

**Fraternal Address of Southern Baptists:
To Those of “Like Precious Faith with Us” Scattered Abroad, Beloved in the Lord (1920)**

Fraternal Address of Southern Baptists¹

To Those of "Like Precious Faith with Us" Scattered Abroad, Beloved in the Lord.
GREETING :--

In view of the conditions of the new times in to which we have come and the part which religion must play in the reconstruction of the world, we address this letter to our spiritual kinsmen in all lands. If these greetings shall result in opening up communications with scattered groups and individuals who hold a common Christian faith with us, and thus lead to a mutually helpful relation and co-operation in the furtherance of the truth, the initial purpose of this letter will have been realized.

Thoughtful men are persuaded now as perhaps they never were before that religion alone can conserve the true values and promote the highest interests of society, and that religion is an indispensable factor in the reconstruction of the world now torn by war and divided by enmity and in the restoration of social harmony. All races and classes of men cannot be taught these lessons without the motives and experiences of religion.

There is, therefore, a large service before those who hold the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. The need and the opportunity of the present hour conspire to make it especially propitious for the promulgation of the religious views and practices which Baptists hold and have consistently exemplified through a long victory. The message of no other religious people is so completely a need of such times as are the principles which Baptists hold and teach. There is not an article of their faith which is not essential to the reconstruction of the world and the social fellowship of the race. Therefore, all people who hold the views which distinguish Baptists should seek to draw close together and render a service which men of pure Christian faith owe their fellow-men. We covet a better understanding and a closer fellowship with those in all lands who cherish a common faith with us, and this to the end that we may with oneness of purpose and concert of action strengthen our witness for this faith everywhere.

The Southern Baptist Convention, composed of 4,200 messengers, in annual session, May, 1919, in Atlanta, Ga., U. S. A., and representing 3,000,000 Baptists in the Southern States of America, realizing the responsibility that is upon them, the largest representative religious body that is in America, address this letter to their brethren and sisters everywhere, and would assure them of our prayers and love in Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord, in the hope that both they and we may be edified, and that a more perfect, effective and universal witness to our faith may be borne throughout all lands.

In order that those who to any degree lack knowledge of the things which Southern Baptists believe and practice may identify their oneness with us, we submit herewith a brief

¹ As reprinted from:

E. Y. Mullins, et al. "Fraternal Address of Southern Baptists," *Baptist Standard* 32, no. 9 (February 26, 1920): 5, 20, 24.

The print copy is available at A. Webb Roberts Library of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

This statement was commissioned at the 64th annual SBC meeting in Atlanta, GA. May 16, 1919. (page 75).

statement of the fundamentals of our faith and the peculiar beliefs and observances which characterize and distinguish us.

1. God

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, who created the heavens and the earth. God is a personal and spiritual and holy Being who loves men with an everlasting love. He has ever had an eternal purpose towards mankind. He loves righteousness and hates iniquity, and to Him belongs every moral perfection. He governs the world with a view of the fulfillment of His eternal purpose. He overrules the sins of men and makes the wrath of men to praise Him. In the Scriptures, God is revealed to us as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three in one and one in three. He has provided for the salvation of men in the revelation He made of Himself in the sinless life, the perfect teaching, the atoning death, the resurrection and the ascension and intercession of Jesus Christ our Lord, the eternal Son of God. Through the Holy Spirit God makes Himself known within the hearts of men, and sanctifies them through the truth as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 6:3; Matthew 10:37; Ephesians 2:18.

2. The Word of God

We believe in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as God's authoritative message to men concerning the way of salvation. Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. The books of the Bible are the record of the messages which these inspired men received from God. The Old Testament is the preliminary and the New Testament is the completed revelation of the Gospel of our redemption. In our study of the Scriptures we are constantly impressed with the unity and progress of the revelation of divine truth. This truth was imparted to men by slow degrees as they were able to receive it. The earlier books of the Old Testament give us the beginnings and the books of the New Testament the endings of the saving truths of God's revelation. The wonderful unity and harmony of the various parts of Scriptures show with great clearness the presence of an overruling and guiding divine mind. The center of the entire revelation is Jesus Christ and His eternal Kingdom. All the earlier stages lead up to the crowning revelation in Jesus Christ. Thus the incarnation of the Son of God is the key to the meaning of all history. From the above setting forth of our view, it clearly follows that we hold that the Scriptures are the sufficient, certain and authoritative revelation of God in all matters of faith and practice, and that obedience to their teachings is binding up on all men.

Ephesians 2:20; Romans 3:1, 2; 1 Corinthians 2:4, 10-16; Acts 28:23.

