

# *The Law and The Confessions*

## ***Introduction***

Let me make myself clear right at the start. I do not publish this article because I regard any Confession as the authority for what I believe: that prerogative belongs solely to Scripture. Sadly, many believers do look upon one or other of the 17th century Confessions as the touchstone of orthodoxy – almost on a par with Scripture itself. I do not! Some even preach the Confession! And that includes Reformed Baptists as well as Presbyterians. I think all such practice is quite wrong and ought to be stopped. Let me hasten to add that I think the faith can be defined, and every man should be able to declare what he believes. Yes, indeed! But the notion that any body of men can set down and define the faith for all time for all believers is quite ridiculous, is it not? If the 17th century men thought they could do it, were they not being foolish as well as arrogant? And if people today think that such a body of men really did define the faith in that way – well, words fail! Just in case it needs saying: I fully accept that ‘the faith... was once for all entrusted to the saints’, and that we must ‘contend for’ it (Jude 3), but that’s a far cry from saying that ‘the faith’ has been once and for all defined by any Confession. I’m firmly with John Robinson on this. Addressing those sailing from Delfthaven in 1620, he told them bluntly: many stop where Luther and Calvin left them – good men, both of them – but God has more light to break out of his word!

Nevertheless, as I say, not a few believers really do think that one or other of the Confessions has set out the faith – full stop! Many Presbyterians, for instance, think that way about the Westminster Confession; they really believe it covers everything, is set in concrete, and must not be touched, dare not be touched. The Gospel Standard Strict Baptists went so far as to enrol their 19th century Articles in Chancery, hoping thereby to ensure that they never could be changed. Recently, the denomination’s bluff has been called, and they have had to acknowledge that the whole thing has been a myth (as long ago as 1921, James Kidwell

Popham told them it was), even so they have come out fighting, stating that they never will change their Articles! Hence my point: a Confession becomes an inviolate, unquestionable, unalterable definition of the faith. I'm sorry to say that not a few Particular Baptists get close to it with their 1689 Confession!

There it is. In this article, therefore, I'm not in the least interested in perpetuating the notion that any Confession is the final word. In fact, I want to do something to put a stop to this icon-making and icon-polishing!

So much for the negative. What's my positive aim?

I am mainly concerned with the hotly-debated topic of the law. The law! What an important subject! However, having already fully argued the case – that the believer is not under the law of Moses – I hope that what I say here will be read in conjunction with what I have written about it elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, many teachers continue to advocate John Calvin's system, and think that believers are under the law<sup>2</sup> for sanctification.<sup>3</sup> And when these believers consult their Confession – the Westminster, the Savoy, or the Particular Baptist 1689, as maybe – they are bolstered in that belief.

I want to do what I can to help such believers. And they need help! This is no academic nicety! The truth is, many believers are locked in the old covenant under the law of Moses; that is, they think that although, as sinners, they have come to Christ (not the law) for justification, having come to Christ, they have to be taken back immediately to the law for sanctification – and much else, including assurance. It's heartbreaking! These believers are locked – imprisoned – in this grim condition. *I use the word 'imprisoned' advisedly; see Galatians 3:23; 4:2-3.* This tragic state affairs needs

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<sup>1</sup> *Christ Is All: No Sanctification By The Law; Four 'Antinomians' Tried and Vindicated; Grace Not Law!: The Answer To Antinomianism.*

<sup>2</sup> They usually restrict 'the law', without the slightest warrant, to the ten commandments, which they like to call 'the moral law'.

<sup>3</sup> They also think that the law must be preached to sinners to 'prepare' them – make them 'fit' for – Christ!

to be put right. Calvin and these great Confessions are grievously mistaken on this matter, and yet many have followed them into bondage under the law.

Having, as I said, set out biblical teaching on this question (see the afore-mentioned books), I now want to address those Particular Baptists who only know of the 1689 Confession. I want them to know that not all the Particular Baptists in the 17th century were old-covenant men! Some Particular Baptists in those days knew that the New Testament is clear: believers are not under the law of Moses, but under the law of Christ. They were also convinced that we do not have to preach the law to sinners in order to prepare them for Christ. Though the religious climate all around them was hostile to their view of the law, these Particular Baptists did not buckle and fall in with majority. And when they drew up their Confession, they made their disagreement with the majority very clear.

