

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND LONDON CONFESSION OF FAITH.

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What has come to be known as the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith finds its origin among a distinct group of Seventeenth- Century English Separatists who later would become known as Particular Baptists.¹

The key to understanding the Second London Confession begins with first considering the history which preceded it spanning roughly three decades. Specifically, as that history is connected to the original seven Particular Baptist churches within London that proved to be instrumental in its publication.

Beginning with the organization of their very first church during the 1630s they were regarded as non-conformist gatherings,² during a time when religious toleration was virtually unheard of. Therefore, their very existence was not only illegal but also accompanied by many unknown hazards.

Further compounding their already difficult situation was the fact they were falsely accused by others of

“...holding Free-will, Falling away from grace, denying Originall sinne, disclaiming of Magistracy, denying to assist them [Magistracy] either in persons or in purse in any of their lawfull Commands, doing acts unseemly in the dispensing of the Ordinance of Baptism not to be named among Christians.”³

As one historian rightly observed, “no heresy was too gross to attribute to them, no practice too wicked...”⁴

Surrounded by such conditions, it is no surprise their churches were often targeted as objects of great suspicion, and why not a few of their members suffered cruel treatment at the hands of others.⁵

Relentless slander by their opponents in both pulpit and print evidenced that these early Calvinistic Separatists were being confused on the one hand with the theological errors of the

¹ They were Calvinistic Separatists, who over time asserted that Christian baptism should be administered by immersion to only those with a credible profession of faith. To learn more about the early identity and origin of these separatists, one must acquaint themselves with: Matthew C. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals, Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

² This contemptible title was given to Protestants who did not “conform” to the governance and practice of the established Church of England.

³ Quoted from the preface of their First Confession of Faith: *A Confession of Faith of Seven Congregations or Churches of Christ in London, which are commonly (but unjustly) called Anabaptists*, Preface (London, 1646).

⁴ E.B. Underhill, *Confessions of Faith of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century* (London, UK: The Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), vii.

⁵ William Kiffi[e]n, a signer of both the First and Second confessions shares an account of being stoned after attending a secret church meeting. William Orme, *Remarkable passages in the life of William Kiffin written by himself* (Knightstown, IN: Particular Baptist Heritage Books, 2022), 24.

General Baptists,⁶ and on the other hand the political extremes of the Munster Anabaptists.⁷ Such misunderstandings were not only untrue but also carried with them immediate dangers of imprisonment and possibly the death sentence.

Thus, these London churches could not afford to delay in confronting the rumors and accusations being leveled against them. Utilizing inter-congregational cooperation, they would unite and employ a proven defense method typical of the era, a written confession of their faith, which resulted in the First London Baptist Confession in the year 1644.

By doing so, their goal to “demonstrate once and for all their fundamental solidarity with the international Calvinist community”⁸ would be realized, while at the same time clarifying their churches’ theological distinctives.

To accomplish their initial confessional task, historians have demonstrated that they did not believe it necessary to abandon the doctrinal foundations they shared with other orthodox Calvinists. They didn’t view themselves as innovators, but rather defenders of truths received from those who had gone a generation before them.

One such example is the work of B.R. White, who offers helpful insights explaining how the original authors of the First London Confession made ample use of the *English Separatist Confession of 1596*.⁹ Additionally, James Renihan convincingly offers other possible influences such as William Ames’ *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*; *The Points of Difference* believed to be coauthored by William Ainsworth, and the *Confession of My Faith* penned by none other than fellow Particular Baptist John Spilsbury.¹⁰

This explains why both the First and Second London Confessions find notable accord with the literal and contextual interpretation of Scripture which harmonizes within the analogy of faith as established by the Reformers.

The use of such resources, in the compilation of their First London Confession, proved these churches to be faithful and responsible stewards of established biblical truth, especially when preparing a Confession of Faith.

Being a “direct product of the [foregone] Reformation,”¹¹ they carefully tested all former traditions and teachings in light of Holy Scripture; and if necessary, reformed that which Scripture could not warrant and Christian conscience could not yield.

Incredibly, both their Confessions of Faith (1st and 2nd London Confessions) were established upon the very same theological principles which previous Protestant reformers constructed theirs.

⁶ Arminian Separatists who asserted that Christian baptism should be administered to only those with a credible profession.

⁷ Munster Anabaptists “Munsterites” a radical sect led by the fanaticism of Jan Matthijs and Jan van Leyden.

⁸ Michael A. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys, Keach-Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage* (Leeds, UK: Reformation Trust Today, 1996), 34.

⁹ B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London, UK: Baptist Historical Society-Great Britain, 1963), 62.

¹⁰ James Renihan, ed., *True Confessions: Baptist Documents in the Reformed Family* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2004).

