FROM CHURCHES IN CULTURAL CAPTIVITY TO THE CHURCH INCARNATE IN A CULTURE: ECCLESIAL MEDIATION AFTER THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST SUBCULTURE

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is an analysis of how my tribe of moderate Baptists arrived at a state of theological paralysis, unable to go forward together but unwilling to critically assess their own history or constructively engage with the broader Christian tradition, and a proposal for how they might seek consensus and renewal. It resembles quite a few recent Baptist projects in that it attempts to make sense of the past in order to be faithful in the future, but it is distinct in that it focuses on the roles of southern culture and especially the Southern Baptist subculture in shaping theology and ethics. It argues that the dissolution of the subculture has distanced moderates from one another and the universal church, thereby impoverishing their thought and action and deepening their captivity to culture. However, it also argues that by exposing flaws in their conception of freedom, the dissolution of the subculture presents an opportunity to develop a robust ecclesiology and theology of tradition with the goal of again incarnating their faith in its own culture, one that both inhabits and transcends American culture.
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is an analysis of how my tribe of moderate Baptists arrived at a state of theological paralysis, unable to go forward together but unwilling to critically assess their own history or constructively engage with the broader Christian tradition, and a proposal for how they might seek consensus and renewal. It resembles quite a few recent Baptist projects in that it attempts to make sense of the past in order to be faithful in the future, but it is distinct in that it focuses on the roles of southern culture and especially the Southern Baptist subculture in shaping theology and ethics. It argues that the dissolution of the subculture has distanced moderates from one another and the universal church, thereby impoverishing their thought and action and deepening their captivity to culture. However, it also argues that by exposing flaws in their conception of freedom, the dissolution of the subculture presents an opportunity to develop a robust ecclesiology and theology of tradition with the goal of again incarnating their faith in its own culture, one that both inhabits and transcends American culture. This introduction first describes the theological stance and cultural situation of moderate Baptists, then identifies the methodology of the dissertation and summarizes its content.

Soul Freedom and Its Discontents

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), my ecclesial home, is over two decades old. Yet its members still tend to call themselves “moderates,” the name they
adopted in response to the “fundamentalists” who “took over” the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) during the 1980s on the grounds of defending biblical inerrancy.\(^1\) The experience of having an alien agenda seemingly imposed on their denomination—and, in some cases, having their employment terminated—conditioned moderates to emphasize freedom, especially individual freedom, to a greater degree and to portray themselves as thereby upholding the Baptist tradition and indeed the American experiment, in which Baptists have long claimed to have a vested interest. According to moderate theologian Lee Canipe, “As America stands for freedom, Baptists have stood with America and proudly defended the country’s ideals as their own.” In a word, they have simultaneously believed in an institutional separation of church and state and a moral convergence of the two around the idea of freedom.

It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which this notion of freedom has shaped the collective imagination of Baptists in America—specifically, white Baptists who live, work, and worship in the South. When the Southern Baptist Convention’s fragile theological and cultural consensus fell apart in the early 1980s, the proposition that freedom represented a supremely distinctive Baptist virtue—above and beyond all others—took on added resonance for the self-described “moderate” Baptists who suddenly found themselves on the outside looking in at a denominational structure they once dominated. … The essence of the moderate argument was clear enough: history is on our side. The freedom of autonomous, individual believers to take personal responsibility for their spiritual

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\(^1\) For a detailed account of the conservative-moderate controversy, see David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, the New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969-1991* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996). Whereas conservatives refer to the controversy as the “conservative resurgence,” moderates refer to it as the “fundamentalist takeover.” I use the terms “conservatives” and “moderates” because the respective parties prefer them to the pejorative labels “fundamentalists” and “liberals” and because the former are better understood as “evangelicals” despite sharing certain traits with historical fundamentalists, who George M. Marsden defines as “evangelical Christians, close to the traditions of the dominant American revivalist establishment of the nineteenth century, who in the twentieth century militantly opposed both modernism in theology and the cultural changes that modernism endorsed.” He also distinguishes them from their “new evangelical offspring.” *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 4.
welfare, moderates insisted, has always been the defining characteristic of the Baptist tradition and it remained a normative conviction for all true Baptists.\textsuperscript{2}

The SBC controversy was doubly painful in that it wrested away moderates’ denominational leadership and damaged their public standing, and they responded by reinterpreting their identity. Canipe remarks that their argument is epitomized by the work of Walter B. Shurden, and moderate historian Barry Hankins adds that Shurden “did more than anyone to shape the moderate party’s irreconcilable thesis,” that is, their claim that “fundamentalism” had always been outside or at odds with the Baptist tradition.\textsuperscript{3} In the aftermath of the controversy, Shurden linked its various disputes (and previous Baptist conflicts in general) to a single issue he called “control versus freedom” as well as “conformity versus liberty” and “uniformity versus diversity.”\textsuperscript{4} He noted that the SBC contained all four orientations of southern evangelicals identified by Samuel S. Hill, Jr.: truth-oriented, conversion-oriented, spiritually-oriented, and service-oriented. Yet he asserted that whereas the last three “tend to be inclusive, relational, and non-absolutist,” the first “tends to be exclusive, rationalistic, and dogmatic” and “is the very nature of the type of fundamentalism that captured the Southern Baptist Convention,” a dramatic turn of events given that “traditional” Southern Baptists had successfully resisted earlier forms of “extremism” such as Landmarkism and the original fundamentalism. Shurden added that “the new fundamentalism has debaptistified the


SBC” by narrowing its theology, centralizing its ecclesiology, and stressing pastoral authority, among other things. The insinuation was that although conservatives technically had a right to the name, they were no longer “true Baptists.” Of course, they have said the same about moderates.

Around the same time, Shurden wrote the popular book The Baptist Identity, which barely mentions the controversy but delineates the norms from which conservatives have departed and has therefore become a touchstone for moderates.

Citing Martin E. Marty’s term for the ascendancy of a Baptist-like style of faith, Shurden declares that “baptistification is a spirit that pervades all of the Baptist principles or so-called Baptist distinctives. It is the spirit of FREEDOM.” He quickly adds that the Baptist heritage involves “the polarity of freedom and responsibility” and “the dialectic of liberty and loyalty, of change and continuity, of soul competency and the Lordship of Christ, of individualism and community.” Although “polarity” denotes a state of opposition or contradiction, “dialectic” can denote a process leading to resolution or synthesis, and Shurden seems to believe that freedom bounded by “responsibility” rather

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6 For example, R. Stanton Norman associates conservatives with the “Reformation tradition” of Baptist distinctives, which “continues to demonstrate theological and historical continuity,” and moderates with the “Enlightenment tradition,” which “is moving theologically further away from the Reformation tradition” and “appears to be fragmenting within its own tradition.” More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 42-43.


9 Shurden, Baptist Identity, 3-4.
than “control” leads to unity. However, he does not specify what is entailed by responsibility or what constitutes unity beyond an experience of Jesus and a belief in freedom common to autonomous individuals and seems to assume that such individuals will inevitably end up sharing everything necessary for the Christian life, which is proving to be a fateful assumption on the part of the first generation of moderates.

Discussing “Bible freedom,” one of four such freedoms, Shurden acknowledges that Baptists are a “dependent people” because they have inherited the Bible, certain doctrines, and even their own distinctives from other Christians. Yet he declares that they are also a “non-creedal people” because they recognize not only the inadequacy of any creed to summarize the theological and ethical demands of Scripture, which mediates the authority of Christ, but also “the seemingly inevitable tendency to make the creed the norm and then to force compliance with the creed.”

Shurden justifies the suspicion of creeds (as opposed to confessions) on the basis of a pattern of “growing restrictionism” in which freedom is limited in the name of orthodoxy, a pattern he claims is “documentable in Christian history generally” but does not document apart from the controversy. At any rate, the fear of control by the church is rooted in the experience of early Baptists in dealing with establishments and ecclesiastical hierarchies but has been deepened by the experience of moderates to include any denominational structure or doctrine. Not even the local church, seen by most Baptists as the only visible church, is immune to this fear. For example, Shurden stresses “the believer’s right of private interpretation of the Bible”

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10 Shurden, Baptist Identity, 9-10, 14.

11 Shurden, Baptist Identity, 17.

12 This is evidenced by CBF’s stated position that it “is not a denomination” and “does not have a statement of beliefs.” “Frequently Asked Questions.”
but disregards the congregation’s obligation to test interpretation in order to preserve its integrity and prevent the confusion of the authority of Christ with a personal inclination or the cultural status quo.\(^\text{13}\)

The primacy of the individual throughout Shurden’s account of Baptist identity suggests that its foundation is effectively “soul freedom,” “the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.”\(^\text{14}\) The term “soul freedom” is associated with Roger Williams, but Shurden’s usage echoes the all-encompassing term “soul competency” proposed by Southern Baptist luminary E. Y. Mullins. He expresses the rationale behind soul freedom as follows:

In the Baptist faith tradition, individualism in religious matters manifests itself at the very beginning of the Christian life. Baptists insist that saving faith is personal, not impersonal. It is relational, not ritualistic. It is direct, not indirect. It is a lonely, frightened, sinful individual before an almighty, loving, and gracious God.

History helps us understand the Baptist position. A century before Baptists emerged in England, Martin Luther challenged the medieval theology of Roman Catholicism. That theology taught that God’s grace was centered in the church and mediated through the sacraments by the priests. Grace was institutionally based, sacramentally received, and indirectly mediated. Luther said, “No!”

A century later Baptists joined the chorus, claiming that the individual comes before God personally, directly, and voluntarily. They were affirming the centrality of the individual over the institutional, the priority of the personal over the sacramental, and the preeminence of direct access over indirect access to God.\(^\text{15}\)

Although soul freedom as such mainly concerns “saving faith,” the juxtaposition of the individual with creeds, rituals, sacraments, clergy, and institutions indicates that

\(^{13}\) Shurden, \textit{Baptist Identity}, 19.

\(^{14}\) Shurden, \textit{Baptist Identity}, 23.

\(^{15}\) Shurden, \textit{Baptist Identity}, 25.
“religious matters” includes other areas widely considered to be within the purview of the church. Even “church freedom” is far more about the prerogatives of the individual, although it does qualify soul freedom insofar as “the individual is always an ‘individual in community’” because the decision to follow Christ entails the duty to join a congregation that governs itself under his authority. With the exception of warning against passivity and authoritarianism, Shurden is silent on the particulars of governance, which for Baptists once included commitments to catechesis, church discipline, and other means of compelling conformity to certain standards. Tellingly, he says that they practice democratic polity “not because it is more efficient or more reliable or even more biblical than other forms” but “because it accents the role of the individual within community.” On the whole, his account implies that the church may be expected and useful but is ultimately unnecessary with respect to faith, interpretation, and morality. In contrast, the state is absolutely necessary, and Shurden identifies the greatest current threat to religious freedom as those Christians, Baptists included, who question the American model of church-state separation, which embodies the authentic Baptist position. Of course, conservatives share the basic belief that church and state are separate but fundamentally in harmony.

16 Shurden, Baptist Identity, 34.

17 Shurden, Baptist Identity, 37.

18 Shurden, Baptist Identity, 45-46.

19 For example, citing Shurden, conservative leader Richard Land declares that “America’s uniqueness as a nation founded upon the concept of soul freedom is at the heart of why this country is different from all others” and that “America’s historic legacy is solidly rooted in spreading this concept abroad.” The Divided States of America? What Liberals and Conservatives Are Missing in the God-and-Country Shouting Match (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 216.
To be sure, Shurden’s account is informative and somewhat consistent with the convictions of historical Baptists about freedom, but it neglects the doctrinal and ecclesial framework that regulated their exercise of freedom. As is evident in his concluding statement that the Baptist identity “has been chiseled primarily from freedom rather than control,” this is because it is dictated by the experience of moderates, who Curtis W. Freeman aptly labels “Other Baptists”:

The otherness we suffer is largely a consequence of what simply became known among Baptists in the South as “the controversy.” Our otherness gave rise to an awareness of alienation. We used to know who we were and where we fit in. Now we are Other. We feel marginalized, no longer at home, even among the people and sometimes in the churches we have been part of all our lives. The denominational empire under whose aegis we once lived was conquered by an opposing power, and the Southern culture we once inhabited is being replaced by an alien way of life that knows not the holy sacraments of sweet tea or fried chicken. Our place in this history has been revised and in some cases erased.

Finding a way to account for this otherness without simply becoming the negative image of the powers that be proves more problematic than one might suspect. The oppositional rhetoric employed by both sides in the controversy requires the Other and indeed is unintelligible apart from it. The residual discourse of controversy illustrates why the protest of exiled Baptists in the South continues to reflect the dominant order that displaced the old one, and it indicates why it is so difficult to find a way to speak in a language that does not assume the terms of the opposition.  

Much like their ancestors defined themselves over against Catholics and Protestants alike, moderates have defined themselves over against conservatives, and not

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20 Shurden, Baptist Identity, 59.

without reason. Yet an “oppositional” identity is not conducive to self-criticism. Furthermore, the control-versus-freedom mentality has taken hold just as the denominational subculture that mitigated the effects of individualism has disintegrated along with the Bible Belt culture that reinforced Baptist views, good and bad, producing a jarring gap between rhetoric and reality. When discussing their post-controversy identity, moderates typically recall being raised by Southern Baptist families and in Southern Baptist congregations, being educated at Southern Baptist colleges and seminaries, and serving in denominational capacities, not to mention living in a predominantly evangelical region. However, they typically treat these factors as separate from conversion and subordinate to cherished principles such as soul competency, the priesthood of all believers (or the believer), and the autonomy of the local church. One could hardly expect any Baptists not to highlight the personal and voluntary factors in their identity. Still, one could expect those for whom being anything other than Southern Baptist was highly unlikely to also realize that they would not have been able to interpret their experiences or make their decisions without distinctly communal and involuntary formation. The fact that they do not is a sign of the influence of the controversy and the legacy of the believers’ church in America.

