

SOURCES OF THE FIRST CALVINISTIC BAPTIST CONFESSION OF FAITH.

W. J. MCGLOTHLIN, PH.D., D.D., SOUTHERN BAPTIST
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

In the address "To the Judicious and Impartial Reader" prefixed to the great London Baptist Confession, known in America as the Philadelphia Confession, the compilers, after pointing out the fact that the Congregationalists had used the Westminster Confession with necessary modifications to produce their Savoy Articles, state that

"We did in like manner conclude it best to follow their [that is the Congregational] example, in making use of the very same words with them both, in those articles (which are very many) wherein our faith and doctrine is the same with theirs. And this we did, the more abundantly to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion, as also with many others whose orthodox confessions have been published to the world, on behalf of the Protestants in diverse nations and cities; and also to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but to readily acquiesce in that form of sound words which hath been, in consent with holy scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring before God, angels, and men, our hearty agreement with them, in that wholesome Protestant doctrine, which, with so clear evidence of scriptures they have asserted. Some things, indeed, are in some places added, some terms omitted, and some few changed; but these alterations are of that nature, as that we need not doubt any charge or suspicion of unsoundness in the faith, from any of our brethren upon the account of them."*

*McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, pp. 224f.

Such is their own statement of the relation of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith to the Savoy Articles of the Congregationalists and the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians together with the motives that actuated them in thus leaning so heavily upon the work of their Protestant predecessors. The dependence of the Philadelphia Confession upon the Westminster has, therefore, long been known and recognized.

But it has been generally supposed that the first Calvinistic Baptist Confession, that drawn up by representatives of seven churches, in London in 1644, and a revised edition of which was presented to Parliament in 1646, was an independent production. There was no Calvinistic Baptist model to follow, and nothing is said in any of the introductory or concluding matter of any dependence or borrowing. So far as known neither contemporaries nor subsequent historians have pointed out any dependence on earlier confessions, and yet it now transpires that this confession leaned almost as heavily on earlier Congregational confessions as the Philadelphia Confession on the Westminster and the Savoy Articles.

The ascertainable facts seem to be about as follows :

In 1596, the London-Amsterdam (Congregational) church published a confession "to stop the mouths of impious and unreasonable men."* This served as the confession of the Congregational churches until the publication of the Savoy Articles in 1658, and was in general circulation among them until that time. The members of the first seven Calvinistic Baptist churches of London had been Congregationalists, at least most of them, and were naturally more or less familiar with and attached to the Congregational Confession. When it became necessary to state their newly adopted Baptist views it was perfectly natural for them to use the confession with

*Quotations of Congregational Confessions are taken from Walker's "Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism"; those on Baptist Confessions from McGlothlin's "Baptist Confessions of Faith."

which they were familiar as the basis of the new statement so far as that was possible. So little had they changed their convictions about things other than the subject and mode of baptism that they could take the major portion of their new confession almost bodily from the old one with which they were already familiar. The new Baptist Confession had fifty-three articles, of which twenty-nine were taken from the old Congregational Confession. These are articles I—XI, XIII, XV, XVII, XIX, XX, XXXIII—XXXV, XLII—XLVIII, L—LII. Three additional articles were taken from a statement of fourteen "Points of Difference" between the Congregationalists and the Church of England submitted to James I, at his accession to the English throne in 1603. These are XXXVI—XXXVIII. Decidedly more than half of the Baptist Confession, or to be exact, thirty-two out of fifty-three articles, were thus derived from these two existing statements of Congregational faith. More than half of the Congregational Confession, which had forty-five articles, was used. The articles thus incorporated were 1-19, 24-26, 34, 36, 38, 41-44. The articles taken from the "Points of Difference" were 5-7.

