

**THE 1919 STATEMENT OF BELIEF AND THE TRADITION
OF CONFESSION BOUNDARIES FOR SOUTHERN
BAPTIST MISSIONARIES**

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Jerry Rankin, President of the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention, announced in January of 2002 that he was sending a letter to all IMB missionaries requesting their acknowledgement of agreement with the newly revised Southern Baptist confessional standard, the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. This announcement was met with immediate uproar from the Baptist left.¹ Typical are the comments of Earl R. Martin, who referred to Rankin's letter as "a bombshell" that "sent reverberations through Baptist mission fields and scandalized many Baptists back home."²

One of the persistent criticisms from the left has been that this request represented a novel departure from Southern Baptist missiological practice.³ There has been a "re-visioning" of Baptist history by some that has imagined the Baptist Christian forebears as not merely noncreedal, but as virulently anti-creedal and even anti-confessional. Southern Baptist

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¹ See the responses compiled in Robert O'Brien, ed., *Stand with Christ: Why Missionaries Can't Sign the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message*, Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2002.

² *Ibid.*, 123.

³ This is the heart of Keith Parks's argument in "An Afterword of Warning," *Stand with Christ*, 151–54. Parks states: "Originally, Baptists with a great variety of beliefs came together to cooperate around the cause of missions. . . . Some 'Ultra-Conservative Resurgence' leaders argued with me that doctrine, not missions, was the unifying force" (151). Later he continues this line of thought:

The crux of the matter is, "Do I have the right under God to confess I believe the entire Bible the way Baptists generally believe it? Do I have the freedom to support the SBC to be accepted as a member in good standing?"

In the past, I could. Baptists confessed their beliefs, supported the convention, cooperated, and were welcomed into the fellowship. Everyone understood there were variations of interpretations on nonessential doctrines. But there was cooperation in order to accomplish the larger purpose of missions. There was fellowship.

That has changed. The current approach is creedal. A confession that "I am a Baptist" is no longer enough (153).

Of course, the question raised by this examination of the *1919 Statement of Belief* is whether or not it was *ever* enough for Southern Baptists missionaries merely to confess, "I am a Baptist" without giving a more precise doctrinal definition.

evangelicals in our era, however, are rediscovering the strong confessional heritage of Southern Baptists.⁴ An objective examination of the historical record, for example, reveals that the establishment of a confessional standard for Southern Baptist missionaries is hardly an innovation. In fact, in 1919 the Foreign Mission Board approved a thirteen-point doctrinal statement to be used as a standard for evaluating mission candidates. William R. Estep says that this statement “reinforced Baptist distinctives and may be seen as the initial step that led to the *Baptist Faith and Message* by the convention in 1925.”⁵ Indeed, the need for confessional boundaries on the mission field contributed to the drive for doctrinal clarity among Southern Baptists as expressed in the *Baptist Faith and Message*. Estep notes the groundbreaking significance of the Board’s adoption of the 1919 statement:

Up to this time no confession of faith has been adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Seminary had asked members of its faculty to sign an “Abstract of Principles” drawn up by the President, J.P. Boyce, and revised by him in 1887. The Southwestern Seminary adopted the popular New Hampshire Confession of Faith and its successive revisions of 1925 and 1963, but the convention itself owned no confession until 1925. The Statement of Faith published by the Foreign Mission Board was a step in that direction. . . .⁶

One might even argue that the *1919 Statement of Belief* was the first attempt to forge a doctrinal consensus among Southern Baptists. This statement, however, did not have the theological depth necessary to sustain such a consensus.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the thirteen-point doctrinal statement of 1919 and its accompanying instructions. This examination is not primarily historical, but theological and doctrinal.⁷ The historical context, however, should not be overlooked. William R. Estep says that

⁴ See Gregory A. Willis, “Baptists, the Bible, and Confessions: The Need for Statements of Faith,” *Southern Seminary Magazine* 68 (November 2000): 13–15. For a historical review of the Baptist confessional tradition, see William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969).

⁵ William R. Estep, *Whole Gospel, Whole World: The Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention 1845-1995* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 210.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 204. Though Estep notes the significance of the 1919 statement as both a continuation of the tradition of confessional documents among Southern Baptists and a precedent for the *1925 Baptist Faith and Message*, he also attempts to downplay the force of the document by stressing its nonbinding nature. Estep’s *Whole Gospel, Whole World* offers a history of the Foreign Mission Board slanted by his own moderate sympathies toward the SBC struggles of 1979–1992, as is particularly clear in his account of Keith Parks’s tenure as President of the Foreign Mission Board (239–74). Estep also evidences a related bias against Reformed theology in Baptist life, as is evident in his account of William Carey and the early Baptist mission movement (5–26). Although Estep rightly recounts Carey’s rejection of hyper-Calvinism, the pioneer missionary was hardly Arminian in theological outlook. Estep’s biases against the Reformed Baptist stream and Baptist confessionalism are certainly related, since those in the Reformed stream of Baptist life were historically the ones who most often put forward doctrinal statements.