¹¹ Michael A.G. Haykin, ed., *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 15.

However, for these heirs of the reformation, a consistent and logical application of such principles lead them to mature doctrinal reforms. Reforms which went much further than their predecessors in addressing the lingering errors among English Protestantism, infant baptism, and compulsory religion by force.¹²

Thus, their initial First London Confession of Faith can be rightfully considered a brave and noble effort in the historical progress of the former Protestant Reformation. Perhaps this is the reason why John Quincy Adams later would write of the Baptists, they should be regarded as “thorough reformers.”¹³

The First London Confession was published in the year 1644 during a time of considerable theological debate. Upon its debut critics “were agreeably surprised to discover how close the Particular Baptists were to Puritan orthodoxy.”¹⁴ However, there was a notable critique written by one of the King’s own chaplains.¹⁵ In it, among other things, he states that the confession lacked clarity regarding how the Particular Baptists viewed the Magistrate’s role and place in the affairs of religion. It’s likely that this critique, in combination with their own desire to be clearly understood, is what compelled the London churches to make significant revisions and republish a second edition of the confession in 1646.¹⁶

This revised edition benefited from a supporting document published in the same year entitled “An Appendix to a Confession of Faith” written by Benjamin Cox[e].¹⁷

Mr. Cox[e], who likely was involved in the confession’s revisions, felt it necessary to provide “*a more full Declaration of the Faith and Judgment of Baptized Believers*”¹⁸ to avoid future misunderstandings and further substantiate their orthodoxy.

In following years, the confession would undergo several more editions that contained slight corrections, none of which resulted in significant alterations. The third edition would be published in 1651 and a fourth in 1652. A fifth edition is recorded as being printed in 1653 by a church “usually meeting at Leith and Edinburgh”¹⁹ who were insisting upon their unity, in faith and order, with the London churches.²⁰

¹² Such as the National Covenant (1643-44) placing the authority of the Presbyterian/Parliamentary State-Church system over the consciences of its subjects in all matters of religion and faith.

¹³ John Quincy Adams, *Baptists: Thorough Reformers* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Robert Oliver, *Baptist Confession Making 1644 and 1689* (Unpublished paper presented to the Strict Baptist Historical Society, March 17, 1989).

¹⁵ Daniel Featly, *The Dippers dipt: or, the Anabaptists duck'd and plung'd over head and ears, at a Disputation in Southwark* (London, UK, 1645).

¹⁶ This explains the expanded footnote associated with Article 48, *Obedience to Government*.

¹⁷ Benjamin Cox[e], M.A. A graduate of Oxford University who later became a Particular Baptist minister and is recorded as having engaged Richard Baxter in a public debate regarding infant baptism. Afterward, Cox was imprisoned for his beliefs. See Thomas Crosby, *History of the English Baptists* (Lafayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1978 facsimile reprint) 1:220-221.

¹⁸ Subtitle to Cox’s Appendix.

¹⁹ John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register, 1794-7* (London: I.R., 1794), 361.

²⁰ Rippon, *Annual Register*, 361.

Approaching the end of the English Civil Wars (c.1642-51), the Particular Baptist churches along with other non-conformists enjoyed limited religious freedoms during the Commonwealth era (1649-1660). This welcomed toleration found its greatest expression during the time under Oliver Cromwell's tenure as Lord Protector of England (1653-58).

Subsequently, their churches began to multiply and appear throughout the Kingdom. In fact, "An association, or general assembly, of the churches in Somersetshire and adjacent counties, was in consequence formed."²¹

It would be during this favorable providence, that the First London Confession of Faith would further gain for these early Calvinistic Baptists a distinctive place in the life of their country as trusted, orthodox Christians and Englishmen.

Whatever restricted religious tolerations were enjoyed during the Commonwealth era, sadly they all would come to an end in year 1660 with the restoration of King Charles II from exile.

Shortly following his restoration, a series of laws were passed known collectively as the Clarendon Code which was intended to re-establish the Church of England as the sole religious authority and put an end to all dissenters and non-conformists.

The peace and growth of these early Particular Baptist churches was of course immediately impacted as they began to hold undercover conventicles²². On one occasion during "a conventicle of members from Petty France"²³, preached to by Nehemiah Coxe, was disrupted by the authorities. As a result, Widow Elizabeth Nightingale of Bishopgate was prosecuted for holding a conventicle in her house."²⁴

The troubles Particular Baptist churches and their early associations were facing would be further aggravated, not from without but from within, by a man named Thomas Collier (d.1691) a Baptist pastor, church planter, and author.

