

ON THESE
TRUTHS

WE STAND

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Scripture references are from the New International Version.

ON THESE TRUTHS WE STAND

INTRODUCTION

This booklet, *On These Truths We Stand*, has been a popular source of information and study for Virginia Baptists and many throughout the country and around the world. The Virginia Baptist Mission Board has reprinted this booklet because of its high demand and because of the poignancy with which it responds to our current context. There is still much need to address what it means to be a Baptist and in particular a Virginia Baptist. This booklet brings clarity to the issues as well as the challenge to remain faithful and true to the heritage that is ours to sustain.

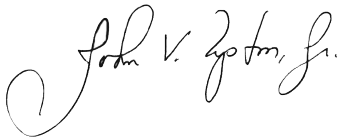
In 1989, the Committee on Denominational Crisis of the Baptist General Association of Virginia prepared a series of articles, *On These Truths We Stand*. The series of eleven articles appeared in the *Religious Herald* each week, May 11 through August 24, 1989. This booklet is a reprint of those articles.

You will find that in this booklet our distinct Baptist truths are well stated. The topics are well selected and presented with the biblical foundation upon which Virginia Baptists stand and upon which our churches have been built and upon which we do our missions causes.

I would like to encourage every church in Virginia Baptist life to schedule study groups to dig deeper into these precious beliefs. Let us not be confused and robbed of a blessed heritage nor have our resolve diminished but remain steadfast to these eternal truths that have bound us together as Baptists.

It is out of popular demand that this booklet has been reprinted. Throughout the Commonwealth, may there be a renewed interest by pastors and church leaders to return to the pages of the Holy Bible and lift up once again our common call in Virginia Baptist life to “advance the Redeemer’s Kingdom” while honoring the autonomy of the local church. We have also included a suggested study guide for use by your church.

Yours in Christ,



John Upton, Executive Director
Virginia Baptist Mission Board of the
Baptist General Association of Virginia

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

ON THESE TRUTHS WE STAND

What is the central doctrine of our Christian faith? There is only one answer! Our faith is built upon nothing less than Jesus Christ. “Jesus is Lord” has long been regarded as the most basic Christian statement of faith. This is the most cherished and historical foundation of our Baptist heritage.

Hebrews 1:2-3 asserts that God “has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being sustaining all things by His powerful word.”

Philippians 2:11 declares that God looks to a day when “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Some denominations are confused on this issue. To some groups, it is the authority of the Church and its infallibility as the true interpreter of God’s will. To others the central doctrine is inerrancy of the scriptures and their authority over Christian thought and conduct. To still others, it is the freedom of human will coupled with the capacity of the human mind to discover God’s mind.

The New Testament is clear and unmistakable on this matter. Our primary source of guidance and unity is in Jesus Himself and in Him alone. “Jesus is Lord” was the favorite confessional claim of early Christians.

Christ’s Lordship grew out of their awareness of resurrection and exaltation. In Philippians 2:9-11, the confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord” assumes that “God exalted Him to the highest place.” On this same basis, Peter could say in Acts 2:36, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

This meant to early Christians that God had vested in Jesus the ruling authority which is properly God’s, so that all people owe Him absolute obedience. In fact, thousands of Christians lived before there was a written word of New Testament scriptures. There were countless disciples of Jesus long before the Church was ever considered a channel of divine revelation. And, if human reason and man’s “free will” were sufficient for redemption, then the incarnation of God in Christ was not necessary.

It is vital that we study the scriptures, for, as Jesus said, “they are they which testify of me.” The Bible was not given to divide us, but to point us to Christ.

The *Baptist Faith and Message* clearly states that “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.” Our main task, then, is not to proclaim the infallibility of our Church, our written sources or our human capabilities. It is to tell the “good news” about what Christ has done for the world and what He has done in us personally.

Throughout history, there have been those who have sought to alter our Christ-centered faith and take Jesus out of His primary place in our witness.

To try to replace the centrality of Christ with anything else is to twist and alter the intentions of our Lord and, in a word, is heresy!

In the book of Acts, churches resulted from everyday disciples giving a personal witness of Christ in their lives. They did not debate the infallibility of Peter, or the words of Jesus, or even the evolution of the human mind. They talked positively of God in Christ and Christ in them. World history was transformed in one century because Christ was central in the lives and teachings of the early disciples.

Can Southern Baptists be united by this most fundamental tenet of our beliefs—the centrality of Christ? The answer: Yes! Throughout our history, this conviction has ordered the faith and practice of our churches. It has given unity to the doctrine of our churches. It has been our motive and guidance for evangelism and world missions concern. The centrality of Christ is the basis and reason for our unity.

Indeed, we may differ on many details and the latitude of our diversity. But on one thing we have always been at one—the deity, humanity and saving power of Jesus.

When the focus is upon the person of Jesus, even the “sons of thunder” are brought into a oneness of experience and purpose. When we give ourselves wholly to the witness and exaltation of Christ, other semantic and interpretive differences are placed in proper perspective and do not overshadow the very foundations of our faith.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

ON THESE TRUTHS WE STAND

The centrality of Christ must be given greater primacy in the remaining years of the twentieth century if Baptists are to do what Our Lord calls us to do in the kingdom of God on earth. As life grows ever more complex, one supreme simplicity will suffice: “Jesus is Lord.”

From our earliest history, Virginia Baptists have believed and have been committed to the biblical doctrine of “the priesthood of the believer.” It is basic to our Baptist faith and practice. It is a cherished Baptist distinctive and one Baptists take very seriously.

