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History or Revisionist History? How Calvinistic Were the Overwhelming Majority of Baptists and Their Confessions in the South until the Twentieth Century?

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In the debate about Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention, at least the following two historical claims are frequently suggested by some Calvinistic Baptists: (1) that the overwhelming majority of Baptists were five-point Calvinists from the time before the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention until the early twentieth century (when it is asserted that some Southern Baptist leaders allegedly changed the course of the Convention in the early to mid-twentieth century); and (2) that the Baptist confessions before the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* were overwhelmingly five-point Calvinist confessions.

The purpose of this article is to assess the historical accuracy of these two claims.

Assessing Claim 1: Were Most Baptists Five-Point Calvinists until the Early or Mid-Twentieth Century?

Some Calvinistic thinkers have asserted that the overwhelming majority of Baptists in the South were Calvinists until the early twentieth century.¹ Were some early Baptists in America in the late 1700s and early 1800s

¹For example, Tom Ascol claims that the “traditional Baptist” view of soteriology voiced in “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation” “*has only been ‘traditional’ since about 1963,*” when the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*, in Ascol’s opinion, represented a “doctrinal downgrade” from the dominance of high Calvinism before it. Ascol likewise asserts, “In his book, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, Tom Nettles has persuasively argued that *Calvinism was the theological consensus for the first 70 years of the SBC.* . . . So if we are going to take the complete history of the SBC into consideration, rather than an abridged version, this document would more accurately be called ‘A Statement of **Modern** Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation.’ *The understanding of salvation that was prevalent throughout the convention at its inception and for many decades afterward was nothing less than historic, evangelical Calvinism.*” Tom Ascol, “Response to ‘A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,’” part 3 and part 5, Founders Ministries Blog, <http://blog.founders.org/2012/06/response-to-statement-of-traditional.html> (accessed 26 April 2014). Bold is Ascol’s; italics are mine.

Or, citing the more modest claim of Tom Nettles himself, “*This consensus in the Doctrines of Grace was perpetuated in Southern Baptist life through the second decade of the present [20th]*

five-point Calvinists? Yes, of course. Were some Baptist leaders, particularly the children of the wealthy aristocracy of the South, many of whom were educated at elite Ivy League type schools, Calvinistic in their own theology? Yes. But these answers might be misleading, and do not answer claim 1. The question is, “Were the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists at the time of the founding of the SBC and the early decades of the SBC in the mid-to-later nineteenth century five-point Calvinists?” Reviewing the historical sources, the answer appears to be “No.”

What Counts as “Calvinism”?

Some Southern Baptists describe themselves as “Calvinists,” but that is not really correct, of course. No Baptist is, properly speaking, a “Calvinist,” because even Reformed-leaning Baptists deny many doctrines affirmed by actual Calvinists, such as infant baptism, ecclesiology, or the meaning and practice of the Lord’s Supper and baptism. Even the Calvinistic English Particular Baptists were clear in distinguishing themselves on key doctrines from fully Calvinist confessions.² Usually it is the Calvinist doctrines of God and salvation with which Calvinistic Baptists resonate. So for Baptists, it is not accurate to use the noun “Calvinist,” but rather the adjective “Calvinistic” to describe what sort of Baptist they are. It is not a question of being fully a “Calvinist,” but rather of how “Calvinistic” they are.

The most commonly used measuring stick of how “Calvinistic” a theologian or confession might be is the “five points” of Calvinism as defined in the Canons of Dort, often summarized in the acrostic of TULIP—Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.³ Let us acknowledge several things that have been

*century. . . . This virtually unanimous belief disintegrated along the way.” Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Lake Charles: Cor Meum Tibi, 2002), 50, emphasis mine.*

Thomas Kidd, while acknowledging in a blog post that “from its origins, the Baptist movement was divided between ‘General’ and ‘Regular’ or ‘Particular’ Baptists over the issue of election,” asserts that “Calvinists have always been a major factor, but especially if you include the first two hundred and fifty years of the movement, *Calvinism arguably has been the dominant theology among English and American Baptists. . . . In America, Baptists who believed in a general atonement became a decided minority, especially after the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century*, as Calvinistic Separate Baptists, emerging from the revivals, became the most dynamic segment of broader Baptist life.” Thomas Kidd, “‘Traditional Baptists’ and Calvinism,” *Patheos* blog, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2012/06/traditional-baptists-and-calvinism/> (accessed 26 April 2014), emphasis mine.

²*The Philadelphia Confession* (1742) was modeled after the Particular Baptist *Second London Confession* (1689), which in turn followed the language of the Calvinist *Westminster Confession* (1646) rather closely at points. For a comparison of the Baptist distinctives affirmed in the *Philadelphia* and *Second London Confession* that differentiated these Particular Baptists from the Presbyterian/Congregationalist doctrines in the *Westminster Confession*, see Steve Lemke, “What Is a Baptist? Nine Marks that Separate Baptists and Presbyterians,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 5, no. 2 (2008): 10-39.

³For a more detailed analysis of the five points of the TULIP, see Steve Lemke, “A More Detailed Analysis of the Five Points of Calvinism,” available at <http://baptistcenter.net/>

stated many times—namely, that:

- (a) Calvinism is more than the five points of the Synod of Dort;
- (b) in fact, the five points do not even nearly express fully Calvinist soteriology; and
- (c) the TULIP acrostic is a recent innovation which may not adequately or accurately describe these doctrines more fully expressed in the Canons of Dort.⁴

The following reasons explain why this functional (though incomplete) measuring stick for Calvinism is useful:

The five points are the minimal threshold for Calvinism. The simple answer is that it is the five points of the Synod of Dort by which Calvinism has been defined traditionally and historically, particularly among Baptists. The two key Calvinistic Baptist confessions affirmed by high Calvinists/Particular Baptists—the *Second London Confession* and the *Philadelphia Confession*—echo the affirmation of these five doctrines in the Canons of Dort and the *Westminster Confession*. As was noted earlier, many Calvinists have rightly asserted that there is more to Calvinism than the five points, and that affirming the five points does not make one fully Calvinist. The five points are focused on soteriology, but do not even encompass Calvinist covenant soteriology as a whole, much less the broader points of ecclesiology and the sacraments that are crucial to Calvinism proper. But note this: in making this argument, they are saying that Calvinism is more than these five points, not less. The five points are the floor of Reformed soteriology, not the ceiling.

Calvinists deny partial Calvinism (Calminianism). Furthermore, both Calvinists and Arminians have insisted that there is no Calminian middle ground between Calvinism and Arminianism; it is an “all or nothing” matter in which one must either be a five-point Calvinist or a five-point Arminian. For example, Calvinist theologian Michael Horton of Westminster Theological Seminary asserts, “There is no such thing as ‘Calminianism.’”⁵

papers/Lemke_Five_Points_Methodology.pdf.

⁴For example, see Kenneth J. Stewart, *Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 75-96; Richard A. Muller, “How Many Points?” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 425-33; James K. A. Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist* (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2010), 59-64; and Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 15, cf. 23, 25, 179-80.

⁵Michael Horton, “Preface” in *Against Calvinism*, by Roger Olson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 10. (By design, Horton authored *For Calvinism* as a companion book to Olson’s *Against Calvinism*). Arminian theologian Roger Olson dedicates an entire chapter in his earlier book *Arminian Theology* to debunking the “myth” that “a hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism is possible.” Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 61-77. I disagree with both Horton and Olson on this point, since the majority of Southern Baptists, America’s largest Protestant denomination, would be counted as Calminians, and, as I have argued elsewhere, this forced “either/or” alternative commits the logical error known as the fallacy of false alternatives. See Steve Lemke, “Using Logic in Theology: The Fallacy of False Alternatives,” *SBC Today*, <http://sbctoday.com/2011/06/03/using-logic-in-theology-the-fallacy-of-false-alternatives/> (accessed 26

Clearly then, one who does not affirm at least all five points is not properly considered a Calvinist.

“Particular redemption” is the key distinctive doctrine. The first of the five points that Baptists normally reject is precisely the doctrine that distinctively defined the Calvinistic Particular Baptists—limited atonement or particular redemption—that Christ died only for the elect. This four-point Calvinism of people who lean toward Calvinism but cannot affirm all five points is sometimes described as Amyraldianism, or in the Baptist tradition, followers of Andrew Fuller (as opposed to Richard Fuller from the Charleston tradition).⁶ But in Baptist history, this is specifically the point which divided Particular Baptists (whose very name is an affirmation of particular redemption) from General Baptists—whether Jesus died to atone for the sins of just a particular group (the elect), or if his atonement could apply to anyone in the general public who repented and trusted Christ as Savior. Therefore, it would be disingenuous to count as true Calvinistic Baptists those who reject the primary and distinctive belief of Calvinistic Particular Baptists, i.e., limited atonement, much less two or three other points of classical Calvinism. Applied to this issue of determining how Calvinistic the early Southern Baptists were, counting as classical Calvinists those who affirm just three or four points of the TULIP is simply not appropriate. They could just as well be counted as two or three-point Arminians. The truth is that many if not most of them were somewhere between Calvinism and Arminianism, and that is the point of this article.