⁷ Though knowledge of the historical context of the 1919 statement is important, the primary aim of this essay is to understand the doctrinal content and significance of the statement. Of course, part of the goal is also to draw comparisons between the use of the 1919 statement and the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* as confessional standards.

the statement was “doubtless prompted by both the Interchurch World Movement and the World’s Fundamental Christian Association (formally organized in 1919).”⁸ It was a Southern Baptist response, then, both to post-war ecumenism among liberal mainline denominations and also anti-modernism among fundamentalists. The adoption of the statement is recorded in the June 11, 1919, minutes of the Foreign Mission Board’s trustee meeting:⁹

The report of the Committee on Articles of Faith was read by Brother White by sections and adopted as follows:

*Your committee finding the Statement of Belief submitted to be fully in harmony with our accepted Baptist **principles**, recommend that it be adopted; that a copy be presented to each applicant for appointment to mission field; that acceptance of this Statement of Belief is essential to appointment.*

We also recommend that a copy of this Statement of Belief be sent to each missionary now on the field.

J.L. White
F.F. Gibson
T.W. O’Kelley

Committee

A STATEMENT OF BELIEF

All missionaries of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention are expected to read carefully and subscribe to the following statement of belief before they are appointed to missionary service under this Board.

I believe and am prepared to teach the following:

I. I believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were written by men who were divinely inspired and that they are a sufficient and final authority in all matters of religious faith and practice;

II. That there is one and only one living and true God who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit;

III. That the virgin birth, the deity, the vicarious death, the bodily resurrection and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ are plainly taught in the Scriptures;

IV. That in his natural state, man is depraved and without true holiness;

⁸ Estep, *Whole Gospel, Whole World*, 204.

⁹ White represented Florida, Gibson was a “local member” of the board from Virginia, and O’Kelley represented North Carolina.

- V. *That salvation is wholly of grace through Jesus Christ;*
- VI. *That on condition of personal repentance for sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ any man can receive the forgiveness of sin and salvation unto everlasting life;*
- VII. *That regeneration is necessary to spiritual life in Christ, and that this change is effected by the direct action of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of each individual who exercises personal faith in Jesus Christ;*
- VIII. *That sanctification is the process by which, between regeneration and glorification, the spiritual life of the believer is deepened, and he grows in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ;*
- IX. *That a church is a company of voluntarily, associated baptized believers in Christ, recognizing Him as the only Head of the church, exercising only such administration and disciplinary authority as He has committed to it, conducting holy worship, observing the ordinances as He has commanded, and seeking by cooperative effort to extend His Kingdom in all the world;*
- X. *I believe in the evangelical view of the ordinances. They were appointed to show the Lord's death and resurrection. They are not sacraments. They do not expiate sin; they exhibit the atonement. Baptism is not a means of salvation but a symbol of Christ's resurrection. The Lord's Supper is not a social feast, but a memorial of Christ's death. We are not to observe it to show our amiability, but do it in remembrance of Him. I will observe and teach these ordinances in accordance with the views and customs common among Southern Baptists;*
- XI. *I believe that the Lord's Day or Christian Sabbath should be sacredly observed by all Christian believers everywhere;*
- XII. *That civil government being ordained of God, due obedience and subjection should be rendered to the government under which I may live and that prayers should be offered for rulers; but that God alone is Lord of the conscience and He has left the soul free to worship after its own dictates;*
- XIII. *That there will be a resurrection and future judgment and that believers in Christ will go to a place of eternal happiness and unbelievers to everlasting condemnation.*

I accept the following Pronouncement on Christian union and cooperation which has been adopted by the Foreign Mission Board and the Southern Baptist Convention, and will seek to promote harmony and unity in the denomination at home and in the mission to which I am sent, and cooperate with my fellow-missionaries in advancing the cause of Christ and the denomination along lines thus fixed for the Board and its missionaries;

This Board has not and will not enter into nor be committed to any compact by which arbitrary territorial boundaries or divisions are fixed for its missionary operations. Such division of territory being a part of a general program of federation, and it being impossible for this Board to recognize divisions thus arbitrarily made, we must decline participation in such program. The Board and its missionaries will in the future, as in the past, endeavor to exercise wisdom and Christian courtesy as well as conscience in such matters; will seek to conserve economy of labor and money in locating its forces, and with due regard to need, opportunity, and probable results, but cannot consent to have any limitations fixed upon the Commission under

which it operates, nor be put in a position which would forbid its loyalty and faithfulness to any company of Christian converts who may now or hereafter profess a “like precious faith” with us.

We cannot subscribe to any agreement providing for an interchange or church letters contrary to the recognized custom among the Baptist churches of the South. The churches which are supporting the work of this Board have a well-known standard of qualification for church membership, and we shall seek to foster this standard in every land where this Board sends its missionaries.

