

An Exploration of New Testament 'Confessions of Faith' that Set the Stage Towards the Definitive Nicene Creed (AD 325) and Later Baptist Confessions

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Abstract

The New Testament includes several Christological 'confessions of faith' which can assist Christians in outlining what they believe about Jesus. These vary in length from the short statement, "Jesus is Lord" (Rm 10:9), or "He is risen" (Mt 27:6), to a more elaborate confession in Philippians 2:6-11.

At baptismal preparation classes, there was a strong focus on teaching the candidates who Jesus was in the flesh and who He is now as the risen Lord. This can be seen in the Didache and the Old Roman Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord". This article will focus on the Christology aspect because this was the issue at stake leading up to the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

As the Christian community grew exponentially and encountered apologetic challenges from without – especially Gnosticism - and polemic challenges from within, relating to the person of Jesus Christ. While the monotheism of the Old Testament's understanding of Yahweh was clearly believed, the new challenge was to understand Jesus' Divinity. How was Jesus both Son of Man and Son of God? The newly converted Emperor Constantine noticed the dispute among Arian and Athanasian followers and feared the consequences

Baptists have preferred to speak of Confessions/Statements of Faith and preferred the Bible simplistically as a creed. As in the case of the Nicene Creed, there is the chance of stepping beyond the boundaries of Scripture. Difficulties can arise when credal ontological statements are made about Jesus when the New Testament focuses on relational language. This difficulty played out over many years and Councils – often with protracted division.

Keywords: Nicea, ontology, divinity, creed, confession of faith, Evangelical, unity, Arian, Athanasian. Condescension

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Contribution: Christology, Creed vs Confessions of faith, Affirming priority of Scripture, Baptists in world context, Biblical hermeneutics.

Introduction

The coming of Jesus Christ challenged and changed people's view of God forever: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (All quotations will be from the NIV unless otherwise stated). The question that needed answering was the same as that put in the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. The high priest of the Sanhedrin posed this question to Jesus: "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you the Christ, the Son of God" (Mt 26:63). Jesus replied affirmatively: "It is as you say." Similarly, Pilate, representing the Roman court, asked Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" 'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replied" (Mt 27:11).

The 'trinitarian' understanding of Yahweh God was not new. There was a clear understanding in the Old Testament. Starting in Genesis 1:2, "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was all over the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." While the Spirit of God was involved in the Creation, John 1:2 in the New Testament informs us that Jesus was also involved: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing has been made." In Deuteronomy 6:4, it says: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD your God is one." God revealed Himself over time, with His 'oneness' understood, not in terms of an arithmetic 'one', but oneness in person and operation with the Spirit and the Logos (Jn1:1). Jesus confirmed this in John 10:30. "I and the Father are one'."

While New Testament texts contain early *confessions of faith* that affirm the deity and work of Jesus (e.g. Col 1:15; 2:9), there remains a scholarly tension in how these confessions relate both to credal formulations like the Nicene Creed of AD 325 and then to contemporary denominational usage. On the one hand, historical theology often presents a linear trajectory from these confessions to the conciliar creeds, suggesting continuity in the development of Christian doctrine. On the other hand, traditions such as the Baptists resist the language of "creed," preferring instead the more flexible and personal term "confession of faith."

The problem, therefore, lies in clarifying how New Testament confessions of Jesus' divine identity functioned in the original context, how they provided theological foundations for later ecumenical creeds, and why some traditions (e.g., Baptists) adopt a different posture toward credal authority. This raises questions like: 1. What is the relationship between the Christological confessions of the New Testament and the later Nicene articulation of faith? 2. To what extent can the continuity or discontinuity between these two be established historically and theologically? 3. Why do Baptists and similar free

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church traditions adopt “confession of faith” rather than “creed” and what does this reveal about their ecclesiology, authority structures, and theological identity?

Just as the New Testament confronted the issue of explaining who Jesus was in relation to the God of the Old Testament, the period of the Church Fathers had to explain who Jesus was in terms of Gnosticism, which had influenced part of the Church. Needham (2011:101) confirms this when he points out that: “The response of Ireneaus and the early Church to Gnosticism had a great effect on the way the Christian faith developed in the patristic age.” This challenge grew over time and called for more pointed action. For example, Needham (2011:101) continues: “Against the doctrine of the Gnostics, the Church pointed to its rule of faith. Each Church had its own version of this rule, but they taught more or less the same thing - it developed into what has become well-known in the Western world as the Apostles’ Creed.”

While the Apostles’ Creed has found and still finds wide acceptance, a new need arose to further *formulate* Christology at the conference of Nicea in AD 325. This was prompted by the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine, as he saw the divisive fractures among Christians potentially adding to the tensions of his Empire. Arius (AD 256-336) was a presbyter in the Church who re-interpreted Christology in terms of Gnostic categories, concluding that Jesus Christ was uniquely created by God to be the agent of creation and salvation. Against this view, Athanasius (died AD 373), a leader in the Alexandrian Church, confirmed the biblical understanding that, “There never was a time when He was not”. This conference eventually formulated the Nicene Creed. It formulated the doctrine of Jesus Christ in terms of New Testament ‘confessions of faith’ and a further ontological understanding of Jesus’ divinity. Pagels (1989:75) explains the key issue in the early debate with gnostic tendencies, in that “orthodox Christians insist that Jesus was a human being, and that all ‘straight-thinking’ Christians must take the crucifixion as an historical and literal event” – and that Jesus was the eternal Word who became flesh (Jn 1:14).

