

Developing a statement of faith for a church and a convention, Part 2

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In [Part 1](#), I explained a basic framework for developing a statement of faith and provided a three-part guiding principle.

The basic framework comes involves determining what constitutes first-, second- and third-order theological commitments.

The guiding principle is: *A statement of faith should (1) focus solely and uncompromisingly on first-order (shared by all orthodox Christians) and second-order (unique cluster of church/denominational beliefs) theological commitments, (2) be as unifying as possible, and (3) provide other means to clarify issues not addressed in the statement of faith.*

Now to see how this works in practice.

Three examples of how the principle works in practice

While I hope the guiding principle I have offered is helpful, an important question still needs to be asked. What does this look in the “real world” of a Baptist church, Baptist association or Baptist convention?

Local church statement of faith

I have led the First Baptist Church of Brenham to affirm a statement of faith that includes affirming the Bible is its sole authority, the 1963 Baptist

Faith and Message, and a “Definition of Marriage.”

Our statement of faith begins: “The church acknowledges the Bible as her earthly authority for faith and practice. Her understanding of Biblical truth is in essential agreement with the Baptist Faith and Message as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963.”

The reason I led First Baptist Brenham to affirm the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message is two-fold. First, it does a good—not perfect—job of providing a consensus of first- and second-order theological commitments of Baptists.

Truthfully, there are parts in the 1925 and 2000 versions of the Baptist Faith and Message I would like to use to revise the 1963 version. Nevertheless, the 1963 version is a good and adequate consensus document of Baptist beliefs.

Second, the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message symbolizes support for and deeper connection with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. This symbolism often is tied to support for the BGCT during the conflicts within the Southern Baptist Convention. Also, many Baptist pastors in Texas are connected to the BGCT via the support we received for theological education and the relationships we have formed.

While the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message is the foundational theological statement of faith of First Baptist Brenham, we also have added a “Definition of Marriage.” The definition begins: “The covenant of marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in commitment for a lifetime (for example: Genesis 2:21-24, Matthew 19:4-6, Ephesians 5:21-33).”

After some more clarifying language, the definition ends: “The church specifically prohibits acts or omissions including but not limited to permitting any church assets or property, whether real property, personal property, intangible property, or any property or asset of any kind that is subject to the direction or control of the church, to be used in any manner

that would be or could be perceived as a favorable impression about any definition of marriage other than the Definition of Marriage.”

Convention membership criteria

In 2016, the messengers to the BGCT Annual Meeting clarified criteria for churches to be in “harmonious cooperation” with the convention. They did so by affirming a motion that “because of the historical and biblical positions of the BGCT as stated in multiple resolutions, motions, and actions, that any church which affirms any sexual relationship outside the bonds of a marriage between one man and one woman be considered out of harmonious cooperation with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.”

Another, more recent example is the [first approval](#) messengers to the SBC Annual Meeting gave in June 2019 to amend the constitution to clarify that churches that do not handle abuse properly and/or who discriminate based on ethnicity will not be considered a church in “friendly cooperation.” One of the recommendations is to have a new standing Credentials Committee to determine which churches are not in friendly cooperation. This amendment will need to be approved a second time in the SBC Annual Meeting in 2020.

In this and the preceding example, the convention process provided a means to help clarify an important theological, moral and cultural issue that arose after previously agreeing on a statement of faith.

Resolutions

Another means provided to conventions is the adoption of resolutions. While resolutions are non-binding on local churches, they can provide a way for a convention to give voice to different issues. In providing a clarifying voice, resolutions also may help a church or churches discern whether or not they want to be part of a particular convention. Churches have been known to leave a state or national convention out of

disagreement with an adopted resolution.

Conclusion

When it is deemed necessary to determine a statement of faith, the following principle can be helpful: *“A statement of faith should (1) focus solely and uncompromisingly on first-order (shared by all orthodox Christians) and second-order (unique cluster of church/denominational beliefs) theological commitments, (2) be as unifying as possible, and (3) provide other means to clarify issues not addressed in the statement of faith.”*

I am not naive about how complicated and conflict-ridden determining a statement of faith may be in the life of a church or denomination, especially in Baptist life. Nevertheless, my prayer—and this process needs to be grounded in prayer—is that this principle may provide a helpful guide in the important and needed clarifying process.

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