

# Voices: Baptists, confessions, creeds and clarity

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In a recent [editorial](#), *Baptist Standard* Editor Eric Black discussed the current debate in the Southern Baptist Convention regarding female pastors and the nature of “confessionalism.” Black called attention to some important remarks from SBC President Bart Barber.

Barber has pointed out cooperating SBC churches must have “a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention’s adopted statement of faith,” per the SBC constitution. But he further points out, “Nobody knows what ‘closely identified with’ means in terms of actually applying it to the case of individual churches.”

In short, while the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message is the official statement of faith for the SBC, the convention is “vague on purpose” (Barber’s words) regarding the precise nature of agreement with the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message required for membership in the SBC.

Barber is not the only prominent Southern Baptist to [make this point](#). I agree with him and others that this problem plays a major role in the current conflict within the SBC. But this problem is not isolated to the SBC, and there is an important lesson all Baptists can learn from this situation.

## The “creedalism” boogeyman

In moderate, progressive and even some conservative Baptist circles, “creedalism” is a dirty word. “No creed but the Bible!” is a popular slogan among many “anti-creedal” Baptists and many other evangelical Protestants.

There is no settled, formal definition of “creedalism,” however. Rather, the term is meant to evoke the mental image of a controlling, doctrinaire church hierarchy using coercive means to force theological uniformity on local churches and other Christians. Naturally, Baptists strongly oppose such a concept.

On the other hand, there are more nuanced conceptions of “creedalism.” Some understand “creedalism” to be, in essence, requiring complete agreement with a specific statement of faith for membership in a local church, association of churches or other group.

Many Baptists still oppose this more nuanced version of “creedalism,” however. When the Baptist General Convention of Texas removed multiple churches several years ago after those churches embraced an “open and affirming” stance toward LGBTQ people, many moderates and progressives decried the BGCT’s action as “creedalism” and a denial of local church autonomy.

In Baptist life, any time a church or association makes agreement with a particular doctrinal stance a “test of fellowship,” someone inevitably will cry, “Creedalism!”

## **“Creedalism” is unavoidable**

I would argue, however, that some form of “creedalism” is a necessary fact of life for Christian churches and associations of churches—Baptists included. Every association, every local church and even every individual Christian is a “creedalist” on some level.

What do I mean? In Christian life, some level of theological agreement is necessary for peaceful fellowship and harmonious cooperation. A local church cannot and will not be able to function if members can believe whatever they want. An association of churches will implode if various

member churches hold diametrically opposed doctrinal stances.

In his book *The Creedal Imperative*, Presbyterian church historian Carl Trueman points out:

“Christians are not divided between those who have creeds and confessions and those who do not ... they are divided between those who have public creeds and confessions ... subject to public scrutiny, evaluation, and critique, and those who have private creeds and confessions ... not open to public scrutiny, not susceptible to evaluation and, crucially and ironically, not ... subject to testing by Scripture to see whether they are true” (16).

Every association, every church and every Christian has a “functional creed.” Whether you label it a “creed” or a “confession,” every Christian organization and Christian person has a standard of faith and practice that serves as a “test of fellowship.” Even the most liberal congregation will refuse membership to those who embrace beliefs or practices the congregation finds abhorrent and intolerable.

As Trueman argues, even “anti-creedal” Christians have functional creeds. Many have pointed out even “No creed but the Bible!” is technically a creed. However, these functional creeds often are not written down and are not subject to public knowledge or scrutiny. And this necessarily breeds the kind of conflict we are seeing in the SBC.

## **Lessons for Baptists**

I hope and pray the SBC takes concrete steps to clarify what the phrase “a faith and practice which closely identifies with” means. While that clarification will not solve all the convention’s doctrinal disputes, it will establish the stakes of those debates.

If the SBC is not clear on what “closely identifies with” means when it

comes to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, then it doesn't really matter what it says about female pastors. Regardless of where you stand on the question of female pastors, you should want clarity and consistency regarding the doctrinal standards required for membership in the SBC.

The Southern Baptist Convention has a creed. The Baptist General Convention of Texas has a creed. Every Baptist church and association of Baptist churches has a creed. If that creed is not clearly written down for the public and consistently enforced, then the creed becomes nothing more than the whims of the powerbrokers in a given church or association.

I firmly believe the Bible is the final authority for Christian faith and practice. Scripture alone is inspired, infallible and inerrant. Every human confession and creed is subordinate to God's word. No church body has the right to force a confession or creed on others. But churches, associations and individual Christians all need to be able to summarize what we believe Scripture teaches on key points.

Some of these summaries of faith—confessions and creeds—will function inevitably as “tests of fellowship” in Christian life. This is unavoidable. And, as I have written [elsewhere](#), “Baptist groups [have the right] to define themselves by particular beliefs and to exclude from membership those who do not share those beliefs.”

Therefore, it is better for such confessions and creeds to be written down clearly than to be hidden behind the vague language of “a faith and practice that closely identifies with.”

*Joshua Sharp is the pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Orange, and a graduate of Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., and Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary in Waco. The views expressed are those of the author.*