3. The Atonement

We believe that in the incarnation Jesus Christ identified Himself completely with the state of sinners, while remaining Himself without sin. He became subject to the operation of the law of sin and death when He became one with the sinful race of men. He endured the agony of the cross in order that by dying He might break the power of death. In His resurrection from the dead He proved Himself to be the conqueror of sin and death. Thus He was able to break the power which held men in bondage and redeem them unto God and righteousness. In His atoning death He vindicated and established the righteousness of God. He suffered instead of sinners that sinners might go free. There is and can be no repetition of the sacrifice of Christ. His atonement was made once for all and brought to an end all previous forms of sacrificial offerings through

priest and altar and slain animals. He thus opened the way for sinners into the most holy place of the divine presence. Being justified, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom also we have our access into the divine grace wherein we stand. Christ ascended into heaven and ever liveth at the right hand of God to make intercession for us.

Isaiah, Chapter 53; Philippians 2:6, 7; Romans 8:30 and 3:24-26

4. Regeneration and Attendant Blessings

We hold that the natural man is not subject to the law of God. The direct action of the Holy Spirit is necessary in order that sinful men may be regenerated or born again into the divine Kingdom. The Spirit of God makes use of the truth of the Gospel in His regenerating work. It is conditioned upon personal repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance is a sincere renunciation of sin, and faith is genuine trust in the atoning Christ as Savior and Lord. Justification is God's declaration freeing the sinner from the consequences of his transgressions and adopting him as a member of the divine family.

John 3:1-8; 1 Peter 1:22-25; Acts 13:39; Ephesians 2:8; Isaiah 53:11, 12.

5. A Church: Its Form, Functions and Limitations

A church of Jesus Christ is a body of baptized believers, united under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for the public worship of God, for spiritual edification and growth, for the observance of the ordinances, for the spread of the Gospel, and for the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ in the earth. The members of a local church are spiritual equals. In the New Testament church there were no overlords or ecclesiastical superiors, to whom the members were under authority. This equality of believers in the church arises from the direct relation between each individual soul and the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is the ruler of His people. It follows that each church is a self-governing body. It conducts its own affairs in its own way and is responsible to no other ecclesiastical body of any kind. A church has no right to take from or add to the revealed will of Christ as recorded in the New Testament. Its duty is to obey the commands of Christ and promulgate them over the earth. It is also the duty of a church to co-operate with other churches of like faith in the work of their common Lord. Missionary and other religious associations and conventions are not ecclesiastical bodies. They are simply voluntary bodies for co-operative purposes. Churches are not subject to the authority of these or any other organizations.

The officers of a church are bishops or elders and deacons. In the New Testament the words "bishop" and "elder" are used interchangeably. The duties of the bishop or elder are teaching and preaching, and the spiritual guidance of the church. Deacons have charge of the temporal affairs of the church. Other officers of local churches, such as recording secretaries or committee chairmen, are not necessary to constitute a New Testament church. They are convenient and useful for certain ends and may be dispensed with whenever the need for them ceases to exist.

Acts 14:23; Ephesians 3:10; Hebrews 12:23.

6. The Ordinances

The ordinance of a church of Jesus Christ are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Immersion alone answers the New Testament teaching as to the form of baptism. The following will make this clear: The word in the Greek means to dip or immerse. The symbolism of baptism can only be expressed thus it represents a death, a burial and a resurrection. It symbolizes complete cleansing from sin and complete consecration and surrender to Christ. Hence, if the form of baptism is changed, the meaning is destroyed. A death, burial and resurrection can only be symbolically expressed by immersion. Since baptism admits to church membership, it is a prerequisite to participation in the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper was instituted by the Master for the perpetual observance of His people until His return. The elements employed are bread and the fruit of the vine. The bread represents His body given for His people. The fruit of the vine represents His blood shed for many for the remission of sins. The Lord's Supper commemorates Christ. We do it in remembrance of Him. It declares the death of Christ. In it we show forth His death till He comes.

The ordinances are not sacraments. They do not convey saving grace. They are symbols observed and preserved by the churches. They are of value to those who observe them only as their meaning is discerned. They are of deep significance as symbols or outward forms. They represent the essential and saving truths of the Gospel of Christ. The ordinances are, when properly observed, great conservators and propagators of evangelical truth. A great responsibility rests upon the churches to preserve in their purity and integrity the two ordinances entrusted to them. Otherwise great abuses creep in and various perils arise. We believe that in thus preserving the ordinances we do a needed work in safeguarding the purity of the Gospel. The great evil of infant baptism arose as a result of changing the New Testament ordinances into sacraments. No error has done greater harm than this in destroying the spirituality of the church. It should be resisted with steadfast vigor and fidelity to the New Testament teaching of believer's baptism.