We will now proceed to Christological confessions in the New Testament. They represent confessional conclusions different people came to about the ‘identity’ of Jesus at different times and various places (Heb. 1:1-2). Kayemba (2024:5) gives guidance on the issue by saying: “The apologist, when rightly equipped with the notion of eternal equality of the Father and Son in nature and substance, should therefore be able to emphatically present the divinity of Jesus the way the Scripture does.” The New Testament canon was not confirmed as we know it today as by AD 325. However, there was a sufficiently recognised body of writings circulating that the Church Fathers recognised as authoritative. These included the Gospels, Pauline letters, the general letters and Revelation.

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Sample Christological 'Confessions of Faith' in the New Testament

Starting from the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, it took time for the 'identity' of Jesus to be meaningfully grasped. His own twelve disciples wrestled with this issue as Jesus became increasingly known by them. For example, in John 14:6, Thomas was still struggling with the 'identity' of Jesus even by the time Jesus announced His departure (Jn 14:1). "Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going. So how can we know the way?'" Jesus understood that there was still uncertainty among the very men who served with Him, and witnessed the miracles He performed and heard His teaching. "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (Jn 14:7). Statements like these and similar statements about the Spirit in John 14-16 confirm the trinitarian biblical message. Jesus was the one who *revealed* the Yahweh God of the Old Testament in His incarnation. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9).

Matthew 16:15-16

In Matthew 16:1, the location of Jesus and His Disciples is identified for good reason in Caesarea Philippi. Schnackenburg (2002:156) comments: "Ancient Paneas (today Baniyas), standing in honor of Pan, god of shepherds, was dismantled by Philip, one of Herod the Great's sons, and named Caesarea." This was the northernmost frontier of the settlement of the Jews. The cult of Pan was also associated with religious suspicion and evil, with the cave entrance still visible today. Legend has it that a man-goat would appear periodically. It's almost as though Jesus chose a location on the border of Jew and Gentile, true faith vs evil religion which demands certainty in our confession of faith. It was here that Jesus is so clearly identified as "the Christ, the Son of the living God." Not merely by the informed opinion of the Disciples, but "this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Jn 16:17).

Jesus asked His disciples two questions. In verse 13: "Who do people say the Son of Man is"? And in verse 15: "But what about you" he asked, "Who do you say I am"? Peter is the first to speak like so often depicted in the New Testament: "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'." Schnackenburg (2002:156) correctly observes that Peter's confession is: "The critical point for faith-understanding of the community (16:13-20)."

"Here for the first time, acting on behalf of the disciples, Peter affirms that Jesus is 'the Christ' ('anointed one' – in Hebrew 'messiah') (Salderini, 2003:1037). The titles or descriptions of Jesus are all linked to each other – namely Son of Man (v. 13), Son of God and Christ (v.16). Salderini (2003:1037) summarises all that took place on this momentous occasion: "When Jesus blesses Peter for the revelation he has received from God (v 17; cf 11:25-27), and He also approves of the identification of himself as Messiah and Son of God as accurate and adequate."

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Mark 16:6

In verse 6 the angel speaks to the bewildered three women who were witnessing the 'open tomb' and the absent body of Jesus: "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him". Jesus is identified by His birth name (Mt 1:21), His place of upbringing in Nazareth and the death by crucifixion He endured. This was a common way of speaking at the time. People in general were identified by their name, the place they grew up, and something startling which they did.

Simultaneously, it is announced that Jesus has risen from the dead and left an open tomb as evidence: "He is risen". This is one of the shortest yet most significant statements of our faith. Karl Barth (1975:123) is correct in stating: "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals; it completes this proclamation of victory. We must not transmute the Resurrection into a spiritual event. We must listen to it and let it tell us the story of how that there was an empty grave, and how new life beyond death did become visible."

This single verse has become the centre of some measure of debate. For example, Küng (1991:105) doesn't deny the empty tomb, but he casts doubt on its importance for our statement of faith. He says: "For if we look closer, at the centre of the story of the tomb is not the empty grave but the brief, confessional message of the resurrection (from the mouth of the angel), 'He is risen' (Mark 16:6)." I am aware that one of the earliest New Testament documents, namely 1 Thessalonians 1:10 makes no reference to the open tomb: "and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath." But this should not dissuade us from recognising the *historical* significance of the resurrection of Jesus and some significance of the women witnessing an open empty tomb.

The Early Roman Creed and the later Apostles Creed affirmed the importance of Jesus being tried and sentenced by 'Pontius Pilate' as a historical fact. Though it's not the open tomb that is of primary significance; admittedly, the risen Lord Jesus Christ is the significant One for our faith. But the open tomb offers some measure of support to this highly controversial subject. Erickson (1994:171) rightly says when he talks of the future of theology as a discipline: "The second factor which will become even more prominent in the future is Jesus' resurrection. Since it sets him apart from everyone else, any success in establishing the historicity of this crucial event in Jesus' life will be of great importance."

