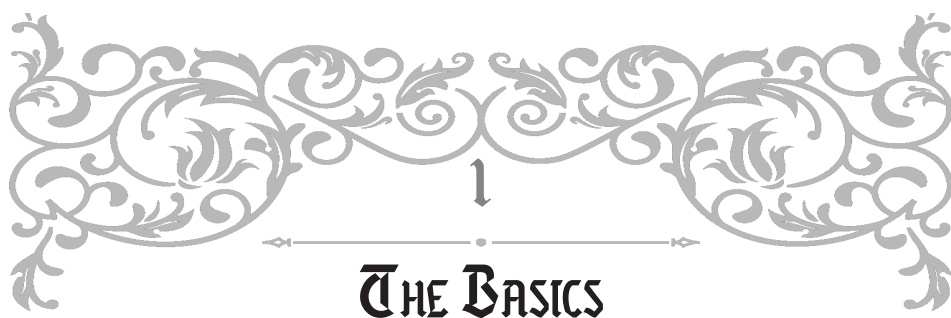




As we begin a study of the First London Baptist Confession, there are several important observations to note.

Provenance

Try to imagine a situation like this: You live in a large city, the capital of your country.¹ You are a member of one of a handful of churches, just beginning to grow and be noticed in the city, but it is illegal for you to meet for worship. For as long as anyone living can remember, there has been only one legal religion, and every attempt to disagree with that one religion has been met with opposition and persecution.

As your churches grow, rumors begin to spread. A hundred years before, some people with beliefs marginally similar to your own had been involved in a terrible rebellion in another country relatively close by, and rumors are spreading that your churches will do the same things. What would you do?

That is something of the situation facing the members of seven Calvinistic Baptist churches in London in 1644. In the space of a few short years, their numbers had grown, and people were beginning to take notice of their presence in London. But it was often not a friendly notice. In 1642, an anonymous pamphlet entitled *A Warning for England, especially for London; in the famous History of the frantick Anabaptists, their wild Preachings and Practices in*

¹ The next few paragraphs are taken from my “Confessing the Faith in 1644 and 1689” in *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* Vol. III No. 1, January 2006, 27–47. Some other paragraphs in this first chapter are also taken from that article.

Germany was published. It is an amazing piece of work. The author, in nine double-sized pages, described the sad events of Münster, Germany. Rebellion, sedition, theft, and murder are all charged to the “anabaptists.” Throughout, there is no mention of anything but these events from another time and place—until the very last sentence of the pamphlet, which states, “So, let all the factious and seditious enemies of the church and state perish; but, upon the head of King Charles, let the crown flourish! Amen.”² The warning was in one sense subtle, but in another, brilliantly powerful: “Beware! What was done in Germany by the Anabaptists may well happen again in London if these people are allowed to spread their doctrines.”

What did the Baptists do in response? The situation was potentially explosive. They knew it was essential to demonstrate they were not radicals, subversively undermining the fabric of society. To the contrary, they were law-abiding citizens being misrepresented and misunderstood by many around them. They wanted and needed to prove they were quite orthodox in their theological beliefs, and they had no agenda beyond a faithful and conscientious commitment to God and His Word.

As the Baptists faced these circumstances, they determined decisive action was necessary to relieve the spreading fears and misinformation. God had blessed their efforts thus far, and they did not want to see those efforts frustrated by the rumor and innuendo of their enemies. So they adopted a practice frequently used by others in the last 150 years—they issued a confession of faith so anyone interested in them might be able to obtain an accurate understanding of their beliefs and practices. As Hanserd Knollys said, it was published so that the reader “may see at large, what we hold.”³

One of the primary purposes in publishing their Confession of Faith in 1644 was to disavow any ties with the Continental Anabaptists. This is evident by a glance at the title page which says, “The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are commonly (though falsly [*sic.*] called Anabaptists.” The epistle at the beginning of the Confession identifies the problem:

Wee question not but that it will seem strange to many men, that such as wee are frequently termed to be, lying under that calumny and black brand of Heretics and sowers of division as wee doo, should presume to appear publicly as now we have done: . . . it is no sad thing to any observing man, what sad charges are laid, not only by the world, that know not God, but also by those that think themselves much wronged, if they be not looked upon as the chief

