the articles. Adam Taylor, another early Baptist historian, said that it is “lamentable” that Crosby would leave out the signatures in his reproduction.²¹ Joseph Ivimey concurs with Taylor and further accuses Crosby, because of his omissions, of, “attempting to amalgamate all the Baptists into one denomination, and therefore he has endeavoured to prevent the General and the Particular Baptists from being distinguished.”²²

Unfortunately, the tradition of following Crosby's work as the authoritative version of the Creed is more problematic than merely omitting the Preface and the other pieces. As Crosby was adding this creed to his volume, he took the liberty of reformatting it. Although he did not change any of the words in the document, nevertheless his changes, however miniscule, at times changed the meaning and left the document devoid of particular emphases which the original authors included.

First, Crosby, in attempting to modernize the grammar, decided to reinterpret the comma placement of the original. Article XX, “Of the Free-will in Man”, for example, speaks of the relationship between the first and second covenants. The original reads, “according to the tenure of the new Covenant of Grace in Christ, though not perfectly according to the tenure of the First Covenant.” Crosby's rendering of this section is, “according to the tenure of the new covenant of grace in *Christ*, tho' not perfectly, according to the tenure of the first covenant.” The difference between the two is small in space, but important in impact, for the original has “perfectly” modifying “according,” whereas, Crosby has “perfectly” modifying the entire clause. The difference in the placement of the comma changes the meaning.

Note also Article XIX, “Of the agreement between the Old and New Testaments”. The last line of this article has in the original the phrase, “and hold forth the self-same Gospel-Salvation to them and us.” There is one congruent thought, yet Crosby inserts a comma between “Gospel”

¹⁷Edward Bean Underhill, *Confessions of Faith, and Other Public Documents, Illustrative of the History of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century* (London: Haddon, Brothers, and Co., 1854), 121–168.

¹⁸McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 122–161.

¹⁹Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 297–334.

²⁰Timothy George, Denise George, eds., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 94–130.

²¹Adam Taylor, *The History of the English General Baptists*, Vol. 1 (London: 1818), 225–226.

²²Joseph Ivimey, *The History of the English Baptists*, Vol. 2 (London: 1814), 90–91.

and “Salvation” creating a short pause and a break of thought. In changing the usage of commas, as well as semi-colons, Crosby altered the construction of thought the General Baptists originally included. Instances such as these are scattered throughout Crosby’s reproduction and, subsequently, all previous reproductions.

Second, the original document is replete with capitalized words that would not normally be treated as proper nouns. Words like “man,” “will,” and “face” are capitalized, as context demands, in the original manuscript. As one reads through the confession, one sees that these capitalized words are the important ideas and main subjects of the particular articles. Through capitalization, the General Baptists were placing emphasis upon these ideas. Yet, Crosby chose to remove most of the capitalization found in the original, and thus the theological import assigned by the authors is lessened.

Finally, Crosby removed all scripture citations from their precise placement in the document and placed them at the beginning of each article. In merely alluding to a passage of Scripture the Crosby tradition obfuscates the specific theological point the writers intended.

Crosby’s version of *An Orthodox Creed*, as a whole, is an adequate reproduction for introductory purposes. However, Crosby’s revisions have not only changed certain meanings for careful theological readers of his edition, but also for the readers of the Underhill, McGlothlin, Lumpkin, and George editions. The version of the creed reproduced here has been transcribed from the original publication rather than the editorial tradition. The punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and notation have been transcribed as published in the 1679 original, and the important front and back matter have been included for the first time in a modern edition.