Following the instruction given to the women at the tomb to "go and tell his disciples" (Mk 16:7), it says in John 20:18, "Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her." Mary and Thomas (v.28) both conclude that the One

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risen from the tomb is in fact Jesus the *Lord*. This would be a title popularised in the infant church community.

Romans 10:9-10

The Apostle Paul was impacted by the risen Lord Jesus and converted to the Christian way (Ac 9: 3-19). He later wrote to the Roman church about the message of the resurrection of Jesus in their community and the general mission of the church in the world. In Romans 10:8 he clarifies to them that this is "the word of faith we are proclaiming to you." We come back to the point of a confession of faith beyond the 'open tomb' in the world mission of the church. "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom 10:9). Dunn (2003:190) explains: "That 'Jesus is Lord' was one of the earliest Christian (baptismal) confessions is attested in Rom. 10:9."

Following on from the confession at the 'open tomb' discussed above, Dunn (2003:868) says, "the resurrection made Jesus 'Lord'." Further, Romans 1:4 says of Jesus, "who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord." The disciples of Jesus slowly but surely pointed beyond His humanity to His inherent Divinity, which was confirmed in His resurrection.

The term and title 'Lord,' is very important in setting Jesus apart in a category of His own. Philippians 2:9 says: "Therefore God has highly exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name." At first, in the infant narrative of Matthew 1:21 the child was given the name 'Jesus.' Then, after the resurrection, the name Lord given, "every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11).

It is critically important to connect the "word was with God" of John 1:1, with the condescension of Jesus to the "word became flesh" in John 1:14, and further to the exaltation of Jesus as Lord after His earthly ministry to mankind. This solves many of the mysteries discussed at the Nicea Council of AD 325 and subsequent Councils. Erickson (2008:221) helps us here when he identifies the basic error of Arianism: "Descriptions of his temporary functional subordination to the Father has been misinterpreted as statements about the essence of the Son."

Two examples are words like 'only begotten' (μονογενής) in John 3:16 and 'firstborn' (πρωτότοκος) in Colossians 1:15 as words chosen from human language to communicate something divine and eternal taking place. In terms of John 3:16, Erickson (2008:237) rightly says about any thought of 'adoptionism' here that: "Those who take seriously the full teaching of Scripture, however, are aware of major obstacles to this view, including the pre-existence of Christ, the prebirth narrative, and the virgin birth."

In terms of Colossians 1:15, while this word could fit the Demiurge idea of Gnostic Christianity to Christ

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as a unique created entity, it does not fit the full teaching of Scripture of the 'eternal generation' of the Son.

1 Timothy 3:16

We have another example of short 'confessions of faith' that were used in the early church as easy summations of doctrine for people to remember. Wessel and Knight (2002:2489) confirm that, "The words are printed in poetic form and probably come from an early credal hymn."

It covers the 'condescension' of Jesus from his appearance "in body" to His ascension "up in glory." This could have also been used in catechetical classes in the preparation of new believers for baptism: "He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up into glory."

This early 'confession' covers critical bases important to the early church and authoritative enough for the Apostle Paul to include in this important letter to the Ephesian church. "Beyond all question the mystery of godliness is great." The word *μυστήριον* has several connotations – especially against the backdrop of insipient Gnosticism at the time. For the Christian, the word has a distinctive meaning: "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past" (Rom 16:26). It was not a secret esoteric knowledge, but a *revelation* of Jesus who appeared in a body. Not just a human body but in the *σαρξ* – the fragile flesh of humanity (Jn 1:14).

Jesus was "vindicated by the Spirit" in many ways. For example, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Mt 1:20). He was anointed by the Holy Spirit (Lk 4:18) and ministered in power by the self-same Spirit (Mt 12:28) and raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit (Rm 1:4).

Angels were involved with Jesus periodically in His ministry, and most importantly, they were involved in affirming His resurrection from the dead. For example, Mary Magdalene is said to have gone to look into the open tomb for herself, and she "saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus's body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot" (Jn 20:12).

The 'mystery' of the Gospel extended further than to the incarnation of Jesus. It included the eternal Gospel for "all nations and was believed on in the world." Romans 16:26 explains: "But now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him."

This short 'confession of faith' ends with a statement about the ascension of Jesus. It served its purpose at the time for the people who used it. The first challenge of the early church was to identify themselves with the identity of Jesus – and thus distinguish themselves from prevailing Judaism. At first, they were

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known as a 'denomination' or offshoot of Judaism because they believed the Old Testament, respected the Temple and expected the Messiah just as the Jews did. But eventually the Christian community's identity aligned increasingly with Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah who had come, Who had died on the cross, and Who had risen from the dead. This led to some persecution and the dispersion of many Christians throughout the then known world.