I say all that because I know some Particular Baptists are coming to appreciate new-covenant theology – having been convinced of the truth by the Spirit through Scripture. Well, I want to encourage them in their stance against the tide, by bringing to their attention – or reminding them of – certain events which took place in the 17th century. Not, I repeat, because I think that what those men said in those far off days is the last word. Not at all! But just to show those who know only the 1689 Confession that there is more to be said on the matter.

### ***The background***

During the 1640s, England was passing through a time of great unrest and change, the antinomian controversy being one of the causes. As a consequence, Parliament summoned the Westminster Assembly in 1643 – one of its aims being to raise a bulwark against antinomianism. Hence the polemical tone of the Westminster documents, with their heavy emphasis on the law. In the event, the Assembly more than dealt with antinomianism; it over-reacted to it. And, much as Calvin allowed his reaction against the Anabaptists to grossly distort his view of baptism, with grievous consequences, so the men at Westminster with

antinomianism. The upshot was, instead of steering the right course between Scylla and Charybdis, in sheering away from antinomianism, they plunged far too much towards legalism, and ended up producing documents heavy with law.<sup>4</sup> So much so, it's not an idle question as to whether or not those documents should be classified as gospel or law!

This is the background to what follows. It was the background at the time, and it must not be forgotten when we come to evaluate the various Confessions which 17th century Particular Baptists drew up.

The Particular Baptists who met in 1644 to draw up their Confession of Faith, were, it goes without saying, fully aware of the anti-antinomian fervour raging at the time, and the pressure that was being exerted at Westminster. And they responded! Excluded from the Westminster Assembly, they published their own Confession, now known as the First London Confession.

They did not start from scratch, but drew heavily on the 1596 Separatist Confession, just over half of its articles being virtually a repeat of the 1596, the tiny changes nearly always a question of wording. There were some differences, of course – baptism, the ministry and church-State relations. In addition, the 1644 also drew upon the Synod of Dort of 1619. The Particular Baptists, setting out their beliefs expressly to rebut unjust charges which had been levelled against them, wanted to show their Calvinistic credentials regarding salvation, as well as their particular view of the doctrine of the church. In light of this, and especially because of the controversy raging all around them at the time, the 1644 Confession is noteworthy; especially so, for my purposes in this book, because of its statements – or lack of them – on the law.

The Westminster men – the vast majority of whom were Presbyterians leavened by a handful of Independents – were, of course, covenant theologians.<sup>5</sup> On the law, they were followers and

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<sup>4</sup> Out of 196 questions, the Larger Catechism has more than 60 on the law, a staggering ratio for the age of the new covenant.

<sup>5</sup> Reformed covenant-theology is very different to new-covenant theology. Very different! The former is an invented philosophy, a logical system

developers of Calvin, a century having passed since he had promulgated his views. As a consequence, they incorporated Calvin's third use of the law in their Confession, in opposition to the view on the law put forward by those whom they dismissed as antinomians. As I have explained, one of the main purposes of the Assembly was to counter antinomianism; Calvin's third use of the law was regarded as the orthodox antidote.

The Particular Baptists of 1644, however, did not see eye to eye with the Westminster men on this; not only did they explicitly disagree with Calvin's first use of the law, they made no mention whatsoever of Calvin's second and third uses. In other words, they did not say the law is the believer's rule of life; they did not catch hold of Calvin's whip; they made no link whatsoever between the law and sanctification. I know it is dangerous to argue from silence, but in light of the controversy raging at the time, and in light of the Westminster Assembly meeting close by, and the reason for it, the inference is inescapable – *the Particular Baptists of 1644 did not adopt Calvin's uses of the law*. Indeed, their Confession does not even have a chapter devoted to the law. What is more, they stated:

The tenders of the gospel to the conversion of sinners, is absolutely free, no way requiring, as absolutely necessary, any qualifications, preparations, terrors of the law, or preceding ministry of the law, but only and alone the naked soul, as a sinner and ungodly to receive Christ, as crucified, dead, and buried, and risen again, being made a Prince and a Saviour for such sinners.