Perhaps one of the key Bible passages for the priesthood of all believers comes from Exodus 19:4-6. This is the account of the establishment of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel.

God called His people to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The people of God responded to that call and answered affirmatively that they would be priests.

First-century Christians applied Exodus 19 to themselves. In I Peter 2:9 these Christians were reminded, “...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Therefore, because of New Testament guidance, by the term “priesthood of believers” Baptists have meant that a believer is once and for all saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:5-10) and has free access to God the Father through the one and only High Priest, Jesus Christ our Savior (Hebrews 9:11-28).

Guided by this principle of “individual competency under God in all matters of religion,” Baptists have opposed any distinction between the clergy and laity. In addition, Baptists have refrained from excessive ritualism and sacramentalism for the same reason. And finally, they have refrained from using creedal statements to enforce doctrinal conformity, preferring to rely upon the competency of a regenerate believer to interpret the scriptures rightly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In short, the biblically centered doctrine of the priesthood of the believer affirms: (1) every person has the privilege of approaching God for himself or herself without the need for any human intermediary, and (2) every person has equal access to the Bible. This access gives every person the right of interpretation led by the Holy Spirit. And therefore, no authority can force or presume to compel submission to his or her interpretation or belief by another believer.

Throughout history, there have been those who have sought to undermine this biblical doctrine and replace God’s authority with human authority. It is not a new phenomenon that such a basic doctrine as the “priesthood of the believer” is under attack, as it seems to be today within our Baptist fellowship.

We can be proud that Baptists were part of those early reformers who demanded that the church be open and that the laity have opportunity for service and ministry. Baptists were on the cutting edge of holding to and reestablishing this basic belief of Christian freedom.

Growing out of the priesthood of the believer doctrine is the matter of individual responsibility. Freedom always brings responsibility.

We are not free to interpret scripture based upon our own wild tangents or preconceived ideas. A proper understanding of the priesthood of all believers demands that believers interpret the Bible in the context of the body of fellowship to which they are related and the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

This freedom also demands that every believer exercise the truth of scripture, that every person is free and able to approach God for themselves and that accessibility to our Savior is unlimited. Every person has the right of access to God.

Indeed, the priesthood of the believer doctrine is not license to be anything, to say anything, or to do anything. It is the essence of being responsible to God and to God alone.

To pass a resolution at a Southern Baptist Convention attempting to alter this fundamental truth is a departure from what we as Baptists believe to be a matter that our Lord has already determined. It is our responsibility to affirm and practice this doctrine. Such truths are not subject to a majority vote.

Virginia Baptists cherish the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. It is a truth on which we stand.

AUTONOMY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

What does “autonomy of the local church” mean?

It depends upon who is asking the question. To an uninformed person the answer might be, “That means a church is independent.” By “independent,” they may mean refusing to be related to other church bodies, or freedom to do as they please, or taking orders from no one.

Perhaps a more thoughtful answer might be, “It means a church is independent, democratic and interdependent.” Webster defines autonomy as having self-government or functioning independently without control by others. True, Baptist churches practice self-government. But the second definition, “functioning independently without control by others,” calls for a second look.

A local Baptist church is under the control of no human person or persons. It is under the absolute control of the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it follows that Baptist autonomy is not license for a church to do as it pleases. Just as personal freedom needs always to be coupled with personal responsibility, church freedom finds its counterpart in church responsibility.

Church responsibility includes at least two important elements: first, the church’s responsibility is to Jesus Christ, its founder and head; and second, the church’s relationship to and/or cooperation with other believers and bodies of believers. This second element is addressed in *Voluntary Connectionalism*, pages 16-17.

Baptists’ stress on autonomy and cooperation is documented in a pamphlet published by The Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, *Autonomy and Cooperation* by H. Leon McBeth.

He writes, “They do not want to lose or compromise either of these important principles. Fortunately, Baptists need not give up either, for freedom and cooperation do not compete. Instead, they compliment each other. Baptist churches are both independent and interdependent.”

Baptists hold to these principles for individual believers as well as for churches. Autonomy of the local church has its roots in the basic belief that the church is a community of autonomous individuals under the Lordship of Christ, held together by a common faith.

Our Lord relates to believers through his revealed word and through his Spirit. Believers have direct and free access to Him. Our relationship with our Lord is personal and individual. The Lordship of Christ is basic to Baptists. As the scripture clearly states in Matthew 28:18, “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,’” and again in Revelation 19:16, “On His robe and on His thigh He has this name written: KINGS OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Our Lord invites every individual to choose to come under the Lordship of Christ. Perhaps the most familiar New Testament passage of this invitation is John 3:16-17, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

Therefore, the first and finest expression of Christ's Lordship over the individual believer is in the gift of autonomy. This is a paradox: the Lordship of Christ and the autonomy of the believers. The paradox is resolved in that the individual believer chooses to come under the Lordship of Christ.

In short, Baptists follow this New Testament pattern voluntarily choosing to cooperate with likeminded bodies, while still recognizing Christ as sole authority to the individual and for the local church. Any study of a Baptist church's autonomy must recognize that freedom of self-government does not preclude freedom to choose to cooperate.

New Testament churches chose to cooperate and believed that cooperation did not take away their freedom, but instead was an exercise of freedom. Following the New Testament example, groups of churches in England chose to work together, believing that in doing so they did not yield their freedom.