This Board will not engage in any form of cooperation, hospital, publication, educational or other missionary activity, which is not fully reported to the Convention, and which does not meet the approval of the Convention, under the auspices of which it operates and to the instructions of which it is subject. We esteem it to be a matter of primary importance that the Board be in a position to control, or control jointly with other Baptist bodies, the religious instruction which is given boys and girls entrusted to its care. This is necessary in order to safeguard what we believe to be our message to the world.

To avoid an exhaustive enumeration, and yet to make the statement comprehensive, we add, that we shall seek to foster a policy abroad which is consistent with the denominational policy at home, and no pressure will be allowed to swerve the Board from its course. We make these declarations for the information of our people at home, and with the view of saving the scattered missionaries of this Board all possible embarrassment or confusion from such pressure.

*Again, we would remind all that Southern Baptists are on record by repeated action of the Convention in recognition of that spiritual union which exists among all believers in Christ, and in favor of their organic union as soon as it can be perfected on New Testament lines. We reaffirm these sentiments. We would have all our people recognize the bonds of brotherhood which unite Christians of every name, cultivate a large spirit of fraternity and strive together with others to secure the closest possible impact of our common Christianity upon the social order for the establishment of righteousness in the earth. We would, however, admonish our people at home and abroad to remain true to New Testament **principles of faith** and church policy, and by so doing, seek to preserve the unity of the denomination, enlist all of our forces for the holy cause of missions, and thus insure the integrity, support and success of this work.¹⁰*

Confessional Expectations

It is clear from the preamble to the *Statement of Belief* that the framers of this document did not see its adoption as inconsistent with historic Baptist principles. The committee reports its finding that the *Statement of Belief* is “fully in harmony with Baptist principles.” It seems clear that this refers not just to the doctrinal content of the statement but also to the very idea of the appropriateness of having such a document. Confessional expectations are par for the Baptist course. According to the framers, it would not be incongruent with Baptist principles for the Foreign Mission Board to impose such a standard.

This document was to be used to evaluate the fitness for service of potential mission candidates. The committee recommends that a copy of the statement be presented “to each

¹⁰ Thanks to International Mission Board archivist Edie Jeter for locating this information. The document is recorded as follows: Accession Number 2430; Date: Jun 11, 1919; Location: Richmond, Virginia; Type: FMB.

applicant for appointment to the mission field.” It furthermore requires “that acceptance of this Statement of Belief is essential to appointment.” Candidates are not given opportunity to provide written explanation of areas with which they are not in agreement. Agreement with the statement appears to be nonnegotiable. Either one agrees with it and is a fit candidate for service, or one does not and thereby excuses himself from consideration.

The focus of this document is not, however, merely limited to evaluation of those who have not yet entered into service. The committee that formulated the statement also recommended “that a copy of this Statement of Belief be sent to each missionary now on the field.” If there was any consideration that it might be unfair or unethical to impose consent to this doctrinal standard upon those already serving in the field who had been appointed before its formulation, it is not noted in the minutes. Nor is there any reference to a “grandfather clause” for any who might wish to continue in the field but who could not in good conscience conform to the standard. The understanding seems to be that all missionaries are expected to accept the adoption of this statement.

The Statement of Beliefs: Brief and Arminian

In turning to the statement itself, one first notes its brevity. The statement is not intended to be exhaustive but suggestive of the Baptist Christian mainstream. As is typical of historic Baptist confessions, it begins with Scripture (article I). The starting point is the epistemological source of authority from which the ensuing doctrines flow. The Scripture statement insists on the inspiration of Scripture, since it “was written by men who were divinely inspired.” It also stresses the sufficiency and authority of Scripture by affirming that “they are a sufficient and final authority in all matters of religious faith and practice.” It might be possible to interpret the scope of the authority of Scripture in this article as limited to merely the “religious” field. Indeed, this is a clear weakness in the Scripture article which would be corrected in the subsequent formulation of the *1925 Baptist Faith and Message*, based on the New Hampshire Confession. Nevertheless, Scripture is given pride of place in the *Statement of Belief*. It is also likely that the framers had no expectation that of Scripture’s absolute lack of error in all spheres that it addresses.

Articles II and III turn to theology and Christology proper. Article II expresses a Trinitarian view of God. Article III addresses the doctrine of Christ. This article has apparently been influenced by the “fundamental” understanding of the Person and work of Jesus. It espouses “fundamental” doctrines such as: the Virgin Birth, Deity, vicarious (substitutionary) death, bodily resurrection, and literal second advent of Christ.

Article IV deals with anthropology and gives mild affirmation of the doctrine of total depravity. Article V affirms salvation as an act of grace, though in minimalist terms. Articles VI–VIII, then, flesh out the concept of salvation. Article VI modifies Calvinistic orthodoxy by stressing conditional election: “That on condition of personal repentance for sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ any man can receive the forgiveness of sin and salvation unto everlasting life.” The Arminian bent of article VI, however, is modified somewhat by article VI’s affirmation of regeneration as a change “effected by the direct action of the Holy Spirit.” Article VIII treats the doctrine of sanctification. It should be noted that this statement does not include mention of the doctrine of the perseverance (preservation) of the saints. Theologically, it seems more Arminian than Calvinistic in tone.