None of these articles were verbatim repetitions of those found in the Congregational documents, but most of the changes are purely verbal—changes in the order of words, in spelling and capitalization, the substitution of synonymous terms, etc. Many of these changes are made on no recognizable principle, but often appear as if they were the result of an effort to reproduce the articles from memory. In about twenty instances the articles were taken over almost verbatim, while in the remaining cases there were more or less extensive and important changes made by the omission or addition of phrases, clauses or sentences. In some cases there were both omissions and additions to the same article.

In order to show clearly how closely the Baptist Confession reproduces the Congregational a few articles are

shown below in parallel columns, the Congregational original on the left, the Baptist modification on the right:

CONGREGATIONAL.

Art. 6—1596.

That this therefore only is lyfe eternall to knowv the only true God, & vvhom hee hath sent into the vworld Iesus Christ. And that on the contrarie the Lord vvill render vengeance in flaming fire vnto them that knowv not God, & vvich obey not the Gospell of our Lord Iesus Christ.

Art. 36—1596.

That thus beeing rightly gathered, established, and still proceeding in Christian communion & obedience of the Gospell of Christ, none is to separate for falts and corruptions which may and so long as the Church consisteth of mortall men, will fall out & arise among them, even in a true constituted Church, but by due order to seeke redresse thereof.

Art. 38—1596.

That though Congregations bee thus distinct and severall bodyes, every one as a compact Citie in it self, yet are they all to walke by one and the same rule, & by all meanes convenient to haue the counsell and help one of another in all needfull affayres of the Church, as members of one body in the common Faith, vnder Christ their head.

BAPTIST.

Art. VI—1644.

This therefore is life eternall, to know the onely true God, and whom he hath sent Jesus Christ. And on the contrary the Lord will render vengeance in flaming fire to them that know not God, and obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Art. XLVI—1644.

Thus being rightly gathered, established, and still proceeding in Christian communion, and obedience of the Gospel of Christ, none ought to separate for faults and corruptions, which may, and as long as the Church consists of men subject to failings, will fall out and arise amongst them, even in true constituted Churches, untill they have in due order sought redresse thereof.

Art. XLVII—1644.

And although the particular Congregations be distinct and severall Bodies, every one a compact and knit Citie in it selfe; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the counsell and help one of another in all needfull affaires of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their onely Lord.

The above quotations will serve to show how nearly identical many of the articles are. It will also be observed that the Baptists have considerably improved the English of their distinguished Congregational predecessors.

In some cases only parts of articles were taken, the change of circumstances or the difference in beliefs rendering the remainder unsuited to the Baptist Confession. This will be seen in the following :

CONGREGATIONAL.**Article 6—1603.**

That the Ministers aforesaid being lawfully called by the Church where they are to administer, ought to continue in their functions according to Gods ordinance, and carefully to feed the flock of Christ committed vnto them, being not inioyned or suffered to beare Civill offices withall, neither burthened with the execution of Civill affaires, as the celebration of marriage, burying the dead, &c., which things belong aswell to those without as within the Church.

BAPTIST.**Art. XXXVII—1644.**

That the Ministers aforesaid, lawfully called by the Church, where they are to administer, ought to continue in their calling, according to Gods Ordinance, and carefully to feed the flock of Christ committed to them, not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind.

There is observable in the Baptist work a disposition to simplify the Confession by the omission of abstruse theological terms, and theological ideas not well authenticated in Scripture. For example in article 2, on the Trinity the usual statement that there are "three distinct persons coeternall, coequall, & coessential, beeing every one of them one & the same God," etc., is changed into the Scriptural statement that "In this God-head, there is the Father, the Sonne, and the Spirit; being every one of them one and the same God," etc.

The usual Calvinistic statement on decrees was that God had ordained some men *and angels* to eternal life. The Baptists modified this by omitting *angels*, saying nothing about them in connection with God's decrees.

There is a very clear and definite softening of the Calvinism of the Congregational Confession in article 3. On the point of election the article reads as follows:

"And touching his cheefest Creatures that God hath in Christ before the foundation of the world, ac-

ording to the good pleasure of his will, ordeyned some men and Angells, to eternall lyfe to bee accomplished through Iesus Christ, to the prayse of the glorie of his grace. And on thother hand hath likewise before of old according to his iust purpose ordeined other both Angells and men, toe ternall condemnation, to bee accomplished through their own corruption to the prayse of his iustice.”