The London Confession of Faith of 1644 set out what Baptists call "the autonomy of the local church." The English Baptist pattern for associations influenced the formation of the Philadelphia Association in 1707. The fourth association to be formed in America was Ketchikan in Virginia during 1766. Early on, some churches chose to remain "unassociated" until convinced that associating would not compromise their autonomy. Virginia Baptists have favored the associational approach which keeps the common tasks church centered.

The autonomy of the local church is a bright thread in the warp and woof depicting Baptists historically and is a truth on which Virginia Baptists stand today.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Religious freedom is at the center of the Baptist way. This great principle is the crown jewel of the Baptists. Derived from our reading of the Bible, it is imprinted on the Baptist memory by hard experience. Religious freedom rests upon an essential insight into the nature of human beings and their relationship to God.

Whether it be the witness of Martin Luther before the parliament of the German states, the ringing cry of Patrick Henry on the eve of the American Revolution, or the peaceful protest of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square, the thirst for freedom is common to all people. And the most essential freedom of all the freedoms is *freedom of religion*.

The Baptist way, quite literally, is anchored upon the principle of religious freedom. Baptists find religious freedom written into the witness of scripture: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21).

First-century Christians were ordered by religious authorities to refrain from teaching about Jesus. They replied they must obey God and not men in these matters. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1), says Apostle Paul. And John wrote, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

The centrality of religious freedom derives, for Baptists, not only from their reading of scripture, but also from the hard lessons of their own history.

The first Baptists emerged in lands with established churches and began as dissenters from the standing orders. Fined, jailed and whipped for non-conformity to religious practices in which they would not consent, and taxed to support churches they did not frequent, they learned a valuable lesson. That lesson was that conscience and compulsion do not mix.

As Roger Williams was to explain, the two things that external force could produce in matters of conscience or religion were martyrs and hypocrites, but not saving faith or sincere Christian conviction.

Central to the principle of religious freedom is the understanding that responsibility rests upon freedom of choice. Where a person is not given freedom to choose deliberately and freely without compulsion, one cannot rightly be held to be morally responsible for the choices made under duress.

Thus, for Baptists, religious freedom, however precious, is not so much an end in itself, but the necessary condition in religious matters for valid commitments and decisions.

The doctrine of religious freedom takes for granted that there is a side or aspect of every person— inward, private, and sacred. Words like soul, spirit, conscience and heart are used to refer to this innermost core of a person. It is that part of each person which must be protected against violation by any kind of external compulsion.

Likewise, there are beliefs, convictions and actions that are the expression of the spiritual faculties of a person. Moral judgment, the discrimination between right and wrong, the sense of the holy, the consecration or surrender of the self, and the attempt to respond to or worship God are all examples of religious functions.

In addition to the belief that there is a religious or spiritual dimension of thought and action within human life that can be marked off and protected from the violation of external constraint, there is one other basic element in the Christian doctrine of religious freedom.

That basic element is the unique nature of divine revelation in Christian thought. Christians believe in a special revelation of God in historical events and encounters. Recorded in divinely inspired scripture, the living Word of God is mediated to persons through the interpretation of the Holy Spirit.

Each person must experience this illumination individually and inwardly. Such an inner and personal experience does not yield itself to the manipulation or to the commands of other persons. Each must meet God individually, in an inward, spiritual encounter. Thus the unique nature of Christian experience with God rules out compulsion or constraint.

If God speaks, as Baptists believe, through the Bible, to the soul, through the Spirit, then each person has an inescapable duty to stand alone before scripture to learn, interpret, and respond in word and deed. Each believer must not shirk this duty or leave it to another.

Since no one can understand, interpret, or obey the Word of God for another, it is wrong and harmful to pressure, to impose or to otherwise bully others into conformity to a prescribed creed, experience or understanding. Therefore, it is wrong for another person to assume the role of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is designated as interpreter and counselor for the true source of Christian conviction. Enforced uniformity in religious thought or practice is an act of distrust toward the Holy Spirit.

Baptist thinkers have always recognized that the essential rights of others cannot be violated in the name of one's own conscience or religious convictions. The rights of my conscience end where another person's body, goods or basic rights begin.

Religious freedom is not confined to belief in sound doctrine or the practice of "true faith." Religious freedom protects the thought and actions of those whose beliefs and practices do not conform to some prescribed standard of orthodoxy or practice—so long as such external acts do not violate the rights or safety of other people. Religious freedom is also the freedom to choose not to believe and not to practice religion.

Upon close examination, virtually every "Baptist distinctive" is an expression of the basic commitment to religious freedom:

1. *Believer's baptism* rests upon the necessity, first, of each person to make a deliberate, conscious and willful decision for Christ prior to receiving baptism and becoming a member of the church. A forced decision is not the exercise of faith.
2. *Priesthood of the believer* is the expression of religious freedom over against the infringement of other believers within the church herself.
3. *A free church in a free state* (separation of Church and State): Freedom of religion requires that the government grant religious liberty and guarantee freedom of conscience by a proper separation of the powers and functions of Church and State.
4. *Local church autonomy* simply extends the principle of religious freedom to the larger group of Christians which makes up a local church.

These are truths on which we stand!

“The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”

— Hebrews 4:12, 13

When the 1988 Baptist General Association of Virginia adopted the Report of the President’s Task Force on the Denominational Crisis, the messengers affirmed “the sovereign authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice.” That action was another in a long and historic series of strong declarations by Virginia Baptists about our complete confidence in and our absolute commitment to the inspired, written Word of God.

Foundational to all Baptist teaching is that the Bible is the supreme norm for faith and practice for the Christian life. The New Testament is clear that this principle was basic to the early church. The reading of the scriptures in the synagogues was a Jewish practice. Young converts to Christianity made the Old Testament and the new apostolic writings, as were in circulation, objects of careful study.