2 William Oldys, *Tracts from the Harleian Miscellany* (London: n.p., 1808–1813), 7:382–390.

3 Hanserd Knollys, *The Shining of a Flaming-fire in Zion* (London: Jane Coe, 1646), 16.

Worthies of the Church of God, and Watchmen of the City: . . . charging us with holding Free-will, Falling away from grace, denying Original sin, disclaiming of Magistracy, denying to assist them either in persons or purse in any of their lawful Commands, doing acts unseemly in the dispensing the Ordinance of Baptism, not to be named among Christians.⁴

It is evident there are several relevant charges here, either in reality or fancy, to the Anabaptists of the Continent. All an opponent of the Baptists had to do was say the name “Münster,” and all the supposed horrors of that sad city would be imputed to their English “counterparts.”⁵ Evidently, the Particular Baptists felt the pressure of these charges and desired to remove as many of them as possible. They therefore openly asserted that the name “Anabaptist” was falsely given and did not reflect their own convictions.

Matthew Bingham has presented a compelling case for the immediate circumstances of the appearance of 1LCF. He notes that in 1644 the Westminster Assembly issued an order calling advocates of antipaedobaptist principles to provide a “brief and compendious” disclosure of their views. In the next month, 1LCF first appeared. He says, “With the publication of this document, the London Baptists were attempting to engage with the Assembly on its own terms, and to participate, however ineffectually, in the ecclesiastical life of the nation.”⁶ In a volatile situation, a pressing need drew forth the first edition of the Confession.

The 1646 revision was a direct response to charges leveled against the first edition of 1644 by a member of the Westminster Assembly, Daniel Featley, DD, as well as several others.⁷ We will meet Featley (and the others) below. He offered a specific critique of six areas he considered erroneous, and the Baptists replied with their revision. In both cases, the versions of 1LCF were attempts to ward off criticism and place themselves within the mainstream of

4 *The Confession of Faith, of those Churches which are commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists* (London: n.p., 1644).

5 William Lumpkin mentions two books which may have been especially obnoxious in their charges against the Baptists: *A Short History of the Anabaptists of High and Low Germany* (1642), as well as the previously cited *A Warning for England especially for London* (1642). William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969), 145.

6 Matthew C. Bingham, “English Baptists and the Struggle for Theological Authority,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* Vol. 68, No. 3, July 2017, 56168.

7 *A Confession of Faith of Seven Churches of Christ in London, which are commonly (but unjustly) called Anabaptists* (London: Matth. Simmons, 1646).

English church life. A third edition came from the press in 1651, was reprinted in 1652, and appeared in a Scottish edition at Leith in 1653.⁸

Some of the subscribers are well known, others appear in literary sources, and still others are shadowy. These tables identify the individuals. The 1644 and 1646 lists seem to designate pairs (and one trio) of names into churches.⁹

1644	1646
William Kiffen	William Kiffen
Thomas Patience (Patient)	Thomas Patient
John Spilsbery	John Spilsbery
George Tipping	Samuel Richardson
Samuel Richardson	
Thomas Skippard (Shepherd)	Thomas Munden (Munday)
Thomas Munday	George Tipping
Thomas Gunne	Thomas Gunne
John Mabbatt	John Mabbatt
John Webb	Benjamin Cockes
Thomas Killcop	Thomas Kilikop (Killcop)
Paul Hobson	Paul Hobson
Thomas Goare	Thomas Goare
Joseph Phelps	
Edward Heath	
	Hanserd Knollys
	Thomas Holmes
	Denis le Barbier
	Christophe Durer

8 *A Confession of Faith, of the Several Congregations or Churches of Christ in London, which are commonly (though unjustly) called Anabaptists* (London: M.S., 1651). The titles for 1652 and 1653 are identical, though 1653 lists no printer and indicates that it was printed at Leith. These editions all contain an appendix, "Heart-Bleedings for Professors Abominations" which is essentially a condemnation of Quakers and Ranters and the manifestation of antinomianism. See appendix B.

9 Murray Tolmie attempts an identification of these congregations: Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London: 1616–1649* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), 57–61.