In the essay cited by Shurden, Hill summed up the foundation of evangelical Protestantism as a “theology of unmediated encounter,” meaning that the relationship between God and the individual is understood to occur “person-to-person, without significant reliance on worship forms, clergy certification, sacramental participation, doctrinal propriety, or ecclesiastical legitimation.” He provided two clarifying

22 In addition to the second and third volumes in Kell’s series, see Cecil P. Staton, Jr., ed., Why I Am a Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1999).
illustrations. The first is an analogy from the airline industry: whereas for most Christians this relationship is like a direct flight in that “forms are used and prized, indeed deemed essential, partly because they are inevitable,” for evangelicals it is like a nonstop flight in that “forms may exist and be used, but they are in theory expendable.” The second illustration is a comparison to a geometric vector: for evangelicals divine communication has only two points, meaning that “you know whatever you know, the truth or the Lord Himself, or what you are being led to do, with precision, exactly, for sure. … This is due to the acceptance of a theory of knowledge, or epistemic position, which assesses truth as precise and exact.”23 Baptists have certainly denied the need for forms and accepted such a theory of knowledge, consciously or unconsciously, out of a desire to preserve the idea of the individual being created by God and of God being free to communicate with the individual. Unfortunately, a “theology of unmediated encounter” misses not only the full import of the Incarnation but also the significance of inescapable forms of mediation in Southern Baptist life.

According to Hankins, a tension was present in the SBC from its founding in 1845 until the early twentieth century: “On the one hand, churches and associations sought doctrinal conformity and often disciplined and even disfellowshipped members for theological deviance. On the other hand, the SBC took orthodoxy for granted and … unified around evangelism and missions, leaving theological controversy to the congregations and associations.”24 This tension faded as unity shifted from the local level to the denominational level with the growth of certain agencies and programs but

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resurfaced during the controversy, when conservatives sought doctrinal conformity because they concluded that orthodoxy could no longer be “taken for granted,” while moderates balked because they concluded that such conformity was unprecedented. Yet the latter’s conception of freedom opened them to the charge of being insufficiently confessional and thus at variance with an essential aspect of their tradition. A cadre of dissenting moderate scholars has attributed the rationale behind this appeal to the impact of the Enlightenment. Canipe summarizes their argument as follows:

The prevailing moderate Baptist understanding of freedom owes much more to the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment that continue to shape modern American life—that is, the conviction that individuals should be morally and politically free to choose both their own identities and their own destinies—than it does historic Baptist theology. In other words, instead of presenting a radical alternative to the ways of the world—as the prototypical Baptists John Smyth and Thomas Helwys attempted to do in the early seventeenth century—a Baptist religious identity that emphasizes individual freedom above all else runs the risk of offering little more than a spiritualized echo of an American democratic culture that emphasizes individual freedom above all else.

Early Baptists defied state churches in order to seek unity in gathered churches, but their descendants became more divided from one another—the number of separate if

25 For example, in a collection conceived as a response to the one edited by Staton, conservative scholars Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore describe the latter as follows: “This volume made a concerted effort to attempt Baptist identity without Baptist theology. … Rejecting confessional boundaries as creedal straightjackets, these moderate writers presented the alternative: a Baptist identity built upon sociological commonality, shared memories, and not much else.” Their volume makes the contrary case that “being Baptist is about theological conviction.” “Preface,” in Why I Am a Baptist, ed. Nettles and Moore (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), xv-xvi.

26 Canipe, Baptist Democracy, 5. The most well-known version of this argument is Mikael Broadway et al., “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” Perspectives in Religious Studies 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 303-10. Responding to the Manifesto, Shurden refers to James Wm. McClendon, Jr., as its “theological father,” then states that “it is important that I talk back because some people assumed, correctly or not, that the original draft of the document was to some degree directed at my 1993 book The Baptist Identity.” “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” Perspectives in Religious Studies 25, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 321. For a study of the Manifesto and its context, see Andrew D. Black, “Kingdom of Priests or Democracy of Competent Souls? The ‘Baptist Manifesto,’ John Howard Yoder, and the Question of Baptist Identity” (MA thesis, Baylor University, 2006).
not rival Baptist groups is ever increasing—even as they became more at home in America, partly because they accepted notions of freedom and rationality related to the Enlightenment and other complex factors. Although they are not alone among Christians in their patriotism, they are less equipped than most to recognize its proper limits. The point is that if the “epistemic position” described by Hill is untenable, then Baptists must distinguish which forms of mediation ought to guide their faith, interpretation, and morality—broadly speaking, those of “American democratic culture” or those of the church catholic. In other words, they must determine what kind of control will both protect true freedom and foster unity. Scholars have attempted to make this point by focusing on the controversy, the Enlightenment, and early Baptists, but they have treated the “theological and cultural consensus” mentioned by Canipe as peripheral and all but ignored the subculture, and oversight this dissertation aims to correct. 

Briefly, Southern Baptists maintained considerable unity for well over a century owing to the formative power of not only their relatively homogenous culture, which complemented their revivalist theology and presented the problem that historians called “cultural captivity,” but also their subculture, which catechized them in the Baptist faith and enabled them to occasionally resist such captivity.27 The subculture was comprised of

27 Marsden defines culture as “the collection of beliefs, values, assumptions, commitments, and ideals expressed in a society through popular literary forms and embodied in its political, educational, and other institutions,” adding that “in most cultures the prevailing formal religion has been an integral part of and support for the dominant beliefs, values, and institutions. Although this has been largely true in Western civilization during the long era of ‘Christendom,’ the relationship of Christianity to Western culture has always been complex. Some Christian groups have equated culture with the ‘world’ which must be shunned; others have virtually identified Christianity with the values and progress of culture.” Fundamentalism and American Culture, v-vi. Suffice it to say that Southern Baptists have done both at various times, often by means of their subculture, which was similar to but less rigid than that of fundamentalists. According to Marsden, “An overview of fundamentalism reveals them building a subculture with institutions, mores, and social connections that would eventually provide acceptable alternatives to the dominant cultural ethos. As in immigrant communities, religion played a central role in shaping their identity.” Fundamentalism and American Culture, 204.
mission boards, educational institutions, a publishing house, a news service, a public policy arm, and numerous other organizations that by means of local congregations instilled a distinctively Southern Baptist identity. Clearly, however, it had little noticeable effect on the most glaring manifestation of their captivity: acceptance of and even support for slavery and later segregation, which can be attributed partly to the sectionalism that gave rise to the SBC and resulted in blacks leaving or being expelled from southern churches, meaning that the subculture was virtually all-white. The racism of southern Christians has been treated exhaustively elsewhere, and there is no space to do so here. Instead, this dissertation simply acknowledges that there was a major flaw in the subculture, a flaw that, because of the reality of human sinfulness, might have existed even if Baptists had been less isolated from Christians outside the South and more connected to the broader Christian tradition. It also acknowledges that many of those who eventually challenged segregation did so from the margins of the denomination, and that the memory of the civil rights struggle conditioned moderates nearly as much as that of the controversy. Yet it maintains that the mediation of the subculture created conditions that allowed Baptists to become faithful disciples. Their heirs no longer enjoy these conditions and now occupy a religious landscape that serves to erode communal identity and for which Baptists bear some responsibility.

**Baptistification Takes Over Baptist Identity**

Marty coined the term “baptistification” in 1983 to describe not the growth of Baptist denominations but a shift in the Christian world from the dominance of a “catholic style” to that of a “baptist style” that emphasized personal experiences and decisions, initiated believers into community, and provided them with a strong sense of
identity. He called this shift “epochal”; it had begun with the Anabaptists and early
Baptists and been accelerated by colonial revivalists, who were among the first to realize
that “Christianity no longer ‘came with the territory’” and to adapt to the modern
religious conditions of choice and competition. According to Marty, “Christian nurture is
interrupted by forces we call pluralism, secularity, and modernization. These distractions
pull at family, church, school, neighborhood, tribe—all the forms through which catholic
Christianity transmitted itself.” The entrenchment of catholic Christianity meant that the
brunt of baptistification was only then being felt, evidenced by the numerical decline and
general apathy of Catholicism and mainline Protestantism in much of the West and the
concurrent growth and enthusiasm of Baptist, Pentecostal, and other evangelical
denominations and charismatic movements within catholic traditions.²⁸

Although one style had apparently supplanted the other, Marty asserted that the
two were “both opposed and complementary” and hoped that “each would borrow the
best from the other” rather than the worst, as in the case of baptist Christians demanding
social privilege.²⁹ He was writing after the successive elections of Southern Baptist
Jimmy Carter—validating pollster George Gallup, Jr.’s description of 1976 as the “year
of the evangelical”—and Ronald Reagan—marking the emergence of the so-called
religious right—and the initial battles of the SBC controversy, and the growth of
theologically and politically conservative evangelicals, chief among them Southern
Baptists, in numbers and influence showed no signs of abating, leading Marty to offer a
warning: “For the moment, baptistification is the more aggressive and effective force, and

²⁸ Marty, “Baptistification Takes Over,” 34.

the circumstances that make it so could prevail for a long time to come. It may succumb, as the worst in catholicism did, to the temptations that come with its new power and prestige. If so, God could raise up the latent catholic Christians to be the voice of prophetic upset.\textsuperscript{30}

Three decades later, Marty’s analysis remains incisive, but the religious landscape is radically different, indicating that he misread the trajectory of baptistification. A recent series of surveys and studies have shown that adults, especially young adults, are switching religious affiliation and becoming unaffiliated (i.e., “nones”) at unprecedented rates, to the point that the nation’s Protestant majority is nearly a memory and the Catholic share of the population is being maintained only by immigration. Protestants are also becoming concentrated in megachurches, many of which hide their affiliations or simply have none, and while evangelicals have surpassed Catholics in sheer numbers, their growth is confined to loosely organized Pentecostal and Holiness groups and nondenominational churches; the latter collectively constitute the largest Christian group by congregations and the second-largest (behind the Catholic Church) by individuals.\textsuperscript{31}

Even the SBC has experienced six straight years of membership decline as of 2012 after more than eighty years of almost continuous growth.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Marty, “Baptistification Takes Over,” 36.


Admittedly, the reliability of surveys and studies is limited, and interpretation of the landscape has been contentious since the postwar era, when sociologists recognized that despite an apparent revival of religious belief and participation, ethnic and denominational differences were fading and Americans were becoming more secular in certain respects. Will Herberg memorably called the new “common religion” of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews the “American Way of Life.” Soon the “emptying churches” in Europe mentioned by Marty and the shrinking memberships of mainline Protestant denominations in the United States lent credence to the secularization thesis, the basic premise of which is that as societies modernize through rationalization, industrialization, urbanization, and so on, religion in those societies declines. Another assumption is that as individuals have more contact with diverse conceptions of religious truth, they become less committed to any single conception. This thesis was virtually unquestioned until a more enduring revival of religion prompted several sociologists to introduce the religious economies model, which employs rational choice theory and historical data to argue that the “demand” for religion is a constant and that disestablishment leads to a greater, more diverse “supply,” which spurs religious “firms” to compete for “consumers.” Firms typically succeed by prescribing strict doctrines and


34 The concept of secularization originated during the Enlightenment and was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, among others, but did not become the dominant paradigm in sociology of religion until the postwar era. For example, Peter L. Berger predicted that the “sacred canopy” that provided a “common world” and shielded believers from modernity would collapse and that religion would be confined to a few isolated sects by the twenty-first century. The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). Berger has since repudiated the secularization thesis. “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics, ed. Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1-18.
morals and promising otherworldly rewards. In short, not only does religious diversity increase religious vitality, conservative evangelicalism is ideally suited to America’s religious economy.\textsuperscript{35}

Proponents of the religious economies model contend that media coverage and scholarly interpretation of the statistical evidence has been misleading and that religion in the United States (as opposed to Europe) is remarkably stable with respect to traditional beliefs and participation in congregations and other organizations. In contrast, proponents of the secularization thesis contend that although personal religious sentiment and activity remain vibrant in some areas, the social significance of religion in the West is declining, as are the intensity and specificity of personal religious beliefs. Steve Bruce convincingly argues that the main development is the replacement of shared communal religions by individualized forms of religion, which may be sincere but discourage the socialization of children, compounding secularization in that, “because privatized, compartmentalized, and individualized religion attracts less commitment, is harder to maintain, and is more difficult to pass on intact to the next generation, it fails to make up the ground lost by, and declines faster than, traditional religion.”\textsuperscript{36} Mark Chaves sees considerable continuity in the United States but concludes that traditional religion is being supplanted by both irreligion and “diffuse spirituality,” exemplified by those who say they are “spiritual but not religious”:


The most obvious interpretation is that such people consider themselves to be generally concerned with spiritual matters (whatever that means) but are not interested in organized religion. If this interpretation is correct, then this growing segment of the population is unlikely to re-energize existing religious institutions. Nor will it provide a solid foundation for new kinds of religious institutions or new religious movements. The spiritual but not religious should not be seen as yearning people ready to be won over by a new type of religion specifically targeted to them. Increasing spirituality may provide a growing market for certain kinds of religious products, such as self-help books with spiritual themes, but it probably will not find a stable, socially and politically significant organizational expression. It is too vague, unfocused, and anti-institutional for that.37

“Spirituality” in this sense is a catch-all term for religious forms that are sometimes labeled “New Age,” “seeker,” and “cafeteria” and are undoubtedly on the rise. On the basis of a national study, however, Christian Smith concludes that very few teenagers fit the profile of being indifferent if not hostile to traditional or organized religion per se and concomitantly having an eclectic spirituality. Rather, most neither embrace nor completely reject traditional beliefs and practices and share a de facto religion he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”38 From his perspective, “This religious creed appears to operate as a parasitic faith. It cannot sustain its own integral, independent life; rather it must attach itself like an incubus to established historical religious traditions, feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities, and expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image.”


38 The “creed” of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is as follows: “1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. 4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. 5. Good people go to heaven when they die.” Christian Smith, Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers, with Melinda Lundquist Denton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-63. For an update on the subjects of this study, see Smith, Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults, with Patricia Snell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
can think of themselves as belonging to a specific tradition—“Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, Mormon, whatever”—while picking and choosing from its beliefs and practices. Smith notes that they are being socialized into this faith by adults and that both age groups are not so much becoming more anti-institutional as regarding religious institutions in particular as less authoritative and worthy of participation. After all, if the church is merely a voluntary association that meets felt needs and provides opportunities for fellowship and service, it is merely one option among many.