Luke encouraged Jewish converts in this practice when he wrote, “They received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day...” (Acts 17:11). The apostle Paul urged young Timothy to understand that “All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Baptists, as a community of faith, have stood and continue to stand as “a people of the Book.” The Bible—God’s written Word for us—has a ministry that opens our hearts and enables the Spirit to bring us to faith in the Living Word, Jesus Christ, God’s unique Son and our only Savior.

The Bible is nourishment for life in all its fullness. The Bible is where God speaks to us in the here and now. The Bible is not so much a book about God as it is a book in which God reveals Himself in the experiences of men and women and nations so that the Book becomes the Truth of God for us. Its truth is food for our individual souls and nurture for the Body of Christ, the church.

The Bible is best understood in the context of the redeemed people of God, the church. The Bible supports the main purposes for which the church exists: To glorify God by winning the lost and developing (disciplining/disciplining) the saved. Bible study is a major way of achieving these purposes. Therefore, Bible reading and study, by individuals, families, groups, are essential.

The Bible is “known and knowable.” The Holy Spirit uses the Bible to direct and guide persons. The Bible is often the direct means of conversion. Growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ comes as the Bible is read, understood and applied with the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

As Virginia Baptists, we should not be afraid of truth from any source. We should not fear new light being brought to the Bible. On the other hand, we should be afraid when the Bible is neglected, disobeyed and wrongly used.

Throughout our history, there has been much agreement about the Bible's divine origin and role. A variety of interpretation theories have emerged over time; but Baptists, for the most part, have avoided extreme positions of interpretation. This has enabled them to focus upon the major tasks of evangelism and missions. Baptists have stressed that the Bible is divinely inspired, but most do not insist upon a single theory on interpretation. Historically, Baptists have been cautious about allowing any human theory of interpretation to assume the Holy Spirit's role in interpreting Scripture directly with each believer.

The 1963 statement of the *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms this conviction: "The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man.... It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.... The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ."

Virginia Baptists—indeed *all* Baptists—must recover and enlarge our authentic Baptist distinctive of the sovereign authority of the Bible. We cannot—we *must* not—claim for the Bible what the Bible does not claim for itself. We must not surrender the Lordship of Christ.

We must be aware that it is wrong to worship the Bible rather than the God of the Bible. We must reject those who neglect both God's salvation and God's judgment. We must not become captives of our culture.

We cannot condone the substitution of a proposition about the Bible, however true it might be, for the Bible itself. We must resist the misuse of the Bible to support personal aims, such as a secular political agenda, even if those views may be worthy.

We must present "the Whole Gospel to the Whole World!" To that end, Virginia Baptists will continue to uphold the sovereign authority of the Bible. Our churches and our people will search its pages and discover all over again its truth and power. They will be disciplined by its message.

They will proclaim God's Word as the unerring pointer to the One ... "who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), was crucified (Luke 23:33), suffered (Luke 24:26), died (Romans 5:8), and was buried (Luke 23:53). On the third day, He rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures (Luke 24:46, Acts 10:40). He ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9) and is seated at the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 12:2). He will come again in glory (II Thessalonians 1:10) to judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42), and his kingdom will have no end (Luke 1:33).

The Word of God is alive! It is a truth on which we stand.

BAPTISTS, A NON-CREEDAL PEOPLE

Baptists reject creeds, but they have written many confessions of faith. Historically, Baptists have made a clear distinction between a creed and a confession of faith. The distinction is that a confession of faith is a summary of Christian doctrine believed at a particular time by those who are willing to subscribe to it. It may pass into disuse and be forgotten, or, if remembered, be regarded as little more than a historical relic. It may be superseded by another confession of faith.

A confession of faith, whenever it was written, was never imposed upon believers as a test of orthodoxy. It was a *statement of what a person or persons believed, rather than what they must believe.*

A creed, on the other hand, is a binding summary to which legal status is assigned and to which conformity is required on the part of an individual within an organization. Creeds are regarded as permanently binding and can only be altered officially by those at the top of the organization, which is a very difficult and painful process.

Baptists are a confessional people, not a creedal people. And they have not taken this distinction lightly.

The introduction to the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms, “Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is grounded in Jesus Christ who is ‘the same yesterday, and today, and forever.’ Therefore, the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

“A living faith must experience a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each new generation. Throughout their history, Baptist bodies, both large and small, have issued statements of faith which comprise a consensus of their beliefs. Such statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority.”

However, Baptists have used confessions of faith freely. Such confessions have been framed during times of crisis. Thus, in 17th-century England, Baptist confessions were issued to persuade opponents in both Church and State that Baptists were orthodox and pious Christians and were not a threat to peace or public order.

Baptist confessions have been used to show differences of conviction between Baptists and other Christian groups, and in some instances to indicate similarities with other denominations. When an overpowering State Church threatened the existence of dissenting groups, it was important that the Free Church people draw closer together.

Again, Baptist confessions have been used for purposes of instructing Baptist people through setting before them a consensus of belief in the form of a brief doctrinal summary. The authors of the *Baptist Faith and Message* caution that “confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience.” Also, “they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life.”

Why have Baptists been opposed to the use of creeds?

First, they have feared the possibility that a creed will usurp the place of the Bible, which Baptists have always regarded as the foundation of their theology and Christian faith. The Bible belongs in the center of any expression of the Christian witness, and the Holy Spirit enables Christians to interpret it.

