

Divine Sovereignty and the GARBC



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WAIT! Don't throw this article away (at least until you know the real topic about which I am writing)! I am NOT writing about the truth or falsity of Calvinism. Instead, I am writing this article as a response to those who criticize the GARBC for drifting away from its original Calvinistic belief in unconditional election and predestination. In this article, I will try to show that the GARBC never had an official position on election and predestination.

The Basis of the Critics' Charge:

The primary reason why some believe that the GARBC originally held to Calvinism is that throughout GARBC history, statements have been made linking the GARBC with Baptist Confessions of faith which were Calvinistic. For example, in May, 1933, Harry Hamilton, outgoing president of the GARB, gave "the president's message" entitled, "Why the General Association of Regular Baptists?" In this message, he proposed that the GARB become an association of churches. Another proposal in his message stated: "THIRD — It does not in any way propose to preserve a denominational order, but rather to re-affirm the truths of Scripture historically believed by Baptists and expressed by the Baptist Confessions of faith of London 1689 or the New Hampshire Confession of faith or the Philadelphia Confession of faith or the Baptist Bible Union Confession of faith or any such which enunciates the same truths though in other words."

A Response to the Critics' Charge:

Several things may be pointed out in response to those who say that the GARBC originally was Calvinistic.

First, Hamilton does not identify “the truths of Scripture historically believed by Baptists and expressed by the Baptist Confessions of faith...”. The critics assume ALL the doctrinal issues described in these Baptist Confessions are meant. I do not! Rather, I believe the doctrinal issues being referred to as “the truths of Scripture” are the fundamental beliefs that have characterized Bible-believing Baptists throughout their history. In the January 1933 issue of *The Bulletin* (later to be known as *The Baptist Bulletin*), O.W. Van Osdel says, “Modernism, and churches with an open membership, and all sorts of unscriptural beliefs, are not for one moment to be tolerated in Regular Baptist Churches.” (See Dr. Paul N. Tassell, *Quest For Faithfulness*, Schaumburg, Illinois: Regular Baptist Press, 1991, pages 35–39 for the quotations by Hamilton and Van Osdel, as well as for a better understanding of early GARBC history.)

Second, if Hamilton and other early GARBC leaders really thought the GARBC affirmed ALL the doctrines presented in the Baptist Confessions mentioned earlier, how are we to explain the non- premillennialism taught by these Confessions? The New Hampshire Confession says, “[We believe] that the end of this world is approaching: that at the last day, Christ will descend from heaven, and raise the dead from the grave to final retribution; that a solemn separation will then take place; that the wicked will be adjudged to endless punishment, and the righteous to endless joy; and that this judgment will fix forever the final state of men in heaven or hell, on principles of righteousness.” (See *Baptist Confessions of Faith* by William L. Lumpkin, Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959, page 367.)

In contrast to this idea that there will be a general resurrection and a general judgment of both the saved and the lost at the same judgment (a belief also taught in the 1689 London Confession and the Philadelphia Confession!), the Confessions of faith produced by the Baptist Bible Union and by the GARBC were clearly premillennial. Instead of a resurrection and judgment of everyone at the same time, premillennialists taught that the righteous would be resurrected and judged before Christ’s 1,000 year rule on earth, while the wicked would not be resurrected and judged until after this 1,000 year reign. It seems obvious, in light of this information, that the GARBC never claimed to believe everything taught in the London, Philadelphia, and New Hampshire Confessions.

Third, by comparing the New Hampshire Confession with the Baptist Bible Union Confession and then with the earliest GARBC Confession, one can readily tell that those who were writing the BBU and the GARBC Confessions had the New Hampshire Confession in front of them. Some statements in the BBU and GARBC Confessions are taken word-for-word from the New Hampshire Confession, while other statements demonstrate substantial changes from what the New Hampshire Confession said.

But here is something startling! Although the New Hampshire Confession had a statement on election (Article IX), the earliest GARBC Confession (and all later editions) had none! Those who are responsible for creating the first GARBC Confession had every opportunity to place a statement on election in it. The New Hampshire Confession had one. Even one edition of the BBU Confession (Article X: “Of the Freeness of Salvation”) said, “We believe (a) in God’s electing grace” (Lumpkin, page 387). NO STATEMENT ON ELECTION appears in the GARBC Confession.

Conclusion:

Since the GARBC never has affirmed any view of election as its own, churches and people within this fellowship are free to hold whatever view of election they believe is Biblical. And this freedom does not indicate a doctrinal drift within the Association.