Examining the religious landscape in detail is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and it would be unwise to regard any change as inevitable or permanent. Still, it is plausible that the postwar resurgence of religious belief and practice was a blip in the process of secularization and that much of the Christianity that remains is different in kind from that of the previous two millennia. Moreover, the fact that baptist Christianity is, for the most part, no longer initiating believers into community or providing them with a strong sense of identity suggests that Marty did not anticipate the effects of its emphasis on personal experiences and decisions. He also did not acknowledge that, for all its claims to the contrary, baptist Christianity has relied on the same forms through which catholic Christianity transmitted itself—“family, church, school, neighborhood, tribe”—and indeed has operated as something of a “parasitic faith,” claiming to require only the individual and (secondarily) the congregation but depending on the denomination and the Christian tradition. It has also claimed to be a creedless faith when some creed, explicit or not, is in fact always present. Regardless of how truly Christian the culture ever was, the end of Christian hegemony leaves

39 Smith, Soul Searching, 166-67.
baptistified believers, especially moderate Baptists, in a theological bind over their conception of freedom.

On one level, the handing on of a specifically Baptist identity is at stake. Moderate historian Bill J. Leonard asserts that Baptist leaders and institutions are faced with a “serious identity crisis” because “an increasing number of Baptists could not care less about the label Baptist, its history, and its traditions.” The same could be said of many other Protestant denominations, but this crisis presents a particular difficulty for Baptists. If it were only about labels, it could be regarded as merely an irony: the more baptistified Americans become, the less interested they are in being Baptists in name. However, it is also about Baptist principles or distinctives being followed to their logical conclusion; the subculture itself was a sign that they were no longer adequate to deal with the modern world. On another level, then, the handing on of a substantive Christian identity is at stake. Although human beings are created by God and remain oriented toward God despite their fallen nature, the “demand” for God must be nurtured in order to lead to truth, and virtuous attitudes and habits must be instilled lest vicious ones become dominant. The landscape described above may promise freedom, but in the absence of ecclesial forms beyond the local and contemporary, ostensibly free individuals and congregations—the next generation of moderates—are actually at the mercy of governments, corporations, technologies, movements, personalities, and so on. Being comprised of sinners, the church is far from perfect, but being the body of Christ, it is essential, particularly for preparing its members for life in a post-Christian, albeit not exactly secular, society.

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After praising early Baptists in England and colonial America, Canipe succinctly asks, “Do Baptists in America still possess the skills of discernment needed to separate the true claims of God from the false claims of Caesar?”[41] Perhaps this question reflects an idealized view of early Baptists, but they were, at the very least, more cognizant of the necessity of the church for acquiring such skills of discernment. Not only must Baptists today learn from their forbears, they must expand their conception of the church. Leonard rightly chides them for the “traditionless tradition” of treating their identity as a repetition of New Testament or early Baptist principles and practices “largely untouched by historical and theological influences present in the broader church or culture.”[42] He also rightly notes that the actual church polity of the New Testament is unclear, meaning that the question “is less what is the polity of the New Testament than which New Testament polity shall become normative,” and that early Baptists believed that “Christ’s authority was mediated not through bishop or king but through the congregation of Christian believers,” meaning that the goal of distinctives such as freedom of conscience and believer’s baptism is “covenant communities.”[43] Yet he neglects the “broader church” and seems to regard denominations as outdated, thereby placing the burden entirely on congregations to choose from among many Baptist traditions or ways of being Baptist and to provide an “audacious witness” in a pluralistic religious marketplace, despite their polity making division inevitable.[44]

What if Baptist thought and action have been dependent on social norms and institutional mediation and are in fact unsustainable, let alone capable of an “audacious witness,” without them? If so, Baptists not only must choose from among ways of being Baptist but also must dialogue with other Christians, particularly catholic Christians, who may yet prove to be “the voice of prophetic upset.” Whereas Marty speculated that “power and prestige” would call for such a voice, I believe that decline and pluralism are calling for it. Leonard states that “Baptists represent a case study in the changing nature of religious denominations in twenty-first-century American culture.” Assuming that this is true, this dissertation may be of interest to non-Baptists who resonate with its account, but regardless, its primary goal is to help inspire Baptists to renew their theology and ethics by means of engagement with the broader Christian tradition as well as their own heritage—whether or not it benefits their public standing or membership numbers—and lead them toward a fuller understanding of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Overview

This dissertation is primarily a work of historical theology but includes elements of systematic theology and moral theology or ethics. It presumes that historical theology brings historical analysis of the church to bear on the present life of the church and that ethics is an area or branch of theology, not a separate discipline, and therefore necessarily historical as well as biblical and contemporary. It analyzes the course of Baptist theology in the United States, notably the interplay between ecclesiology and ethics among Baptists in the South, with an eye to their prospects. Thus it serves as a preface or

prolegomena to the practice of Baptist theology and ethics today, and although the above description of the dilemma of moderate Baptist identity is cursory, it establishes my location and motivation. Some familiarity with Southern Baptist life would be helpful for understanding its arguments, but my intention is for them to be relevant and accessible to anyone concerned about the future of the church in America precisely because America is, by and large, baptistified.

The project is divided into an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter one addresses the nature and trajectory of cultural captivity from the growth of Baptists in the early republic through the formation of the SBC over slavery and on to the Civil War and its aftermath, the impact of the Social Gospel, and the upheaval brought on by the civil rights movement. Chapter two focuses on the theological and cultural consensus that was embodied by Mullins and undergirded the extensive Southern Baptist subculture well into the twentieth century. It argues that Mullins reinterpreted Baptist theology in such a way as to allow a novel kind of individualism to become established and further undermine this consensus, leaving Southern Baptists unprepared for the internal conflicts and cultural changes that arrived in the second half of the century. Chapter three examines the background and development of the SBC and contends that no matter how earnestly Baptists proclaimed their belief in freedom and autonomy, their identity was inseparable from their subculture, which mediated the Baptist and Christian heritages to individuals and congregations. It then explains how the subculture both facilitated and inhibited captivity until it was undone by internecine strife, shifting demographics, and an inadequate theology.
Chapter four turns to the theological project of James Wm. McClendon, Jr., who was a product of the subculture and can be loosely categorized as a moderate. It shows how McClendon recognized the nature of the crisis in his denomination, critiqued the foundationalist epistemologies of conservative and liberal theologies alike, and sought to recover a baptist (with a lowercase “b”) vision rooted in the collective witness of the New Testament church and that of the Radical Reformation and to bring it into dialogue with the broader Christian tradition. It argues that this vision can help abate cultural captivity because it is voluntary, thoroughly communal, and appropriately mystical, but it also argues that he does not fully account for the mediation of the church throughout history. Chapter five continues the theme of historical mediation by identifying the parameters of a Baptist theology of tradition and contends that the dissolution of the subculture reveals that mediation is inescapable and that therefore the church and its tradition should decisively inform faith, interpretation, and morality. Finally, the conclusion suggests several ways in which Baptists might look to Catholics in particular for resources to take advantage of the present opportunity.
CHAPTER I
CULTURAL CAPTIVITY REVISITED

This chapter examines the phenomenon in Southern Baptist life that historians have called “cultural captivity” in order to clarify the nature of captivity and the relationship between captivity and theology. Utilizing scholarship in the field of southern religious history, it describes the manner in which Southern Baptists addressed social issues from before the founding of their denomination in the mid nineteenth century to the turmoil that arose in that denomination in the mid twentieth. After summarizing the notion of cultural captivity and the contrast between the ideals of denominational leaders and the realities exposed by the civil rights movement, it expands on John Lee Eighmy’s identification of three forces that restricted the social thought and action of Southern Baptists through the 1960s—revivalism, congregational government, and social pressure—and relates them to other forces such as democratization and church discipline and to factors such as the Social Gospel and the fundamentalist-modernist controversies. It argues that Baptists have been captive to American culture in general as well as southern culture in particular and that their changing conceptions of the individual and the church both contributed to their social involvement and undermined the confessional consensus and denominational subculture that sustained involvement and inhibited captivity.
A Cultural Establishment

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) belatedly celebrated its centennial in 1946 by, among other things, concluding a two-year Evangelistic Crusade that claimed half a million converts and adopting a Statement of Principles intended to project a postwar identity and purpose. The statement included a fairly standard list of Baptist principles and grounded them in a “distinctive belief”: a “doctrine of the individual” in which the person is the “focal unit” in God’s dealings with humanity and is endowed with “competence” and certain rights and responsibilities in relations with God and other people. It also included an application section that described the “Christian movement”—not the church, mentioned only in the local sense—as “a leavening and instructing agency in the midst of society for the good of the human race and the glory of God in the coming of His Kingdom” and urged the pursuit of Christian unity and cooperation—found in “experience and spiritual fellowship” over against “ecclesiastical overlordship”—the recognition of human rights, and opposition to materialism, nationalism, and racism.¹ Overall, the statement was a bold attempt by Southern Baptists to visualize a different future without rejecting their heritage, but it nevertheless manifested signs of their persistent captivity to culture.

Jesse C. Fletcher notes that the Statement of Principles not only did not reference any prior confession—not even the Baptist Faith and Message, adopted by the convention in 1925—but also took “a different approach from any prior confession” in specifying a

single distinctive doctrine.² This innovation suggests that a shift had taken place in Baptist theology with respect to the individual. A more obvious innovation was the inclusion of an application section, which Fletcher calls “possibly the noblest [declaration] ever produced by the body” and “its marching orders for the next three decades.” Like the Baptist Faith and Message, however, the statement was met with silence. One reason was the low regard for confessions among Baptists of the day, but he speculates that

the Statement of Principles may have been the way Southern Baptist leaders envisioned themselves rather than the perceptions of the average church member. If so, the vision was an outgrowth of the denominational pride that had been nurtured partly by the successionism of early Landmarkism and partly by the triumphalism of the 1920s. But it also represented a coming of age on the part of Southern Baptists in the larger world of human affairs and was definitely focused in a new American pride as the preeminent world power.

… The Statement of Principles, however taken for granted, revealed Southern Baptists’ belief, at least among the leadership, that they had come into being for a unique purpose that would unfold in the second century.³

Baptists had long been exceedingly confident in themselves and in their country, where they had flourished as much as any other religious group. Although they comprised less than one-half of one percent of the colonial population, they were burdened by neither a history of establishment nor a requirement of clerical training, and their experiential faith appealed to every class, race, and gender in the early republic. The SBC in particular had grown throughout its first century. Although it had not created the Cooperative Program for collecting and distributing funds until 1925 or expanded beyond the South until the Second World War, it would count over seven million members in


³ Fletcher, Southern Baptist Convention, 177-78.
1950—nearly five times more than the Northern Baptist Convention, renamed the American Baptist Convention that year—and become the nation’s largest Protestant body shortly thereafter. Yet it had not escaped the predicament that dated back to its origins in the conflict over slavery in the General Missionary Convention, better known as the Triennial Convention, a national body formed in 1814. Whereas their counterparts in England had participated in the antislavery movement and those in the North largely supported abolition, Baptists in the South showed no inclination to question the institution on which their economy depended. Tensions came to a head in 1844 when the convention refused to appoint a slaveholder as a missionary. The 293 delegates from nine states who met in Augusta, Georgia, the next year included many educated landowners but no women or blacks. According to Fletcher, “Who was there as well as who was not there reflected the cultural identification peculiar to southern Baptist life. That cultural union would mark the Baptist Convention for decades to come. It was to be all but inseparable from a white male-dominated culture dependent upon agriculture, especially cotton. It was a culture marked at that time by slavery and for years following by its demeaning aftermath.”

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4 Fletcher, *Southern Baptist Convention*, 11. Early Southern Baptist scholars ignored the role of slavery in the founding of the convention, and even Fletcher’s immediate predecessors were reluctant to identify it as the primary cause. William Wright Barnes stated that the SBC “grew out of division … over the question of slavery” but qualified this statement by emphasizing long-standing differences between Baptists in the North and those in the South. *The Southern Baptist Convention, 1845-1953* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954), 12. Robert A. Baker likewise stated that all the arguments for separation were related to “the involvement of the South with the ‘peculiar institution’” but added that “there were other strong considerations for a separate southern body.” *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 171-72. In contrast, H. Leon McBeth asserted that “slavery was the main issue that led to the 1845 schism; that is a blunt historical fact. Other issues raised barriers and, in time, might have led to division … However, slavery did lead to division.” *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 382.
By the centennial a significant number of Southern Baptists realized that if they were to fulfill their “unique purpose,” not to mention their moral obligation, they needed to address segregation. The locus of advocacy was the Social Service Commission, created in 1913 and renamed the Christian Life Commission in 1953. In addition to producing several programs and publications, the commission presented a recommendation to the 1954 annual meeting of the convention endorsing the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education, the adoption of which (by an overwhelming majority) made the SBC one of the first denominations to officially support desegregation.\(^5\) By and large, however, Southern Baptists either did not notice the recommendation or simply ignored it, and although their attitudes were more diverse than is usually acknowledged, most disapproved of the Brown decision. Even the Christian Life Commission backed off as opposition mounted, and in 1964 the SBC defeated a recommendation from the commission endorsing the pending Civil Rights Act and passed a substitute motion stating that segregation was a local concern. The next year it passed a resolution supporting civil rights, but not until after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 did it confess to its part in racial injustice and commit to confronting it.\(^6\)

By then the civil rights era was essentially over and the failure of white Christians had become a subject of fascination to scholars, who blamed it on a close identification with southern culture that interfered with the development of “progressive” social ethics.


Briefly, historians who focused on the Social Gospel, such as Charles Howard Hopkins and Henry F. May, had disregarded the South, while those who focused on the South, such as C. Vann Woodward, had maintained that the impact of the Social Gospel had been negligible because the movement was a product of industrialization and urbanization, which proceeded slower in the South, and inseparable from liberal theology, which southerners rejected. In the 1960s, however, Kenneth K. Bailey, Samuel S. Hill, Jr. (at that time a Southern Baptist), and others asserted that southern white Protestants—mainly Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, collectively known as evangelicals—had been noticeably influenced by the Social Gospel or social Christianity in general despite being preoccupied with evangelism and personal morality.

The first historian of southern religion to concentrate on Baptists was Rufus B. Spain, who ended *At Ease in Zion*, a study of convention reports and state newspapers, at 1900 because “Baptist attitudes on the great social questions of the time had crystallized by then or had fallen into patterns which could be projected into the twentieth century.” He asserted that they “had lost the odium associated with their forebears” by the Civil War and “were homogeneous members of Southern society,” then asked whether they “molded or merely reflected Southern attitudes.” After reviewing the evidence, Spain allowed that Baptists “did develop a degree of social consciousness” that led them to

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modify their denominational agenda but nevertheless concluded that they ultimately
“defended the status quo” and “conformed to the society in which they lived,” adding that
“only on matters involving personal conduct or narrow religious principles did Baptists
diverge noticeably from prevailing Southern views.”