2 Timothy 2:11-13

The context here is the suffering that might have to be endured in times of persecution for the sake of the Gospel. Paul speaks about his own suffering "even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's work is not chained" (2 Tm 2:8). This 'confession of faith' reads as follows: "This is a trustworthy saying: 'If we died with him, we will also live with him; If we endure, we will also reign with him, if we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.'" (2 Tm 2:11-13). Like the one above, this is also most likely a well-known verse people recited when facing persecution.

Perkins (2003:1440) explains: "The faithful saying formula introduces a formulaic call to endurance (2:11-13a), It opens with parallel clauses that promise what one would expect of a judgemental oracle...But 2:13 appears to break the pattern." God remains faithful toward us despite our faithlessness. This is very encouraging to anyone facing persecution because the situation could be highly unpredictable and some people's way of handling it could compromise the Gospel in some way. God is graciously faithful towards us even in these very difficult contexts.

Titus 2:13

This is not a 'confession of faith' as those above, but I've included this verse because of its human/divine statement, "while we wait for the blessed hope – the blessed appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ." Pannenberg (1992:53) points to the importance of Jesus for the church: "Few communities are built so exclusively on personal identification with one individual person. By way of such identification, which is the point of confessing Jesus Christ as Lord."

The question in Titus 2:13 is whether Paul is saying that "God (the Father) and Saviour, Jesus Christ," or "God (as in Jesus) and Saviour, Jesus Christ?" Perkins (2003:1444) is convinced of the latter, and "and is "clearly equating him with God."

This format is followed in the Apocalypse of John with the repeated mention of the Father and the Lamb on the throne of heaven together and attended to by the Spirit. "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever" (Rv 5:13b). Then: "And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb' (Rv

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7:10). Followed by Revelation 12:10, "Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say, 'Now have come the salvation and the power of the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ'."

Philippians 2:6-11

This passage is one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the Condescension of Jesus through to the Exaltation of Jesus after His resurrection. What is rather unique is the statement in verse 6, in that "ἐαυτὸν ἐκενύσεν" – Jesus 'emptied Himself'. The extent of 'emptying' has been debated over a long time and with differing conclusions under the heading of the Kenosis debate. What did Jesus empty Himself of?

Erickson (2008:238) discusses the various nuances of the debate and then correctly says: "We conclude that it is equality with God, not the form of God, of which Jesus emptied himself." Jesus did submit to becoming "flesh" (Jn 1:14), and He did take the "form of a servant" (v.7). Yet Colossians 2:13 confirms both the divinity of Jesus and His humanity, in that "in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form." Qualitatively, there was no change in Jesus as the Son of God, but quantitatively, there was a *season* of condescension from His conception to His Ascension.

Verse 8 says: "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross." Erickson (2008:239) comments: "For the humanity of Jesus was not the humanity of sinful human beings, but the humanity possessed by Adam and Eve from their creation and before their fall." Jesus submitted further than just leaving heaven's glory to a redemptive and sacrificial death "on a cross."

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 Paul says: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." Though many others died the Roman crucifixion death of crucifixion after being sentenced for a crime, as we see on either side of Jesus, His death on the cross was unique and of eternal significance.

Due to the person who Jesus was and the nature of His obedient death, "God has highly exalted him to the highest place, and gave him a name above every name ...to the glory of God the Father" (Phlp 2:10-11). In the attempt to put this message into a contemporary creed. Nicea AD 325 chose the homoousios vs homoiouosios engagement which succeeded to some degree but failed to solve Emperor Constantine's concern of the unity of the Christian church, because Arianism continued to grow unabated. Creeds and/or Confessions of Faith don't necessarily solve practical and missional problems.

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Hebrews 1:3

"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of Majesty in heaven," Guthrie (1981:86) comments briefly but significantly, "the focus falls on the 'Majesty on high', with the Son seated at the right hand (1:3)." This verse sums up the theme of Jesus humanity and Divinity and is a fine conclusion to New Testament confessions outlined in this section.

The Baptist Union of Southern Africa's Confession of Faith

The focus of this next section is on the Baptist Union of Southern Africa and its challenges in terms of a 'Confession of Faith' as opposed to a 'Creed' – though the differences between the two are open to debate. The Baptist Union of South was formed in 1877 by four English-speaking churches and one German-speaking church. This was after many Baptist settlers came from Great Britain and Germany before and after 1820 (the date when many shipments of people arrived in South Africa over a short period of time). There was a need for commonality and a sense of organized mission among these people whose inherited tradition from the Reformation was primarily *the Bible* as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

Both of these two groupings of Baptist settlers were influenced by the Reformed vs the Arminian debates in their countries of origin, while at the same time were resistant to the Roman Catholic traditions on the one hand and the growing Renaissance Liberal influences on the other hand. At the heart of the debate was essentially the authority of Scripture in the life of an evangelical Christian church. The *context* here was markedly different from that of the second and third centuries which led up to the calling of the Council at Nicea in 325 and the formulation of the Nicene Creed.