Many five-point Calvinists reject four-point Calvinism. Furthermore, many significant five-point Calvinist thinkers express nothing but disdain for four-point Calvinism. One need not peruse long Calvinist websites, books by Calvinist authors, and Calvinist publishers before seeing this claim repeatedly. For example, it is asserted that “it is impossible to be a four-point Calvinist and remain consistent. The other points of the doctrines of grace cannot stand without it.”⁷ Four-point Calvinism is described

April 2014). The Baptist “Middle Way” between Calvinism and Arminianism is articulated in a statement entitled “Neither Calvinists Nor Arminians, But Baptists” by a group of Baptist theologians and ministers loosely associated with the book *Whosoever Will: A Biblical and Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, edited by David Allen and Steve Lemke (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010). The statement is available at http://www.baptistcenter.net/papers/Neither_Calvinists_Nor_Arminians_But_Baptists.pdf. Although LifeWay research has shown that the majority of Baptists are somewhere between Arminianism and Calvinism, the point being made here is that neither true Calvinists nor Arminians think that three or four points is sufficient, but that one must embrace all five points of their systems to count within their folds.

⁶Fuller’s views were articulated in Andrew Fuller, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation, or, The Duty of Sinners to Believe in Jesus Christ, in The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1845, rep. ed.), 2:328-92. Four-point Calvinism is sometimes also humorously denoted as “Christmas Calvinism,” i.e., “No-L.”

⁷In providing a negative answer to the question, “Is Four-Point Calvinism Possible?” John Hendryx opines, “In other words, to reject limited atonement is *to reject total depravity*

as failing the “test of biblical Calvinism” and thus presents a “partly distorted” gospel.⁸ R. C. Sproul equates four-point Calvinists with Arminians.⁹ Likewise, R. Scott Clark of Westminster Seminary asserts that “definite atonement or absolute (total) universalism” are the only two viable alternatives.¹⁰ B. B. Warfield raised questions whether the denial of limited atonement is a “good,” “acceptable,” or “tenable form of Calvinism,” and asserted that four-point Calvinism is a “logically inconsistent” and thus an “unstable” form of Calvinism.¹¹ Elsewhere, four-point Calvinists are described as being as in-

and unconditional election. The four-point Calvinists, therefore, do not really believe in election, but rather, that the natural man still has the moral ability to turn to God on his own without regenerating grace (as if faith was somehow a contribution on our part). Therefore, it is impossible to be a four-point Calvinist and remain consistent. The other points of the doctrines of grace cannot stand without it. In fact, all of the points stand or fall together since it is either God or man determines whether the atonement will be effectual.” John Hendryx, “Is It Possible to Deny Limited Atonement and Still Believe in Unconditional Election?” Monergism.com, <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/four-point.html> (accessed 26 April 14), emphasis mine.

⁸In another post on Monergism under the category of “Bad Theology,” Hendryx further dismisses four-point Calvinism: “*So-called four-point Calvinism fails the test of biblical Calvinism because this view tends to see the TULIP as an abstraction rather than seeing it Christocentrically. The TULIP only works when we see Christ at its center. . . . Four-point Calvinism not only fails the test of Christocentricity but fails to acknowledge that the Trinity always works in harmony.* The Father elects a particular people for himself, Christ dies to secure their redemption and the Holy Spirit unites the same to Christ applying the benefits of Christ’s redemption to them. I believe that until Jesus Christ is seen as central to the TULIP then *four-pointers will continue to reject the christocentric nature of the Scripture and the gospel is partly distorted as a result.*” John Hendryx, “Four-Point Calvinism,” listed under “Bad Theology,” Monergism.com, <http://www.monergism.com/topics/bad-theology/four-point-calvinism> (accessed 26 April 2014), emphasis mine.

⁹In a quote cited on The Gospel Coalition’s website, Sproul asserts, “There are a host of folks who call themselves four-point Calvinist because they can’t swallow the doctrine of limited atonement. . . . *I think that a four-point Calvinist is an Arminian.* I say that for this reason: When I have talked to people who call themselves four-point Calvinists and have had the opportunity to discuss it with them, I have discovered that they were no-point Calvinists. They thought they believed in total depravity, in unconditional election, in irresistible grace, and in the perseverance of the saints, but they didn’t understand these points.” R. C. Sproul, *The Truth of the Cross* (Stanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007), 140–42; cited at The Gospel Coalition, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/mobile/article/justintaylor/sproul-on-four-point-calvinism> (accessed 26 April 2014), emphasis mine.

¹⁰Warfield asserts: “Post-redemptionism . . . (although it is a recognizable form of Calvinism, because it gives real validity to the principle of particularism), is *not therefore necessarily a good form of Calvinism, an acceptable form of Calvinism, or even a tenable form of Calvinism.* For one thing, *it is a logically inconsistent form of Calvinism and therefore an unstable form of Calvinism.* For another and far more important thing, it turns away from the substitutive atonement, which is as precious to the Calvinist as is his particularism, and for the safeguarding of which, indeed, much of his zeal for particularism is due. I say, Post-redemptionism is *logically inconsistent Calvinism.*” B. B. Warfield, “Warfield on Four-Point Calvinism” listed under “*Bad Theology*” on Christian Reformed Ink Archives, <http://christianreformedink.wordpress.com/bad-theology/four-point-calvinism/warfield-on-four-point-calvinism> (accessed 26 April 2014), emphasis mine.

¹¹“If one accepts that Jesus died as a propitiatory substitute for all his people, *there are really only two alternatives, definite atonement or absolute (total) universalism.* Either he saved

consistent as “hymn-singing atheists.”¹² *Real* Calvinists, then, do not believe the same thing as mere three-point or four-point Calvinists, and in fact tend to equate them with being Arminian in theology. Therefore, in connection with this study, it would be merely grasping at tulips to count four-point Calvinists as legitimate Calvinists.

The Tributaries which Helped Shape Southern Baptist Life

Again, the question being addressed concerns what the *overwhelming majority* of Baptists believed after the Second Great Awakening, not what a few elite leaders believed. The two main threads of Baptists in the South have been identified as the Charleston tradition and the Sandy Creek tradition.¹³ These groups could hardly have been more different socially, economically, or by doctrine and practice. Those associated with the Charleston tradition tended to be

- (a) Calvinistic in theology,
- (b) urbane, wealthy, landed gentry,
- (c) slave owners who made passionate pro-slavery arguments, and
- (d) well-educated, some with Ivy League degrees. For example, the third president of the SBC was very wealthy, the largest slaveholder in South Carolina, and had an earned degree from Harvard.

In contrast, those in the Sandy Creek tradition, whose numbers swelled through the Second Great Awakening (usually dated the fifty-year period from 1790-1840), tended to be

- (a) mixed somewhere between Calvinism and Arminianism,
- (b) poor farmers and frontiersmen in rural areas across the South,
- (c) opposed to slavery (the Sandy Creek Association condemned slavery in 1835, a decade before the wealthy slaveowners of the Charleston tradition led in breaking away from northern Baptists primarily over the right for missionaries to be slave

everyone who ever lived, or he saved all those whom he loved.” R. Scott Clark, “Limited Atonement,” Westminster Seminary, <http://clark.wscal.edu/atonement.php> (accessed 26 April 2014), emphasis mine.

¹²“*Calvinism isn't a produce stand from which we can pick and choose which doctrines we wish to keep and pass over the rest in a sort of hermeneutical reprobation.* Calvinism is an interwoven system of theology which must be accepted or rejected as a whole. From the acceptance of one point, one is compelled by simple logic to the acceptance of all the rest. *You can't deny one without denying them all. The four-point Calvinist is as consistent as a psalm-singing atheist.*”¹⁴“The Inconsistency of Four-Point Calvinism,” Banner of Truth, <http://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2003/the-inconsistency-of-four-point-calvinism> (accessed 25 April 2014), emphasis mine.

¹³This distinction is usually attributed to church historian Walter Shurden. See Walter B. Shurden, *Not an Easy Journey: Transitions in Baptist Life* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 201-10.