In *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, which coined the term, fellow Southern Baptist
John Lee Eighmy extended Spain’s research into the 1960s and—with a damning choice
of words, given that establishment was antithetical to Baptist identity—likewise
concluded that their people “assumed the role of a cultural establishment by sanctifying a
secular order devoted to states’ rights, white supremacy, laissez faire economics, and
property rights.” He also concluded that the Social Gospel “destroyed the uniformity of
their nineteenth-century social thought and created two opposing interpretations of the
church’s earthly mission.” Whereas a majority (the “evangelical tradition”) continued to
restrict this mission to evangelism and personal morality, a minority (the “progressive
tradition”) broadened it to include social reform, resulting in a “divided mind.”
Furthermore, although the growing denominational structure encouraged Southern
Baptists to address social problems, their congregational polity hindered them from doing
so. He perceptively remarked that “whether a democratic church can exercise loyalty to
an authority that transcends its cultural environment remains an open question.” Still, he
pointed to the limited success of the Christian Life Commission and opined that “the
main source of hope is the ever-growing number of enlightened leaders who are vocal,
influential, and strategically located in pastorates, schools, and denominational positions.

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10 Spain, *At Ease in Zion*, 211, 213-14.

For the character of Southern Baptist influence in the secular world will be determined largely by the extent to which leaders of this sort are allowed to shape denominational social attitudes and action.”

Marking out a progressive elite was central to how the initial proponents of the cultural captivity thesis challenged the consensus history of southern white Protestants while denouncing the racism prevalent among such Protestants. This thesis paved the way for a tremendous amount of scholarship but has not been without critics. Some have noted that it obscures diversity; Wayne Flynt criticized it early on for “ignoring the dissident voices of inarticulate members” by focusing on denominational leaders and sources, and Paul Harvey points out that it “ignores the presence and agency of black churches.”

Carolyn Renée Dupont argues that the cultural captivity thesis also “ignores the active role the church played in creating and sustaining the system of oppression” by implying that “something foreign had trapped the church” and that it “erects a false distinction between religion and culture by supposing that religion somehow stands apart from culture as either adversary or accomplice” and “inappropriately excuses religion from historical contingency, treating matters of faith as constant and unchanging.”

Although there is truth to each of these arguments, the second and third are less convincing because they disregard the capacity of Christianity to form a distinct subculture and to hand on a faith that is consistent, even if understood in various ways by

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12 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 198-99.


the faithful, because it is ultimately contingent not on history, culture, or human subjects but on God, who is “constant and unchanging.”

The cultural captivity thesis has also contributed to the so-called two-party thesis, which locates religious groups and ideas on a spectrum that mirrors the American political spectrum. Martin E. Marty popularized this thesis in the 1970s when he attempted to correct the consensus model that categorized Protestant history according to a mainstream and a periphery by categorizing it according to a modernist, reform-minded mainline party and a conservative, pietistic evangelical party. One consequence of widespread acceptance of the two-party thesis is that scholars typically treat cases in which theologically “conservative” persons support politically “progressive” causes, or vice versa, as notable if not inexplicable exceptions. Another is that they often read the model back into history, resulting in oversimplifications such as Harvey’s claim that the evolution of the Southern Baptist Convention provides a good case study of the transformation of southern religious conservatism in the twentieth century. Conservatives had been caucusing over their grievances since the early twentieth century, but they managed to enlist only a minority of disaffected believers in ideological crusades against the heresies of modernism. In the 1950s and 1960s, their anger at denominational leaders who endorsed desegregation in the South compelled them to coalesce. As they perceived it, there was a denominational elite from which they were largely excluded. This elite, these conservatives believed, produced modernist books, endorsed integration, and perhaps even were soft on communism. In later years, the list of sins changed—endorsing abortion rights replaced sanctioning integration, for example—but the coalitions essentially remained the same.

From this perspective, the ideology of conservatism, of which “southern religious conservatism” is a species and “fundamentalism” a subspecies, cuts across


denominational boundaries and is more decisive than theological convictions; the same is true of the ideology of liberalism or progressivism, meaning that virtually any political or religious issue or movement can be understood according to the spectrum between these two poles.

Although the two-party paradigm is useful in that it conveys the close connection between religious and political development in the United States, it obscures the significance of dissenting groups and ethnic and racial minorities and signifies that captivity to culture involves more than just one party or perspective. Christopher H. Evans notes that this paradigm alone

does not grasp the complexities of the theological divisions that split American Protestantism apart in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The story of [Baptist pastor and Social Gospel theologian] Walter Rauschenbusch suggests an era in which churches were dividing along numerous fault lines that broke Protestantism into not just two camps but into several. …

What Rauschenbusch’s life story reveals is that the distinction of who falls under the labels “evangelical,” “liberal,” “fundamentalist,” or “modernist” is as much a judgment constructed by contemporary historians and theologians as it is an indicator of how Rauschenbusch and his contemporaries labeled themselves. 17

In the case of Southern Baptists, the two-party perspective proved to be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. A major reason that Eighmy’s hoped-for enlightenment did not come to pass was that within a decade tensions between self-identified “conservative” and “moderate” parties erupted in a controversy that ended in a denominational split. Whichever party was more correct, polarization finally unraveled the theological consensus inherited from the Baptist tradition and Christian traditions, making it even more difficult for either party to “exercise loyalty to an authority that transcends its cultural environment.”

Eighmy also remarked that the greatest difficulty presented by the Social Gospel was “defining the actual role of the church in bringing about social reform.”

He was referring to the ambiguity of Southern Baptists claiming that evangelism and personal morality would solve social problems while supporting collective efforts when it suited their purposes. Although he made the common mistake of judging ethics according to success in the public policy arena, he recognized the importance of the denominational structure and ecumenical relationships, at least on a practical level, as did the adopters of the Statement of Principles. In contrast, moderates, who generally regard themselves as the heirs of the progressive tradition but have been traumatized by the actions of conservatives, have downplayed or ignored these aspects of the church. Walter B. Shurden, for example, cites the application section as evidence that the doctrine of the individual, which stood in continuity with early Baptist theology, “led not to hyperindividualism but contained vastly important social and ethical implications.” Although he admits that Southern Baptists, for the most part, did not follow this “theological logic” and become more socially involved, he offers no explanation and only laments the centralization of the SBC by conservatives. Shurden does not consider the possibility that in very different conditions, this doctrine does lead to “hyperindividualism,” thereby weakening the capacity for involvement, let alone involvement characterized by unity and discernment.

Moreover, few if any moderates have recognized that the stance exemplified by the Statement of Principles took for granted not only a large denominational structure but

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18 Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity*, 87.

also a high social standing. Baptists assumed that their theology and American
democracy were fundamentally compatible, which explained why their numbers and
influence had grown. The fact that both have since declined, then, casts doubt on these
assumptions and suggests that no matter how much the above stance improved on the
status quo, it was not as uncompromised as it appeared. Although the concept of cultural
captivity requires qualifications, it is useful as a trope for conveying the nature of the
relationship between Southern Baptists and their environment in light of the historical
witness of their forebears and the church as a whole. Eighmy began and ended his study
by discussing three forces that had restricted their social thought and action: revivalism,
which encouraged individualism; congregational government, which discouraged
denominational activities; and social pressure, which encouraged “conservatism.” The
following sections examine these forces in turn.

Revivalism and Democratization

Baptists have emphasized personal conversion and congregational polity since
their beginnings in the early seventeenth century, but they would not have become who
they are today without revivalism, which was not exclusively southern but thrived on the
frontier and endured even after the threat it posed to the social order dissipated. Events
such as the camp meeting at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801 reanimated the spirit that
had been preserved by Separate Baptists and other “New Light” groups since the First
Great Awakening, and the Second Great Awakening made revival a fixture in the South.
Eighmy’s assessment of its ethical significance was typical: “By presenting morality in
terms of individual rather than social reform, revivalism functioned as a socially
conservative force with the practical effect of upholding traditional values and
institutions against basic social changes.”

Writing at around the same time, John B. Boles described the “theology of individualism” that resulted from the Second Great Awakening as follows:

In practically every aspect, the fundamental emphasis of the popular churches in the South was individualistic. For neither Baptist, Methodist, nor Presbyterian did the idea of the church mean a universal institutionalized body. Instead, whenever they spoke of the church, they meant the local congregation, or, in the most abstract sense, they sometimes used this phrase to refer to that mystical body of individual believers known only by God. This localized, individual ecclesiology was intimately related to the prevalent evangelical theology. The brunt of the preaching and teaching was exerted to break down the barriers of personal indifference. The ministers’ aim was immediate conviction and conversion. For this goal they had no overarching purpose beyond the development of individual Christians. …

A corollary to this theology of individual conversion was a vigorous emphasis on sanctification, or Christian perfectionism. Necessarily the more those committed to Christianity pressed toward an “imitation of Christ,” the society they in part composed would be purified. Private perfectionism would produce social improvement. This personal, inward, pietistic theology has characterized the dominant religious beliefs in the South since at least the Great Revival itself.

Despite its moderately Calvinist character, Baptist theology was more adaptable than Methodist or Presbyterian theology to a climate in which personal experiences and voluntary decisions were valued over doctrines, institutions, and clerical training. This climate was a product of more than just revivalism. Nathan O. Hatch convincingly argues that the crucial series of events behind the popular movements that “Christianized” American society was in fact the Revolution, which “dramatically expanded the circle of people who considered themselves capable of thinking for themselves about issues of

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20 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 58.

freedom, equality, sovereignty, and representation.”\textsuperscript{22} Those who applied the “rhetoric of liberty” to Christianity were not entirely anti-institutional, evidenced by the success of institutions that catered to them, but they modified or discarded existing forms and invented new ones. The quintessential example is the Christian movement, also called the Restoration movement for its goal of restoring the New Testament church or the Stone-Campbell movement after leaders Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell (a former Baptist minister), who joined together in 1832. Hatch explains that the Christians “illustrate the exaltation of public opinion as a primary religious authority. … People were expected to discover the self-evident message of the Bible without any mediation from creeds, theologians, or clergymen not of their own choosing.”\textsuperscript{23} Because most people could easily perceive what the Bible meant, the will of the people reflected the will of God and was therefore authoritative.

Although Restorationists drew many of their primitivist ideas (and members) from Baptists, they pushed them further and in an apocalyptic direction, whereas Baptists placed more hope in the state. The most prominent Baptists in the struggle for religious liberty were Isaac Backus, a convert of the First Great Awakening and a minister in Massachusetts, and John Leland, thirty years younger than Backus and a revival preacher in Massachusetts and Virginia. To illustrate the shift that occurred in this period, Hatch contrasts the Calvinist and pietist Backus, who “was unconvinced that laymen could articulate their own theology” and supported strict church discipline, with the populist and rationalist Leland, who “depicted the typical clergyman as venal and conniving” and


\textsuperscript{23} Hatch, \textit{Democratization of American Christianity}, 81.
“perceived the organized church as corrupted by ‘priest-craft.’” Leland anticipated the Restorationist argument that the New Testament required no mediation, and he was so fearful of potential violations of conscience that he opposed any use of creeds or confessions, the creation of mission societies and seminaries, and even the administration of the Lord’s Supper.

Like Backus and their Baptist ancestors, Leland had theological reasons for protecting the individual and the church from the state, but unlike them, he regarded the individual as a self-reliant bearer of natural rights and the church as a strictly voluntary association, a perspective derived from Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who he lobbied on behalf of religious liberty, and their Enlightenment influences, especially John Locke. Borrowing heavily from Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia, Leland asserted that certain rights were inalienable because “every man must give an account of himself to God,” meaning that “religion is a matter between God and individuals.” In a sermon delivered shortly after Jefferson’s inauguration, he denounced establishment because of the state’s incompetence in the area of “religion,” which overlapped with its interests only insofar as some moral evils, notably slavery, were also political. The state was “a necessary evil, to prevent further evils,” but Leland nevertheless entrusted it with the livelihoods of its citizens, specifically the preservation of life, liberty, and property. “For these valuable purposes, individuals have, in certain cases, to expose their lives in war to defend the state. … Government is, when rightly understood, the most economical means that men make use of, to secure themselves and be happy.” He also reiterated that

24 Hatch, Democratization of American Christianity, 99.

the state could not take away rights such as freedom of conscience, for the defense of which “Baptists have chiefly borne the lash” and grown as a result.26

Such a state seems to be more than a “necessary evil,” and Leland later declared that “nothing is more plain, than that the Almighty has set up the government of the United States in answer to the prayers of all the saints, down from the first proclamation of the gospel … Had such a government existed, from the beginning of the Christian era, what rivers of blood—what shocking havoc—how much imprisonment, confiscation, exile, torture and burning, would have been prevented!”27 The government of the United States is undoubtedly preferable to most under which Christians have lived, and institutional separation of church and state is undoubtedly preferable to establishment or persecution. Yet Leland typified an uncritical endorsement of the state qua the state that, together with an emphasis on the individual rather than the church, proved to be a recipe for captivity, particularly after Jefferson’s election, when, according to William G. McLoughlin, Baptists “entered the mainstream”:

By entering the mainstream the Baptists ceased to be critics of American society; their piety relaxed, and they became the captives of the culture against which they had fought for so long. … they came to believe that because the American social order had accepted their evangelical views, then America must be the equivalent of a Christian society. They concluded that the United States was, in fact, the most Christian society the world had ever known and that the Baptist cause must sink or swim with America. To be a good Baptist one should be a good American, and to be a good American one should be a good Baptist. Which meant, in effect, that the Baptists began to act as though they were the establishment.28


27 “Miscellaneous Essays,” in *Late Elder John Leland*, 410.