The Directory, Policies and Statistics Handbook (2021-2022:275) of the Baptist union states: "We as Baptists share many areas of our faith with other members of the professing Christian Church. These include a belief in on God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; in the supreme Lordship of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church; and in the Bible as the inspired Word of God in all matters of faith and practice." In today's world, the Baptist Union would mostly align itself with the Evangelical Model of doing theology worldwide in terms of doctrinal distinctives. The context today may be very different to that of the fourth century – but the key doctrinal distinctives are the same.

In this article I will follow on from the Nicene Creed's primary occupation with the doctrine of Jesus Christ (Christology). So, I will only be comparing this key doctrine in the Creeds or Confessions of Faith below. There is simply not enough space in this article to cover all the doctrines.

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The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith

Just as the context and the prevailing political/theological winds of change are germane to understanding the Nicene Creed (4th Century AD), so the same is important to understand the Baptist 1689 Confession of Faith. Davidson (2024:1) gives the original context that led to the 1689 Confession of Faith: "Huddled together in 1644, representatives of 7 churches gathered to summarise their common confession, and to distinguish themselves from the Anabaptists and the Arminians. It was a time of turmoil, and the river of the Reformation had swept across the shores of England."

It followed some two years later that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was published and then the Congregational *Savoy Declaration* in 1648. It was ultimately in 1689 that the Particular Baptists General Assembly (they had adopted a Calvinistic view of Limited Atonement), building on these two Confessions of Faith, passed "The 1689 London Confession of Faith" (Davidson, 2024:2). It aligned itself very much with the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, but was Baptist in its ordinance of baptism, the celebration of communion and its ecclesiology.

Davidson (2024:2) confirms that the 1689 Confession of Faith is "a comprehensive Systematic Theology." It was also an alignment of Particular Baptists, as opposed to Anabaptists and General Baptists, with a chosen Reformed Theology that had been developed from the works of John Calvin. It has 32 chapters and is 42 pages long. This is a far cry from the several shorter confessions of faith found in the New Testament for easy memorization and simple confession of the profound condescension of Jesus Christ in His birth, life, atoning death, triumphant resurrection and ascension. Cairns (1996:331) confirms my suspicions when he says: "The stronger group of Calvinistic or Particular Baptists originated in a schism from Henry Jacob's congregation in London in 1633 and 1638. They held to the baptism of believers by immersion and a Calvinistic theology that emphasized a limited atonement."

There are some of our Baptist Churches in South Africa who have adopted the 1689 Confession of Faith in their early stages of establishment or later stages of development. Some have aligned themselves with the Baptist Union of South Africa and then added the 1924 Baptist Union Statement of Faith (which is one page long) for the practical functioning of the Church. The Baptist Union of Southern Africa has a shorter intentionally worded statement identifying themselves as well while also aligning themselves with a worldwide ecumenical biblically based movement like Evangelicalism. "People like John Stott (a paedobaptist) and Billy Graham (believers baptism) realised in the middle of the 20th century that a fresh heralding of the New Testament doctrines needed to be crystalized for clearer Gospel impact. This resurgence was eventually identified as 'Evangelicalism'" (Pohlmann, 2021:1). Evangelicalism is not founded on the writings of any one theologian but is the result of theologians,

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evangelists, pastors, missionaries and leaders who all shared commonality on the key Evangelical doctrines of the Bible as opposed to the rampant Liberalism of the early/mid-20th century.

However, each congregation may also have an addendum of theological documents unique to its mission and purpose. For example, the Baptist Union handbook (2021-2022: 275-276) has an additional addendum entitled, Baptist Union of Southern Africa Statement of Baptist Principles which occupies 2 pages. These principles *supplement* the section on the Church in its Statement of Faith that are unique to Baptist Union churches.

The 1924 Baptist Union Confession of Faith (Statement of Belief).

It was at an Assembly of the Baptist Union in 1924 in Durban that a Statement of Faith was tabled and passed. The president at the time was the Rev Cas Garrat (1924:1) who said: "The Baptist Church, therefore, has never formulated an official creed to which its Ministers and Members are required to subscribe as a condition of fellowship." While Baptists have always simplistically seen the Bible as their creed and believed in the freedom of conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit in reading it for understanding – they have seen the need to formulate their faith afresh in a "confession of faith" from time to time.

As opposed to the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, the Baptist Union of churches wanted its move to be a *unifying factor* for the body of churches through its 1924 Statement of Belief, rather than divisive. The Baptist Union recognised this need within its context and times. Garrat (1924:1) as one eyewitness provides us with input from the time and says: "In recent years – years of much unsettlement in many directions - the wish has often been expressed for some such declaration to which our younger people especially might be able to turn for guidance". This was not a hermeneutical mandate of one or other model of theology, but an outline of biblical Evangelical Baptist thinking that would demarcate it from Renaissance Liberalism on the one hand and/or Roman Catholic traditionalism on the other. These were the challenges of the day as they still are today.

Based on "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in their original writing as fully inspired" (Article 1) and the belief in the Trinity (Article 2), the Statement of Faith made its statement about Jesus Christ. "We believe that Jesus Christ was begotten by the Holy Ghost born to the Virgin Mary, and is true God and true man" (Article 3). This runs true to all the relevant verses of the New Testament dealt with above under section 2. This is appropriately far enough in terms of the ontology of Jesus for a document of this type. Liberals would balk at this paragraph while Roman Catholicism and the Reformed Churches could agree. Liberalism is decidedly anti-supernaturalist in its world view while the statement about Jesus Christ is intentionally supernaturalist.