Articles IX and X turn the focus to ecclesiology. Article IX addresses the church proper as “a company of voluntarily, associated baptized believers in Christ.” As might be expected in a missionary creed, this article stresses the true church as “seeking by cooperative effort to extend his [Christ’s] kingdom in all the world.” The true church has as its focus “conducting holy worship” and “observing the ordinances,” a modification of the reformation ideal of the true church as a place where the Word is preached and the Sacraments (ordinances) observed. Article X presents an “evangelical view” of the ordinances themselves. Baptism is symbolic and not salvific. The Lord’s Supper is merely a “memorial of Christ’s death.” The article makes explicit that “they are not sacraments.” Some modern Baptists might be surprised by the striking nonsacramental, even antisacramental, views expressed in the *1919 Statement of Belief*.¹¹

Articles XI and XII deal with Christian ethical issues. Article XI is a standard affirmation of Sabbath principles. Article XII affirms Christian submission to civil authority. The injunction that “prayers should be offered for rulers” echoes 1 Tim. 2:1–2. Submission to civil authorities, however, is subject to prior allegiance to God since “God alone is Lord of conscience.” The article also affirms the emerging Baptist emphasis on “soul competency” by stating that God “has left the soul free to worship after its own dictates.”¹²

The thirteenth and final article, appropriately enough, addresses eschatology. No commitment is made to any particular eschatological viewpoint (whether premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial) but only to the basic scriptural concepts of a general resurrection and judgment. A clear affirmation is also made of the eternal bliss of believers in heaven and the eternal condemnation of unbelievers in hell. Universalism and annihilationism are clearly out of bounds.

The Pronouncement on Christian Union and Cooperation

The statement of beliefs is followed by a mandate for missionaries to abide by denominational and institutional mission guidelines adopted by the Board.¹³ By modern missiological standards, this part of the document might appear to be antiecumenical, and even heavy-handed. It calls for loyalty and fidelity not just to the Foreign Mission Board but also the Southern Baptist Convention. This part of the document makes plain that the Foreign Mission Board will not

¹¹ Contemporary moderate Baptists have demonstrated a pronounced tendency to move toward a more sacramental view of the Lord’s Supper. One mark of this has been the hosting of the Lord’s Supper in contexts beyond the local church. Recent annual meetings of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship have included the Lord’s Supper, and the November 8, 2001, meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia featured a “Multi-Cultural Worship Experience” that featured a “Celebration of the Lord’s Supper” (see *Book of Reports, 178th Annual Meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia*, 14). For evidence of the move toward a more sacramental view of the ordinances among moderate Baptists, see Walter B. Shurden, ed., *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999).

¹² The term “soul competency” was coined by E.Y. Mullins in 1908 in *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*. See E.Y. Mullins, “Chapter 4: The Soul’s Competency in Religion,” in *The Axioms of Religion*, compiled by R. Albert Mohler, in *The Library of Baptist Classics*, eds. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 69–76.

¹³ See *SBC Annual 1920*, 197–99.

agree to “arbitrary territorial boundaries or divisions...fixed for its missionary operations.” It rejects acceptance of any interchange of church membership contrary to “the recognized custom among Baptist churches of the South.” It is also unapologetic in stating that the Board makes it “a matter of primary importance” to “be in a position of control” over “religious instruction.” The burden of doctrinal accountability and responsibility of missionaries both to the Board and to the Southern Baptist Convention is clear. The injunction is concluded with the disclaimer, “This is necessary in order to safeguard what we believe to be our message to the world.” This report also affirms the Board’s desire to make “policy abroad” identical “with the denominational policy at home.” Modern ears might hear in these words a cultural triumphalism. It certainly does not reflect a present-day, incarnational approach to cross-cultural ministry. The principles that undergird this statement, however, are less reflective of cultural triumphalism than of an underlying assumption that there are universal doctrinal truths revealed in Scripture that transcend any cultural setting.

The Statement Defended and Explained

The statement was adopted by the Board in June 1919 and presented at the following annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in May 1920 in Washington, D.C. The adoption of the statement seems to have caused little stir or brought much attention at the annual meeting. That was perhaps most noteworthy for George W. Truett’s sermon at the capitol, where he presented a Baptist view on religious freedom. In the annual *Book of Reports*, the statement is introduced: “The Board would submit here a Statement of Belief which was unanimously adopted at its annual meeting last June for the guidance of young men and women who shall be appointed by this Board to represent the denomination in Christian service and witness bearing on the fields of our activities.”¹⁴ The statement then concludes with these words:

This statement, though much briefer, will be found to be in accord with the Fraternal Address which was prepared by the Committee of which Dr. Mullins was chairman, and which has had such cordial and welcome approval. It attempts to state only a sort of “irreducible minimum” of truth, a synopsis of the faith which is common among our people. It was adopted unanimously by the full Board in annual session, and with the purpose of promoting unity on the mission fields. Its value to this end is perhaps as great in what is omitted as in that which is included in the Statement. The Board does not require anyone to sign it, but does present it to all volunteers for mission service before they are appointed to any field by the Board, and it expects all such to respect it in their teaching and practice on the mission field. Those who are sent to the fields are necessarily young and go forth before they are enured to contrary winds of doctrine. They are thrust forth into a strange environment where new and unfamiliar influences are felt, and have need to be fortified against them. Scattered on remote fields where communication with the home constituency is only occasional, they do not have opportunity for conference and the advantage of counsel such as the young enjoy at home. Some such statement as this has been found necessary to facilitate the examination of the frequently large numbers of applicants in the midst of crowded Board sessions, as well as to satisfy the Board that it is not sending to the field those who will inject discord

¹⁴ *SBC Annual*, 1920, 196–97.

in their stations, or promulgate on the field doctrines which are not acceptable to the churches at home which support the work. This Statement, together with the Fraternal Address, may have value for our Baptist people everywhere as suggestive of the common bonds of faith, and a basis for Baptist federation and a missionary program.¹⁵

The defensive tone of these framing remarks indicate that Secretary Love may have previously experienced or anticipated some opposition to the adoption of the statement. The report takes pains to emphasize that the statement attempts “to state only a sort of ‘irreducible minimum’ of truth, a synopsis of the faith which is common among our people.” The report notes the unanimous approval of the full board. Although the report stresses that the board “does not require anyone to sign” the statement, it also makes clear that the board expects appointees “to respect it in their teaching and practice on the mission field.” The statement is presented as an instrument of doctrinal protection, particularly for the young and immature, against “contrary winds of doctrine.” It is also presented as an instrument of accountability to safeguard missionaries against those who might “inject discord” or “promulgate on the field doctrines which are not acceptable to the churches at home which support the work.”

The statement apparently did meet with criticism both from those who saw it as overly creedal and from those who wished it were more explicitly creedal. One can trace the outlines of this debate in a series of articles and commentaries that appeared in the pages of *The Religious Herald*, the organ of Virginia Baptists, throughout 1920. The statement was first defended by Love in a July 8, 1920, article which begins:

A lot has been said and some things written about the Statement of Belief which has been adopted by the Foreign Mission Board. Some of the things which have been said and written show that there is a lack of perfect understanding concerning this matter. Having a desire that the work of our Foreign Mission Board shall be conducted in the open, I esteem it to be my duty to give Southern Baptists a statement concerning this matter.¹⁶

Love then lists nine reasons for the adoption of “a statement of what Southern Baptists believe.”¹⁷

1. He points to the youth of the appointees and concludes, “Those experienced and representative men have, therefore, an obligation to these young people to set before them as plainly as they can what Southern Baptists believe and are seeking to propagate in the way of a Christian message.”¹⁸

2. Love stresses the need for denominational orientation and indoctrination for these young people who “have had little contact with the denomination.”¹⁹ He concludes, “It becomes,

¹⁵ Ibid., 199.

¹⁶ J.F. Love, “The Statement of Belief by the Foreign Mission Board,” *The Religious Herald* (July 8, 1920): 7. The bold here, and in subsequent citations of this source, is original.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

therefore, a solemn obligation of the Foreign Mission Board to place in the hands of young people some such brief statement as this which the Board has adopted in order that the young people may assure themselves whether they are in harmony with the denomination and the Board may assure itself of the same thing.”²⁰

3. These young people would be sent out to fields “where the contrary winds of doctrine and church polity are often many and stiff.”²¹ If they are “to represent the denomination” and help maintain “a homogenous denominational life,” then they should “know their minds concerning the Baptist message before they go to their fields of labor.”²²

4. Love contends that the statement was necessary in order to avoid “embarrassments” that had arisen when “a thorough understanding was not had at the beginning as to what doctrines were to be taught, and what policies were to be observed.”²³ Love notes that even “the most liberal-minded” missionaries had stated “before the statement referred to was adopted, that the Board should have a more thorough examination of candidates and missionaries should, when appointed, be allowed to understand what was expected of them.”²⁴

5. Love argues that the statement had been adopted through a fair and above-board process. It was approved at the June annual meeting of 1919 since it was one “of the most representative meetings of the year.”²⁵ Love points out that the local (Virginia) representatives believed that the statement “should not represent any camp or section of Southern Baptists,”²⁶ and, therefore, it was only considered “when the State representatives were in Richmond.”²⁷ Again, upholding the integrity of the process, Love closes, “The vote on the statement was absolutely unanimous after a frank discussion and after it had been in the hands of a committee and was reported back to the full Board.”²⁸

6. Love offers a brief description of the doctrinal content of the statement. He notes the addition of “the statement concerning interdenominational cooperation which was adopted by the Board and the Southern Baptist Convention in 1916.”²⁹ He defends it as “a bond of unity” which deals “with fundamentals which belong to the common Baptist faith.”³⁰