Again:

The same power that converts to faith in Christ, the same power carries on the soul still through all duties, temptations, conflicts, sufferings, and continually whatever a Christian is, he is by grace, and by a constant renewed operation from God, without which he cannot perform any duty to God, or undergo any temptations from Satan, the world, or men.

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imposed upon Scripture. The latter seeks to expound the New Testament in the way it handles the old covenant, and to take its teaching on the new covenant and apply it to believers. And what is that teaching? That believers are not under the law of Moses but under the law of Christ.

Again:

All believers are a holy and sanctified people, and that sanctification is a spiritual grace of the new covenant, and effect of the love of God, manifested to the soul, whereby the believer is in truth and reality separated, both in soul and body, from all sin and dead works, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, whereby he also presses after a heavenly and evangelical perfection, in obedience to all the commands, which Christ as head and King in his new covenant has prescribed to him.<sup>6</sup>

These are highly significant statements. In conversion, no place is given to a preparation work by the law; for the believer, sanctification is not by the law, but by faith, and the effect of the love of God. The absence of the law for sanctification is deafening. Not only that! When we couple it with the positive emphasis which the 1644 men made when talking about sanctification – an emphasis upon the new covenant, saying that it is the same power that sanctifies as that which converts and justifies, and putting weight on the love of God – the picture is clear. No talk here of the old-covenant law, and a whip with its consequent fear! No! These men, thinking about sanctification, talked about the love of God! Let Calvin and the men of Westminster say what they would about the law – and they said plenty! – the 1644 Particular Baptists would stick to Scripture!

I admit they distanced themselves from the Anabaptists, who, I agree were (overwhelmingly) against Calvin on the law. Does this mean that the Particular Baptists – even though they did not say so explicitly – did adopt Calvin's position on the law, after all? No! The fact is, 'Anabaptist' in those days was a loose term, changing in meaning throughout the 16th and 17th centuries; it was a term of abuse, only vaguely defined, much like 'bolshie', 'commie', 'black-leg' or 'scab' of a later age. Indeed, it is much as Christ was labelled a 'Samaritan' (John 8:48). All this might equally be said of the pejorative label, 'antinomian'.

So, just as English tourists abroad these days might wish to distance themselves from 'lager-louts' (or worse), in the 17th

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<sup>6</sup> Articles 25, 26 and 29.

century Particular Baptists did not want to be tarred with the brush of Münster.<sup>7</sup> And not only that. ‘Anabaptist’ meant ‘re-baptiser’. It was these two slurs which ‘the baptised churches’ of 1644 wished to disown.<sup>8</sup> What is more, the Particular Baptists did not disagree with *everything* the Anabaptists believed!<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the main point: although it is dangerous to argue from silence – but, as I have explained, and will further expand upon, ‘silence’ is too strong a word – we know that the 1644 men repudiated Calvin’s first use of the law, and did not mention his second and third uses, but set out what they saw as the new-covenant way of sanctification.

In 1646, following an attack by Daniel Featly, the Particular Baptists revised their First London Confession. Featley, addressing Parliament, had reminded them of ‘a book presented to you’ – Parliament – ‘in whose Dedicatory Epistle there are many heinous accusations unjustly and falsely laid against us’. The Particular Baptists responded – expressly revising their Confession to make their position crystal clear on the points raised by Featly. In so doing, they strengthened the Confession’s Calvinistic tone, but made no changes to their position on the law. Once again, in light of the Westminster debates, this is very significant.

What is more, we do not have to argue from silence! In 1646, Benjamin Cox published an Appendix to the 1644 Confession. While it is true that no one else signed this document, Cox claimed he was speaking for the seven churches involved. He also stated that he was clarifying, strengthening certain points in the

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<sup>7</sup> Following Münster (1533-5), ‘Anabaptist’ was a term of virulent abuse, sinister and ugly in tone. And it lasted a long time. John Wesley used it abusively as late as 1788. Later still it was linked to the French invasion in Wales in 1797 and was mentioned in debate in Parliament in 1813. But, significantly perhaps, black Jamaican Baptists at the end of the 1700s were quite prepared to accept the name.