Collier was, by all means, a prominent leader among the West Country²⁵ Particular Baptist churches and in 1674 he caused not a small disruption among all Particular Baptists with a work he entitled *An Additional Word to the Body of Divinity*.²⁶

"Among other things in this work, he taught that God exists in an 'increated' heavens, that Christ died for the universe, that man is able to believe the gospel of his own power, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit,

²¹ Underhill, *Confessions of Faith*, xi; B.R. White, "The Organisation of the Particular Baptists 1644-1660" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27, no. 2 (1966): 209. These works demonstrate "General Meetings" being held as early as 1650.

²² Secret, unlawful religious meetings.

²³ An early and significant Particular Baptist Church.

²⁴ Cited by T.E. Dowley, *A London Congregation During the Great Persecution: Petty France Particular Baptist Church, 1641-1688*, Baptist Quarterly 27.5 (January 1978), 236.

²⁵ Identifying a large area of south-western England.

²⁶ Thomas Collier, *An Additional Word to the Body of Divinity, or Confession of Faith; Being the Substance of Christianity* (London: Printed for the Author, 1676).

that believers could lose their salvation, that salvation remained possible after death, and other heresies regarding the hypostatic union²⁷ of the Mediator, Jesus Christ, asserting that God the Son was a creature.”²⁸

Collier’s influence and popularity among the Particular Baptist churches was well known, even outside Baptist church circles, which made the whole situation potentially explosive.

The likelihood that his erroneous views could be confused with that of the other churches necessitated a response to (1) retrieve a fallen brother (2) reaffirm their theological orthodoxy and (3) insulate themselves from Collier’s continued influence.

As was the case in the creation of their First Confession of Faith, the Particular Baptists wisely employed a familiar hallmark among their churches regarding how to respond to Collier’s heresies - congregational cooperation.

Upon the request of several regional pastors and some of the members of Collier’s church, elders from various Particular Baptist churches attempted to amicably retrieve Collier and all those who agreed with him from their firmly held heretical doctrines.

Finally in 1677, and only after their biblical attempts of rescuing Collier and his followers failed, several elders and messengers decidedly cooperated with and endorsed a written response to Collier authored by Nehemiah Coxe and sent the response to Collier’s church.²⁹

Collier wasted no time with a reply. In it was evidenced no repentance, but rather scorn toward Coxe’s attack. His reply made clear he had no intention of recanting from his errors and furthermore was willing and able to continue the controversy into the unforeseeable future if they so desired.

Collier’s obstinacy was to the lament of those in Collier’s church who were opposed to his heresies and afterward who were advised by the elders and messengers of the London churches to reject Collier and come out from among those who supported him.

This controversy with Thomas Collier has reasonably been demonstrated by Baptist historians to play an integral part in our understanding of why there was a need for the Particular Baptists to publish the Second London Confession.³⁰

By this time in 1677 over thirty years had passed since the publication of their First London Confession, and it appears that the First London Confession had become scarce, so much so, that one of the key subscribers [Benjamin Keach] to the Second Confession states “that he had not previously seen the earlier document.”³¹

²⁷ Hypostatic union is a technical term in Christian theology to describe the union of Christ’s humanity and divinity in one hypostasis, or individual existence.

²⁸ Samuel Renihan, *The Petty France Church (Part 1)* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist Studies, 2019), 97 n.5.

²⁹ Nehemiah Coxe, *Vindiciae Veritatis, Or a Confutation of the Heresies and Gross Errors Asserted by Thomas Collier in his Additional Word to his Body of Divinity* (London: Nath. Ponder, 1677).

³⁰ Samuel Renihan, *The Petty France Church*, 103-104; Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach*, 68.

³¹ Benjamin Keach, “To all the Baptized Churches and faithful Brethren in England and Wales, Christian Salutations” in *Faith and Life for Baptists*, ed. James Renihan (Palmdale: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2016), 109.

The original preface to the Second Confession also acknowledges “...that Confession [i.e. the First London Confession] [was] not now commonly to be had”³²

It is somewhat difficult for the reader to fully appreciate why and how such an important document could have fallen into such scarcity. To do so, one must recall that keeping something in print during the Seventeenth Century was not only a time-consuming process but would have been very expensive for these poor churches.

Thus, the scarcity of the First Confession along with the recent doctrinal controversy with Collier made it necessary for the broader Particular Baptist community of churches to cooperate with one another once again “...to express ourselves [themselves] the more fully, and distinctly...”³³

Therefore, in the year 1677 “elders and brethren of many congregations...in London and the Country”³⁴ affirmed what has become known as The Second London Confession of Faith (popularly referred to as the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith). The 1677 edition would be published anonymously due to the ongoing acts of oppression against all non-conformists.