7. Love addresses the specific use of the statement:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Now what use does the Board make of this Statement? Simply this: When candidates come to Richmond for examination concerning their religious experience, faith and call to mission work, this Statement is placed in their hands for a careful reading before they appear before the Board, designated to conduct the examination using this Statement as a basis for it. We stated explicitly in our report to the Convention, “The Board does not require anyone to sign it,” but does present it to all volunteers for mission service when they are appointed to any field by the Board, and it expects all such to respect it in their teaching and practice on the mission field.” The Board has had much experience in examining candidates, and not infrequently this important matter has been slighted under pressure of busy Board sessions. A deliberate conclusion was reached, therefore, that unless with the growing number of missionaries this Board is sending out, we are going to have confusion and discord on the mission field, preparation must be made for an examination of candidates which really amounts to something.³¹

8. Love alludes to an apparent charge circulating among some that the committee offering the report of the Foreign Mission Board at the 1920 Southern Baptist Convention had taken issue with the statement and had watered it down by annulling “the Board’s decision to require candidates to sign this Statement.”³² He counters this charge: “As a matter of fact neither the committee nor the Convention did any such thing. Both the committee and the Convention simply ratified the Board’s report, the committee calling attention to the Board’s own words that missionaries were not required to sign the Statement of Belief.”³³

9. Finally, Love argues that the statement has already been effectively used since June 1919 to the satisfaction of board members, candidates, and visitors.

In conclusion, Love argues that the statement is merely “the very things we preach from Sabbath to Sabbath.”³⁴ He contends, “This Statement is not, therefore, something new, but that which is new and revolutionary is criticism of sch [*sic*] a statement of Baptist faith.”³⁵ He again stresses the board’s “peculiar attachment for young people” and its appointment “to secure the proclamation of a Christian message.”³⁶

A few months later the Virginia Baptist newspaper ran a controversial note about a recent theological investigation of a mission candidate in a non-Southern Baptist context.³⁷ Though the author (editor R. H. Pitt) cites the *Herald’s* previous contention that “Baptist Boards or other organizations ought to be very careful not to set up formal, written creeds as final and

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 15.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Untitled editorial, *The Religious Herald* (September 30, 1920): 11.

authoritative,” he also holds that “they may and indeed ought to guard, in their appointments and their administration, the fundamentals of Christian and denominational faith. This must, of course, be done tactfully and considerately, but it must be done.³⁸ To buttress this contention, the author cites a reliable “eye-witness and ear-witness” account of a recent interview of a mission candidate:

A young man, a graduate of a Baptist college and of a Baptist theological seminary, was among those under examination. One of the examiners said to him: “You are offering to go among a heathen people to preach the gospel of Christ?” Without a moment’s hesitation, the young candidate for the foreign field answered: “He is divine just as you and I are divine, no more, no less.” A lively discussion followed and there were outspoken opposition to the appointment, but a majority of the examining committee voted to send him.³⁹

The author concludes by affirming the accuracy of this interchange (“It really happened”), no matter how audacious it might appear to his conservative readers, but he also makes plain that “it did not happen in Southern Baptist territory.”⁴⁰

Despite the disclaimer that the reported interview did not happen among Southern Baptist, J.F. Love felt compelled to respond a few weeks later.⁴¹ He notes that he had been thinking “calmly and seriously” about the *Herald* article.⁴² He then frankly acknowledges his initial disappointment that “the editor did not tell his readers the name of the mission board who appointed this young man to mission service,” but then confides that, upon further reflection, this enables him “to discuss the matter impersonally.”⁴³

Love notes that the conditions on the foreign fields are marked by “human depravity and a moral deadness which nothing but the revitalizing gospel of Christ and divine energy can overcome.”⁴⁴ Under such circumstances, Love concludes:

There is absolutely no security for the gospel of Christ, no way of promoting a sound gospel evangelism on the foreign field if men who are sent to the field either as preachers or teacher, hold loose views concerning the fundamental and the structural elements of the evangelical gospel.⁴⁵

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ J. F. Love, “A Serious Matter,” *The Religious Herald* (October 21, 1920): 8.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

He points out that there are “strong influences against a pure gospel” on the mission field.⁴⁶ Among the influences which Love cites are “the young foreigners” who attend American universities and return “to proclaim with the authority of scholars to their countrymen the philosophical, critical and materialistic views of religion which in the home land vex and challenge the giant advocates of orthodoxy.”⁴⁷ This situation is “bad enough and thrusts a great burden” on orthodox missionaries preaching “the gospel in its simplicity,” but when these “foreign students” are reinforced by missionaries “who share their views and carry under the auspices of mission boards the radicalism of the university into the missionary circles,” then “the case becomes desperate.”⁴⁸ Love confides:

Many missionaries have told me on my visits to the mission fields and other have written, “See that the Foreign Mission Board takes greater care in the examination of its candidates and sends to the field men and women who believe the gospel as Southern Baptists hold it, and who will help us propagate it and defend it on the mission field.”⁴⁹

He further laments that “certain theological seminaries take no pains to ground their students in the evangelical faith” and expresses sympathy for “faithful missionaries” who “are compelled to welcome to their ranks on the fields those who at their appointment deny that which is fundamental to missions.”⁵⁰ Love clearly supports the need for doctrinal clarity and accountability among Southern Baptist missionaries.

