

# CONSTITUTION FOR THE MID-AMERICA REFORMED BAPTIST ASSOCIATION OF CHURCHES (MARBAC)

## PREAMBLE

Churches of the same faith and gospel order, as they all have drunk of the one and same Spirit; as they are branches of the one and same body, and hold to the one and same Head; and as they have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism; may and ought to have and enjoy voluntary fellowship and friendly association together, as occasion may require and opportunity serve. Therefore, in the discharge of those relative duties that may tend to the mutual benefit and edification of all of Christ's churches (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:5; John 17:20-26), as Reformed Baptist churches of Mid-America we come together to form an Association of Churches. The name of this Association shall be the Mid-America Reformed Baptist Association of Churches.

### I. The Need and Nature of an Association of Churches

- A. The many needs of the churches, such as mutual encouragement and support, assistance of various kinds, edification, oversight (when requested and agreed upon by the local churches involved), and cooperative efforts to advance Christ's kingdom in and around the region, bring about the need for an Association of churches.
- B. An Association consists of particular churches who have agreed to associate together, to meet at stated times, to obey the word of God, and to promote their own interests and the good of common causes found among them. When conducting the business of the Association, these churches are represented by qualified delegates. All delegates must be men who personally and fully subscribe to the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith and to this Constitution (see Appendix 1).
- C. The practice of churches associating is exemplified for us in the Scriptures: by the apostolic practice of Acts 15; by the New Testament church practice of 2 Corinthians 8:18-24, Galatians 1:2, 22 and Colossians 4:13-18; by numerous historical examples such as the Abingdon Association in England and the Philadelphia Association in the United States; and the confessional position of our Baptist forefathers (see the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, chapter 26, paragraphs 14 and 15). Also the spirit of Christ's gospel, Christian prudence, and wisdom further encourage our associating together.
- D. This Association shall be an unincorporated, non-profit association operating in the Tennessee, Kentucky, and Indiana area.

### II. The Doctrinal Statement of this Association

- A. We hold tenaciously to the inerrant and infallible Word of God as found in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments in the Holy Bible (this being our only source of faith and practice) as being our full, final, and sufficient authority in all things.
- B. We embrace and adopt the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 as the most accurate expression of that system of doctrine taught in the Bible. Therefore, this Confession is the doctrinal statement and position of this Association.

### III. The Purpose of This Association

- A. To advance and secure in every way the interests of Christ's kingdom (Acts 28:30-31; Col. 1:13).
- B. To cooperate in the spreading of the gospel, especially in planting Reformed Baptist churches in the region (Phil. 1:3-7; II Cor. 8:18).
- C. To show visible unity to the world and churches (John 17:20-26; Eph. 4:4-6).
- D. To gain a greater knowledge, communion and love with sister churches (Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:10-11).
- E. To afford counsel and advice in difficult cases of various types (Acts 15:1-6).
- F. To help preserve uniformity of faith and practice within the confines of our Confession of Faith, especially in dealing with doctrinal and practical questions (I Cor. 14:33).
- G. To detect and deal with heresies and/or heretics, and in so doing to maintain harmony and peace in the churches (I Tim. 1:18-20; Titus 1:7-11).
- H. To give financial aid as God prospers our churches (I Cor. 16:1; II Cor. 8:19).
- I. To help curb the wanton abuse of church power (III John 9).
- J. To supply the pulpits of sister churches in the event one is without a pastor (2 John 1:7-11; Jude 3).

### IV. Membership in this Association

- A. The uniting of churches in this Association is a voluntary act similar to the unforced confederation of members into a church. Churches, therefore, may be admitted into this Association through a process of application similar to that which a local church may require of its members. Thus, the requirements for admission to this Association are as follows:
  - 1. A church must formally and fully subscribe (see Appendix #1) to our Confession of Faith, having officially adopted the Confession as the best expression of that church's doctrinal position; and
  - 2. That church's pastors/elders/bishops (these terms referring to the same office) must also personally and fully subscribe to our Confession of Faith; and
  - 3. The church and its officers, agreeing with our Constitution, must have officially agreed to join this Association (this decision being made in whatever manner that local church's government dictates).
- B. The procedure for receiving new churches is as follows:
  - 1. A church that is interested in joining this Association ought to make every effort to familiarize itself with this Association. This may include attending stated meetings as guests, reading any history or minutes of past meetings, and asking questions of delegates from existing member churches.
  - 2. A church desiring membership in this Association must apply through a member church, which then must give its recommendation on behalf of the applying church to the Association.