The 1651, 1652, and 1653 editions identify fourteen names without separating them into specific churches:

1651, 1652, 1653 editions

William Kiffen
 John Spilsbery
 Joseph Sanson
 Hugh Gosnell
 Thomas Paule
 Joseph Parshall
 William Conset
 Edward Harrison
 Richard Graves
 Edward Roberts
 Thomas Waters
 Henry Forty
 Thomas Young
 John Watson

Kiffen and Spilsbery are the only names found in all the lists. The omissions and additions are interesting. Kiffen, Spilsbery, Coxe, and Knollys are well known.¹⁰ Henry Forty, a minister from the West Country who would later become pastor of the church in Abingdon, and Edward Harrison, a former vicar in Kensworth, Hertfordshire, who labored in London's Petty France church (as did his son years later), are important additions. Others had erratic careers, most notably Samuel Richardson and Paul Hobson. Richardson seems to have quickly departed from orthodoxy, becoming the target of barbs from his fellow subscriber Thomas Killcop in 1648.¹¹ Richardson had written a treatise advocating justification from eternity, including the antinomian

10 On Kiffen see Larry Kreitzer, *William Kiffen and His World* (Oxford: Regent's Park College Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2010 etc.). As of February 2020, six volumes have been published in this excellent ongoing series. See also *ODNB*, s.v. "Kiffin or Kiffen, William." On Spilsbery (spelled in various ways) see James M. Renihan, "John Spilsbury" in Michael Haykin, ed. *The British Particular Baptists 1638–1910* (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 1:21–37; *BDBR*, s.v. "Spilsbury (or Spilsbery), John (1599–c. 1668)." On Coxe, see Samuel D. Renihan, "Benjamin Coxe, 1595–c.1676" in Michael Haykin, *The British Particular Baptists, Volume 1*, 1st rev. ed., (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 2019); *ODNB*, s.v. "Cox [Coxe], Benjamin." On Knollys, see Barry H. Howson, *Erroneous and Schismatical Opinions: The Question of Orthodoxy Regarding the Theology of Hanserd Knollys (c.1599–1691)* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); *ODNB*, s.v. "Knollys, Hanserd."

11 Thomas Killcop, *Ancient and Durable Gospel. The Second Book. By way of answer to Samuel Richardsons Book, intituled, Justification by Christ alone.* (London: Giles Calvert, 1648).

overtones associated with that doctrine, and Killcop opposed him in dialogue form.¹² Near the end of his life, Richardson penned a work denying the doctrine of eternal punishment.¹³ Although he seems to have been a prominent leader early in the life of the Particular Baptists, his heterodoxy was quickly uncovered. Hobson served in the Parliamentary army and worked with churches in London, Bristol, Newcastle, and Newport Pagnell, and finally in 1660, upon returning to London, became part of Kiffen's Devonshire Square congregation. He came under discipline in 1664 for "sexual misconduct" with two women.¹⁴

It must be noted that at least the 1644 edition of 1LCF is the product of untrained theologians—men who didn't have any specific theological instruction in the universities. These were not Puritan worthies, whose books were famous; they were laymen. This confession is actually well stated. In many cases it is very, very good, and this says something to us about the level of ability that belonged to laymen in the seventeenth-century churches. They could be aware of issues such as these and write a confession that is largely of high quality. This ought to make us appreciate the value of 1LCF. It deserves a certain level of recognition. I like to joke that we Baptists could have our own Three Forms of Unity: 1LCF, 2LCF, and the Baptist Catechism.

Sources

Good confessions have a context, and that context shapes and molds the statements found throughout the document. There are two sides to this background we ought to consider. First, we should consider the sources used to write the Confession,¹⁵ and then second, the broader theological climate to which these sources point.

The primary source from which the First London Confession is drawn is the 1596 *True Confession*. A full copy of the text of this early document may be found in William Lumpkin's *Baptist Confessions of Faith*.¹⁶ Approximately

12 Samuel Richardson, *Justification by Christ Alone*, (London: M.S., 1647).

13 Samuel Richardson, *A Discourse of the Torments of Hell* (N.P.: n.p. 1660). See also Paul Gritz, "Samuel Richardson and the Religious and Political Controversies Confronting the London Particular Baptists, 1643–1658." PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987; *BDBR* s.v. "Richardson, Samuel, (fl. 1637–1658)."

14 Richard Greaves, "Paul Hobson" in *ODNB*, s.v. Hobson, Paul; Devonshire Square Church Book, LMA CLC/179/MS20228/001A, Memoranda of the Acts, 1664–76 And 1690–1702, then Minutes, 1702–27 of the Church Meeting at Devonshire Square, London.

15 For a tabular comparison of the sources of 1LCF, see James M. Renihan, *True Confessions* (Owensboro: RBAP, 2004).

16 Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 79–97.