Ephesians 4:5; Acts 2:41; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23

7. The Rights and Responsibilities of the Individual Soul

We believe that the true nature of the Christian religion is understood only when we recognize that it is a relation between the individual soul and God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Each soul must repent and believe for itself. Each soul is responsible directly to God for sins committed. Each soul has the high privilege of dealing directly with God. No priest is needed to mediate between the soul and God, save our great High Priest, Jesus the Lord. Every true believer, by reason of his union with Christ, is a priest unto God with free access to the divine presence. Salvation cannot be imparted by means of sacraments in the hands of earthly priests. This would rob the soul of its spiritual right to direct approach to God, and it would displace the one divine Mediator and Redeemer. No body of people calling itself the church of Jesus Christ has any right to limit salvation to its own members. This is to substitute a saving church for the saving Christ. No one, not even a parent, has any right to substitute his own faith for that of a morally unconscious infant, and in the name of the substitute have water applied to the infant and call it baptism. This robs the child of his own God-given privilege of believing and obeying for himself when he reaches a suitable age. The mediation of earthly priests, ecclesiastical salvation, sacramental grace and proxy faith are each and all foreign to the teachings of the New Testament and the nature of the Christian religion.

Matthew 10:28, and 23:10; Romans 14:4; John 4:23, 24.

8. Civil Government and Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is one of the inalienable rights of men. Since God is superior to the state, civil government has no authority whatever to control men in their religious beliefs. Every man has an inherent right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience. The state should protect individuals and religious denominations in the free exercise of their religious rights. It is an abuse of the power of the state when it favors one religious denomination to the exclusion of others. All religious denominations should stand on an equality before the civil power, just as all individuals stand on an equality in their religious rights. It follows that state churches are a clear violation of the religious rights of men.

It is equally clear that all attempts on the part of the church to control the state are wrong in principle and disastrous in results. As the state has no religious function, so also the church has no civil function. A free church in a free state is the ideal relation between church and state.

Romans 13:1-7; Matthew 22:21; Acts 5:29; .Matthew 10:28, and 23:10; Romans 14:4; John 4:23, 24.

Baptists and Christian Union

For Baptists the question of Christian union goes to the heart of the deeper question as to the nature of the Christian religion. Questions of outward forms of worship and organization and of relations to other denominations depend upon the fundamental question: What is Christianity? The Christian religion is primarily the personal union of the individual with Christ by faith. From this root springs the tree. It is this direct relation of the soul to God in Christ which is the growing principle for Baptists.

In their view of religion Baptists are necessarily democrats of the most thorough-going kind. They hold the following truths as self-evident: first, that the individual soul is competent to deal directly with God in Christ; second, that all are equally entitled to direct access to God; third, that all believers are entitled to equal privileges in the church; fourth, that to be responsible the soul must be free; fifth, that the true ideal of the relations between church and state is a free church in a free state; sixth, that our social ideal is best expressed in the divine command, "Love your neighbor as yourself." These principles allow and encourage the broadest charity and cordiality for Christians of other names and they permit us to co-operate for many common ends with Christians of other names--ends which involve no compromise or weakening of conviction. But the same principles debar us from all forms of effort where these principles cannot be fully safeguarded.

We hold the foregoing principles, not as incidental or detachable opinions, but as cardinal teachings of the New Testament and vital to genuine Christianity.

Baptists are convinced that the voluntary principle is an essential element in all ecclesiastical and religious organization, because of the direct relation of the soul to Christ and of the equality of believers in the church. It follows that they reject any and all forms of centralized church and ecclesiastical organization and government. In the Baptist view there could scarcely be any greater disaster to Christianity than the formation of a great centralized bureaucratic

organization, with a single directing head for all the denominations. As we believe, such an organization would be the forerunner of new forms of strife and discord, new and bitter antagonisms, and new legal contests. And it is because Baptists desire to live in amicable relations with their brethren of other names that they oppose any artificial joining together of alien elements in any form of so-called organic church union. Since Baptists feel themselves called, not only to hold, but also to bear witness to the truths above set forth, they refrain from combinations with others in ways which would bring embarrassment to others by reason of the Baptist witness and embarrassment to Baptists by reason of the restraints imposed. We hold that freedom of preaching is of greater value to the world than the alleged gains of merely outward union.

Baptists are irrevocably committed to a great missionary and educational program, unhampered by any compromises of Gospel teaching. We are convinced that the whole world needs Christianity of the New Testament, unmixed with errors brought over from earlier ages of autocratic and sacramental doctrines of the church. We pledge ourselves to such a program, and pray for the co-operation of all our people to this end. In this new age of the world all Baptists should seek fraternal relations with each other, so far as this is practicable. Thus united upon the broad platform of New Testament Christianity, we should seek together the great ends of an apostolic program of world redemption.

Finally, we would admonish all who accept these articles of faith and practice that they do not compromise them through either fear or sentiment, but that they so teach and observe these things as to commend them to the understanding and conscience of all men everywhere.

"Now to Him who is able to guard you from falling, and to set you without blemish in gladness before the presence: of His glory; to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, might and authority, before all, time, and now, and forever. Amen."

Signed by the committee appointed by the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta, Ga.,
May, 1919.

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President Southern Baptist Theological Seminary;
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