- owners, and a quarter of a century before the Civil War), and
 (d) undereducated and, in some cases, illiterate. The revivalistic Sandy Creek worship style was looked down upon by the urbane and straight-laced advocates of the Charleston tradition.

The evidence which follows details the testimony of early Baptist leaders and Baptist historians close in proximity to this period and with perspective on Baptist life in their own era in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The evidence will show that the rural Sandy Creek tradition Baptists, who comprised the majority of Baptists in the South as a whole, were *not* overwhelmingly five-point Calvinists in their soteriology. Most of them were neither fully Calvinists nor Arminians, but somewhere between those polar positions.

The Evidence:

(1791) John Leland (1754-1841), prominent early Virginia and Massachusetts Baptist leader and abolitionist who was influential in working with Jefferson and Madison to assure the inclusion of freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights:

I conclude that the *eternal purposes* of God and the *freedom of the human will* are both truths, and it is a matter of fact that the preaching that has been most blessed by God and most profitable to men is the **doctrine of sovereign grace in the salvation of souls, mixed with a little of what is called Arminianism.**¹⁴

(1813) David Benedict (1779-1874), Baptist pastor for many years in Pawtucket, RI, who then retired to his avocation of Baptist history, publishing seven books. The following citation describes the diversity of views in Virginia and Kentucky on the American western frontier. Benedict traced how the diverse theological perspectives in Virginia were transposed into Kentucky associations such as the South Kentucky Association, organized in 1785, settled primarily by Virginians moving west. (Just for historical perspective, when Benedict wrote this in 1813, Louisiana had become the only state with land west of the Mississippi River just one year previously after the Louisiana Purchase from France a decade earlier; Mississippi, Alabama, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan were still territories; and Florida was still a territory of Spain):

The Baptists in Virginia, at the time they began to send forth populous colonies of their brethren to the western country, were

¹⁴John Leland, "A Letter of Valediction on Leaving Virginia, 1791," in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, ed. Louise F. Green (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 172. Italics his, bold mine.

divided into *Regulars* and *Separates*, although the **Separates were much more numerous**. The *Regulars* were professedly, and some of them very highly Calvinistic; but the **Separates were far from being unanimous in their doctrinal sentiments**. A majority of them, however, were Calvinists, and of the rest, a part were much inclined to the Arminian side of the controversy; and some of the most distinguished among them, in opposing the high strains of Calvinism, which were incessantly, and in many instances dogmatically sounded by their orthodox brethren, **had gone nearly the full length of the doctrine of Arminius**. Others, with different modifications of the objectionable articles of both systems, were **endeavoring to pursue a middle course**. Such was the state of the Virginia Baptists, with regard to doctrine, at the period under consideration, and some of all those different classes were among the emigrants to the fertile regions of the west; but a majority of them were Separates in their native State. But the same people who had traveled together before their removal, so far as least as it respected their associational connection, pursued a different course when settled in Kentucky. The *Calvinistic Separates* united with the few *Regular Baptists* among them, and established the Elkhorn Association, which, at its commencement, adopted the Philadelphia Confession of Faith; while **those who inclined to the Arminian system, as well as those who adopted some of the Calvinistic creed in a qualified sense, united with the Association whose history we now have under consideration** [the South district]. Thus the names of the *Regular* and *Separate* were transported beyond the mountains, and two separate interests were established in the neighborhood of each other.¹⁵

(1832) **Jesse Mercer (1769-1841)**, leading pre-Civil War Georgia Baptist, first president of the Georgia Baptist Convention, four-time delegate to the Triennial Convention, founder of the Georgia *Christian Index*, and founder of Mercer University, which is now named in his honor:

¹⁵David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World*, 2 vols. (Cornhill: Manning and Loring, 1813), 2:237; cf. David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and Other Parts of the World* (New York: Lewis Colby and Company, 1848), 820-21, italics his, bold mine. There are minor variances between the 1813 and 1848 editions, such as that "Calvinistic" is spelled "Calvinistick" in the 1813 edition, and a few words are italicized in the 1848 edition. The 1848 text is followed here. The long history of tensions between Arminian and Calvinistic Baptists in Virginia are detailed in Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond: John O'Lynch, 1810); or the 1894 revised and extended edition of the same work, ed. G. W. Beale (Richmond: & Dickinson, 1894), available at <https://archive.org/details/historyofrisepro00semp>.

It seems to be taken for granted that all those venerable fathers, who founded the Baptist Denomination in this state [Georgia], were as stern Calvinistic preachers as are the opposers of the new plans. But this is altogether a mistake. Abraham Marshall [son of Daniel] was never considered a predestinarian preacher. Some of them were so—seemed to be set for the defense of the gospel. Of these, Silas Mercer and Jephtha Vining were the chief. To use his own figure; he used to say, “he was *short legged* and could not wade in such deep water.” He, with several others, was considered sound in the faith, though *low Calvinists*. Peter Smith and some others **were thought rather Arminian; some quite so.** . . . And here it may not be amiss to add, that the Baptists in the upper parts of South Carolina, in those days, comprehended mostly, it is believed, in the Bethel Association, were *general provisionists*. I think **most of their ministers preached what is now called General Atonement.**¹⁶

(1857) Francis Wayland (1796-1865), professor at Andover Theological Seminary, founder of Newton Theological Institution, president of Brown University, pastor of First Baptist Church in Boston and First Baptist Church of Providence, RI (the first Baptist church in America). A campaigner for anti-slavery causes and prison reform, Wayland College in Virginia (now Virginia Union University) for freed slaves was named in his honor. (Wayland Baptist University in Texas was named for a different Wayland).

The extent of the atonement has been and still is a matter of honest but not unkind difference. *Within the last fifty years a change has gradually taken place in the views of a large portion of our brethren.* At the commencement of that period Gill’s Divinity was a sort of standard, and Baptists imbibing his opinions were what may be called almost hyper-Calvinistic. **A change commenced upon the publication of the writings of Andrew Fuller,** especially his “Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation.”

It is difficult at the present day to conceive to what extent the doctrine of the limited atonement, and the views of election which accompanied it, were carried. I once knew a popular minister, who used to quote the passage, “God so loved the world,” etc., by inserting the word *elect* before world: “God so loved the *elect* world,” etc. I was, in the early part of my ministry, settled in a respectable town in Massachusetts. One of my members, a

¹⁶C. D. Mallery, *Memoirs of Elder Jesse Mercer* (New York: John Gray, 1844), 201-02; [also cited in James Donovan Mosteller, *A History of the Kiokee Baptist Church in Georgia* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1952), 37]. Italics his, bold mine.

very worthy man, and the son of a Baptist minister, and reputed to be “very clear in the doctrines”—(this was the term applied to this form of belief)—had an interesting family wholly given up to worldliness. I wished to converse with them on the subject of personal religion, and mentioned to him my desire. He kindly but plainly told me that he did not wish any one to converse with his children on that subject. If they were elected, God would convert them in his own time; but if not, talking would do them no good, it would only make them hypocrites. He was, I believe, **the last pillar of Gillism then remaining in the church.**

In my last number I referred to **the change which had taken place, in the opinions of Baptists, on the subject of the Atonement.** The question mainly at issue was the *extent* of the gospel sacrifice; in other respects there has ever been, I believe, an entire harmony. It may be well to state briefly what I suppose to be the prevailing belief, in this doctrine, at present. In the northern and eastern States, it is generally held that the whole race became sinners in consequence of the sin of the first Adam; and that, on the other hand, the way of salvation was opened *for the whole race* by the obedience and death of the second Adam. Nevertheless, this alone renders the salvation of no one certain, for, so steeped are men in sin, that they all, with one consent, begin to make excuse, and universally refuse the offer of pardon. God, then, in infinite mercy, has elected some to everlasting life, and, by the influence of the Holy Spirit, renders the word effectual to their salvation and sanctification. In his offer of mercy he is perfectly honest and sincere, for the feast has been provided, and it is spread for **all.** This does not, however, interfere with his gracious purpose to save by his sovereign mercy such as he may choose. There is here sovereignty, but no partiality. There can be no partiality, for none have the semblance of a claim; and, **if any one perishes, it is not from the want of a full and free provision, but from his own wilful perverseness. Ye will not come to me, that ye may have life.**¹⁷

(1890) Edward T. Hiscox (1814-1901), pastor of several Baptist churches in New England and New York, and publisher of a number of amazingly popular Baptist church manuals which amazingly sold over 100,000 copies in total, primarily between 1859-1894, and are still in publication today:

American Baptists are decidedly Calvinistic as to substance of

¹⁷Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, and Co., 1857), 18, 19, 20. Italics his, bold mine.

doctrine, but *moderately so, being midway between the extremes of Arminianism and Antinomianism*. Though diversities of opinion may incline to either extreme, *the 'general atonement' view is for the most part held*, while the 'particular atonement' theory is maintained by not a few. *The freedom of the human will is declared, while the sovereignty of divine grace, and the absolute necessity of the Spirit's work in faith and salvation are maintained.*¹⁸

(1893) John A. Broadus (1827-1895), professor of preaching at Southern Seminary and a colleague of five-point Calvinist professor James P. Boyce. In Broadus' memoirs of Boyce, he quotes approvingly (and was perfectly qualified to challenge this claim if he thought it was inaccurate) the depiction of E. E. Folk (editor of the *Baptist Reflector*) about the theology of the new students at Southern Seminary whom Boyce taught in the post-Civil War 1800s:

"The young men were *generally rank Arminians when they came to the seminary*" until they encountered the "strong Calvinistic views" of Boyce.¹⁹

The important point about this quote is that the majority of the incoming students, based on how they had been disciplined in their local churches, were "rank Arminians." This provides strong evidence that the "rank and file Baptists" in the last half of the 1800s were far from being five-point Calvinists. Boyce was able to persuade many into being Calvinists, but these seminary educated ministers were a small minority of Southern Baptist pastors.

(1894) A. H. Newman (1852-1933), church historian on the founding faculty of Southwestern Seminary, as well as serving as a faculty member at Baylor University, Rochester Baptist Theological Seminary, McMaster University, Vanderbilt University, and the University of Chicago. Writing in 1894, Newman wrote the following summary of the impact of the Reformed tradition in Baptist life:

As regards the set of doctrines on which Augustine differed from his theological predecessors, and modern Calvinists from Arminians, *Baptists have always been divided*. The medieval evangelical sects were all, apparently, anti-Augustinian, and the Baptist parties of the sixteenth century followed in the footsteps of their medieval spiritual ancestors in this and other important particulars. Those Baptist parties of modern times whose histori-

¹⁸Edward T. Hiscox, *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1890), 57, italics mine.

¹⁹E. E. Folk, cited in John A. Broadus, *Memoir of James Pedigru Boyce* (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1893), 265, italics mine.

cal relations with the medieval evangelical parties and the antipe-dobaptist parties of the sixteenth century are most intimate have rejected the Calvinistic system; while those that owe their origin to English Puritanism, with Wiclifism and Lollardism behind it and with the deeply rooted Calvinism of the English Elizabethan age as its leading characteristic, have been noted for their staunch adherence to Calvinistic principles, not, of course, because of any supposed authority of Calvin or of the English Puritan leaders, but because they have seemed to them to be Scriptural. Calvinistic and Arminian Baptists have both had periods of extreme development, the former sometimes scarcely escaping fatalism and antinomianism, the latter sometimes falling into Socinian denial of the deity of Christ and Pelagian denial of original sin. *The great majority of the Baptists of today hold to what may be called moderate Calvinism, or Calvinism tempered with the evangelical anti-Augustinianism which came through the Moravian Brethren to Wesley and by him was brought to bear on all bodies of evangelical Christians.*²⁰

(1911) **Z. T. Cody (1858-1935)**, a Mercer University graduate, studied theology under James P. Boyce at Southern Seminary while earning the Master of Theology degree there, who later earned the Doctor of Divinity degree from Bowden College. He served as pastor of several prominent churches in the South, including First Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, and served as editor of South Carolina's *Baptist Courier* from 1911-1935. He is described as "a theologian of the first rank" by the *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*. In 1919, he was appointed by the Southern Baptist Convention to be on a five-member committee to write a historical document, a fraternal letter to Baptists around the world. The committee was comprised of Cody, J. B. Gambrell, E. Y. Mullins, L. R. Scarborough, and William Ellyson. The article cited below, published originally in the *Baptist Courier* on "Are Baptists Calvinists?" was so popular that it was reprinted in *Baptist World* magazine and in the book *Christian Union Relative to Baptist Churches*, edited by James M. Frost:

Are Baptists Calvinists? The answer to this question depends on what is meant by Calvinism. *If by it is meant all that Calvin himself taught and practiced a negative answer is the only possible one;* for Calvin believed in burning men for deadly heresy, in the union of church and state, in infant baptism and in a good many other things which have ever been rejected by all Baptists. But these things, while taught and practiced by the Genevan, are not now considered as essential to his system; and many feel that churches can reject them and still be called Calvinistic.

²⁰A. H. Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States* (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1894), 5-6, italics mine.

The so-called “five points of Calvinism” are the essential doctrines of the system. Men have forgotten them now but they were once as familiar as the letters of the alphabet. They are, particular predestination, limited atonement, natural inability, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints. *Now if this is the system that constitutes Calvinism it is again very certain that Baptists are not Calvinists.*

But it can be very confidently affirmed that there is now no Baptist church that holds or defends the five points of Calvinism. Some of the doctrines are repugnant to our people. Could there be found a minister in our communion who believes in the theory of a limited atonement? In answering our question, then, we would say that Baptists are not Calvinists; and while Calvinism is an honored name, yet to wear it would detract somewhat from a greater honor that properly belongs to Baptists.²¹

Weighing the Evidence. The evidence listed above is significant and compelling for the following reasons:

- 1. Well-informed evaluators.** Each of the eight persons cited was a significant and trusted Baptist leader in the era under discussion, and were thus in an excellent position to make an informed judgment on this issue beyond their own church or personal beliefs. They provide us with their professional judgment of the status of Baptist life in the immediate past which they were positioned to observe personally. The original source material from these Baptist leaders from the past provides much stronger support than other recent works which cite secondary sources or anecdotal accounts. Were such anecdotal counterexamples to be presented, I do also have in hand literally dozens of additional anecdotal accounts of individuals, churches, and associations moving away from a five-point Calvinist perspective during this era. (Perhaps a collection of them can be listed in a forthcoming article). Although cumulatively these additional anecdotal accounts do help support the case against the dominance of five-point Calvinism in early Baptist life, I have resisted the temptation to provide anecdotal evidence in this article, opting instead for these more comprehensive regional and national evalua-

²¹Z. T. Cody, “Are Baptists Calvinists?” *Baptist Courier*, February 16, 1911; reprinted in *Baptist World*, April 12, 1911, and in *Christian Union Relative to Baptist Churches*, ed. James M. Frost (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1915), 32-35, italics mine. Since the book by Frost is most accessible to readers, these citations are taken from it, 32-33, 35. The Frost book is available at <https://ia600200.us.archive.org/22/items/christianunionre00edit/christianunionre00edit.pdf>.

tions by well-informed Baptist leaders of that era.

2. **Historical proximity of the evaluations.** The Baptist leaders listed have overlapping lives spanning from the mid-eighteenth century through the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Their published writings are spaced at intervals between 1791 and 1911, and all the authors lived at least forty years in the 1800s, giving them decades of time to observe Baptist life carefully. Their cumulative and overlapping experience in Baptist life over this two-century period provides a comprehensive and synoptic vision of Baptist life in this period.
3. **Professional judgment, not merely their own personal or localized perspective.** A crucial point is that each of the persons cited was not stating their own theological views or those of a church or small area, but assessing the theological posture of Baptists/Southern Baptists as a whole. This is a crucial distinction from some other works which have addressed this subject. Indeed, since some of these authors cited held to a more Calvinistic perspective in their own personal views, this lends even greater credence to their affirmation that Baptists in the South as a whole had much more mixed views on Calvinism than others have suggested.
4. **Meets the threshold of evidence required.** The threshold of evidence necessary to disprove the claim that the “overwhelming majority” of antebellum Baptists in the South were five-point Calvinists is rather low. The evidence need not show, for example, that (a) some Southern Baptists were not five-point Calvinists, or that (b) a few leading Southern Baptists were not five-point Calvinists, or that (c) some theologians or institutions affirmed five-point Calvinism. All that the evidence need show is that there were a substantial number of Baptists in the South who were not five-point Calvinists. The evidence does clearly meet and exceed that threshold of evidence.
5. **The overall perspective, not anecdotal accounts.** This evidence cannot be disconfirmed by merely citing counterevidence or anecdotal accounts of (a), (b), or (c) listed above, i.e., citing the theological stance of individual theologians, churches, or institutions. The only relevant counterevidence would be that which demonstrates that an “overwhelming majority” of Baptists in the South in the nineteenth century were five-point Calvinists. However, as noted earlier, even if such anecdotal evidence were to be presented, there are also dozens of anecdotal accounts in churches and associations across the South which support the conclusion that

Baptists in the South were not overwhelmingly five-point Calvinists. Combining these sets of anecdotes would only provide further support for the thesis being presented here: that nineteenth-century Baptists were not uniform but were rather diverse regarding some aspects of soteriology.