3. This recommending church must then send this application, along with copies of all pertinent documents, to all member churches at least two weeks before the next scheduled meeting. At that meeting, pastor(s) of the applying church must appear before the messengers of the member churches in order to give satisfactory evidence of the church's and its pastors' faith, practice, and willingness to support this Association wholeheartedly (see IV. A. 1-3, inclusive).
  4. The applying church shall be received into membership by the 3/4 vote of all messengers present and voting.
- C. Associate Membership
1. We recognize that there are churches and men in this region who are at various stages in reformation. Since part of the purpose of this Association is to promote the Calvinistic Confessional roots of Baptists and fellowship of like-minded churches and men, officers who subscribe to the 1689 Confession, but serve a church that does not subscribe may be an associate or non-voting member of the Association. Such men would have the right to participate in theological discussions and have a voice in the Association, but no power of vote.
  2. The procedure for joining shall be the same as a church as outlined in IV.B.2.-4.
- D. A church retains membership in this Association as long as:
1. It continues to meet the requirements for admission (see IV. A. 1-3, inclusive); and
  2. It continues to desire membership in this Association; and
  3. It is represented at a minimum of two out of the four stated quarterly meetings of the Association, one of which must be the Annual Meeting of the churches. Failure to attend the meetings in the prescribed manner may indicate a lack of interest and support for the Association, or a providential hindrance from supporting it, and may therefore constitute reason to be excluded.
- E. The Association may exclude any church:
1. Which officially or whose pastors personally deviates from the Confession of Faith in a manner indicating that said church or its pastors no longer fully subscribe to the Confession of Faith; or
  2. Which officially or whose pastors personally can no longer peacefully support the Association or its Constitution; or
  3. Which is not represented by qualified delegates at the requisite number of the Association's stated meetings (see I. B. and IV. C. 3).
- F. Any member Church desiring to withdraw from the Association may do so by submitting a letter of resignation, stating its reason(s).

## V. The Functioning of This Association

- A. The delegates of the churches will meet three times each year. The purpose of these meetings will be: (1) to give an account of their particular church's spiritual state; to request prayer of their sister churches; to assess needs; to consult and make plans for the future; to hear and deal with questions and complaints; and to conduct all other necessary business of the Association; (2) to pray together; and (3) to eat together. The time and sponsor of the next meeting will be appointed as an item of new business in each business meeting.
- B. A quorum for the purpose of conducting the business of this Association shall consist of all those seated delegates present at its scheduled meetings.

- C. The moderator of that meeting will be (one of) the pastor(s) of the sponsoring church. A secretary shall be appointed and take minutes of the meeting and provide a copy to each of the associational churches.
- D. Additionally, we will have one appointed joint service each year, the Reformation Day Service sponsored by GRBC Owensboro, at which each member church will be represented by a pastor and delegation. Furthermore, we will diligently and fervently support those ministries of each member church intended for the broader edification of the church of Christ. This support will include the ministry of CBTS. Finally, we may plan other events in which the churches can participate together such as conferences, camps, youth gatherings, and evangelism. Finally, we will encourage member churches to ask fellow pastors and elders from sister churches in our association to preach in our worship services in order to foster brotherly love and strengthen relationships between our congregations.
- E. The Association shall have the power to establish a bank account (upon approval of the delegates) in order to create a fund for carrying out its purposes and functions. Contributions to this fund shall be strictly voluntary.
- F. In the event of the dissolution of this Association, no member church or private individual shall be entitled to the assets of this Association. Assets shall be used first to pay outstanding debts. Any remaining assets shall be divided equally among missionaries supported by the churches in the Association at the time of dissolution. If there are no such supported missionaries at that time, the assets will be given to some missionary-support organization approved by a majority of the delegates, provided that that missionary-support organization holds to the Confession, as prescribed in Appendix 1 of this Constitution.
- G. Proposed amendments to this Constitution must be distributed in writing to every member church at least sixty days before the next scheduled Associational meeting. Any article in this Constitution (except Article II) may be amended by a two-thirds vote of the messengers present and voting at an officially-called business meeting. Amendments shall be incorporated into this Constitution after they have been approved. Article II may never be amended or altered by this Association.
- H. At a scheduled Associational business meeting, a church may send as many qualified delegates as it has. All delegates must personally and fully subscribe to the Confession of Faith and to this Association's constitution. Each delegate at the meeting shall have one vote, but no church shall be allowed to have more than two delegates vote on any particular issue. This will ensure that no matter how small a congregation may be or how large a congregation may become, no church will ever be without a voice, and no church will ever be able to gain preeminence or control over the Association. Certain matters may require a hearing only before the pastors of the member churches (see Article VI).
- I. A church shall not vote on matters pertaining to questions or issues regarding itself.

## VI. The Power and Authority of this Association Relative to Its Member Churches.

- A. Each church is independent, self-governing, and autonomous under the authority and control of the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church, according to the Word of God. No outside entity, whether a government, religious group, or even another church and its officers, has any power or jurisdiction over one of Christ's churches. Therefore, the powers of this Association shall never be construed as being superior to, or as interfering with, the authority of a local church.

