

The Creeds of the Church

Session 8—The History of the Westminster & London Baptist Confessions

I. The English Reformation

A. Henry VIII

The Reformation that had taken root in Germany under Luther and affected many more through the widespread writings of John Calvin in Switzerland, began to attract adherents in England as well. King Henry VIII (who had himself hoped to be named Holy Roman Emperor and had written a book in 1521 attacking Luther's reforms and defending the seven sacraments, earning the title "Defender of the Faith" from the Pope) was originally as intolerant of the Reformers' ideas as Charles V had been in Germany. But when his own interests began to align with a break from Rome, he suddenly had a convenient change of heart and became sympathetic to the Reformation.

The precise event which best represents England's break from Rome is debatable. Henry effectively deposed his wife Catherine of Aragon and replaced her with Anne Boleyn in 1531. Anne affected the appointment of Thomas Cranmer (a Reform-sympathizer) to the position of archbishop of Canterbury in 1532. Henry, Anne, and Cranmer were all excommunicated by the Pope as punishment for the divorce and remarriage in 1533. From that point onward, sympathy for the Reformation among the English powers grew by leaps and bounds. In 1534, the Act of Supremacy officially declared Henry the "Supreme Head of the Church" in England (a title he had created for himself in 1531). By 1536, all the Roman Catholic Church's holdings in England had been seized and handed over to the Church of England and all monasteries and convents had been closed. It was also in this year that the Ten Articles were published as an official statement of faith of the new Church of England. These Articles were only slightly Protestant in nature and generally served to express a compromise between the Protestant and Catholic-leaning theologians in England.

Whatever the most definitive event is considered to have been, the break was made, and the Reformation gained ground in England.

B. Elizabeth I

After experiencing a severe set-back under the reign of Mary, the Reformation again grew strong under Elizabeth, the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth authorized the publication of the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1563 (finally revised in 1571). These articles still serve as the official doctrinal statement of the Anglican Church.

C. The English Civil War

Fast-forward 80 years. England was now solidly Protestant, though with still too much Catholic theological influence for a group called the Puritans. These theologians wanted to purify the Church of England from the last vestiges of Catholic thought. At the same time, a dispute between King Charles I and Parliament erupted in the English Civil

War(s) in 1642. The English Parliament, in order to win its battle with the Royalist forces of Charles, needed the aid of the Scottish military. Scotland by this time had been thoroughly reformed under the preaching of John Knox (who himself had been heavily influenced by John Calvin). Scotland, before agreeing to aid the English Parliament, insisted that they reform the Church of England to bring it more in line with the Scottish reforms. This was the opportunity the Puritans in England had been waiting for.

D. The Westminster Assembly

An assembly was convened at Westminster Abbey for this purpose in 1643 and the product of its work was the Westminster Confession of Faith and the two Westminster Catechisms in 1646.

II. The London Baptist Confession (1689)

A. The rise of the Baptist churches

Throughout all these events, Baptists were still considered beyond the pale in polite society. The idea that the sacrament of baptism was only properly applied to those who professed faith as opposed to infants seemed ludicrous, even to most Protestants. Additionally, many who later identified as Baptists disliked the strong controls of the Church of England, preferring instead to worship when, where, and how they saw fit. These Baptists were persecuted for their non-conformity, churches were closed down, ministers were imprisoned (e.g. John Bunyan). Nevertheless, Baptists grew in number. Some sailed away from England to America to escape the religious persecution.

B. The Toleration Act of 1689

Although it failed to grant full religious liberty, the Toleration Act stopped the persecution of non-conformist churches, including Baptists, though they were still required to pay a tax that supported the state church, and they were subject to various other restrictions.

C. The Ratification of the Confession

Immediately upon being given a legal status for existence, the Baptists in England came together to produce a document clarifying their doctrine. One motive was to demonstrate to everyone that they were not heretics in belief. Thus, the text of the London Confession is almost word-for-word from the Westminster Confession, the most notable exceptions being the issues of Baptism and church governance, as well as a few more abstract theological issues.

D. Later Developments

In America, the London Confession was adhered to by virtually all Baptists. Meeting in Philadelphia in 1742, American Baptists officially adopted the London Confession as their statement of faith.