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Article 5 then makes a statement about our soteriology through the person of Jesus Christ. "We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins, a substitutionary sacrifice, according to the Scriptures, and that all who believe in Him are justified on the ground of His shed blood." Again, Liberal Theology would balk at several aspects of this statement. Fundamentalist groups may dissent on the questions relating to salvation. But everyone would have to agree on the outcome of salvation in the conversion of sinners. Roman Catholicism would also want to explain its soteriological sacramental understanding.

Article 6 presents the heart of any Christian Confession or Creed: "We believe in the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, His ascension into heaven, and His present life as our High Priest and Advocate." This continues to state the world view of the Bible in terms of both created time and Eternity, the realm of God. "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me was like a trumpet said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this'." So, it is natural for the seventh article to state: "We believe in the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ."

All Evangelical Baptists can agree together with these articles of faith in their global mission and ministry. Added to this is by most of Christians around the world. Clouse (1992:1) says: "Theology has fallen on bad times in some circles but to those who truly cherish the Word of God and desire to know what God is seeking to reveal to His people, it is a necessary and glorious task." Much depends on one's attitude towards God's overall plan, purpose and the way He chooses to use His church. The high priestly prayer of Jesus implores on unity and mission as priorities: "My prayer is not for them alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:20-21).

Improvements and updates to this Confession of Christ could include, for example article 3: "We believe that Jesus Christ was *conceived* (Lk 1:35; Jn 3:16) by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, and true God (Jn 1:1) and *truly human* (Heb 2:14)". This allows for more contemporary reading and valid proof-texting. In article 5: "We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins, a substitutionary sacrifice (Rom 3:25), according to the Scriptures, and that all who believe in Him are justified on the grounds of *this* (Rom 3:21-22)."

In Article 6, the mention of *history* is important due to the debates that have ensued over the last century. "We believe in the bodily *historical* resurrection (1 Cor 15:17), His ascension (Ac 1:9) *into eternity* and His present life as our High Priest (Heb 8:1-2) and Advocate (1 Jn 2:1)." Pannenberg (1992:7) correctly says that, "the content of truth is inherent in the documents of the tradition has to be determined again and again, because in each historical situation a new effort is needed to distinguish the truth of the

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gospel and of the dogma of the church from the evanescent forms of language and thought that at one time served to express such abiding truth."

Then article 7: "We believe in the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ *for His Church (Rev 1:7) with cataclysmic consequences for humanity and Creation (Rev 19:11-19).*" This last article addresses the ubiquitous obsession with Eschatology over the last century without choosing a model of Eschatology.

The Baptist Union of South Africa has already wisely added a separate Statement of Baptist Principles for member churches to follow in the ecclesiology of a Baptist Church. This was concluded at the Baptist Assembly in Krugersdorp, 2000. This was meant as an addendum to the Statement of Faith in terms of the application of Baptist Christology, identity and praxis.

The 2017 proposed Confession of Faith (Statement of Belief) among South African Baptists

In June 2017 a Baptist Union committee finalised a proposed '2017 Statement of belief' to the Assembly. The intention was that the Baptist Union Assembly would accept and endorse it to replace the '1924 Statement of belief.' While the '1689 Baptist Confession of Faith' was 46 pages long, the 1924 document was 1 page in length, and this new document is 7 pages long.

It has a strong resemblance to the 1689 document in that it achieves the needs of a basic Confession of faith, but adds many Scripture references as proof texts, and it also resembles a document that could be used for catechetical instruction. This makes it cumbersome and pushes the boundaries much further than the spirit of the New Testament confessions of faith.

While the 2022 Baptist Union Assembly failed to agree on accepting the 2017 document as its official Statement of faith in place of the 1924 document, several Baptist Churches have chosen to include retain it. They have either adopted it in place of the 1924 document or have added it as a second Statement of Faith defining their own trajectory of belief and practice. Either of these options has proved to be acceptable by the Baptist Union.

The Need for Baptists to Engage with a Global Evangelical Missional Movement

In the Baptist Union Handbook (2021-2022:275) the preamble states that: "We as Baptists share many areas of our faith with other members of the professing Christian Church. These include a belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; in the supreme Lordship of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church; and in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice."

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It is important for the Church in general and sub- groupings of the Church to remain true to the mission and mandate originally given to it as recorded in the New Testament.