This statement is changed by the Baptists to read as follows:

“And touching his creature man, God had in Christ before the foundation of the world, according to the good pleasure of his will, foreordained some men to eternall life through Iesus Christ, to the praise and glory of his grace, leaving the rest in their sinne to their just condemnation, to the praise of his Justice.”

Only one other change will be noted, and that one seems to indicate a rather striking difference in the theological viewpoint of the respective framers of the two confessions. It has to do with the effect of the atoning death of Christ. In regard to Christ's death it is said in article 14 of the Congregational Confession, “that touching his Priesthood, bein consecrated, hee hath appeered once to put avvay sinne, by offering & sacrificing of himself; and to this end hath fully performed and suffred all those things, by which God through the blood of that his crosse, in an acceptable sacrifice, might bee reconciled to his elect.”

The Baptists make the latter part of this excerpt read as follows: “Suffered all those things by which God, through the blood of that his Crosse in an acceptable sacrifice, might reconcile his elect onely.” That is th Congregationalists make the death of Christ reconcile God to his elect, while the Baptists make that death reconcile the elect to God. Much modern theological discussion is involved in this difference of view.

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Of the articles in the Congregational Confession which the Baptists have omitted altogether, Articles 20-23, deal with the ministry and its relation to the church and to Scripture; Articles 27-33 treat of the Church of England and the necessity of leaving it; Articles 35 and 37 treat of baptism and the supper; Articles 39 and 40 treat of the authority and religious duties of the magistrates, declaring that they ought to pull down the Church of England and build up a pure Scriptural Church, and Article 45 declares that they have no objection to the use of the Lord's prayer.

Of the twenty-one articles which the Baptists added Articles XII, XIV, XVI and XVIII treat of Christ and his offices, simply enlarging on these points; Article XXI limits the benefits of Christ's death to the elect, XXII defines faith, XXIII asserts the perseverance of the saints, XXIV declares the sinner is wholly passive in the process of salvation, XXV to XXXII assert the freedom of the gospel offer, progressive sanctification through the Spirit, justification, divine help in the affairs of life, etc. Articles XXXIX to XLI state very clearly and forcefully the Baptist position on the various questions related to baptism.

Articles XLVIII and XLIX are on civil government and are in sharp contrast to the Congregational demand that the government should interfere in religious matters. Robert Browne, the founder of the Congregationalists, had very clearly enunciated the principle of religious freedom, which he had doubtless imbibed from the Anabaptists with whom he had been in contact. Later Congregationalists, however, wavered for some years, always demanding freedom for themselves, but failing to see that this demand involved the granting of freedom to others. In article 39 of the Confession of 1596, they declare it to be the duty of civil magistrates "to suppress and root out by their authoritie all false ministeries, voluntarie Relligions and counterfeyt worship of God, to abolish and

destroy the Idoll Temples And on the other hand to establish & mayntein by their lawes every part of Gods word his pure Relligion and true ministerie” No such doctrine as this is found in this or any other Baptist confession.

This will be sufficient to show that these first English Calvinistic Baptists leaned very heavily on the work of the earlier Congregationalists in the formulation of their first confession. Possibly all of them had come out of Congregational churches, and hence were familiar with their confessions. But they also show marked independence, modifying, omitting, adding to, as was necessary to express their new convictions. In this respect they were true pioneers of all the Baptists since their day; for it has been characteristic of later Baptists to draw up many confessions, but feel bound by none of them. They have adapted, adopted, discarded, built new, confessions as seemed best at the time. In this way they have escaped the blight of theological dry rot, have preserved their intellectual and spiritual freedom, have responded readily to changes in theological atmosphere and have been able to keep their eyes open to the light from whatever source it has come.