Second, any humanly devised creed is bound to be incomplete. They are too brief to comprehend the totality of biblical doctrine.

Third, traditional creeds are derived from ancient and often unknown authors and do not necessarily reflect the experience and terminology of contemporary believers.

Fourth, a variety of interpretations inevitably accompanies the use of creeds. Baptists affirm that believers should depend upon the Holy Spirit to express doctrinal unity in an atmosphere of freedom.

Finally, creeds tend to concentrate authority in themselves rather than the scriptures. Baptists have insisted the Bible alone to be their sufficient, external authority for faith and practice.

Even the Bible can be used as some denominations use their creeds— as one huge creed. This happens when Christians say to one another, “You must believe everything which we think the Bible says and means.” The heresy of this approach is that their interpretation of the Bible becomes a creed in itself, which they attempt to impose upon others.

For Baptists, the Bible is the Word of God, the supreme authority for faith and practice, divinely inspired and uniquely authoritative. Believers have the right before God to interpret these scriptures as the Holy Spirit guides them. There is always a danger that confessions of faith may indeed be transformed into creeds. This occurs when they are used to demand external conformity, taking to themselves legal force. When this happens, they become rivals of the “only Lord of Conscience” and instigators of schism among Baptists.

The concept that Baptists are a non-creedal but a confessional people is a truth on which Virginia Baptists stand.

VOLUNTARY CONNECTIONALISM

What does “*voluntary connectionalism*” mean? Why is it so vital and important to the life of Baptists?

“Voluntary” is defined as proceeding from or effected by the will, as an act; unconstrained; intentional; by choice. “Connectionalism” means coming together or union.

These terms were used frequently by our forebears in the faith in building our Baptist consciousness and in their call for cooperation within and among the churches, associations and conventions.

Coercion and compulsion have no place in Baptist life. Authoritarian and inflexible leadership styles are anathema to authentic Baptists. We guard jealously what John Bradbury called “the Crown Rights of the Redeemer.”

We own no Lord save Jesus Christ Himself. Since we abhor denominational imperialism in any form, we reject any and all attempts to coerce these voluntary relationships into any other than voluntary.

In practice, believers choose (volunteer) to join a Baptist church. Baptist churches choose (volunteer) to join a Baptist association. Baptist churches choose (volunteer) to cooperate with state Baptist conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention; and these Conventions choose (volunteer) to cooperate with each other.

What holds us, Virginia Baptists as well as Southern Baptists, together? “Voluntary connection” is a “rope of sand.”

It is a *rope* because:

- It rests on the Lordship of Christ (Philippians 2:5-11);
- It grows out of His missionary imperative (Matthew 28:19, 20; John 20:21; Acts 1:8);
- It seeks to fulfill His high priestly prayer (John 17, especially vs. 21).

It is *sand* because:

- It depends on human cooperation and consensus;
- It requires flexibility and care to preserve its genius;
- It prospers only in an environment of mutual trust where diversity and difference are accepted and appreciated.

Therefore, voluntary connectionalism describes Southern Baptists’ extraordinary strength, our unique mutual relationships and our practical way of working together. It is part of our self-understanding as a people of God.

It demonstrates our ideal of a unified church with:

- a unified purpose expressed in

- a unified program supported by
- a unified budget, and conducting its missions outreach through:
- a unified denomination with
- a unified missionary vision expressed in
- a unified missionary program supported by
- a unified missionary budget—The Cooperative Program.

Thus, voluntary connectionalism is a description of Southern Baptist personality, proficiency and possibilities. It is a description of “what makes us tick.” It is the hallmark of our corporate life. It embraces all we mean when we use the terms, “cooperate, cooperation, or cooperative.”

Indeed, voluntary connectionalism is the Baptist way! It is a marvelous work of grace when soul liberty and missionary mandate combine to produce and maintain a procedure by which autonomous Baptist churches and autonomous Baptist bodies become “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Voluntary connectionalism is God’s glue by which we are joined with others of like faith and order and like commitment in missionary enterprise called the Southern Baptist Convention.

Voluntary connectionalism is a principle to be cherished and protected. It is a truth on which Baptists stand.

SEPARATION OF CHURCH & STATE

For Baptists, the principle of religious freedom includes the institutional separation of Church and State. The belief in and defense of this principle has been and is now extremely important to Virginia Baptists.

Early Baptists believed religious freedom grew out of scripture. Jesus explained his ministry as that of providing liberty for the oppressed (Luke 4:18). He outlined the proper relationship between the Church and State in his famous statement, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). In one of Apostle Paul’s many statements on the importance of liberty, he writes, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Baptists were the first to take a stand for complete religious freedom in England. This principle was set forth clearly in the writings of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in the early 17th century. These two English Baptists refused to admit that earthly monarchs had a right to interfere in the religious life of their subjects.

Their view was maintained in the various confessions of faith which were written in the years that followed. These convictions were made clear in the American colonies in the teaching of Roger Williams, John Clarke, Isaac Backus and John Leland. Their story of persecution is well known. Baptists owe a great debt to these men who denied the right of a civil magistrate to interfere in matters of conscience and religion.

Indeed, democratic America is indebted to the Baptists in colonial New England and Virginia, for it was their struggle for religious liberty that resulted in the exclusion of all religious tests and restrictions from the Constitution of the United States.

It is widely agreed that the decisive period for the development of what has been called “the great American experiment”—the separation of Church and State—took place in Virginia during the years of the Confederation: 1776-1789.