Conclusion Regarding Claim 1.

The historical evidence demonstrates not only that not all Baptists in the antebellum South were five-point Calvinists; but to the contrary, a broad mixture of Calvinist and Arminian perspectives was most characteristic in the churches. Based on this evidence from some of the most influential and well-informed Baptists of that era, the claim that five-point Calvinism was the dominant perspective at the time before and after the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention appears to be closer to a somewhat inaccurate revisionist history than an established historical fact. This Calvinianism becomes even more pronounced in the latter nineteenth century.

This conclusion that Baptists in the 1800s and 1900s held to a hybrid mixture of Calvinist and Arminian beliefs is confirmed by more recent historians as well.

Nathan Finn, associate professor of historical theology and Baptist studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. While asserting that early Southern Baptists were “broadly Calvinistic,” Finn concedes that in fact many of these Baptists were remarkably diverse, affirming neither all five points of Calvinism nor all five points of Arminianism, but a Baptist hybrid of these perspectives:

This does not mean Southern Baptists were uniformly Calvinist—if by Calvinist one means strict adherence to all ‘five points.’ For example, it is clear that the founding generation of Southern Baptists were debating the intent of the atonement, with some holding to more ‘limited/particular’ understandings and others holding to more ‘general/unlimited’ views. It is also clear, however, that there was minimal debate concerning the doctrines of election or perseverance.²²

Wayne Flynt, distinguished professor of history at Auburn University, winner of numerous book awards, and author of *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie*, which was printed to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the Alabama Baptist Convention, and was lauded in *Journal of Southern History* as “without question, the very best state or regional Baptist history ever published in the United States.” Flynt likewise points to the diversity of beliefs among Baptists of the South, and Alabama in particular:

²²Nathan Finn, “On the ‘Traditional Statement’: Some Friendly Reflections from a Calvinistic Southern Baptist,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 10 (2013): 66-67, italics mine.

*No Biblical dispute shaped early Alabama Baptists so profoundly as Calvinism. . . . Although Baptists were Calvinists in the general sense of that term, they modified the doctrine. . . . If Charleston, South Carolina provides the clearest ancestry for Calvinism, Sandy Creek, North Carolina, lays firmest claim to the revival tradition. Ardent, charismatic, emotional, independent, Biblicist, the Sandy Creek tradition merged elements of both Calvinism and Arminianism.*²³

Albert W. Wardin, Jr., history professor emeritus of Belmont University, former president of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, and author of the Tennessee Baptist history. Wardin also describes this diversity among Tennessee Baptists in the 1850s, coinciding with the founding and early days of the Southern Baptist Convention:

In 1856 the *Baptist Watchman* maintained that *Separate Baptist influence had triumphed and most Missionary or United Baptists held to a general atonement.*

Wardin also notes on the same page,

In its adoption of a new constitution in 1844, the Concord church [Brentwood, TN] *eliminated references to election and effectual calling and instead declared, "That the blessings of salvation are made free to all by the gospel."*²⁴

So, there appears to be an emerging consensus that although some of the Calvinistic doctrines of the Baptists of the North (primarily the Philadelphia Association) were shared through their emissaries (such as John Gano) in some areas of the South in the latter 1700s and first several decades of the 1800s, and resonated with the Charleston Association, the following statements are descriptive of Southern Baptist life in the first seventy-five years of the Southern Baptist Convention (1845-1920):

- (a) while affirmed by some churches and associations, five-point Calvinism was not dominant among most Baptist churches in the South after the Second Great Awakening,
- (b) actual churches and associations reflected a broader diversity than any one view, and
- (c) most characteristic was a distinctively Baptist hybrid mixture of Calvinism and Arminianism that fell short of an affirmation of either five-point Calvinism or five-point Arminianism.

²³Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 26-27, italics and underlining mine.

²⁴Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History, 1779-1999* (Nashville: Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 148, italics mine.

Assessing Claim 2: Are Baptist Confessions Overwhelmingly Five-Point Calvinist Documents?

This section addresses the historical accuracy of the second claim, (b) that the Baptist confessions (particularly those affirmed in the South) were overwhelmingly five-point Calvinist confessions from the time of the founding of the SBC through the early to mid-twentieth century.²⁵

Frankly, this is a fairly easy claim to disprove. In fact, there are only a couple of five-point Calvinistic Baptist confessions in America that achieved any level of prominence, and neither of these were widely accepted by the time of the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention. The great majority of Southern Baptist confessions are somewhere between Arminianism and Calvinism. More strongly than this, the evidence will show that the confessions which were overwhelmingly affirmed by Southern Baptists were not the five-point Calvinist confessions, but in fact Southern Baptists intentionally chose the confessions which were clearly neither Calvinist nor Arminian (a position that some describe as Calminian)²⁶ over against the existing five-point Calvinistic Baptist confessions.

²⁵For example, the Spurgeon Baptist Association of Churches makes the following astounding assertion on its website: "It was not until the early twentieth century that Baptists in the south turned from the 1689 Confession to a form of the New Hampshire Confession of 1833." See "Confession of Faith," Spurgeon Baptist Association of Churches, http://sbaoc.org/page/statement_of_faith (accessed 26 April 2014).

Likewise, Tom Ascol has claimed that the soteriology voiced in "A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation" "*has only been 'traditional' since about 1963,*" when the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*, in Ascol's opinion, represented a "doctrinal downgrade" from the dominance of high Calvinism before it. Ascol, "Response to 'A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation,'" part 3 and part 5.

Thomas Kidd has made the even bolder claim that "In America, Baptists who believed in a general atonement became a decided minority, especially after the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century." Kidd, "Traditional Baptists' and Calvinism." This claim seems very difficult to support from the historical evidence. In fact, what stands out is the overwhelming rejection of Limited Atonement from the time of the founding of the SBC until now—in the widely affirmed *New Hampshire Confession* of 1833, in the Abstract of Principles of 1858, in the Articles of Religious Belief of 1918, and in all three versions of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1925, 1963, and 2000) which follow the pattern of the *New Hampshire Confession*.

²⁶Personally, I do not prefer the term "Calminian." However, it is sometimes used to refer to the Baptist tradition within which I was reared, which some call "Traditional Baptists," and I prefer to call "majoritarian Baptists" (since by every objective measure, including LifeWay Research, it is the held by the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists and has been for many years). The "Calminian Baptist" nomenclature is utilized here as a reference to the reality that most Southern Baptists since the inception of our convention are neither fully Calvinist nor Arminian, but a unique and distinct Baptist tradition that is somewhere between these two extremes. This perspective is articulated in the *New Hampshire Confession* and all three versions of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. Again, this Calminianism is also articulated in the "Neither Calvinists Nor Arminians, But Baptists" statement.

The Minority Report: Two Calvinistic Confessions

There are only two Baptist confessions in America that reflect five-point or high Calvinism—the *Philadelphia Confession* of 1742, which rather slavishly parroted the language of the *Second London Confession* of 1689, and the “Principles of Faith” of 1818, adopted briefly by the Sandy Creek Association, which they changed a few years later to a more “Calminian” Baptist confession. Both were early Baptist confessions before the full impact of the Second Great Awakening, and both were roundly ignored by the overwhelming number of Southern Baptists after the mid-1800s.

The *Philadelphia Confession* (1742) / The *Charleston Confession* (1700 and 1767).²⁷ The *Philadelphia Confession* was approved by the Calvinistic Philadelphia Association in 1742, with only minor editorial changes from the Particular Baptist *Second London Confession* of 1689. The *Second London Confession*, in turn, followed closely the wording of the *Westminster Confession* of 1647,²⁸ which was adopted by the Westminster Assembly in its attempt to calvinize the Church of England, though making changes in a few doctrines not affirmed by these Particular Baptists. The Charleston Association likewise adopted a confession with the same language as the *Second London Confession* in 1700 and reaffirmed this *Second London/Philadelphia Confession* in 1767. The alterations made by the *Second London Confession* from the truly Calvinist *Westminster Confession* reveal the significant theological and ecclesiological differences between even the strongly Calvinistic English Particular Baptists and true Calvinists—distinctives which seem to be overlooked or minimized sometimes by some contemporary neo-Calvinists.²⁹

The Philadelphia Association sought to gain wider acceptance of its doctrinal confession by sending persuasive representatives into the South such as John Gano to try to popularize it in the South, which was fairly successful. The *Philadelphia Confession* resonated particularly among those in the Charleston tradition. However, the Charleston Association was not dependent on the Philadelphia Association, because it adopted the *Second London Confession* in 1700 before the *Philadelphia Confession* was even written. However, the *Philadelphia Confession* was not adopted by the Convention as its confession in 1845, and was never widely adopted by associations, state conventions, or educational institutions. It was largely ignored by Southern Baptists after the mid-nineteenth century and remains something of an out-

²⁷The *Philadelphia Confession* of 1742 is available online in the Baptist Confessions section of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/Philadelphia_Confession_of_Faith_1742.pdf. The *Philadelphia Confession* (1742) was modeled after the *Second London Confession* (1689), which in turn followed the language of the *Westminster Confession* (1646) rather closely at points.