Even as Baptists were embracing the republic (and expecting to be embraced in kind), they were being transformed by revivalism and the “liberal individualism” heralded by Leland, whose legacy was as “a twofold persuasion that operated powerfully in the hinterland of Baptist church life: an aversion to central control and a quest for self-reliance.” This persuasion counteracted attempts to build up denominational institutions and made Baptists susceptible to “take-charge entrepreneurs.” According to Hatch, “Leland’s message carried the combined ideological leverage of evangelical urgency and Jeffersonian promise. Using plain language and avoiding doctrinal refinements, he proclaimed a divine economy that was atomistic and competitive rather than wholistic and hierarchical.”29 Regardless of how extreme Leland’s message was or how imprecise the term “liberal individualism” is, the rhetoric of liberty was tremendously influential in the long run. Yet there were other powerful forces at work.

On the basis of a study of ministers’ journals, Christine Leigh Heyrman argues that Baptists and Methodists became predominant in the South by self-consciously shedding their radical and subversive tendencies, including supernaturalism and attention to the most vulnerable in society, and espousing conventional (i.e., white male) views of class, race, the family, war, and so forth. After 1800 these groups sought “to assure wary whites that spiritual intensity would not be their undoing,” and the first step was to segregate worship rather than ban slaveholders.30 It did not take long for the idea that slavery was consistent with evangelical piety to take root, such that Baptists and other Protestants justified their support for it on biblical grounds. Of course, those in the North

29 Hatch, Democratization of American Christianity, 100-101.

justified their opposition on the same grounds, and the privatization of interpretation made it unlikely that either would dispute the general will. Hatch comments that “the study of the religious convictions of self-taught Americans in the early years of the republic reveals how much weight was placed on private judgment and how little on the roles of history, theology, and the collective will of the church.”

Although “history, theology, and the collective will of the church” would not necessarily have made a difference, they might have. As Mark A. Noll says, “The theological crisis of the Civil War was that while voluntary reliance on the Bible had contributed greatly to the creation of American national culture, that same voluntary reliance on Scripture led only to deadlock over what should be done about slavery.” The absence of authority resulted in the deadlock being broken by generals, not theologians, establishing a pattern in which “theological arguments have only rarely been able to overcome the inertia behind institutions and practices sanctioned by the evolving usages of a voluntaristic, democratic consumerist culture.”

The outcome of the war put southern Christians in the difficult position of maintaining the righteousness of the Confederacy while acknowledging God’s will and justice in its defeat. As Charles Reagan Wilson explains, this resulted in the further intertwinement of religion and culture in the “Lost Cause”:

The cultural dream replaced the political dream: the South’s kingdom was to be of culture, not of politics. Religion was at the heart of this dream, and the history of the attitude known as the Lost Cause was the story of the use of the past as the basis for a Southern religious-moral identity, an identity as a chosen people. The Lost Cause was therefore the story of the linking of two profound human forces,

31 Hatch, Democratization of American Christianity, 182.

religion and history. … It was a Southern civil religion, which tied together Christian churches and Southern culture.  

Even if the cohesiveness of the Lost Cause has been exaggerated, it is true that “the self-image of a chosen people leaves little room for self-criticism.” Furthermore, sectionalism weakened the “evangelical consensus” achieved in the early nineteenth century and encouraged “a moral-religious crusade against the atheistic North,” which drew people into churches more for social reasons than for pious ones. Wilson vividly illustrates the point: “The churches’ powerful role in the Civil War, and their expansion and dominance after 1865, suggest that if the Confederacy before dying was baptized in blood, Southern religion was likewise symbolically baptized, born again in a fiery sacrament that gave it new spiritual life.”

To some degree, southern Protestants were bound by cultural norms that were reinforced by an individualistic ethic, but this is not the whole story. Although many were preoccupied with evangelism and personal morality, some acquired a greater concern for the well-being of other individuals and even a millennial hope that spurred them to attempt to reform society. Of course, some actively supported slavery and Jim Crow for theological reasons, and almost all accepted the idea of a Christian society and its embodiment in the South. Having imbibed a new kind of individualism and separated from their northern counterparts, they were unlikely to adopt a contrary stance on any issue on which public opinion was clear, let alone a condition as entrenched as racial inequality. Revivalism and democratization were double-edged: they provided a measure

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of freedom to many who lacked it but few parameters or “causes” apart from those of the state or society at large. This changed somewhat as their denominational structure grew and their region became less isolated, but they simultaneously became less interested in or capable of producing disciplined and confessional congregations.

**Autonomy and Discipline**

The second restrictive force identified by Eighmy was a system of congregations whose independence discouraged working together except in missions. Although several confessions by early Baptists acknowledged the reality of a universal church, those by Baptists in America tended to define the church as exclusively local. The New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833) states that “a visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel.”

Whereas Baptists in the North developed this moderate Calvinist confession in response to the growth of Free Will Baptists, who emphasized individual and congregational independence, Baptists in the South combined a similar emphasis with a proclivity for working together and a traditional Calvinist commitment to initiating converts into covenants and maintaining doctrinal and moral boundaries. By 1845 there were already numerous local associations and state conventions in the South, some of which had begun to publish literature and support educational institutions.

The SBC’s founding delegates exemplified the tension between independence and cooperation. They described the new body as “a general organization for Christian benevolence, which shall fully respect the independence and equal rights of the

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Churches’” but left open the possibility of collaborating on more than missions, which they soon did in the form of a publishing house and seminary.\textsuperscript{36} They also insisted that Baptists in the North and the South “differ in no article of the faith” and “are guided by the same principles of gospel order,” but they echoed the Restorationist motto “no creed but the Bible” in declaring that “we have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion to all creeds but the Bible.”\textsuperscript{37} Being predominantly Calvinist, the delegates did not regard doctrinal agreement as unimportant; rather, they distinguished between creeds and confessions, and virtually all belonged to congregations that had adopted the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742) or the slightly modified Charleston Confession of Faith (1767). They emphasized the church in practice but not in theory and instead simply trusted that those who studied the Bible would arrive at the same basic doctrines. However, the lack of a confessional consensus at the denominational level “constituted an ambiguous area that consumed Southern Baptists’ energies over and over again.”\textsuperscript{38}

A pressing threat to unity came from the Landmark movement, which emerged in the 1850s in response to the spread of Restorationism and the founding of the SBC. Southern Baptist pastor J. R. Graves and his followers claimed that local churches practicing believer’s baptism by immersion had existed in an unbroken succession since the time of Christ, which led them to treat baptism and the Lord’s Supper as valid only when administered by a Baptist congregation, to eschew the cooperation fostered by

\textsuperscript{36} Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845 (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1845), 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845, 17, 19.

\textsuperscript{38} Fletcher, Southern Baptist Convention, 48.
revivalism, and to denounce the creation of boards and agencies. Landmarkism faded by the end of the century, but not before causing several controversies and imprinting an attitude that was behind much of the opposition to denominational involvement in ecumenism and social reform and later a denominational statement of faith. The principle of congregational autonomy also provided an excuse for those who opposed such involvement for other reasons and therefore hampered the efforts of denominational leaders, who could not risk offending the constituents on whose good will and financial contributions the SBC depended.

Eighmy made a fair point about independence, but he neglected congregational practices that mitigated captivity, including church discipline, which he dismissed as being preoccupied with “worldly amusements” such as dancing, drinking, and gambling, although he mentioned that it counteracted individualism by preserving the faith of converts and “civilizing” frontier communities.  

Using the records of Georgia Baptists, Gregory A. Wills demonstrates that democratic polity and egalitarian spirituality did not preclude discipline. Wills, a conservative, is up front about his intention to counter the moderate argument that Baptists always had “an intensely individualistic religion that embraced freedom as a sacred good” and therefore rejected any form of ecclesial authority. Rather, they shared with other evangelicals a “democratic exclusivism” grounded in a vision of a pure church that was separate from the world and began with membership. According to Wills, “Undergoing baptism was a radical step, for it meant crossing the wide chasm from a life of moral autonomy to a life of submission to the

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39 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 47-48.

moral authority of the church, and Baptists made that passage narrow, admitting only those who fulfilled a list of conditions,” including a conversion experience, orthodox beliefs, and a moral life.\footnote{Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 15.}

Southern Baptists exercised authority democratically through the ritual of discipline, which they believed to be a source of revival and which they intended to restore members who had strayed and exclude those who were unregenerate or hypocritical. In a word, “The issue was submission to divine authority mediated by the community of believers.”\footnote{Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 49.} The belief that genuine authority was divine served to equalize members of the community to a significant extent; in the antebellum era, for example, women and slaves were often granted voting privileges in matters of discipline. The combination of a hierarchical view of society and an egalitarian view of the church sometimes resulted in women and blacks being disciplined more severely than men and whites, other times the reverse. Yet Wills notes that women and blacks were just as committed to discipline, and some black churches became more strict after separating from white churches, indicating the presence of a “broad consensus” between them despite disagreement about racial equality.\footnote{Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 82-83.}

Church discipline as practiced by nineteenth-century white Baptists, which typically involved monthly meetings that centered on public confessions of sin and trials that occasionally resulted in excommunication, was certainly not without problems, but it did help distinguish true Christian identity from mere citizenship:

\footnote{Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 15.}

\footnote{Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 49.}

\footnote{Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 82-83.}
Baptists championed the rights of conscience and private judgment in the interpretation of scripture, but people had these rights, they believed, as citizens of the state, not as members of the churches. The state had no right to inflict civil or criminal penalties for religious opinions, but churches had every right to inflict spiritual penalties for erroneous beliefs. The authority to censure members for wrong doctrine was a matter of both freedom and unity. Churches could not fulfill their evangelistic commission unless united in doctrine and morals, but they could establish this unity only if they could exclude anyone who disrupted it by teaching error.\footnote{Wills, Democratic Religion, 87-88.}

A prime example is none other than Leland, who expressed doubts about administering and even receiving the Lord’s Supper in a statement to the Shaftsbury Baptist Association in Cheshire, Massachusetts, by writing that “good church order is scriptural” and adding that “for more than thirty years experiment, I have had no evidence that the bread and wine ever assisted my faith to discern the Lord’s body.”\footnote{“Further Sketches of the Life of John Leland,” in Late Elder John Leland, 59-60.} When he thus exercised his “right of private judgment in the interpretation of scripture,” his association responded by exercising its right to disfellowship him.

Baptist congregations subordinated individual freedom to church order because they were mindful of divine agency, meaning that the Lord’s Supper was not merely a matter of personal feeling or efficacy. Their understanding of unity was not ecumenical or even denominational—it actually justified opposition to ecumenism and sometimes led to schism—but it was such that they “settled disputed points by appeal to ‘the common usage of the churches.’”\footnote{Wills, Democratic Religion, 88.} Although such congregations were technically independent, most practiced “mutual oversight” through associations and, when necessary, “interchurch discipline” to disfellowship others that had departed too far from the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{44} Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 87-88.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{45} “Further Sketches of the Life of John Leland,” in \textit{Late Elder John Leland}, 59-60.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{46} Wills, \textit{Democratic Religion}, 88.}
confessional consensus, meaning that such associations possessed an “effective authority.” Responding to Hatch, Wills contends that Baptists of Leland’s day “were not liberal individualists. They maintained that the right of individual conscience in religion was inalienable and that creeds did not infringe on that right. They balanced the individual’s need to follow conscience with the community’s need to define truth and morality. They did this by establishing voluntary, creedal churches.” They opposed creeds not on principle but only when imposed by a civil government or ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Wills depicts the victory over modernity as temporary, undone not by liberal theology but by the ideals of the New South. The decline of discipline began around the time of the SBC’s founding and accelerated with industrialization and urbanization after the Civil War, a period in which the SBC’s membership increased from approximately 350,000 in 1845 to over 1.2 million in 1875 and surpassed that of Methodism’s southern branch to become the region’s largest shortly thereafter. Together with the difficulty of resisting “worldly amusements” that had become commonplace during the war, upward mobility left Southern Baptists with fewer reasons to separate themselves from the world and more to influence it. Yet they had been doing so throughout the century, and in ways that can be considered modern. In a study of Baptists and Methodists in Virginia, Beth Barton Schweiger describes the conviction of evangelical converts that the gospel “worked up,” not only as a mysterious source of spiritual, moral, and material progress but also by moving people to act, first through pastors and then through the

47 Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 100-101.

denominations they built. These pastors were apprehensive about liberal theology but eagerly adopted modern bureaucratic methods even before the war, such that “they evangelized the nineteenth-century South through organization, printing presses, strategic planning, and settled institutions, rather than through the revival preaching long hailed by historians.”

Expansion was an outgrowth of revivalism as well as sectionalism, which further transformed the alienation felt by those who had welcomed revival. Moreover, southern churches found themselves in a prominent social position. Whereas schools were common in the North, “churches were the schools of the South”: “In worship services and revivals, Sunday schools, sewing circles, deacons’ meetings, and prayer groups, nineteenth-century Southerners learned and practiced the social manners, values, and aspirations that defined the lives of the professional and mercantile classes and those who aspired to them.” Denominations linked urban and rural churches and institutionalized this pattern. There was little denominational activity apart from missions and ministerial education for most of the century, but this changed in the Progressive Era, and the upshot was the subordination of the pursuit of doctrinal and moral purity to that of organizational efficiency and social reform. Although Baptists continued to emphasize evangelism and missions, they no longer did so primarily to “save sinners and establish pure, orthodox churches” but to “establish a pure social order.” Corrective discipline was a casualty


51 Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 133.
and all but vanished by the 1920s, replaced by formative discipline or spiritual training aimed at efficient evangelization. Wills’ conclusion is stark:

In 1850, Southern Baptists understood democracy largely in terms of ecclesiastical authority. In 1950, they understood it largely in terms of individual freedom. The revolution gained momentum from individualist trends in American culture, but it also contributed to new forms of individualism in the churches. … The church-oriented evangelicalism of early nineteenth-century American Protestantism continued the Puritan pursuit of the pure, primitive church. Twentieth-century American evangelicalism preferred pietism’s traditional approach: the promotion of an individual spirituality that was loosely connected to the institutional churches. Evangelicals were no longer convinced that there was a divine mandate to establish pure churches as the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom was within. Individual piety required no mediation of the ecclesiastical institutions. The role of the church had changed.52

Wills passes over the fact that discipline was occasionally abused and rarely if ever used in connection with racism or oppressive labor practices, and he may overstate his case owing to his focus on Georgia, where the impact of Landmarkism was minimal. Nevertheless, he demonstrates that Baptists in the South once treated the Christian life as requiring both individual faith and congregational order. Eighmy and many others have overlooked the limits of individualism and autonomy and therefore misunderstood denominational expansion and collapse. One need not subscribe to Calvinism or the same form of discipline to agree that the community of believers, not just the Bible and personal experience, mediates divine authority, however imperfectly. To be sure, disciplined and confessional congregations alone were inadequate to the task of overcoming racism and other social problems, as Baptists tended to relate theology and ethics to politics and economics only in a general sense. Their leaders looked to the denomination as a means to alter this tendency, but they lost a crucial element of unity and discernment by relinquishing a commitment to such congregations.