Perhaps, Isaac Backus personified the ongoing struggle of the Baptists for religious freedom. In 1774, Backus urged Samuel Adams to adopt a consistent policy of separation of Church and State. He pointed out that British taxation of American colonies was no more unjust than Massachusetts’ taxation of Baptists for the support of a state church.

In the same year, Backus and the Baptists from the Warren Association presented a “Memorial” to the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress laying before them their claims for religious liberty.

After much debate, John Adams, the spokesman for the delegation said, “The Baptists might as well expect a change in the solar system as to expect Massachusetts to give up their establishment.” In the end, Massachusetts did give up their establishment, but it was not to come until almost 60 years later, in 1833.

Thomas E. Buckley describes the struggle in his book *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1789*. He identifies three representative groups present in Revolutionary Virginia:

1. Traditional religionists who clung to the establishment arrangement and civil support for religion.
2. Rationalists who fought for an absolute separation of Church and State.
3. Dissenters who wanted equal religious rights and a church free from state control.

A full range of alternatives was developed during the period. In the intense political and religious process of a decade-long struggle, there emerged a distinctly American arrangement, defining religious liberty and the relationship between Church and State.

Ultimately, The Virginia experiment became the American way of Church-State relationships: a free church in a free society.

After disestablishment was achieved, the perspectives listed evolved into two positions:

1. Strict separationists who insisted on an absolute Church-State separation and avoided any entanglement of Church and State.
2. Instrumentalists who, while rejecting a formal establishment, nevertheless were anxious to use the state's powers to advance their religious causes and to shape and control the society about them after their own sectarian vision.

The present tension among Southern Baptists reflects these attitudes.

On the one hand, some advocate with Walter Berns of the American Enterprise Institute, "a program of assistance on a non-discriminatory basis, across the board, to all churches, all religions, all sects." They seem to prefer the "old world" model and plainly say that the state has an interest in and an obligation to preserve and foster religion.

Others, while giving lip service to the separation of Church and State, say, "Of course I believe in the separation of Church and State, but..." They focus on the effort to force society to conform to their sectarian values. Although less forward in their abandonment of the consensus developed two hundred years ago in Virginia, these tend toward a zealous affirmation of a "civil religion," which equates America with the kingdom of God.

Baptists, who maintain the Virginia (and the American) consensus on strict separation, share John Leland's report: "Experience has taught us that the fondness of magistrates to foster religion has caused more problems than all the persecutions ever did."

These Baptists affirm George W. Truett's famous words: "Christ's religion needs no prop of any kind from any worldly source." They agree with Billy Graham, who has said, "The kingdom of God is not the same as America... our nation is subject to the judgment of God just as much as any other nation."

In short, there are those who would use the state's powers to secure and maintain their religious views and those who would not.

Virginia Baptists of the Confederation period set the pattern for a strict separation of Church and State. As Thomas E. Buckley wrote, they were “remarkable in their consistency... squarely in the tradition of Roger Williams and Isaac Backus. . .requesting no favors from civil government, they wanted what may be fairly termed a separation of Church and State based on the distinctive difference between these two spheres... and the need to maintain a pure church.”

The choices for Baptists today—a pure church or not? Religious freedom or religious toleration? A strict separation or co-mingling?

For authentic Baptists, true to their origins and heritage, and most importantly, the guidance of Holy Scripture, the choice is obvious: A pure church in an environment of religious freedom and a strict separation of Church and State. It is a truth on which we stand.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Theological education at its best seeks to take seriously the preeminent command of Jesus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

Theological education at its best is *pietistic*. This means it encourages the regular practices of devotional Bible study, prayer, worship, stewardship and witness. It is administered and taught by men and women of professed Christian commitment and exemplary moral conduct.

Competent scholarship and committed churchmanship are not mutually exclusive. Students train for ministry in an environment in which their relationship with God matures and their calling is crystallized. At the same time, their minds are stretched and ministry skills are formed.

Theological education at its best is *scholarly*. It adheres unashamedly to the highest standards of contemporary academic scholarship. Excellent theological education introduces ministerial candidates to a breadth of ideas and perspectives. This is accomplished while maintaining a reverence for the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.

Believing that unexamined issues are limited in value and that Truth transcends and survives the critique of finite minds, students are encouraged to probe, question and reformulate without fear of losing their faith and calling. Patterns of study and thinking established in seminary enhance the ministries of students across a lifetime.

Theological education at its best is *practical*. It is more than the academic study of religion to satisfy intellectual curiosity. It is a process to prepare men and women for a lifetime of Christian ministry. In addition to courses in theology, ethics and Bible, students take courses to hone practical skills in preaching, evangelism and community ministry.

Seminaries seek to graduate men and women ready to fill the infinite variety of places where God calls His servants. Graduates are prepared to present the unchanging gospel of Jesus to a pluralistic world.

Theological education at its best takes place in *community*. Seminaries are more than communities for learning. They are places where students, professors, administrators and families participate in each other’s lives. Caring, worship and relationship-building occur in the context of Christian love and friendship. The quality of Christian community is part of the educational experience. Seminaries become “demonstration communities” for churches.

Theological education at its best is *accessible*. It is readily available to students in all regions of the country and priced inexpensively in order that no person called of God will be excluded on the basis of finances. It is academically diverse to meet the needs of students with or without college degrees.

Christian education was a stated purpose of the Southern Baptist Convention at its beginning in 1845. Within 15 years of this beginning, the first denominational seminary was founded, in large part by the efforts of James Pettigru Boyce.