²⁸Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1877), 3:600-73.

²⁹For a comparison of the Baptist distinctives affirmed in the Philadelphia and Second London confessions that differentiated these Particular Baptists from the Presbyterian/Congregationalist doctrines in the *Westminster Confession*, see Steve Lemke, “What Is a Baptist? Nine Marks that Separate Baptists and Presbyterians.”

lier in Southern Baptist experience for the last century and a half.

The [Sandy Creek] Principles of Faith of 1816.³⁰ The second but virtually unknown Calvinistic Baptist confession was the “Principles of Faith” of the Sandy Creek Association in 1816. This is an extremely brief outline of doctrine (ten principles enunciated in eleven sentences). Although the Principles reflect virtually no verbal reliance on the Philadelphia or Second London confessions, this brief doctrinal statement clearly affirmed five-point Calvinism. However, just 29 years later, toward the end of the Second Great Awakening in 1845, the Sandy Creek Association changed their doctrinal confession to be essentially the same as the *New Hampshire Confession*.³¹ This change of confessions reflects a clear and deliberate move away from the five-point high Calvinism that was pushed by Regular Baptists in the eighteenth century to a modified Calvinian Baptist view by the time of the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention.

However, Separate Baptists and Sandy Creek Baptists overall were reluctant to author doctrinal confessions. Let me suggest several contributing reasons for this phenomenon:

1. Separate and Sandy Creek Baptists opposed having creeds and confessions. Some of the early Baptists had seen how creeds had been used like clubs of religious oppression in Anglican England, Congregationalist New England, and Episcopalian Virginia. This creedal religion was precisely that from which the “Separate” Baptists wanted to separate themselves. As true representatives of the free church tradition, their leaning was toward soul freedom to interpret Scripture under the leadership of the Holy Spirit rather than dictums from popes or synods. So although they had strong doctrinal convictions, they were somewhat reluctant to form them into confessions because of their mindfulness of confessions sometimes coming to be enforced in a creedal way. When confessions were approved, there was often an “escape clause” that allowed for broad individual interpretation, not creedal force.

Numerous attempts were made to unify Separate and Regular Virginia Baptists. For example, in Robert Boyle C. Howell’s 1857 history of *The Early Baptists of Virginia* records that as early as 1769, “the Kettocton, a Regular, or

³⁰The Principles of Faith can be found in the Minutes of the Sandy Creek Association for October 26, 1816 in George W. Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Association, From Its Organization in A.D. 1758 to A.D. 1858* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1859), 104-05. A copy of this volume may be found at <https://archive.org/details/historyofsandycr01pure>.

³¹See the Minutes of the Sandy Creek Association for September 26, 1845 in Purefoy, *A History of Sandy Creek Association*, 197-216; the confession is also available online in the Baptist Confessions section of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/Declaration_Of_Faith_Sandy_Creek_Association_1845.pdf.

Calvinistic Association in Northern Virginia” communicated with “the Sandy Creek, or Separate, or Arminian Association” in Southern Virginia and North Carolina about a possible union.³² Howell also reports the successful attempt at union between the Regular and Separate Baptists in Virginia in 1787, citing James B. Semple’s seminal 1810 book, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*. Semple records that the primary hindrance to union was the adoption of a confession. The Regular Baptists “complained that the Separates were not sufficiently explicit in their principles, having never published nor sanctioned a Confession of Faith.” The Separates countered that they believed that “a large majority” of beliefs of the Regular Baptists, but they “did not approve the practice of churches binding themselves too strictly by Confessions of Faith.” The Separates also had some among their leaders who may have been considered to lean “too much towards the Arminian system” if the Confession was enforced strictly, and did not want to lose them from the association because it “would be like tearing the limbs from the body.”³³

The Separate Baptists argued against the need for any confession at all, but in the interest of unification acceded to the Regular Baptist confession with the following important qualification: “To prevent the Confession of Faith from usurping a tyrannical power over the conscience, we do not mean (by giving it our approval) that every person shall be bound to the strict observance of everything therein contained, but only that it holds forth the essential truths of the gospel, and (shows) that the doctrine of salvation by Christ, through free and unmerited grace alone, ought to be believed by every Christian, and maintained by every minister of the gospel.”³⁴

2. Most leaders of the Separate Baptists and Sandy Creek tradition Baptists were simple biblicists, not the highly trained academicians of the Charleston tradition. The Separate and Sandy Creek Baptists preferred asserting the Bible as their

³²Robert Boyle C. Howell, *The Early Baptists of Virginia* (Philadelphia: The Bible and Publication Society, 1857), 45-46.

³³James B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond: John O’Lynch, 1810), 73-75; or the 1894 revised and extended edition of the same work, ed. G. W. Beale (Richmond: & Dickinson, 1894), 99-101; Howell, *he Early Baptists of Virginia*, 48-50. The 1894 Beale revision of Semple rewords this hindrance as being that the Separates “kept within their communion many who were professed Arminians” (100).

³⁴Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, 74; Semple *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, rev. ed., 100; Howell, *he Early Baptists of Virginia*, 49.

creed over any human statement of doctrine. They were more interested in asserting biblical truths than becoming systematic theologians. The Sandy Creek leaders were not educated in Ivy League type schools like many in the Charleston tradition. Furthermore, most of them were bi-vocational ministers and subsistence farmers, trappers, and hunters, and thus did not have the leisure time or interest to develop such statements (unlike some key Charleston tradition leaders, who were the Southern aristocracy with slaves to take care of their work and daily tasks around the home).

3. Unlike the Charleston tradition Regular Baptists, there were no confessions available to the Separate and Sandy Creek Baptists (until the *New Hampshire Confession* of 1833) which perfectly expressed their own doctrinal convictions, particularly after the Second Great Awakening. The only extant American Baptist confession was the *Philadelphia Confession*, and they were consistently resistant to approving it. They did come to affirm the *New Hampshire Confession* as an adequate expression of their faith by 1845.

One simply cannot read these historical accounts of early Baptist life and then say with a straight face that Baptists were univocally and overwhelmingly five-point Calvinists. There was considerable diversity within their ranks regarding Calvinist or Arminian doctrines. The point being made here, however, is that the Separate and Sandy Creek Baptists were disinclined toward confessions being utilized in creedal ways that superseded Scripture and individual conscience.

The Seminary Confessions – All Calvinian

No SBC seminary has ever affirmed a five-point Calvinist confession. Every SBC seminary confession is no more than three or four points, which is the very definition of Calvinian.

The Abstract of Principles of SBTS (1858).³⁵ What about the Abstract of Principles, the doctrinal confession utilized by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary before the first *Baptist Faith and Message* was written in 1925? Although the Abstract of Principles is sometimes described as a Calvinist confession, clearly this is a misnomer. No one claims that it affirms five-point Calvinism. It can be claimed to be Calvinistic only by comparison with majoritarian Baptist confessions over the last century-and-a-half which lean even further away from five-point Calvinism. What evidence can document this claim?

³⁵The Abstract of Principles is available online in the Baptist Confessions section of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/1858_Abstract_of_Principles.pdf.

