

Baptist historians affirm individual conscience

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ATLANTA (ABP) — A group of Baptist historians that meets annually to read and discuss early Baptist writings endorsed a statement affirming the role of individual conscience in Baptist life.

Fourteen members of the Baptist Classics Seminar group cited "broad and recurring themes" found in original Baptist sources written between 1610 and today.



Bruce Gourley

Those affirmations include, [according to a document](#) released by the group: "believer's baptism, personal 'heart' experience of God, the priesthood of all believers, personal and communal devotion to God, a commitment to the church as the body of Christ, the autonomy of each local church, congregational polity, the regular practice of ordinances (baptism/Lord's Supper), voluntary cooperation among churches and strong voices for religious liberty and the separation of church and state."

"We believe these themes are still relevant and should continue to inform our Baptist heritage and witness," the statement said.

Bruce Gourley, executive director of the [Baptist History and Heritage Society](#) , said in a background statement compiled in consultation with three other members that the group frequently shares its findings with the larger Baptist community through classrooms, preaching and teaching in local churches, publications and other venues.

This year, [a controversy](#) over proposed changes to foundational documents of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina "made us realize just how important our studies are to the larger Baptist community," Gourley said.

The North Carolina CBF is currently holding listening sessions about a proposed statement that replaces references to Baptist concepts like the priesthood of believers and religious freedom with language from the Apostles' Creed, an early statement of Christian beliefs used for liturgical and teaching purposes in a number of Christian denominations.

Members of the task force proposing the new North Carolina document say the intent is not to abandon principles of individual freedom, which are articulated in values shared by the national and state CBF, but rather to identify Baptists not only by what separates them from other Christians but also by what they hold in common with the larger church.

Critics of the proposed changes say the North Carolina statement tilts toward a "Bapto-Catholic" school of thought drawn from the writings of a few early English Baptists. Scholars articulated the view in a "Baptist Manifesto" in 1997 that affirmed Bible study in "reading communities" rather than relying on private interpretation and following Jesus "as a call to shared discipleship rather than invoking a theory of soul competency."

While "not a direct rebuttal" of the Baptist Manifesto movement, Gourley said his group's statement is "a reminder to the Baptist world that we as Baptists of the 21st century share a distinct identity that arises from

common and still relevant historical themes in our four centuries of existence."

The statement said this year's study of selections from 17th-century English Baptist writings particularly affirmed "the role of individual conscience, especially when voluntary faith was threatened with coercion or compulsion."

The foundation for all the Baptist principles they enumerated, the scholars said, was "the belief that the Bible alone, neither creeds nor tradition, is the authority for religious faith and practice."

"In our tradition we find both the personal and communal elements of biblical faith; we find a believer's church that preserves a place for unfettered individual conscience," the scholars said.

The historians renewed their commitment to "the vibrant Baptist witness of freedom that is responsive to the authoritative Scriptures and under the Lordship of Christ" and to "the relevance of Baptist identity for the 21st century."

Historians endorsing the statement were Sheri Adams of Gardner-Webb University's M. Christopher White School of Divinity, Loyd Allen of Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology, Rosalie Beck of Baylor University, Jimmy Byrd of Vanderbilt University, Pam Durso of Baptist Women in Ministry, Jerry Faught of Oklahoma Baptist University, Gourley, Carol Holcomb of the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, Glenn Jonas of Campbell University, Sandy Martin of the University of Georgia, Rob Nash of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, Doug Weaver of Baylor and Mark Wilson of Auburn University.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.

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