At first glance, the Second London Confession is notably different from the First, specifically in its structure and formatting. Under closer examination, however, the substance of its theology remained the same “...forasmuch as our method, and manner of expressing our sentiments, in this, doth vary from the former [i.e. the First London Confession]... the substance of the matter is the same”.³⁵

Admittedly, over the previous three decades, these churches did experience some change (a new generation of leaders, many new churches, scruples over secondary issues, etc.) however from the preface to the Second Confession, it’s clear that they themselves saw no fundamental discontinuity between their First Confession and their Second.

Such continuity should not be surprising, especially when we take into consideration that five of the seven churches which signed the First Confession were involved with, and signatories to the Second Confession.

Notably, their chosen ‘method, and manner of expressing [their] sentiments’ followed that of two previously published reformed confessions which flow out of Elizabethan Puritanism: the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 (Presbyterian) and the 1658 Savoy Declaration and Platform of Polity (Congregational). A Comparison of these three confessions³⁶ reveals that the editors of the Second London Confession³⁷ follow the Savoy in almost every instance where the Savoy differs from the Westminster.

³² From the original Preface, *A Confession of Faith Put Forth by the Elders and Brethren of Many Congregations of Christians (Baptized upon Profession of their Faith) in London and the Country* (London: n.p., 1677).

³³ *A Confession of Faith*, Preface.

³⁴ *A Confession of Faith*, Preface.

³⁵ *A Confession of Faith*, Preface.

³⁶ James Renihan, *True Confessions*.

³⁷ Samuel Renihan *The Petty France Church*, 104; James Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675-1705* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 22-26. These works reasonably demonstrate that Nehemiah Cox and William Collins, co-pastors of the Petty France church, were the original editors.

What was it that the Particular Baptist churches hoped to accomplish by incorporating the Westminster and the Savoy confessions into their own?

“...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 divers Nations and Cities...”³⁸

Such a statement evidences what they desired to accomplish, which was, to be identified within the broad stream of English, Reformed, Confessional Christianity and demonstrate that they had

“no itch to clogge[sp] Religion with new words, but do readily acquiesce in that form of sound words, which hath been, in consent with the holy Scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring before God, Angels, & Men, our hearty agreement with them, in that wholesome Protestant Doctrine.”³⁹

The irenic temperament of the Second London Confession’s preface toward their fellow Christians ought not to be considered a softening of their convictions regarding that which caused them to differ from their fellow Protestants in the first place.

As with their First London Confession, when it was necessary to depart from others for the sake of truth and their conscious, they readily did so in the Second London Confession. Upon such points of difference, whenever it occurs, the Particular Baptists reveal their own valuable and distinct contribution to Christian Theology.

The overall significance of the Second London Confession would not become fully realized until the year 1689 when William and Mary assumed the throne in England and issued the Act of Toleration, thereby granting much broader religious acceptance and toleration amongst Protestantism.

Under the kind providence afforded them, the Particular Baptists traveled from diverse parts of England and Wales and gathered in London for a general assembly meeting which took place between Sept. 3-12, 1689.⁴⁰

The assembly represented over one hundred churches to publicly announce a “Confession we own, as containing the Doctrine of our Faith and Practice; and do desire that the Members of our Churches respectively do furnish themselves therewith.”⁴¹

Now being freely owned and widely distributed, the Second London confession quickly became the standard of orthodoxy among the Particular Baptist churches throughout the United Kingdom.

³⁸ *A Confession of Faith*, Preface.

³⁹ *A Confession of Faith*, Preface.

⁴⁰ To learn more about the details of the assembly’s activities see: James Renihan, *Faith and Life for Baptists*.

⁴¹ Letter sent out after the 1689 General Assembly. See James Renihan, *Faith and Life for Baptists*, 42.

Eventually, it would also become a recognized standard in the young United States through its adoption by the oldest Baptist Association in America, the Philadelphia Association.⁴²

Afterward many more Baptist Associations throughout the early States would embrace the Second London Confession of Faith as their own and it would serve as a bulwark for many years throughout the Eighteenth century.

The Second London Confession of Faith was believed by William Carey, a Particular Baptist minister who in 1793 was used of the Lord to bring the gospel to India.

While accounts exist of it being recognized by Baptist churches well into the Nineteenth century,⁴³ sadly it largely fell into complete disuse for much of the Twentieth century. That is until it experienced a revival of use beginning sometime during the 1960s. This revived recognition has triggered a welcomed reformation among Baptists who are continuing to recover their historical and theological heritage as it is connected to this great Confession of Faith.

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⁴² Associational records make clear that as early as 1724 the Association was employing the Confession throughout their churches.

⁴³ James H. Oliphant, *Principles and Practices of the Regular Baptists* (Knightstown, IN: Particular Baptist Heritage Books, 2022), 47.