1. The authors of the Abstract of Principles were very aware of the already existing *Philadelphia Confession* of 1742, and yet they chose not to utilize it. Obviously, were the *Philadelphia Confession* acceptable, there would have been no need for the Abstract to be written. One of the criteria the founding faculty of SBTS utilized in writing the Abstract was that it would not take a position about which there was division within the Convention.³⁶ In particular, the Abstract was written with sensitivity to the New Divinity theology of Timothy Dwight and the four-point Calvinism of Andrew Fuller.³⁷
2. In his authoritative history of SBTS, Greg Wills notes that although Basil Manly, Jr., the primary author of the Abstract's first drafts, was himself a five-point Calvinist, he was unable to persuade the other committee members to affirm the higher Calvinist document articulated in his early drafts. Wills describes the Abstract of Principles as affirming no more than four of the traditional five points of Calvinistic soteriology.³⁸
3. Dr. Al Mohler, President of SBTS, recently described the Abstract of Principles as being a three-point Calvinist document, not affirming limited atonement (particular redemption) or irresistible (enabling) grace.³⁹
4. Even if the Abstract of Principles had been a five-point Calvinistic confession, the SBC in general session never voted on or approved the Abstract of Principles as reflecting the convention's own doctrinal perspective. The Abstract was simply allowed to remain standing until it was superseded by

³⁶Greg Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1859-2009)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 38. Wills notes that the document went through numerous revisions as it was vetted by the SBTS faculty, a group of pastors, and a committee of Baptist educators. The majority rejected the affirmation of limited atonement (or particular redemption) in accord with the followers of Andrew Fuller. Revisions were also made to be sensitive to the views of the New Divinity of Timothy Dwight, held by prominent Southern Baptists such as William B. Johnson, who preferred the moral government view of the atonement over the penal substitution theory, and denied that Adam's sin was imputed to his posterity such that persons were punished for someone else's sin. In regard to the latter topic, a later revision rewrote the section on the "Fall of Man" with language that later was included (with one significant rewording) in the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*: "whereby his [Adam's] posterity inherit a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His law, are under condemnation, and as soon as they are capable of moral action, become actual transgressors." (*Ibid.*, 33-40). Note that it is a corrupt nature that is inherited, not inherited guilt.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 38. Wills asserts that the Abstract of Principles does not affirm limited atonement.

³⁹James A. Smith, Sr., "Mohler: Southern Baptists need 'table manners' when discussing Calvinism," *Southern News*, November 15, 2013; <http://news.sbts.edu/2013/11/15/mohler-southern-baptists-need-table-manners-when-discussing-calvinism/> (accessed 26 April 2014).

the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1925.⁴⁰ In fact, statements which follow regarding the popularity of the *New Hampshire Confession* make it clear that the Abstract of Principles was never widely accepted or utilized by Southern Baptists as a confession.⁴¹

5. Furthermore, high Calvinists find the Abstract of Principles to be a deficient expression of Calvinism. Not only did Calvin himself hold Baptists in low regard, and the Abstract fails to affirm all five points of traditional Calvinist soteriology, but James A. K. Smith singles out the Abstract as reflecting a deficient stream within Calvinism. According to Smith, the Abstract of Principles reflects the anemic Westminster stream, which was an “arid desert” within the Reformed tradition compared with the “nourishing oasis” of the stream flowing from the *Heidelberg Confession*.⁴²

[T]his Westminster stream diminishes the *catholicity* of the Reformed tradition, so the “Calvinism” that it articulates is just the sort of slimmed-down, extracted soteriology that can be basically detached and inserted across an array of denominations (and “non-denominations”).⁴³

Smith laments that the Abstract and other such deficient expressions of true Calvinism reject other key Calvinist doc-

⁴⁰The adoption of SBTS by SBC from Furman College by the SBC was a bit unusual in that it was not done in the open convention session business, but in auxiliary meetings called the “Education Convention” in 1857 and 1858. Thus neither the Abstract of Principles nor the adoption of Southern Seminary actually came to a full convention vote. See Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1859–2009)*, 31–52, and *SBC Annuals* for 1857 and 1858.

⁴¹Tom Ascol cites Tom Nettles as asserting “that Calvinism was the theological consensus for the first 70 years of the SBC. The convention’s first official confession of faith [i.e., the Abstract of Principles], which was written to provide doctrinal boundaries for our first seminary, reflects this consensus.” See Tom Ascol, “Response to ‘A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,’” part 3 and part 5, Founders Ministries Blog. There are several profound problems with this claim: (a) The Abstract of Principles was never formally approved by the SBC, so it would be quite an extrapolation to make the Abstract the consensus view of Southern Baptists as a whole; (b) as the SBTS sesquicentennial history and SBTS President Al Mohler make very clear, the Abstract of Principles is only a three or four-point Calvinist document, and therefore hardly counts as a strong Calvinist confession, and (c) as the following section will clearly demonstrate, the Abstract of Principles was an anomaly that was rarely adopted by any other Southern Baptist entities, conventions, or associations, and thus makes the claim that it reflects a consensus view rather hard to justify. It was the *New Hampshire Confession* that was clearly the consensus doctrinal statement for Southern Baptists from about 1845 until the writing of the first *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1925, which was itself largely based the *New Hampshire Confession*.

⁴²James K. A. Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, 55.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 61.

trines such as infant baptism and ecclesiology, and thus do not truly belong within the Reformed tradition.⁴⁴

The (Slightly Modified) *New Hampshire Confession* of SWBTS (1908).⁴⁵ B. H. Carroll had already affirmed the *New Hampshire Confession* in the Waco Baptist Association while serving as Pastor of First Baptist Church in Waco, Texas. At the founding of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1908, he made a slightly modified (changing just one word) *New Hampshire Confession* the doctrinal statement of SWBTS in 1908, just seventeen years before the first *Baptist Faith and Message* would be approved in 1925.⁴⁶

The Articles of Religious Belief of NOBTS (1918).⁴⁷ President Byron H. DeMent and original faculty member W. E. Denham of Baptist Bible Institute (later New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) were charged with writing a doctrinal confession for the new seminary in 1917 (because the first *Baptist Faith and Message* was still eight years in the future). DeMent and Denham were graduates of SBTS, and DeMent was a former faculty member of SBTS, but they neither utilized the Abstract of Principles as a confession nor used its language in the new confession, nor the language of any other prior confession. DeMent and Denham wrote a uniquely new Baptist confession which has been affirmed by every NOBTS faculty member since its founding faculty. Applying the methodology of “A More

⁴⁴Ibid., 61-64.

⁴⁵*Minutes*, Board of Trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, November 1908 (Fort Worth: Archives of the Roberts Library), 21-22, cited in Malcolm Yarnell, “Calvinism: Cause for Rejoicing, Cause for Concern,” in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 82-83. The Southwestern Seminary faculty reaffirmed the *New Hampshire Confession* in 1921 when under the assault from J. Frank Norris. See also Robert A. Baker, *Tell the Generations Following: A History of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1908-1983* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983), 142-43.

⁴⁶*Minutes*, Southwestern Board of Trustees, November 1908; cited in Yarnell, “Calvinism: Cause for Rejoicing, Cause for Concern,” 82-83, and Baker, *Tell the Generations Following*, 142-43. Yarnell notes that the one word changed concerned ecclesiology, from “particular” church to “visible” church, to deny any possible unintended affirmation of the “invisible” church. Yarnell, “Calvinism: Cause for Rejoicing, Cause for Concern,” 82-83. Carroll provided a detailed analysis of the *New Hampshire Confession* in a lecture series with Calvin Goodspeed delivered between 1905 and 1909, and later published in the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 5, no. 2, 3, and 4 (1921); 6, no. 1, 2, 3, and 4 (1922); 7, no. 1, 2, 3, and 4 (1923); 8, no. 1 and 2 (1924); and the complete series is reprinted with minor revisions in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 51 (2009): 134-256. Carroll might best be described as being in that Calvinian perspective of holding in an unresolved tension both Calvinistic views of depravity and election with Arminianistic views of human freedom and responsibility. Carroll leaves room for some mystery in this intersection of divine and human, affirming the statement in Article 7 on regeneration in the *New Hampshire Confession* that regeneration and spiritual life “is above our comprehension” (183).

⁴⁷The Articles of Religious Belief are available in the Baptist Confessions section of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/NOBTS_Articles_of_Religious_Belief.pdf.

Detailed Analysis of the Five Points of Calvinism,” the Articles of Religious Belief appear to affirm about 2.5 to 3.0 points of classical Calvinism.⁴⁸

The Majority Report: The “Calminian” Confessions

The *New Hampshire Confession* (1833). By far the most widely accepted and formative Southern Baptist confession from about the 1840s until today is the *New Hampshire Confession* of 1833. The *New Hampshire Confession* took significant steps away from the higher Calvinistic doctrine of the Second London/Philadelphia/ Charleston confessions. Applying the methodology of “A More Detailed Analysis of the Five Points of Calvinism,” the *New Hampshire Confession* is about 3.25 or 3.5 points.