52 Wills, Democratic Religion, 139.
Sectionalism and Nationalism

The third restrictive force identified by Eighmy was the pressure of the social environment, but the agenda of Southern Baptists themselves was perhaps equally pivotal. They had achieved religious liberty and experienced revival and therefore affirmed and even shaped social values and conditions, positive and negative, and their interests were increasingly national as well as regional. Although they insisted that the church and the state ought to be institutionally separate, they also believed that the latter was fundamentally Christian (i.e., Protestant) and therefore obligated to extend the former certain privileges. In return, Christians were obligated to vote, support military actions, and so on; for example, despite their belief in freedom of conscience, Southern Baptists refused to financially support their conscientious objectors who were interned in work camps during World War II. They also simultaneously opposed public financing of sectarian institutions (i.e., Catholic schools) and supported public enforcement of their moral standards, notably through the temperance movement. Yet they showed little sympathy for women’s rights, although women did take on roles in the denomination that were often related to social reform, notably through the Woman’s Missionary Union. Not only did they weaken their stance on religious liberty, they developed a contradictory stance on social involvement by claiming that it was outside the church’s mission and would not lead to progress while undertaking it on issues about which evangelicals largely agreed.

Ironically, the Lost Cause ultimately solidified the commitment of Protestants in the South to the nation as a whole even as it led them to distrust “northern” ideas. By favoring laissez-faire capitalism and urban industry and siding with employers over labor,
conservative, “Bourbon” Democrats helped establish the so-called Solid South that was solidified by disfranchisement of blacks and supported every Democratic presidential candidate from 1876 to 1948 with the exception of Al Smith, a Catholic, in 1928. Eighmy asserted that Baptists “expressed attitudes that were more Bourbon than Populist” despite being predominantly rural and working-class. They attributed economic problems to unregenerate individuals rather than the system itself and were more concerned about an influx of Catholic immigrants than about urban living conditions. In 1895 the SBC’s Home Mission Board warned that “the great misfortune of [immigration] is, that these foreigners bring along with them their anarchy, their Romanism, and their want of morals. We must evangelize them, or they will overwhelm us.” Here “evangelize” referred to cultural preservation as well as personal salvation. Baptists were hardly alone in their nativism but took it upon themselves to defend America against Catholics, who officially opposed religious liberty and were seemingly unwilling to integrate into society. The Home Mission Board initially supported evangelism efforts among immigrants, but they were largely unsuccessful, and by 1914 it was denouncing unrestricted immigration as “a threat to the nation’s political and religious institutions.”

Meanwhile the board centralized its program, and “perennial evangelism in every church became the keynote in Southern Baptist life,” which accounted for much of its unity over the next seventy or so years. As Eighmy said, evangelism “ran counter to contemporary trends in Protestantism—liberal theology, ecumenism, and the Social

53 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 43.


55 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 72.
Gospel.” Baptists repeatedly refused to join ecumenical efforts and quickly dealt with liberal incursions. The most well-known episodes involved Crawford Howell Toy, a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who espoused views influenced by Darwinism and higher criticism and was forced to resign in 1879 (and later became a Unitarian), and William Heth Whitsitt, the seminary’s third president, who used critical methods to show that Baptists had not always baptized by immersion, sparking an outcry from Landmarkists that led to his resignation in 1899. Whitsitt’s views came to be accepted while Toy’s did not, but a precedent had been set:

Defending Biblical orthodoxy against the new theology and its frequent companions, ecumenism and the Social Gospel, gave them a new raison d’être at a time when landmarkism had lost its standing as a creditable and practical position. Now, more clearly than ever, Southern Baptists could explain their existence in comprehensive theological terms. They came to think of themselves as possessing at least three distinctive traits: loyalty to Biblical authority, separation from compromising ecumenism, and reliance on personal experience for conversion. In the securing of these beliefs, they found the necessary authority to launch an aggressive program of expansion.  

Eighmy identified E. Y. Mullins, Whitsitt’s successor and the subject of chapter two, as the main architect of this modified Baptist identity.

Eighmy and his generation of historians established that although Southern Baptists rejected the Social Gospel proper along with liberal theology and ecumenism, they sympathized with a number of Populist and Progressive causes. Scholars such as Keith Harper have since shown that they were substantially more involved in these and other causes; as the century drew to close, and under the influence of social Christianity, Baptists turned their rhetoric about individual conversion leading to social change into

56 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 73-74.

57 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 75-76.
reality by building up institutions such as hospitals and orphanages in order to both evangelize and meet physical needs. In the first half of the next century, they also established a number of social service and public policy agencies at the state and denominational levels. The impulse to pursue social reform and to do so for theological reasons was clearly neither negligible nor the sole province of progressives, who were themselves captive to culture. According to Harvey, “Cultural intolerance, naïve optimism of the harmony of interests between classes, and reliance on moral persuasion to address significant social problems characterized the southern Baptist progressives as well. Religious and secular progressives were culturally captive to visions of an efficient and cooperative society dominated by a Protestant morality.”

Such captivity was evident at Southern Seminary, particularly after the arrival of sociologist Charles S. Gardner in 1907, the year that saw the publication of Rauschenbusch’s landmark book *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. Rauschenbusch was no secularist, and he argued that the Social Gospel was “not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven” and opined that the future of Western civilization “will depend almost wholly on the moral forces which the Christian nations can bring to the fighting line against wrong, and the fighting energy of those moral forces will again depend on the degree to which they are inspired by religious faith and enthusiasm.” He later described the movement’s goal


59 Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 206.

as “a moral regeneration of social institutions, a christianizing of public morality.”  

Similarly, Gardner hoped to undertake “the proper correlation of Christianity and social science in their common task of guiding society toward the goal of universal righteousness.”  

Echoing Rauschenbusch, he asked, “Did Jesus think of the Kingdom as a subjective state of the soul or as an objective social order? The answer must be, both.”  

The kingdom of God originated with the regeneration of individuals but would come to fruition when the principles of Jesus were translated by social science into public policy that enabled the state to eliminate corruption, economic disparity, and other causes of poverty and crime.

Social Gospel leaders tended to be dedicated to congregations, but they also tended to treat politics as the primary means of reform and “social institutions” and “public morality” as the primary measures of faithfulness and consequently to minimize the role of the church. Gardner referred to the church as “only an instrument for the realization of the Kingdom” and “related to the Kingdom solely as a means to an end” and claimed that it would no longer be necessary once the secular order were reconstituted.  

The temptation was then to alter doctrines that interfered with this agenda and could be blamed on the church. Rauschenbusch regarded the church’s historical failures as proof of a false ecclesiology, and he began what turned out to be his final book by declaring that “we have a Social Gospel. We need a systematic theology large enough

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64 Gardner, *Ethics of Jesus and Social Progress*, 78-79.
to match it and vital enough to back it.” He went on to describe ways in which the doctrines of sin, salvation, baptism, eschatology, and so on needed to be “expanded and adjusted.”

Gardner did not go that far, and Eighmy criticized him only for not deemphasizing evangelism or dealing with “the problems posed by making the regenerate society dependent upon regenerate men” and praised him for making the Social Gospel relatable and demonstrating that “one could adopt liberal social thought without accepting liberal theology.” J. B. Weatherspoon, who replaced Gardner in 1929 and later presented the resolution endorsing the Brown decision, “shifted the basic approach of the department from sociology to ethics, but the liberal point of view remained the same.”

The trajectory outlined above and the disillusionment that followed the First World War justified the verdict that the Social Gospel was theologically thin and socially naïve, as in H. Richard Niebuhr’s summation that “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Niebuhr recognized that the movement had evangelical roots and did not intend to impugn its motivations. At any rate, in the case of Gardner and Southern Baptists, the problem was not so much liberal theology as a reductive ecclesiology and a consequent susceptibility to individualism. For some individualism meant avoiding social involvement, but for others it meant downplaying theological agreement and effectively handing over responsibility for discerning moral means and ends to the state.

66 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 90-91, 131.
It is telling that “for Gardner, as for many other Baptist churchmen, Woodrow Wilson appeared as an ideal symbol of the fruitful intersection of Christian ideas and the powers of the state.”  

Wilson was a leader in the Progressive movement, but he was also the son of a southern Presbyterian minister. His election suggested to many southerners that God had called one of their own, and when he brought the nation into World War I to “make the world safe for democracy,” they believed he was defending their virtues against anti-democratic and anti-Christian forces. Charles Reagan Wilson states that

The World War I era thus had a profound impact on the Lost Cause, transforming its tragic meaning, which had emphasized suffering, failure, and defeat, into a more typically American success story. From one perspective, the ministers of the Lost Cause had played a prophetic function, insuring that the United States would continue to stand for traditional American values. From a more profound viewpoint, though, the Lost Cause had failed in its prophetic aspect. Rather than standing in judgment of the American civil religion from the perspective of defeated, chastened holy warriors, the Lost Cause civil religion had linked itself with the national faith.

Despite the devastation of the war, Baptists remained triumphalist, not least because their membership tripled to 3.6 million between 1875 and 1925, and began to speak of not only evangelizing the world but also saving it from modernism and secularism. In 1919 the Home Mission Board declared that “America is in fact God’s new Israel for the races of men. It is a land divinely chosen, peopled with a race divinely chosen, preserved with providential purpose, prospered now with world power, and pledged to a divine mission. A Christianized world waits on a Christianized America. The South is America’s best hope.”

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68 Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, 209.
70 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1919* (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce, 1919), 79.
The idea of a Christian society had been pervasive in the West since long before Southern Baptists appeared. Yet their comfort and growth in the United States led them to place their hope in the government, the market, and the idea of progress in a new way, even if they, like their fellow Americans, disagreed more and more about what progress entailed. The conflation of theological hope with social and political hope came at an inopportune moment. Robert T. Handy memorably characterized the ethos of the century from 1830 to 1930 as “the Protestant quest for a Christian America.”71 The tail end of that century was marked by irony, however, for even as Protestant leaders sought to unify church and society using modern methods, both were fracturing as a result of the encounter with modernity. Baptists were no exception, but their regional and denominational identity delayed the process.

The Construction of the Subculture

An emphasis on evangelism held Southern Baptists together during the early twentieth century and provided them with opportunities for social involvement, but they were not unaffected by the growing discord in Protestant America. Victor I. Masters exemplifies the crosscurrents in the convention. While head of publicity for the Home Mission Board from 1909 to 1921, he insisted that Christianity prioritized the personal and spiritual but was nevertheless related to the social and political. He also insisted that the South had not allowed the “Anglo-Saxon evangelical faith” renewed by revivalism to be diluted by liberalism and Catholic immigration. “Chastened and refined by suffering” but newly wealthy from industrialization, southerners were faced with a temptation and a

responsibility: “If we really had all the greatness of soul we believe we had, we would be able to show it by using our wealth for service, instead of spending it for power and pleasure.”72 Baptists were uniquely positioned to influence the world, for “as goes America, so goes the world. Largely as goes the South, so goes America. And in the South is the Baptist center of gravity of the world.”73 After becoming editor of the Kentucky Baptist newspaper in 1922, however, Masters denounced anything associated with modernism, including Darwinism and the Social Gospel, and led the opposition to the proposed Social Research Bureau that would have replaced the part-time Social Service Commission.

Harvey contrasts the bleak vision of Masters with the promising one of Mullins, who “best expressed the progressives’ ideal of the gradual diffusion of a democratic Christianity.”74 Mullins restated Baptist theology in light of modern philosophy and science and linked a belief in what he termed “soul competency” (referenced by the Statement of Principles) to one in progress, and he was responsible for bringing Gardner and several like-minded faculty to Southern Seminary. Above all, however, he was a statesman, and when fundamentalists began to threaten denominational unity, he chaired the committee that drafted the Baptist Faith and Message to allay concerns about the convention’s view of Scripture.75 The statement’s adoption counteracted lingering Landmarkism, while its content counteracted fundamentalism. Eighmy asserted that “of


74 Harvey, Redeeming the South, 225.

75 Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925 (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce, 1925), 70-76.
the ten new articles, only the one about the Second Coming could be credited to fundamentalism influence. On the other hand, at least three articles, those on world peace, social service, and the kingdom of God, could be traced directly to liberal Christianity and the Social Gospel.”

Whether or not this assertion is true, racial inequality was not yet on the agenda. Given that Southern Baptists were quite involved in other social issues, however, this issue was something of an anomaly, primarily because it was so regional. Even taking into account the criticism that white Baptists played a role in creating and sustaining inequality, there was undeniably a change in their stance; they did not support segregation with the fervency with which they had supported slavery, such that segregationists often criticized them for being apolitical. Of course, few actively opposed segregation, either; rather, black Baptists did, and using the kind of explicitly theological language that had been characteristic of both sides during the Civil War. Moreover, according to Flynt, “There was no exact correlation between fundamentalist theology and resistance to integration.” Neither was there a renewal of the Lost Cause; whereas conservatives remained opposed to liberal theology and many progressive causes, they quickly rejected racial inequality after it was exposed as unchristian.

Denominational expansion created a level of bureaucracy that, coupled with congregational polity, frustrated leaders who wanted Southern Baptists to collectively engage in social reform. Yet it also helped build up a subculture that not only widened the influence of such leaders but also enhanced Christian education and social

76 Eighmy, Churches in Cultural Captivity, 129-30.

involvement among Southern Baptists in general, thereby fostering an identity that was not merely local or regional and somewhat more resistant to captivity. Although there were a number of factors in the slow advance of support for racial equality, it is reasonable to conclude that the subculture was a major one, perhaps the main one. A belief in the God-given value of individuals like that expressed by the Statement of Principles is essential and can lead to social action, but the fact that it did not do so for more white Baptists on behalf of their black neighbors, most of whom were fellow Baptists, is one indication that such a belief is not enough to overcome captivity. In other words, the theological logic of their doctrine of the individual required something in addition to a Bible and a competent soul to be followed, let alone followed properly with respect to complex issues.