- B. Nevertheless, the Association has a right to call any delinquent member church to account, whether for a wanton abuse of its power towards its members, neglect of attendance at Association meetings, or any deviation from the Word of God and the Confession of Faith in teaching or practice. If satisfactory reasons are not given by the delinquent member church's pastors for its actions or lack of reformation thereof, the Association has the authority to exclude that church from its connection and fellowship. However, this action of exclusion neither disannuls nor destroys the independence of that church, nor has any binding authority of any kind on that local church's government, members, or pastors. It merely removes that church from its good standing and membership in this Association.
- C. In cases of difficulties or differences between: member churches in general; or among one church's members which threaten the unity or doctrinal stability of that church; or between members of different churches regarding similar matters; in such cases the pastors of the churches involved shall willingly submit these things for the advice and recommendation of the Association at a hearing before the assembled pastors of the Association's member churches (see the Confession, chapter 26, paragraph 15). Doctrinal issues, difficulties, or any matter within or between churches can be placed on the agenda of the Association's regular meeting by the pastorate of any one of its member churches.
- D. Any complaint from a member or members of an Association church regarding the abuse of pastoral authority in their own church must first be made to and through their own pastors. If, after due process, that church's pastors refuse to make the matter known to the Association, the church member(s) may appeal to the pastor(s) of another member church. If this brings reconciliation to the satisfaction of all parties, the complaint will be considered sufficiently resolved. However, if reconciliation is not affected, the pastor(s) must then make the matter known to the pastors of the Association.
- E. The pastors of the churches in the Association will convene at the next regularly scheduled meeting to: address any request for advice; or to hear, from all parties involved, any complaint; and to make their recommendation known to all the member churches in general.
- F. The pastors thus assembled are not armed with coercive power to compel the churches or their pastors to submit to their decisions. But any church or church's pastors which does not hear the advice or recommendation of the Association in such matters demonstrates that it no longer supports the Association. While the Association can take nothing from the transgressing church but what it gave to it (i.e. a good standing in the Association), nevertheless the Association has the prerogative to remove from membership any transgressing church and to publish the results of its findings, as deemed necessary, for the good of the cause of Christ, and the purity of the gospel.

*May the Most Holy and Gracious Triune God –  
the Father who chose the church,  
the Son who made atonement for the church,  
and the Holy Spirit who applies the redemptive work of Christ to the church -  
Bless and enlarge our churches in Christ Jesus' name. Amen!*

## Appendix #1

### What Is “Full Subscription?”

Submitted by Dr. James M. Renihan

Confessional subscription employs three main terms in its nomenclature: absolute, strict/full, and loose. SCARBC has adopted the middle position. According to Dr. Morton H. Smith, “strict or full subscription takes at face value” the terminology used in adopting a confession of faith.

In an article entitled “The Case for Full Subscription” (in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, ed. by David Hall, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995; pages 185-6), Dr. Smith provides some helpful insights [albeit in a Presbyterian context with a much more developed tradition of discussion of the issue than among Baptists]. He says, “Note some things that full subscription does not mean. First, it does not insist that all of the teachings of the Confession . . . are of equal importance (just as not all of the teachings in the Bible are of equal importance). The full subscriptionist recognizes that some doctrines are more foundational than others, in accord with the Biblical example. Positively, the full subscriptionist believes that in professing that the Confession . . . [is] his confession, he is subscribing to all of the doctrines in the Confession . . . they are all part of the system of doctrine . . . . Second, full subscription does not require the adoption of every word of the Confession . . . but positively believes that we are adopting every doctrine or teaching of the Confession . . . .”

One should note the language found in the agreement signed by the messengers of the founding churches in Mesa, Arizona in March, 1997; in the ARBCA constitution; and in the application for membership. The first states, “We declare that our primary rule of faith and practice is the inerrant Word of God, and adopt as our subordinate standards the excellent document commonly known as the London Baptist Confession of 1689, and the Constitution of this Association.” The second states, “While we hold tenaciously to the inerrant and infallible Word of God as found in the sixty-six books of the Bible (this being our final source of faith and practice), we embrace and adopt the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 as a faithful expression of the doctrine taught in the Scriptures. This Confession is the doctrinal standard of the Association,” and in the third the applying church signs this statement: “We accept the London Confession of Faith of 1689 as an accurate and reliable expression of what the Scriptures teach and the faith we confess.” In each case, the member churches commit themselves to the Confession as a whole. We maintain the primacy of the Scriptures, and “embrace and adopt” the Confession as a truthful expression of our convictions with regard to the details of Scripture.

Taken at face value, these words imply (even though they do not explicitly state) strict or full subscription. This does not mean that we treat every doctrine in the Confession as if it were equally important, but we do commit ourselves to all of the doctrines of the Confession. In addition, as Dr. Smith says so well, “full subscription does not require the adoption of every word of the Confession or Catechisms, but positively believes that we are adopting every doctrine or teaching of the Confession or Catechisms.” This is an important distinction, and needs to be understood. It is possible for an individual, a church, or an association to be cautious about the wording used to express a specific doctrine without denying the doctrine that wording seeks to define. Full subscription honestly adopts all of the doctrines expressed in the confessional formulation. In the case of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America, this means that by subscribing to the document commonly known as the London Baptist Confession of 1689, we receive all of the doctrines contained in it as true, founded on the Word of God.