Baptists are better known in the wider Christian community for their Baptist Principles. "There are, however, areas of principle and practice where we as Baptists make distinctive emphases arising out of our understanding of the Scriptures" (2021-2022: 275-276). They are by all intents and purposes, biblical principles and form one of the most versatile set of guidelines for a Christian congregation within any denomination or independent Church. Pereira (2017:38) agrees: "The fact that Baptist Principles are biblical principles, puts them in a position of general Evangelical embrace. Most Evangelical Churches could endorse these principles"

The Freedom of Choice Within Each Baptist Congregation

There are several independent Baptist congregations in South Africa that are not in membership with the Baptist Union of Southern Africa. This is mostly due to doctrinal choices or sometimes a choice of leadership praxis. There are also Baptist Unions (e.g. The Baptist Union of Great Britain) and/or Conventions (e.g. The Southern Baptist Convention) in many countries of the world. Within South Africa, Baptist congregations volunteer to join the fellowship of churches, known as the Baptist Union of Southern Africa. There are rules and regulations to abide by, including the Statement of Faith and the Statement of Baptist Principles. Even with this condition of membership, there is a vast number of different modes of praxis and styles within the many Union churches. The idea is not uniformity but rather commonality of identity and united purpose.

As discussed above, there are different theological emphases in some congregations, sometimes due to hermeneutical differences, or the difference in understanding different texts of Scripture, resulting in different praxis at times. Though this be true, there should be a generosity of love and fellowship that maintains Baptist unity. One thing that is required of a Baptist is an agreement on the major texts of Scripture and charity on the difficult ones. What this means to each Believer and every local Church is that we have permission to read Scripture, interpret it and apply it when the process is done in full sincerity, reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and some help from reliable tools.

Grenz (1993:17) wisely counsels us: "The transitional era in which we live demands that we give honest thought to articulate in a new context the vision that inspired the giants of the evangelical tradition. In short, the transition to postmodernity demands nothing less than a rebirth of theological reflection among evangelicals." This requires that we remain true to certain hermeneutical 'rules' as a tradition born out of the New Testament and affirmed at Nicea in AD 325. Here are a few guardrail-hermeneutical tools to help along the way.

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The first rule is a commitment to *history*. Evangelical scholarship recognises that: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The Creation of Genesis 1 is not a mythical story but a historical reality. Adam and Eve were created to be real people reflecting the Imago Dei, and so were Moses, Joshua and Ruth, together with all those listed in the genealogy of Mathew 1 and Luke 3. Pannenberg (1992:32) reminds us that: "A theology of creation is related to the universe as well as to the nature of things in particular." A key issue that emerged at Nicea was that God was claimed by certain Gnostic trends not to be involved in Creation directly. The only the 'begotten' Jesus was said to have been created to create. God was seen by the Gnostic Christians to be above and untouched by creation.

The second rule is whether our exegesis and theology are *Christological*. Even the doctrine of Creation is Christological as stated in John 1:3, "Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made." The notable difference to the Gnostic view is that John 1:1 says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word is God." Following that: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Upon the apostle Paul's conversion, he shifted his hermeneutic from that of a Pharisee to be Christocentric (Gal 1:6-18) and took some 14 years (Gal 2:1) in revising his theological model.

The third rule in the Evangelical model is whether it is expressed *doctrinally* in the New Testament. From the doctrine of Creation to the doctrine of Eschatology, they are all presented in doctrinal form somewhere in the New Testament. For example, the doctrine of sin arising from the narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3 is outlined in Romans 1-3, reaching a conclusion in Romans 3:28, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

The fourth rule is that our doctrine is expressed *practically*. For example, Paul spends the first twelve chapters of Romans explaining the doctrines of salvation. Then in Romans 12:1 says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship." The following three chapters offer the practical pastoral application of salvation. It is not just a *higher gnosis* as Gnostic Christianity tried to present in the early centuries. The Colossian letter, which addressed issues of insipient Gnosticism, admonishes Christians practically to: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since you are members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful" (Col 3:15). There is a practical outcome.

The fifth rule to consider, is exploring the reading of Scripture *theologically*. 2 Peter 1:20 hints at not making private or subjective interpretation of Scripture: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation." Erickson (2008:16) advises on this: "Theology is systematic. It does not look at each of the books of the Bible separately but attempts to draw together into one coherent whole what the entirety of Scripture says on a given topic." Within

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this 'whole' of God's overall revelation in Scripture is progressing through the ages towards a goal, and there are incremental developments along the way. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets and many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (Heb 1:1-2). A very helpful tool is the simple Bible concordance to find verses and words for the purpose of comparison.

Baptist Associational Responsibility

Ultimately there is only one Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says of the Church that it is, "God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15). This Church is made of everyone who has ever confessed Jesus Christ as Lord, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Rom 10:10).

The one Church of Jesus Christ has always met in local communities in different localities (See for example – Revelation chapter 2 and 3). However, we are aware that due to the influence of leaders and/or doctrinal emphases and/or disputes and/or cultural issues much like the Nicene Creed of AD 325 – the Church today is expressed in many ways. From the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox denominations, to schisms of these to more informal associations to independent groups. Pereira (2017:37) rightly says that: "Baptists do not really like to think of themselves as a 'denomination', but this is unavoidable because they have also found it necessary to embrace a particular Statement of Faith (of 1924; BU Handbook, 2015:257), own property, employ 'officers, have a 'Ministry List' of accredited ministers and function corporately to maintain some measure of 'denominational' identity."