Love’s concern for doctrinal safeguards is also clear in a *Herald* article, “Awakening to the Danger on the Foreign Field,” that appeared a few months later.⁵¹ In this article, Love shares the statement of “The Bible Union of China,” adopted “by 150 missionaries in Kuling, China.”⁵² Among other things, the framers of this statement called on their supporters “to represent to our home boards and supporters the vital importance of accepting for missionary service only such candidates as will handle aright the word of truth.”⁵³ Love says that the statement “speaks for itself, and should be an effectual warning at home and secure protection for the mission field.”⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *The Religious Herald* December 9, 1920): 9.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

He notes that the “radicalism” that has assaulted the churches at home is now attacking “the young mission churches.”⁵⁵ The board’s recording secretary forcefully states:

The man who does not know that the time is fully upon us when mission boards must take the greatest care in inquiring into doctrinal views of candidates for missionary appointment has indeed a limited knowledge of the things which some schools are teaching mission volunteers, and the trouble which the men of unseasoned faith are stirring up on mission fields. Mission boards are under no more solemn obligation to the men and women on the fields who are jealous for the gospel and wish faithfully to represent the men and women at home who have love enough for it to finance it, than they are to send out those only who will faithfully re-enforce such men and women. It should never have been necessary for faithful missionaries to appeal to home societies to protect them and the cause from such untempered missionary material as some who have been sent to the field.⁵⁶

It is clear from Love’s comments that the fundamentalist-modernist controversy had reached the mission field, and that he saw it as an urgent concern to safeguard the integrity of the Southern Baptist witness. Love’s comments, no doubt, also come in defense of the Board’s adoption of the *1919 Statement of Belief*.

Conclusion

What does this survey of the *1919 Statement of Belief* adopted by the Foreign Mission Board reveal about Southern Baptist traditions for setting confessional boundaries for missionaries? First, the thirteen-point statement is not a particularly dynamic doctrinal document. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that the statement did not endure as the confessional yardstick for evaluating mission candidates. It does not have the fullness of the New Hampshire Confession that would later become the foundation for the *Baptist Faith and Message*.⁵⁷ Its particular

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Admittedly, the *1925 BFM* was never used as the confessional standard by the Foreign Mission Board. The *BFM* began to be used as an instrument to evaluate doctrinal accountability beginning with its 1963 revision. The following summary appears on the International Mission Board website, www.img.org: “How the IMB Has Used the *Baptist Faith and Message*”:

1960—The FMB did not require any affirmation of *The Baptist Faith and Message (BFM)* that was adopted by the SBC in 1925, but did require candidates to write out their basic statement of beliefs. In addition, candidates were asked to respond to the following question in their written application: “Are your doctrinal beliefs and views of church government such that you can cordially cooperate with the officers and missionaries of your denomination?”

1963—The FMB began sending a copy of the *BFM* (1963) to all candidates. Each candidate had to write, in their own words, his or her beliefs on the major doctrines covered in the *BFM*. The candidate’s beliefs were then covered during interviews at several stages in the process.

1968—Candidates’ doctrinal statements began to be included in the composite reports sent to the trustee committee.

weaknesses include the article on Scripture and the overtly Arminian slant of the document, particularly in its defense of conditional election and its omission of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

Second, the *1919 Statement of Belief* does give evidence that doctrinal accountability for Southern Baptist missionaries is not a novel notion which has only emerged in recent days. Rather, it has deep roots in the practice of missionary appointment by the Foreign Mission Board. The 1919 doctrinal statement was no doubt precipitated by the fundamentalist-modernist debates of the early part of the twentieth century. These same concerns would lead to the formulation of the first *Baptist Faith and Message*, or the “Memphis Articles,” in 1925.

Even before the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the twentieth century, however, Southern Baptists had given evidence of concern over doctrinal issues in missionary appointment. The premier example would be the celebrated rejection by the Foreign Mission Board of John Stout and T. P. Bell as missionary candidates in 1881. The disputed issue was apparently their unwillingness to espouse “a theory of verbal plenary inspiration.”⁵⁸ A five-member committee of the Board reviewed statements by the candidates concerning their views

1970—The candidates’ Christian beliefs statement was expanded to include more basic doctrines. In addition, in their written applications, they were asked to respond to two related questions: “Are your doctrinal beliefs in substantial agreement with those printed in *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1963) and adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963? Are your views of church government such that you can cooperate with the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention?”

1975—In writing their Christian beliefs statement, candidates were asked to respond to the following questions: “Are you familiar with the contents of the *Baptist Faith and Message*? Are you in agreement with this statement? Please cite and explain any areas or differences.”