This occurred despite reluctance on the part of Baptists to establish specific educational requirements for ministerial candidates and a suspicion of trained clergy among some segments of Baptists. As the Southern Baptist Convention grew and spread geographically, opportunities for ministerial training were regionalized to meet a growing need for theological education.

Virginia Baptists were early supporters of a trained clergy and theological education. Many ministers began their training in Virginia Baptist colleges and schools. Before the Southern Baptist Convention was formed, students prepared for ministry at the Virginia Baptist Seminary, now the University of Richmond.

God continues to supply His people with an endless variety of gifts and talents. God calls many into a wide range of Christian vocations for which theological education is desirable.

At its best the theological education supplied by our seminaries does not create only one style of minister. It allows every student to be formed into the minister God intended, so that a complex and diverse world will hear and see the love and power of Christ proclaimed in infinite variety.

These are truths on which we stand!

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The New Testament presents the church as “the people of God.” Our Baptist understanding about the church—its nature, function and mission—is built upon this fact.

When Peter wrote to the early church in exile he said:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

The church is the people of God, the elect community of believers in Jesus Christ, God’s incarnate Word to every human being. The church is the Body of Christ, created by the Holy Spirit. People do not create the church. Persons are incorporated into the church through personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. The church is a *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.

The gifts by which the church fulfills its mission are secured by and through the Holy Spirit who comes to bear witness to Jesus and to be the Presence of God in the world (John 15:26-27).

The mission of the church—its reason for being—can be described in four words: *worship, witness, teach* and *serve*.

As a “royal priesthood,” the church is to *worship* the omnipotent living God. True worship is both individual and corporate, both private and public. True worship celebrates what God has done in Jesus Christ and calls worshipers to present themselves “as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (Romans 12:1).

True worship unites adoration, confession, praise and response into a communion so that believers are rightly related to the Living God. Thus, worship fulfills its high purpose and becomes the most significant human endeavor.

It is sad when promotional and organizational concerns dominate a gathering so that true worship is diminished. It is tragic whenever human longings for God are left unanswered in the presentation of a worship service which gives more attention to human leadership than upon the Living God.

The *witness* of the church proclaims the Word of God, which became incarnate in the virgin-born, crucified, resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. To this Word, the Bible bears unfailing witness: Jesus Christ is Lord and only Savior for every human being. The Holy Spirit empowers believers, as divinely authorized witnesses of that Savior, to “declare the wonderful deeds” of the living God.

All these declarations are innumerable in variety. They all come together to glorify the living God and in authentic evangelism—leading persons to faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Proclamation, or preaching, is a primary form of witness; however, it is not a substitute for other aspects of the

mission of the church. The ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are dramatic witnesses to the gospel, as the scriptures clearly instruct: "buried with him through baptism. . . raised to live a new life. . ." (Romans 6:4); "the new covenant in my blood. . . in remembrance of me. . . proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:25-26). These celebrations are distorted when their witness theme is neglected or omitted.

Our Lord's command to the church to *teach* believers in the faith assures the fulfillment of the divinely assigned mission of the church. The teaching vocation of the church is linked inseparably with the worship-witness-serve activities of the church.

Bible teaching is the primary method of discipling the nations and individual believers. "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. . ." (2 Timothy 3:16).

Thus, God-like character is formed, a Christian ethic is developed and a righteous society becomes more nearly possible because the conscience of all humankind is affected by the witness-teaching of the gospel.

The church *serves* by ministering in the name of Jesus to the whole human personality (physical, emotional, social and spiritual) and to all the nations of the world. "Missions" is a natural result of the faithful worship-witness-teach-serve endeavor of the church and addresses all these needs.

Ministry is purposefully and unashamedly evangelistic. Ministry is offered humbly in the name and spirit of Jesus—not on condition of a faith response—because the church is under the judgment of its own gospel.

The church can find fullness of life (John 10:10) only by losing its life in the ministries entrusted to it. The church's mission is achieved by following the Lord (Mark 10:35-45). Service to the whole world becomes a Christian's responsibility.

An exclusive emphasis on either the "far-away places" or the "next-door needs" subverts the gospel imperative "into all the world." A balanced effort to share the gospel with all persons is a continuing quest.

The worship-witness-teach-serve mission of the church is sustained as truth is cherished in all its forms. The life of the church is strengthened as it guards freedom as the ideal environment for the preservation and spread of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

The truth about the life and work of the people of God, His church, is an ever-present challenge to every Christian, to every Virginia Baptist. Whatever detracts from these truths keeps us from being all God has called us to be and become.

These truths are God's marching orders for His people: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..." (Matthew 28:19-20).

On these truths we stand!

FREEDOM & COOPERATION

Freedom is a major word among Baptists. It always has been, actually. But what about cooperation? Does cooperation compromise freedom? Or is cooperation a responsible expression of freedom?

These questions have been asked by Baptists from their earliest beginnings to the present moment. In every instance, the answers have shaped Baptists' theology, polity and ministry.

Throughout the Bible, God is revealed as a liberator. The words, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exodus 9:1) resound throughout the Old Testament. God willed for people to be free from slavery of any kind—bound by the government, enslaved to sin, captivated by culture.