Malcolm Yarnell also notes the significant adjustments made in the New Hampshire Confession from earlier more Calvinistic confessions:

The New Hampshire Confession downplays most of the doctrines that the Synod of Dort and Second London Confession emphasized. There is no hint whatsoever of unconditional predestination, for the questions of particularity and reprobation are never addressed. Rather, New Hampshire immediately affirms that election is “perfectly consistent with the free agency of man,” then proceeds to teach the benefits of a biblical doctrine of election: it effectively elevates divine wisdom, promotes humility among men, encourages Christian proclamation, and provides assurance (9). The debate between general and particular atonement is left unaddressed: Christ simply “made atonement for our sins by his death” (4). There is a doctrine of corruption, but the Augustinian doctrine of original sin is muted: all are “now sinners, not by constraint but choice” (3). As for irresistible grace, it is replaced with a strong statement regarding the freeness of salvation: “Nothing prevents the salvation of the greatest sinner on earth except his own voluntary refusal to submit to the Lord” (6). Ultimately, the only soteriological distinctive of the Synod of Dort to be clearly confessed in the New Hampshire Confession, and in its Southern Baptist descendants, is final preservation (11).⁴⁹

⁴⁸“A More Detailed Analysis of the Five Points of Calvinism” is an attempt to provide a more accurate and precise analysis of how closely a theologian or confession align with the Canons of Dort. Each main head of doctrine of the Synod of Dort is broken into four component parts affirmed in that confession. The specific subpoint within the affirmations or denials of the Synod of Dort are noted for each of these subdoctrines. One-fourth of a point is given for each of these affirmations. This method allows one to affirm some but not all of each of these doctrines, and thus be more precise in what the theologian or confession actually affirms or denies.

⁴⁹Yarnell, “Calvinism: Cause for Rejoicing, Cause for Concern,” 81.

Likewise, Phillip Schaff, writing in the 1877 first edition of his *Creeds of Christendom*, describes the *New Hampshire Confession* as being in a “milder form” than previous American Baptist confessions, and as being “widely accepted by Baptists.”⁵⁰ Indeed, the *New Hampshire Confession* was approved not only by New Hampshire Baptists in 1833, but by the important Sandy Creek Association in North Carolina in 1845, moving away from their markedly more Reformed “Principles of Faith” that they had affirmed in 1817.

More importantly, every major Baptist church manual or book on Baptist beliefs from 1853 through 1913 (though they were clearly aware of the *Philadelphia Confession* and the Abstract of Principles) promulgated and recommended the *New Hampshire Confession* as the confession that best expressed the perspective of Baptists. These widely used church manuals and statements of Baptist beliefs which recommended the *New Hampshire Confession* included the following:

- J. Newton Brown, *Baptist Church Manual* (1853), which, amazingly for the time of its publication, sold over one million copies.⁵¹
- Dudley C. Haynes, *The Baptist Denomination, Its History, Doctrines, and Ordinances* (1857). Haynes defended his utilization of the *New Hampshire Confession* authored by J. Newton Brown in the following words: “We have finally decided to adopt that prepared by Rev. J. Newton Brown, D. D., Editorial Secretary of the American Baptist Publication Society. These articles of faith were prepared several years ago, and are now in very general use” (61-62).⁵²
- Edward Hiscox’s publications such as *The Baptist Church Manual* (1859), *The Baptist Directory: A Guide to the Doctrines and Practices of Baptist Churches* (1868, 1876) and *Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* (1890)⁵³
- J. A. Pendleton’s *Church Manual, Designed for Use by Baptist*

⁵⁰Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:742. The confession is printed on pp. 742-48.

⁵¹J. Newton Brown, *Baptist Church Manual* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1853), 5-22.

⁵²Dudley C. Haynes, *The Baptist Denomination, Its History, Doctrines, and Ordinances; Its Polity, Persecutions, and Martyrs; Facts and Statistics of Its Missionary Institutions, Schools of Learning, Etc.; the Indebtedness of the World to Baptists, and Their Duty to the World* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, and Co., 1857), 62-74.

⁵³Edward Hiscox, *The Baptist Church Directory: A Guide to the Doctrines and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1859, 1888 rep. ed.), 154-76; *The Baptist Directory: A Guide to the Doctrines and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1876), 154-76; *Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, 1890), 58-76; *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1894, 16th printing 1941), 538-63. All of these variously renamed and repackaged publications by Hixson, with numerous reprintings, sold a total of over 100,000 copies, all of which recommended the *New Hampshire Confession*. It is still in publication today.

- *Churches* (1867)⁵⁴
- J. M. Frost, ed., *Baptist Why and Why Not* (1900)⁵⁵
- O. C. S. Wallace, *What Baptists Believe* (1913), which sold over 200,000 copies. Wallace said he recommended the *New Hampshire Confession* because “it is the formula of Christian truth most commonly used as a standard in Baptist churches throughout the country, to express what they believe according to the Scriptures.”⁵⁶ Wallace did include the Abstract of Principles in the appendix in the back of the book for “helpful comparison and study,” thus clearly presenting the *New Hampshire Confession* as the majority confession and the Abstract as a minority confession.
- Phillip Schaff, writing in the 1877 first edition of his *Creeds of Christendom*, describes the *New Hampshire Confession* as being in a “milder form” than previous American Baptist confessions, and as being “widely accepted by Baptists.”⁵⁷
- B. H. Carroll was a key figure in nineteenth-century Baptist life—pastor of the influential First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas, a key leader in the founding of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, a key player in the Whitsett controversy at Southern Seminary, and later the founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The Waco Baptist Association had adopted the *New Hampshire Confession* as its own in 1860, and Carroll later made it the doctrinal confession for Southwestern Seminary.

In the 1897 history of the Waco Baptist Association, B. H. Carroll affirmed the *New Hampshire Confession*, which had been approved in 1860 by the association, with these words:

The Articles of Faith are the most widely accepted compendium of Baptist principles known to me. They were adopted by Waco Association before Pendleton’s “Manual” was published and only one year after the publication of the first edition of Hiscox’s “Directory.” . . . If I were asked to suggest a needed declaration of Baptist principles, I would not go further than the Articles of Faith of the Waco Association. Of course these Articles are popularly known as the New Hampshire confession.⁵⁸

⁵⁴J. M. Pendleton, *Church Manual, Designed for Use by Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1867), 44-61.

⁵⁵J. M. Frost, ed., *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1900).

⁵⁶O. C. S. Wallace, *What Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1913), 4.

⁵⁷Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:742. The confession is printed on 742-48.

⁵⁸B. H. Carroll, “Introduction,” in J. L. Walker and C. P. Lumpkin, *History of the Waco Baptist Association of Texas* (Waco: Byrne-Hill Publishing House, 1897), 5-6. Introducing the Waco Association’s variation of the *New Hampshire Confession* (18-22), the authors wrote,

The Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963, and 2000). The language of the *Baptist Faith and Message* was revised but not dramatically altered in its three versions, especially in the sections addressing soteriology. Applying “A More Detailed Analysis of the Five Points of Calvinism,” all three versions of the 1925 BF&M affirms about 2.0-2.25 points of the Synod of Dort. No one seriously claims these are Calvinistic confessions.

Conclusion regarding Claim 2

The evidence has demonstrated rather conclusively that the Baptist confessions (particularly those affirmed in the South) from the early-nineteenth century through the early twentieth century were NOT overwhelmingly five-point Calvinist confessions, but in fact reflected various degrees of compromise between Arminianism and Calvinism. Or, more accurately, these reflected a new distinctive perspective drawn from blending multiple theological streams that we know as “Southern Baptist.”

Just Who Are Southern Baptists?

What the evidence has shown is that Southern Baptists are an amalgam, a great river that is fed by many tributaries. Broadly speaking, the Calvinistic leanings of the Particular Baptists and the Arminianistic leanings of the General Baptists are important historical tributaries into American Baptist life. More particularly, the Charleston tradition and the Sandy Creek tradition are two of the most prominent tributaries which flow into the Southern Baptist current. What is most characteristic of Southern Baptist life as a whole is to be neither fully Calvinist nor Arminian, but a mixture of both perspectives which has formed into a Calvinian Baptist or traditional Baptist position which has found broad expression in Southern Baptist life from before its founding in 1845 to the present day. Southern Baptists as a whole have never affirmed a five-point Calvinist confession nor a five-point Arminian confession. There have been times that one perspective or another garnered greater attention and popularity to swing one way or another for a decade or so (and we are currently in such a time), but in the end the anchor has always held within this Southern Baptist majoritarian consensus. And I imagine that it will for years to come.

“There is no more complete uninspired compendium of Baptist faith to be found in all literature” (18).