Eighmy inhabited the subculture at its apex and unsurprisingly thought that strong leaders and institutions were required, but he and many other Southern Baptists no longer recognized the importance of a theological consensus or even that of the church beyond serving as a means to certain ends. Although they may have questioned whether democracy was the best form of polity to accomplish those ends, they did not consider whether the denomination was ecclesiologically significant in that it, like the congregation, mediated divine authority. Unfortunately, by the time the subculture began to disintegrate, disciplined and confessional congregations were long gone, leaving only captivity to the corrosive combination of individualism and nationalism inherent in American culture. This does not mean that Baptists—conservative, moderate, or otherwise—have ceased to be socially involved, but it does mean that they lack the capacity to be involved as the church rather than merely a range of self-selected or
partisan interest groups or to discern whether what society regards as progress is in fact *true* progress. As a theologian Mullins had attempted to explicate the above logic, and as a statesman he had attempted to establish consensus at the denominational level in order to pursue progress. Yet he took far too much for granted and thus typifies the promise and peril of Baptist theology in the United States, which is why he is the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER II
THE MYTH OF SOUL COMPETENCY

This chapter assesses the historical impact and contemporary suitability of the theology of E. Y. Mullins, the most prominent Southern Baptist of the early twentieth century. After introducing Mullins and the debate about his legacy, it evaluates his method and shows how he restated Baptist theology in light of modern philosophy and science with an eye to ensuring the continued growth and progress of the Southern Baptist Convention and indeed the standing of Christianity in the modern world. Using his major books and critical sources, it argues that although his method has been misunderstood in some respects, he erred by grounding faith in a modern notion of personal experience and thereby deemphasizing the historical and communal consensus of the Baptist tradition. It also argues that by not accounting for the mediation of southern culture and the Southern Baptist subculture even as he undergirded the latter, he reflected and perpetuated an attenuated theology that was susceptible to American individualism and a fragile unity that was more cultural than ecclesial.

The Enigma of Baptist Belief

Timothy George maintains that despite the diversity of the Baptist tradition in America, where the frontier “offered limitless opportunities for escaping the past,” and the adversity it faced from the surrounding culture, “an orthodox Baptist consensus,
represented in the North by Augustus Hopkins Strong, in the South by E. Y. Mullins,” emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.\(^1\) It did not last, however, and “the history of the Baptist movement in the twentieth century could be largely written as the story of the erosion of that theological consensus that obtained in most places until the Fundamentalist-Modernist disputes,” which peaked in the mid 1920s. This erosion was due not so much to cultural changes as to an inadequate two-part response to them. The first part was an appeal to Baptist “distinctives,” typically in the form of “a litany of negative constraints” (e.g., non-creedal confessions, non-sacramental ordinances) instead of “the positive exposition of an essential doctrinal core.” The second part was the privatization of theology:

Historically Baptist life was shaped by strong communitarian features. The congregation was not merely an aggregate of like-minded individuals, but rather a body of baptized believers gathered in solemn covenant with one another and the Lord. Nor were Baptists doctrinal anarchists who boasted of their “right” to believe in anything they wanted to. Instead of flaunting their Christian freedom in this way, Baptists used it to produce and publish confessions of faith both as a means of declaring their own faith to the world and of guarding the theological integrity of their own fellowship. Nor did Baptists want their young children “to think for themselves,” as the liberal cliché has it, but instead to be thoroughly grounded in the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. Thus they developed Baptist catechisms and used them in both home and church to instruct their children in the rudiments of Christian theology.

The privatization of theology dovetailed with the rise of “modern rugged individualism” in American life, leading to some Baptists trading their communitarianism for liberalism, others for “anti-intellectual pietism and emotion-laden revivalism.”\(^2\)

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\(^2\) George, “Future of Baptist Theology,” 4-5.
George clearly has in mind the recent controversy that split the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and believes that the victorious conservatives have secured their theology between the above extremes, although they have work left to do. To this end, he outlines five identity markers—orthodox convictions, evangelical heritage, Reformed perspective, Baptist distinctives, and confessional context—that entail not “escaping the past” but maintaining continuity with it while “passing on the faith intact to the rising generation.” George’s Calvinist slant and acceptance of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, an area of contention during the controversy, are open to criticism, but he makes three points that hold up regardless: first, Baptists in America have inherited much of their theology from the Baptist and Christian traditions, despite their insistence that they have derived it directly from the Bible and personal experience; second, they have guarded and passed on this inheritance; and third, they have lost much of their capacity to do so owing to individualism of various kinds.

George implies that Mullins not only represented the theological consensus but also contributed to its erosion. The former is certainly true. Edgar Young Mullins was born in Mississippi in 1860 to a slave-owning, second-generation Baptist pastor who moved the family to Texas in 1869. Intellectually curious but religiously indifferent, he chose the new Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas over Baptist flagship Baylor College. He intended to go on to law school but was converted at a revival in Dallas and subsequently baptized by his father, and he enrolled at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1881. Prevented from becoming a missionary by a lack of funding, Mullins pastored congregations in three states and briefly worked for the SBC’s

Foreign Mission Board before returning to the seminary in 1899 as professor of theology and president. There he succeeded William Heth Whitsitt, who had been forced to resign for challenging the popular Landmarkist belief in an unbroken succession of churches practicing believer’s baptism but had also sympathized with the views of previously ousted professor Crawford Howell Toy and defiantly defended academic freedom.

Although Mullins had publicly supported Whitsitt, he pursued denominational unity throughout the Progressive Era, when southern culture was in transition and Baptists were under pressure to choose sides. His vision proved successful for a generation or two, but his legacy became contested during the controversy, with moderates increasingly treating him as a totem and conservatives increasingly criticizing him. Many scholars have agreed that he failed but disagreed about whether his failure was theological or strategic. Moderate historian William E. Ellis states that Mullins “tried to intellectualize evangelicalism as it came into contact with the newest and most revolutionary ideas” but nevertheless “failed to develop a moderate evangelical synthesis that would mollify both fundamentalists and modernists.” In contrast, conservative historian Gregory A. Wills states that Mullins “succeeded where Whitsitt had failed because he was able to cultivate brotherly feeling toward Whitsitt’s enemies and win the trust of rank-and-file Southern Baptists” but nevertheless “led Southern Baptists away from traditional orthodoxy in significant ways.” Although there is truth in each of these interpretations, they may say more about the interpreters and the controversy than they do


about the subject. As James Leo Garrett, Jr., notes, by the twenty-first century he had become so “controversially important” to both parties that “one could identify as a defining question ‘What do you think of E. Y. Mullins?’”6

The controversy has had a reductive effect on interpretations of Mullins, not to mention Southern Baptists in general, but it is responsible for the creation of most of those interpretations. Even at its tail end, scholarly interest had been so slight that literary critic Harold Bloom could reasonably call Mullins “the most neglected of major American theologians.” Bloom goes so far as to characterize him as “the Calvin or Luther or Wesley of the Southern Baptists” for being “their re-founder, the definer of their creedless faith,” a faith that, along with Mormonism, exemplifies the triumphant “American Religion.”7 Baptists flourished after the Second Great Awakening popularized their experiential faith and especially after the Civil War disabused them of politics, and Mullins provided this faith with an intellectual basis, namely, the doctrine of soul competency, which Bloom regards as making traditional doctrines unnecessary and revealing a latent Gnosticism:

Even Mullins tended to define soul competency by negation, usually comparing it to its opposite in the Roman Catholic hierarchy of authority in spiritual matters. If soul competency is simply a description of an absolutely unmediated and intimate relationship with Jesus, then what precisely is the function of reading and


7 Harold Bloom, The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 199. He borrows the concept from Sydney E. Ahlstrom, who identified Ralph Waldo Emerson as “the theologian of something we may almost call ‘the American religion.’” A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 605. Bloom does not define the “American Religion” but does identify its two main characteristics: “The American finds God in herself or himself, but only after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude. Freedom, in a very special sense, is the preparation without which God will not allow himself to be revealed in the self. And this freedom is itself double; the spark or spirit must know itself to be free both of other selves and of the created world.” Its fundamental premise is what Emerson called “self-reliance.” American Religion, 32, 43.
interpreting Scripture? … If you reject the Catholic idea that the Church is the mystical body of Christ, then why cannot you be free of congregation, preacher, and text, and so be wholly alone with Jesus, walking and talking, spirit with spirit, spirit to spirit? If your soul is ultimately competent, then the nakedness of the soul should suffice.

Mullins powerfully insisted that Baptists are not dualists, in the precise sense that those who baptize infants necessarily declare themselves to be. But how can you have a religion of experience, that is not sacramental, without a dualism, or division between knower and known, whether Jesus is known in direct encounter or through Scripture? … If you are saved once and for all, experientially, what will keep you from becoming an antinomian, beyond good and evil? All of these queries fuse into one: How does the Southern Baptist maintain the boundary between herself and Jesus, so that she does not become him, with rather unfortunate societal and psychical consequences?

Granting that Bloom oversimplifies the issues, he asks thought-provoking questions. Does soul competency imply an “absolutely unmediated” relationship with God that renders all external forms of authority unnecessary, even if Mullins and his followers did not realize it? Bloom remarks that “to institutionalize a piety as personal and spiritual as Mullins advocated is scarcely possible and returns one to the full enigma of Southern Baptist belief,” that is, simultaneously professing the sufficiency of an inward relationship and a need for something outward. As he sees it, Southern Baptists did not follow through with the pragmatism implicit in soul competency and drop their doctrinal and ecclesial pretenses, resulting in a combination of unthinking pietism and a diffuse denominational structure that was vulnerable to fundamentalism. However, what if soul competency is in fact untenable?

Analyses of the American religious landscape indicate that more and more people believe that “the nakedness of the soul” does suffice, a belief that is eroding their loyalty to the very sorts of institutions to which Mullins dedicated his life. For all that has been

8 Bloom, American Religion, 207-8.
9 Bloom, American Religion, 214.
said about him, it is difficult to determine whether he transformed Southern Baptist theology or merely epitomizes its transformation, but it is impossible to deny that he contributed to a pervasive individualistic theology alongside a massive denominational subculture. Yet the former left his people unprepared for the dissolution of the latter. This chapter does not examine every aspect of Mullins’ theology or blame him for excessive individualism. Rather, it treats him as a representative figure and argues that he signifies a contradiction between Baptist theology and Baptist practice and a shift from a conception of freedom grounded in biblical and ecclesial authority to one grounded in individual certainty. Both partly explain why the moderates who embraced his legacy have failed to develop a functional ecclesiology as their formal connections have broken down, and revisiting Mullins is a way of responding to this failure.

Although Mullins wrote twelve books and numerous articles, scholars have rightly marked out *The Axioms of Religion* (1908), which “has probably done more than any other single volume to define Baptists in the twentieth century.” Yet it is also an anomaly in that his other major books all but ignore Baptists, a reflection of his desire to make common cause with other evangelical Protestants. While pastoring a working-class congregation in Baltimore, he had opposed child labor, supported strikes, and “made every effort to reshape his form of Southern Baptist evangelical Christianity to meet the exigencies of the modern world.” This experience and his relationships with Northern Baptists led to him being one of the few Southern Baptists to respond directly to the Social Gospel movement. Although he continued to insist that social involvement

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followed from evangelical theology, however, he became preoccupied with the perils and possibilities of modern thought. William Carrell states that an array of modern sources helped Mullins “form a multi-front apology to refute the reductionist philosophy and science characteristic of his day.” Furthermore, the same sources helped him “shift the location of Baptist identity from the practice of baptism by immersion to the belief in the competency of the soul in religion,” partly in response to the Whitsitt controversy. Carrell also claims that Mullins used them only for apologetic purposes and did not incorporate them into “the core of his theology.”¹² This claim is highly debatable.

The core of Mullins’ theology is an orthodox doctrine of Jesus Christ, but an emphasis on Christian experience obscures some of its other qualities. This emphasis is mostly implicit in *The Axioms of Religion*, which is subtitled *A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* and was new in that it not only codified Baptist traits in a short list of principles but also grounded them in a single principle and contended for their superiority “in a much friendlier and less pejorative way than the Landmarkists did.”¹³ The book originated as a series of addresses to Baptist groups, including the inaugural meeting of what became the Baptist World Alliance, which Mullins persuaded the SBC to join; he also unsuccessfully attempted to persuade it to join the new Federal Council of Churches. However, he had no interest in compromise for the sake of the organic union sought by the ecumenical movement because it would short-circuit the achievement of unity by Baptist means. In the preface he boldly asserts that “God has given to the Baptists of the


world a great and sublime task in the promulgation of principles on the preservation of which the spiritual and political hopes of the world depend,” and this has led to “a marvelous growth in influence, in numbers, in wealth, and all other forms of power” even as they have remained “a remarkably homogenous people.”

Mullins acknowledges that since the Reformation “the right of private judgment and freedom from ecclesiastical superiors … has led to great variety in the interpretation of the New Testament” and thus to denominationalism. Yet he claims that unnamed biblical scholars have reached a consensus about church polity, and rather than considering the imperative of unity exemplified by Christ’s prayer in John 17, he concentrates on the “practical test” facing denominationalism, that is, the problems posed by certain social conditions and movements. This test ought to lead not to rejecting New Testament teachings but to supplementing and corroborating them, because “the progress of events and the conditions of Christian work are the best interpreters of Scripture.”

Regarding the problem of “doctrinal adjustment,” Mullins chides “ultra-conservatives” and “ultra-progressives” and opines that the really safe leaders of thought, however, are between these extremes. They are men who have sympathy on the one hand with those who are perplexed by the difficulties to faith occasioned by modern science and philosophy, and on the other are resolved to be loyal to Christ and his gospel. Out of this situation arise two urgent questions. The first is this: What is the regulative principle of doctrinal

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15 Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 12-13. Mullins later elaborates, still without citing any scholars: “Hitherto in our Baptist literature there has been exhibited a vast amount of minute and careful exegesis of the New Testament passages which support our claims as to the form and meaning of baptism, the nature and significance of the Lord’s Supper, and the constitution and order of the church, and related subjects. The exegetical basis for our plea has been wrought with such success, indeed, that we may assert with the utmost confidence that the scholarship of the world, taken as a whole, stands with us in our conclusions.” *Axioms of Religion*, 70.
growth and progress? The second is: What are the limits of doctrinal divergence within the pale of denominational life?¹⁶

This statement conveys his basic stance and his intention to describe such a “regulative principle,” but he never properly answers the second question.

