

## \*BAPTIST HERITAGE\*

## London Confession of Faith - 1644

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For most Baptists, a believer “can never finally nor totally fall away” from a relationship with Jesus but “shall be kept by the power of God to salvation.” The latter quote paraphrases 1 Peter 1:5, but it first appeared in a Baptist statement, “Confession of Faith” (article 23), which the Calvinistic or Particular churches of London issued in 1644. In fact, this “First London Confession” contains the distinctive beliefs held by the majority of today’s Baptists.

The Calvinism in the 1644 text differed from that of other English dissenters. The Baptists said that God foreordained some individuals to eternal life, but they omitted any reference to double decrees, one of election and a second of reprobation (article 3). For them, the death of Jesus reconciled only the elect, but they added an evangelistic emphasis. The Gospel is “to be preached to all men as the ground of faith,” and salvation is only “to be had through the believing in his Name” (article 21). A person believed the Word of God because of the specific work of the Holy Spirit in his or her heart.

Unlike other Calvinist documents, the 1644 one affirmed that only those who made personal professions of faith could be baptized (articles 33 and 39). Even the children of believers were not qualified. Moreover, for the first time a group of Baptists declared baptism to be “dipping or plunging the whole body under the water” (article 40).

Most Calvinistic confessions stated that only ordained ministers should preach, administer the ordinances and conduct discipline. The 1644 document declared, however, that all members had this responsibility. Some received the gifts of the Spirit for certain leadership roles, but the whole membership conducted church discipline (articles 36, 41, 42, 44 and 45). In other words, the church’s ministry reflected the priesthood of believers. Each congregation made its own decisions under the lordship of Christ. No outside group ought to control them, but each body of believers should not act alone. They should work in fellowship with like-minded congregations (articles 38 and 47).

Finally, in contrast to standard Calvinistic teachings, the 1644 statement did not acknowledge that civil magistrates had any right to promote true religion. Although Christians were to obey their rulers in civil matters, they had to defy “ecclesiastical” laws. Only Christ’s teachings in the New Testament were valid for governing true churches (articles 49-52).



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