<sup>8</sup> As confirmation of the second point, the Anabaptists themselves rejected the label; their baptism as believers, they insisted, was their first baptism.

<sup>9</sup> But neither did the Anabaptists! I mean, of course, there is no such body as THE Anabaptists.

Confession: ‘for the further clearing of truth’. And on the law, he explicitly stated:

Though we that believe in Christ are not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14), yet we know that we are not lawless, or left to live without a rule: ‘not without law to God, but under law to Christ’ (1 Cor. 9:21). The gospel of Jesus Christ is a law, or commanding rule unto us; whereby, and in obedience whereunto, we are taught to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world (Tit. 2:11-12), the directions of Christ in his evangelical word guiding us unto, and in this sober, righteous, and godly walking (1 Tim. 1:10-11). Though we are not now sent to the law as it was in the hand of Moses, to be commanded thereby, yet Christ in his gospel teaches and commands us to walk in the same way of righteousness and holiness that God by Moses did command the Israelites to walk in, all the commandments of the second table being still delivered unto us by Christ, and all the commandments of the first table also (as touching the life and spirit of them) in this epitome or brief sum: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, *etc.*’ (Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10).

In short: believers are not under the law of Moses, but under the law of Christ.

Other revisions of the Confession followed, and for several reasons. The rise of Quakerism which threatened, if not ruined, many Baptist churches; the weakened Calvinism of Thomas Collier, an important figure among the Particular Baptists, whose book of 1674 caused alarm throughout their churches; on the opposite flank, the rise of hyper-Calvinism; and bitter persecution – for all these reasons, the Particular Baptists felt the need to restate their position clearly.

In 1677, therefore, the Calvinistic Baptists drew up a new statement, the Second London Confession, and this was published – when the political climate was easier – in 1689. Although there is evidence that the 1677 men made use of the 1644 Confession, nevertheless they made several important changes. They strengthened their Calvinism. Above all, the 1677 (1689) Confession was clearly a revision, an adaptation, of the Savoy Confession of the Independents, which itself was mostly the Westminster Confession.



Now why did the 1677 Particular Baptists take this course? We do not have to guess. As they explained, they did not wish merely to set out what they believed, but they wanted to show how much they agreed with the Independents and Presbyterians.

This speaks of a radical departure from 1644 (and 1646). The tone of the 1644/1646 Confession is very different to that of the 1677/1689; so much was changed.<sup>10</sup> Why? Copies of 1644 Confession and its revision had become scarce by 1677, but why did the Particular Baptists at that time turn to the Westminster Confession (and the Savoy) and make it the basis of their own, new, Confession? In 1646, when they revised their First Confession, they could have made use of the current deliberations at Westminster, but they did not, yet they made liberal use of the Westminster Confession in 1677 (1689). Why? There is serious disagreement today over the explanation.

Some allege, and it is my opinion also, the Particular Baptists of 1677 were concerned with ‘political correctness’, and especially so when they published their Confession in 1689. The ‘dissenting establishment’ was Presbyterian. The Particular Baptists wanted to show that they were mainstream Calvinists, that they were not going to rock the boat. It has been suggested that this is why they played down the contentious rules of restricted communion held by most of their represented churches. Their purpose was clear: ‘Hereby declaring... our hearty agreement with them (Presbyterians and Congregationalists), in that wholesome protestant doctrine’. Unity was uppermost in their minds.

I do not say the 1677 men copied the Westminster Confession blindly. For instance, the 1677 left out Westminster material on the covenants and several other topics. Nor do I wish to imply that the men of 1644 (the First Confession) and 1646 (its revision) did not use previous Confessions from non-Baptist sources. I have already noted how they went back to the 1596 Separatist Confession. Above all, I do not say the 1677 men were forced to adopt the

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<sup>10</sup> Although they claimed ‘the substance of the matter is the same’ as the earlier Confession.

Westminster Confession;<sup>11</sup> but ‘political correctness’ was a very strong pressure, no less in their day than ours.