1980—The *BFM* continued to be sent out to all candidates. The candidates’ beliefs continued to be covered during interviews.

1990—The Sharing of the Christian Beliefs form was expanded to three pages and covered the major doctrines listed in the *BFM*. The *BFM* questions were changed to the following: “When did you last read *The Baptist Faith and Message*? _____(Date) Are you in agreement with this statement? (Yes or No) If ‘no,’ attach a separate sheet of paper citing and explaining any area of difference.” Candidates’ beliefs continued to be reviewed during interviews by two different candidate consultants.

1996—The *BFM* questions on the Sharing of Christian Beliefs form were changed to the following: “I have read and am in agreement with *The Baptist Faith and Message*. (Yes or No) I have read and am in agreement with the IMB’s Vision, Mission and Basic Principles Statement. (Yes or No) If ‘no,’ attach a separate sheet of paper citing and explaining any area of difference.”

1998—The IMB began sending copies of the revised *BFM* (1998) to all candidates.

2000—The IMB began sending copies of the revised *BFM* (2000) to all candidates.

2001—The IMB begins asking all candidates to respond to the following two affirmations: “I have read and am agreement with the current *Baptist Faith and Message*. (Yes or No) If ‘no,’ please cite any area of difference. In accountability to the International Mission Board and Southern Baptists, I agree to carry out my responsibilities in accordance with and not contrary to the current *Baptist Faith and Message* as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention (Yes or No).”

⁵⁸ Estep, *Whole Gospel, Whole World*, 137.

on inspiration and protests, by Stout in particular, “regarding the freedom to teach his views on the mission field.”⁵⁹ The resolution adopted by the board in response to the committee’s recommendation is enlightening:

Whereas Rev. John Stout has candidly and courteously presented to the Board of Foreign Missions his views on Inspiration; and whereas his views do not seem to the Board to be in accord with the views commonly held by the constituency of the Southern Baptist Convention; and whereas Bro. Stout reduces the question between himself and the Board to the simple point whether the Board will give their consent to teach or print, if thought advisable by him, these views as a missionary of the Board; therefore,

1. Resolved, that, while the Board distinctly and emphatically disclaim the least right over the conscience or Christian liberty of any man, they have no right to consent to any missionary teaching or printing anything regarded by them as contrary to the commonly received doctrinal views of the constituency of the Southern Baptist Convention.

2. Resolved, that while the discovery of this difference in views fills the Board with unfeigned regret, they rejoice at the fraternal spirit manifested by Bro. Stout in the assurance that whatever be the issue of this difference, he shall ever be a fellow helper with the Board in giving the gospel to the heathen world.

*3. Resolved, that the Board having answered the inquiry of Bro. Stout in the same candor and Christian love that it was propounded by him, they refer the matter back to him for his decision which they await with the deepest interest.*⁶⁰

The ultimate outcome was the Board’s removal of both Stout and Bell from consideration for appointment as missionaries.⁶¹ This earlier incident demonstrates again that concern for doctrinal purity among missionary candidates is not a recent issue in Southern Baptist life.

Third, the adoption of the thirteen-point doctrinal statement gives historical evidence that the Foreign Mission Board did not think it inappropriate to expect doctrinal conformity to the new *Statement of Belief*, even of those who had been appointed before the conception of the document. Not only was acceptance “essential” for new missionaries, but it was also directed that a copy be sent to each missionary already on the field. Although the statement itself argues that the soul is “free to worship after its own dictates” (article XII), it does not see any contradiction in requiring conformity to classical evangelical understandings of the faith. In article X on the ordinances, the document goes even so far as to require the missionary to affirm: “I will observe and teach these ordinances in accordance with the views and customs common among Southern Baptists.” The “soul freedom” that the *1919 Statement of Belief* affirms is the freedom from civil interference in the affairs of faith. It is by no means a *carte blanche* to believe whatever one chooses or to abandon evangelical doctrine.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 137–38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

J. F. Love's defense of the *1919 Statement of Belief* in both the *1920 SBC Annual* and the pages of *The Religious Herald* certainly gives evidence of controversy surrounding the adoption of the 1919 statement. There were obviously some who opposed any demand that candidates sign the statement, but there were also those who felt that the mere adoption of the statement did not go far enough. Concern for doctrinal clarity and integrity has long been significant part of the Southern Baptist mission endeavor.

The *1919 Statement of Belief* gives clear historic precedent for the recent actions of the International Mission Board or the Southern Baptist Convention. Missionaries are to be doctrinally accountable to the churches that send them out. Though the gospel is expressed in different ways in different cultural settings, timeless truths of doctrine transcend the cultural context and are universally valid wherever the Scriptures are received as the norm for "faith and practice." Jerry Rankin might well say of the controversy surrounding the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* what J. F. Love said years ago: "This Statement is not, therefore, something new, but that which is new and revolutionary is criticism of sch [sic] a s statement of Baptist Faith."⁶²

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⁶² "The Statement of Belief," *The Religious Herald* (July 8, 1920): 15.