Jesus established the possibility of real freedom for all people. At the outset of his public ministry, Jesus declared as one of his divinely ordered purposes "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners" (Luke 4:18). *Freedom!*

Later, Jesus made sure that no one misunderstood the liberating nature of salvation, "so if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). *Freedom!*

Paul recognized freedom as an essential characteristic of Christian life. He wrote to the Corinthians, ". . . where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). The apostle's words to the Galatians serve as a profound admonition to all of God's people: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

God has called us to freedom. That much is certain. Baptists' unrelenting passion for freedom is divine in origin. But how about cooperation? Can cooperation be enjoyed without freedom being destroyed? The history of Baptists is a ringing "yes" to that question. After all, cooperation is as basic to biblical Christianity as freedom.

A helpful portrait of this truth was painted by Paul. The apostle likened the church to a human body with many parts (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). For the body to function properly, each part must work with other *parts—cooperation—while* retaining its own uniqueness—*independence*. An eye is free to be an eye, an ear an ear, a foot a foot. Yet, maturity and meaningful activity are the results of eyes, ears and feet working in cooperation with each other.

The church is a body—"the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27). God has called different members of the church to different tasks—apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, helpers, administrators (1 Corinthians 12:28-29). Each is free to fulfill God's call. However, the church serves best and is best served when each member in freedom decides to minister in cooperation with others.

What is true for individuals is true for congregations. Paul appealed to numerous free and independent congregations of believers to cooperate with each other in providing financial support for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

At their best, Baptists have recognized the proper relationship between freedom and cooperation. They incorporated it into their lives. Baptist people are free. Baptist churches are free. However, free people in free churches have pledged themselves to cooperate in order better to fulfill the Great Commission of Christ.

The purpose of the Southern Baptist Convention as stated in its constitution underscores the importance of cooperation “for the promotion of Christian missions, Christian education, benevolent enterprises, and social services.”

In 1925, with guidance that must have been from God, Southern Baptists adopted a plan of financial stewardship that enhanced both freedom and cooperation. The Cooperative Program has provided a way for Southern Baptists to impact the world for Christ to an extent unimaginable if people and churches only did their work alone.

Reflection on the basic truths that form the foundation on which Baptists stand reveals the fact that the freedom and cooperation principle is essential to all of the rest.

Individually, freedom finds expression in the practice of liberty of conscience and the priesthood of every believer. However, cooperation is also affirmed. Each person of conscience recognizes and assumes responsibilities in relation to the values of others. Individual priests best understand their ministries when they see themselves as a community of priests (1 Peter 2:9).

Ecclesiastically, freedom is interpreted to mean that every congregation, association, state convention, and the national convention is autonomous. However, the working relationship between these bodies is one of cooperation, not competition. Each shares in a ministry that could not be provided by one group alone.

Theologically, freedom is assured by the affirmation of a non-creedal faith which recognizes the authority of the Bible and the centrality of Christ. Cooperation takes place as like-minded believers joined with each other to strengthen witness and ministry in Christ’s name.

Politically, freedom inspires an uncompromising conviction about the separation of Church and State institutionally and the guarantee of religious liberty individually. Yet, cooperation is evidenced as Christians assume the responsibilities of good citizens.

A proper balance between freedom and cooperation is a necessity for the continuation of the Baptist way of life. If uniformity replaces liberty as a basis for cooperation, our identity as Baptists will be jeopardized. If autonomous freedom becomes the enemy of cooperation, the strength of our mission will be weakened.

As Baptists of conviction we must continue to say “yes” to both freedom and cooperation. On these truths we stand!

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE STUDY OF *On These Truths We Stand*

ON THESE TRUTHS WE STAND

The study of this booklet can lead a church to understand and appreciate the biblical foundation on which Virginia and Southern Baptists are based. Information about these truths is essential for an intelligent understanding of both our history and our heritage. The study of this series and other related materials can become a rare spiritual experience to all who participate.

A church might consider conducting a special study of these *truths* during Church Training or during a Wednesday evening prayer service. Some churches may wish to use this booklet as a basis of study to help members understand and appreciate their own church membership.

Such a study would be ideal for new church members, deacon retreats, Bible studies, and a sermon series. Churches may find benefit in securing additional copies for distribution to each church family. Sunday School teachers will find the information a handy reference to aid in their own teaching when lessons deal with the subjects contained in this booklet.

As these truths are studied, leaders can lead participants to locate and read the many scripture passages included in each article. The use of the Bible, throughout the study, is encouraged.

Other suggestions for sharing this vital and important information might include:

1. Participants might be asked to report on the history of their church as it relates to the teaching and practice of these *truths*. Older members might be asked to share “how their church has emphasized Baptist doctrinal teachings in the past and what it has meant to the church.” Testimonies might be encouraged. Many church members will be able to share how these basic biblical truths have shaped and directed lives.
2. Allow time for full discussion of the biblical doctrines under study— especially centered upon their importance for faith and practice.
3. During the course of study, leaders might consider applying each of the *truths* presented in this booklet to their local church. Such an approach might include such things as how each of these biblical truths influences the life and work of the church; the importance of providing a solid foundation for expanding the message of Christ throughout the world; and ways a local church might help all members—as an ongoing activity—to be knowledgeable of these basic doctrines.
4. The church library or media center might motivate members to increase their study and reading on the “*truths on which we stand*” by featuring various books available to them. Many church members will profit from reading and studying this booklet independently. Home study could be encouraged.
5. Request from the Virginia Baptist Historical Society additional resources to add to the study. The VBHS has assembled a large research collection of Baptist materials and has published numerous histories. Its staff presents heritage programs in churches and associations and serves as a resource for planning historical observances, preserving records and promoting heritage awareness. The address is Virginia Baptist Historical Society, P. O. Box 34, University of Richmond, Virginia 23173.

ON THESE TRUTHS WE STAND

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