This is a voluntary association which a Baptist Church can enter upon agreeing to the guidelines, and it may also resign from this voluntary association and remain an independent Baptist Church. "A Statement of Faith is for Baptists of Southern Africa an interpretation of the Bible on certain specific doctrines and practises which (however good and comprehensive), it still narrows the biblical scope. This is not unlike several other 'denominations'" (Pereira, 2017:38).

Engaging the Global Baptist Community together with the Global Christian Church

Our priority is to follow Jesus Christ together with all Christians everywhere. When Paul addressed the Corinthian Church about the need to work together, he said: "Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do" (1 Cor 16:1). There is a sense of being aware of each other and cooperative. This 'offering' project aimed at supplying the needs of the 'mother' Church in Jerusalem (verse 3) was hugely co-operative. "And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace

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that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of their most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity" (1 Cor 8:1-2). This is what Jesus had in mind when He prayed for the people who would form the 'Christ-followers' of the future: "My prayer is not for them alone; I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message. That all of them should be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21-22).

Our second priority is to extend the reach of the Gospel together with every effort being made. This need not hinder our local congregational efforts nor any national denominational efforts. The Evangelical effort launched afresh in the 20th century is a rallying point as millions of people share a very similar Statement of Faith based on the fundamentals of biblical Christian faith. Our contribution as Baptists to remain true to our convictions just as other groupings remain true to theirs. Harmon (2017:149) wisely says: "The Baptist tradition has emphasized the renewal of the church through the restoration of ancient Christian patterns of faith and practice that are often thought to have been lost or corrupted in later periods of the church in its historical pilgrimage."

The Baptist Union of Southern Africa scores highly – in that it engages very widely with both Baptist denominations and Evangelical initiatives around the world. Every year different leaders from different parts of the world are introduced to the Assembly delegates. Equally – there is representation and participation on local, African, and international bodies like the Baptist World Alliance.

Conclusion

Coming back to the Nicene conference of AD 325 and its Creed. Our Baptist Statement/Confession of faith clearly reflects a dependence on the earlier Roman/Apostles Creed which was used as a later measure of true Christian faith in line with the New Testament confessions of faith dealt with above. There is also an understanding of the Christology formulated in the Nicene Creed which dealt with a specific ontological Christological issue demanding an answer at the time. Hannah (2001:63) rightly says: "Christ was 'begotten' of the Father but was not 'created'. He who had no beginning had a beginning, not of being, but of function through the 'becoming human'."

The same can be said of the Creed of Constantinople AD 381, which dealt with its challenge related to the humanity of Jesus and its affirmation in more detail of the Holy Spirit. Hannah (2001:71) explains: "The second ecumenical council, held in Constantinople (381) condemned the teaching of Apollinarius and affirmed that Christ became human." Thus, the One who created mankind 'human' was able to 'become' Himself human – but without sin.

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It's important to reflect in conclusion on the central changing event of the *condescension of Jesus* which is at the heart of the Nicene Creed. There can be no compromise on the fact that Jesus was sent by the Father and enacted by the Holy Spirit. Five key Greek words outline this event on earth, starting with the conception of Jesus and concluding with the resurrection of Jesus. This answers the key issue raised by Arianism in the 4th Century and contemporary Liberalism. Of particular importance is to note the challenge of human language and choice of human words to record this sweeping event of the life, person, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus in Scripture. The New Testament chose key words.

Philippians 2:6 uses the word ἐκένωσεν – “He emptied himself”. The point made clear throughout this article is that Jesus Christ did not empty Himself of His Divinity but laid aside His ‘glorious omnipresence’. John 17:5 explains, “And now Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” This is the commencement of the *condescension*.

Luke 1:34, here we have Doctor Luke trying to explain the miraculous conception with the word ἐπιλευσεται -which he later admits: “For nothing is impossible with God” (Lk 1:37). Luke describes this as the Holy Spirit coming with power and “overshadowing” the young lady. These are words and explanations chosen by a medical practitioner to convey the unique conception of Jesus to the reader.

John 3:16 uses a word that was at the centre of the Gnostic vs Orthodox debate, μονογενή. Translations have grappled with this word, as for example the NIV “his one and only Son”, and the KJV “his only begotten Son”. This word does not contain the Gnostic idea of a uniquely created being like the demiurge philosophical idea for the sake of creating the universe without God getting involved.

Colossians 2:9 explains what is not immediately evident to some readers of John 3:16. In Christ, God in His ‘fullness’ κατοικεῖ. Qualitatively and ontologically, Jesus Christ was in every respect Divine. This is explained further in verse 10, “and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.”

Romans 1:4 says: “And through the spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” The word ὁρισθέντος explains the finality of the condescension, affirming all that Jesus came to do to accomplish redemption for humanity and victory over the Fall.

I conclude with these key verbs in key Christological verses to confirm the condescension and exaltation of Jesus as being at the heart of the homoousios statement in the Nicene Creed of AD 325. As Athanasius said: “There was never a time when He was not”. While the Greek word homoousios was a chosen word to bring understanding of Jesus in AD 325. New Testament writers also had to choose words to express what they were saying of Jesus. May the sum of these verbs be ever in our minds in our understanding of who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

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