This peer-pressure for ‘correctness’ has not always been given due weight, even though the evidence is there, plain for all to see. For instance, George Fox, the Quaker, died in 1691, and his *Journal* was first published in 1694, nearly twenty years after its final entry, and more than fifty years after its earliest. These dates are significant – 1643, 1675 and 1694. With the passing of these decades, persecution of Dissenters had given way to toleration. Consequently, later Quakers, omitting or toning down many passages in the *Journal* which to them, in their more genteel age, seemed outrageous and fanatical, edited Fox’s trenchant style and language to produce a sanitised, more acceptable version for public consumption. And not only Fox; John Reeve’s writings were drastically altered, and Edmund Ludlow’s millenarianism was left out of his, so as not to offend. Not only was much lost by this process of ‘tidying up’, it shows the pressure Nonconformists felt themselves under at the time, brought about with the change in the political climate in the last decades of the century compared with the 1640s and 50s.

I am not saying that the 1689 Particular Baptists did not sincerely and wholeheartedly believe their Confession. All I wish to point out is that the change in the political climate before and after 1661 must not be left out of the equation, since politics and religion were so inextricably linked in those days. The Particular Baptists of 1677 (and 1689) were facing very different political circumstances to the men of 1644 and 1646. I am convinced this showed itself in the 1677 (1689) Confession. Large political forces were at play throughout the 17th century, of course, but the pressure felt by Dissenters was different during its middle decades to those which dominated its close. In the former period, Dissenters took full advantage of their new-found liberty to express their differences; in the latter, unity was paramount. The Dissenters adapted to survive in face of a government which

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<sup>11</sup> As the position I have put forward has been caricatured.

wanted them controlled. But when I say they adapted, I do not mean they were absorbed; I mean adapted.

Excluded from society – and they felt the sting of it – Dissenters, at the end of the 17th century and the start of the next, certainly had reason enough to be alarmed: the early 1700s brought an increasing pressure to bear on them all. In a sermon by Henry Sacheverell at Oxford in 1702, for instance, Nonconformists were labelled ‘as enemies of the Commonwealth and State’, ‘greater monsters than Jews, Mohammedans, Socinians and Papists’. Daniel Defoe responded with his satire: *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* – seemingly, he wanted them exterminated as vermin – but he was too subtle for many who thought, for a while, he meant it! Samuel Wesley, however, was not being satirical when he vented the bitterness felt towards Nonconformists, calling their academies immoral, and accusing them of disloyalty to the State. Such critics were following the pattern set by the throne itself. Queen Anne, who despised Dissenters, would have abolished their civil and religious liberties had she not providentially died when she did. In all this, Baptists were treated with less respect than either the Presbyterians or Independents, and thought more dangerous revolutionaries than Quakers. The Particular Baptists responded, in part, by writing their history to establish their credentials, having tried, as I have said, by their 1677/89 Confession to show the same in another way. They strongly desired to present a united front with Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Even so, Dissenters, in general, felt shut out, and had good reason for feeling it. Indeed, discrimination against them was still alive and kicking a century later.

When all is said and done, perhaps we will never know the rights and wrongs of this debate. Leaving this disputed politics to one side, let us get back to the incontrovertible on the 17th century Particular Baptists and the law of Moses.

The fact is, we have the two sets of Particular Baptist Confessions which radically differ on the law. Even though, I admit, I cannot explain how William Kiffin signed both the First and Second Confessions, and Hanserd Knollys signed both the 1646 revision and the Second Confession, there were profound changes in the

Confession. But what is wrong, after all, in simply saying the Particular Baptists changed their mind between 1644 and 1689? The point for my purposes is this: The Particular Baptists of 1677 and 1689 agreed with Calvin on his uses of the law, but those of 1644 and 1646 did not. This much is irrefutable.

In the end, however, the issue of the law and the believer does not depend on what Particular Baptists said or did not say in the 17th century – or why they said or did not say it; the final authority is Scripture. That being said, I do not go to the opposite extreme and dismiss the Confessions of the 17th century. Indeed, since so many believers today are basing their view of the law on Calvin’s third use, especially as incorporated in the Westminster Confession and the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession, we dare not ignore the history of the time, even if we wanted to. Above all, those contemporary Particular Baptists, who have come across only the 1689 Confession, ought at the very least to know of the earlier Confession, and the radical differences between the two. Not least on the vital question of the law.

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