Mullins argues that denominations must move beyond controversy in the interest of being “useful” and avoiding “dissolution” in the face of growing anti-institutionalism and anti-ecclesiasticism. “The man who is unattached to any religious organization, or equally attached to all, may of course exert some local influence for good combined with a very bad example of a false individualism. But he will lose all that splendid opportunity for service which comes of a life reinforced by thousands of others united and organized and aggressive in the pursuit of common ends.”¹⁷ In other words, Christianity must be institutional but entirely for practical reasons. Over against Landmarkism and certain strains of liberal Protestantism, Mullins urges cooperation and asks, “Out of our doctrine of independence, how shall we realize, in any adequate manner, the complementary principle of interdependence? Baptists must face this problem with renewed interest in order to avoid serious waste and great loss of power. We must work out patiently our problem of democracy and unity.” He is adamant that episcopacy is antithetical to Baptist theology and that denominations are not the church but “simply means of co-operation on entirely voluntary basis.”¹⁸

Mullins’ primary aim is to illuminate “the historical significance of the Baptists” through a new principle that sums up their contribution to Protestant Christianity and

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indeed Western Civilization: “the doctrine of the competency of the soul in religion,” which is “not a Baptist creed” because Baptists generally agree with other evangelicals about theology.\(^{19}\) On the one hand, this doctrine excludes “all human interference, such as episcopacy and infant baptism, and every form of religion by proxy” because “religion is a personal matter between the soul and god.” On the other hand, it includes the Reformation principle of justification by faith and Baptist principles such as “soul freedom” (i.e., freedom of conscience), separation of church and state, and believer’s baptism. Moreover, it “goes further than individualism in that it embraces capacity for action in social relations” and therefore implies democratic polity and the priesthood of all believers, the two sides of the religious life.\(^{20}\) After describing soul competency as the summary of modern progress in art, science, philosophy, and politics, Mullins asserts that “America is the arena which God has supplied for the free and full play of the principle, and from here it is destined to spread until it covers the earth.”\(^{21}\)

The bulk of the book explicates six axioms that grow out of the doctrine of soul competency and are in harmony with both the ideals of the kingdom of God and the doctrines of “universal Christianity,” such that evangelicals and some others will accept them as “self-evident.”\(^{22}\) The following sections use these axioms as a framework to review Mullins’ theology as a whole, but it is worth mentioning that does not refer to soul competency as such in his other books, perhaps not only because it is distinctively Baptist but also because it is somewhat vague. In one sense, it echoes other principles: “The free

\(^{19}\) Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 53.


\(^{21}\) Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 68.

\(^{22}\) Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 77-78.
fellowship of man with God, implied in the doctrine of the competency of the soul in
religion, and in the religious axiom the right of men to direct access to God, is the
ultimate basis of [all forms of] freedom.” In another sense, however, it implies that true
freedom is not just freedom from but freedom for: “Freedom alone is not the end but the
means. Self-realization through Christ is the end. Until freedom is thus directed toward
its end it remains negative in meaning, it simply points toward the broken fetters, from
which it has escaped.”23 Soul competency involves additional ends insofar as it “goes
further than individualism,” and Mullins believes that it encompasses the communal
elements of the Baptist identity.

The Centrality and Certainty of Experience

Mullins begins with the theological axiom that “the holy and loving God has a
right to be sovereign,” a discussion of divine attributes and the relationship between
divine election and human freedom that illustrates his moderate Calvinism. He then turns
to the religious axiom, which reiterates that “primarily the religious relation is a relation
between God and the individual man,” meaning that “it is a species of spiritual tyranny to
interpose the church itself, its ordinances, or ceremonies, or its formal creeds, between
the human soul and Christ.” In addition to salvation, “direct access” involves biblical
interpretation and thus theology and ethics in that it “guarantees the right of examining
God’s revelation each man for himself, and of answering directly to God in belief and
conduct.”24 Although individuals necessarily have social relations, their knowledge is
independent of these relations. Citing Christ’s promises to Peter (Matt. 16:17, 19),


Mullins says that “experimental knowledge of the truth as revealed to the heart of the individual directly by the Father is the only possible key to the kingdom of God.” Likewise, citing the declaration that the law is written on the heart (Heb. 8:10-11), he says that “personal knowledge, derived from God himself, and not even from the brethren is the characteristic mark of the members of the kingdom.”

Mullins’ pivotal claim is that direct access to God yields intellectual certainty, a claim based on the view of experience explained in other books such as Why Is Christianity True? (1905), which restates the grounds of Christianity “by means of the principles of investigation employed by the opposition,” particularly inductive logic, in order to demonstrate that knowledge is not restricted to reason or physical science. René Descartes’ principle that only indubitable propositions merit unqualified assent sets the parameters of inquiry, albeit with the qualification that even the first principles of science require faith and thus “are not one whit more certain or sure than the ultimate beliefs of religion.” Descartes’ proposition “I think, therefore I am” also establishes that thought is known with greater certainty than the external world, so religion deals with facts that “are attended with the highest degree of certainty.” In a word, “there is no conflict of interest or method”; religion and science simply investigate different spheres.

Mullins elaborates in The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression (1917), which is nearly as important as The Axioms of Religion owing to its having been required


in systematic theology courses at Southern Seminary for three decades.\textsuperscript{28} He credits Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl as well as biblical criticism for moving away from a method “derived from a past age” and toward the recognition that religion “is a form of knowledge” and “is capable of clear and scientific exposition.” Yet theology is “more than deductions from objective facts.”\textsuperscript{29} Although Mullins values the usual methods for dealing with doctrines, he develops one that gives prominence to experience. This method has heretofore been implicit and does not make experience “the sole criterion of truth”; after all, “The Bible is the greatest of all books of religious experience. The theology of its great writers is all, in a sense, the expression of their experience under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit.” Nor does it mean that doctrines did not develop historically or cannot be arranged systematically. However, it does mean that religion precedes theology: “Religion has to do with facts about God and man, and the relations between God and man. Doctrines are simply the expression of the meaning of these facts and relations.”\textsuperscript{30}

Theology must take four factors into account. God, particularly the historical revelation of God in Christ, is the object of Christian knowledge. The Bible, particularly the New Testament, is the authoritative source of the revelation as well as the definitive experience of its eyewitnesses. Experience is the means by which knowledge is acquired, and the work of the Spirit is the means by which Christ is revealed. Thus the experiential method bears on the nature of biblical authority. To the objection that the Bible is not

\textsuperscript{28} Wills, \textit{Southern Baptist Theological Seminary}, 247, 251.


\textsuperscript{30} Mullins, \textit{Christian Religion}, 3-4, 243.
infallible because it contains textual, historical, or scientific errors, Mullins responds that its authority is a matter of faith and that it “is not … an authority on all subjects, but in religion it is final and authoritative.” He later clarifies that “the Bible is not a book of science nor of philosophy. It is a book of religion. It only asks that science and philosophy recognize the facts of man’s religious life for which it stands.”

To the consequent objection that no external authority, “whether pope or church or Bible,” can be accepted because truth cannot be imposed, he responds that the essence of Christianity is “inwardly assimilated truth.” To the consequent objection that truth is merely inward, he responds that “it is in the union and combination of the objective source and the subjective experience that certainty and assurance are found.”

The church, Christian history, and the Bible all confirm this knowledge:

If, therefore, in the exercise of repentance and faith a face answers my face, a heart responds to my heart, and I am acted on from without in personal ways, I have, for me at least, irrefutable evidence of the objective existence of the Person so moving me. When to this personal experience I add that of tens of thousands of living Christians, and an unbroken line of them back to Christ, and when I find in the New Testament a manifold record of like experiences, together with a clear account of the origin and cause of them all, my certainty becomes absolute.

Scholars have noted a number of liberal Protestant influences on Mullins’ theology, including the German “mediating theology” embraced by many American Reformed theologians, notably Horace Bushnell; the apologetic use of experiential “evidence” by Lewis French Stearns, who traced the idea of Christian experience to John Calvin; and the experiential method of William Newton Clarke, who preceded Mullins in

31 Mullins, Christian Religion, 10, 150.
33 Mullins, Why Is Christianity True, 285.
a pastorate outside Boston and drew heavily on Schleiermacher. Mullins cites each of these thinkers and discusses Schleiermacher, Ritschl, William James, and Borden Parker Bowne far more than fellow Baptists such as Strong, John Leadley Dagg, and James Petigru Boyce, the first president of Southern Seminary. Understandably, then, much of the debate about his theology concerns the extent to which it was shaped by liberal Protestantism and the movement to which it was a response, that is, the Enlightenment, which Immanuel Kant famously defined as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,” that is, “the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”

Mullins is a child of the Enlightenment in this sense; in *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (1913) he remarks that “the moral autonomy of the individual as emphasized in the philosophy of Kant has been a potent influence in the development of the modern ideal of freedom,” although he later rejects Kant’s limitation of knowledge to phenomena. He also praises Schleiermacher for being “the first modern writer to give coherent expression to the Christian consciousness as the seat of authority in religion” but criticizes him for being pantheistic and “making religion consist in feeling alone,” and he likewise praises Ritschl for relating faith to value judgments but criticizes him for assuming that true knowledge is derived from physical science alone.

Mullins is less critical of James’ pragmatism, which treats experience scientifically and holds that the human will is “a factor in all knowledge,” including religion. However, he does say that

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submission of the human will to God’s will is [also] of the essence in religion. Thus pragmatism cannot consistently become a philosophy at all without the experiential knowledge of religion. If we cannot know, save as the will enters into experience, then to know the ultimate meaning of the world we must test that meaning by a voluntary act by relating our wills to the universe. It is this test when honestly made which produces the impregnable conviction of the truth of religion in men’s hearts. Within that world of Christian experience man meets a personal God through Christ. A distinct and definite type of experience and of knowledge arises. Through this interaction of God and man in religious fellowship the Scriptures come into being.37

Similarly, he states that James’ view of religious experience “goes with the Christian all the way in recognizing the presence of a supernatural transforming power in Christian experience … But beyond this he will not go.”38 This is because the normative type of experience is conversion, which overcomes the problem of empiricism by uniting the subjective experience to its objective meaning. The resulting type of knowledge is inaccessible to science because it is personal, which is why Mullins guardedly affirms Bowne’s personalism.39

Mullins certainly tried to distinguish his method from that of liberal Protestants, but he also distinguished it from the appeal to biblical inerrancy in response to Darwinism and higher criticism by evangelical Protestants, many of whom were influenced by Scottish Common Sense Realism. Briefly, Common Sense philosophy involved the belief that ordinary people had the innate capacity to grasp foundational principles and acquire knowledge through the senses, and although it took several forms, the idea that the Bible should be interpreted in the plainest sense was central to the so-

37 Mullins, Freedom and Authority in Religion, 153-54; William James, Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907).


called Princeton Theology, the Presbyterianism of Princeton Theological Seminary, where Boyce had studied. During the controversy, conservatives came to believe that Mullins had helped lead the SBC away from inerrancy, which for some entailed the Calvinism of its early leaders. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., the current president of Southern Seminary, argues that Mullins shifted the starting point of Baptist theology from revelation to experience and thereby undermined standard views of divine sovereignty and biblical authority. He also accepted the division of religious and scientific facts and believed that biblical truth “is secured by divine revelation mediated through the experience of the biblical writers—and mediated again through the religious experience of the reader.”

According to Mohler, Mullins’ method was so indebted to Schleiermacher that “though points of continuity remained, his teachers [Boyce et al.] could not have recognized their own theological system behind that of their student.”

Although he managed to achieve an orthodox consensus in the SBC, this massive methodological shift in theology set the stage for doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism. The compromise Mullins sought to forge in the 1920s was significantly altered by later generations, with personal experience inevitably gaining ground at the expense of revealed truth.

Once the autonomous individual is made the central authority in matters of theology—a move made necessary by Mullins’s emphasis on religious experience—the authority of Scripture becomes secondary at best, regardless of what may be claimed in honor of Scripture’s preeminence. Either personal experience will be submitted to revelation, or revelation will be submitted to personal experience. There is no escape from this theological dilemma, and every theologian must choose between these two methodological options.

Mohler and others probably overestimate the influence of liberal Protestantism. For one thing, Carrell shows that Mullins’ emphasis on a distinct type of experience that


41 Mohler, “Baptist Theology at the Crossroads,” 12, 19.
confirmed biblical authority “was rooted in a tradition older and more central to Baptist thought than Schleiermacher,” that is, the Reformed tradition.\textsuperscript{42} Russell Dilday convincingly argues that Mullins’ use of liberal thinkers amounted to “a commendable constructive attempt to sift out their best without embracing them,” which does not mean that he \textit{succeeded} in this attempt or clearly stated that “the Bible, not experience, is the authority,” as Dilday also argues.\textsuperscript{43} Mullins was inconsistent at best on the subject, but he treated both the Bible and experience as authoritative in a proximate sense and tried to navigate, in his own words, “between the extremes.” Curtis W. Freeman contends that he managed to avoid the “Scylla and Charybdis” of modern theology: “His wise leadership and theological direction steered the Southern Baptist ship around the rocky waters of fundamentalism and past the swirling currents of liberalism.” When it came to foundationalism, however, Mullins headed toward “Charybdis” of empiricism, such that soul competency could easily mutate into “sole competency.” In contrast, conservatives headed toward the “Scylla” of rationalism, that is, inerrancy, in which the Bible serves as a repository of inspired propositions from which doctrines are derived and experiences are produced.\textsuperscript{44}

William E. Hull, a former professor at Southern Seminary and longtime opponent of inerrantists, exemplifies the Mullins trajectory. Responding to Mohler, he argues that Mullins adopted his progressive strategy “to build a rapprochement with the cutting edge of modern thought” and that, regarding Schleiermacher and company, “he did not so

\textsuperscript{42} Carrell, “Inner Testimony of the Spirit,” 39.


much borrow their conclusions as he joined them in the common task of redefining how life might be understood and lived in a radically new century,” leaving behind an era in which Calvinist congregations were certain that the infallible Bible supported slavery and attacked or stifled anyone who challenged this belief.\footnote{William E. Hull, “Mullins and Mohler: A Study in Strategy,” \textit{Perspectives in Religious Studies} 31, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 315, 318.} To be sure, those congregations and their biblicism did not overcome and may have exacerbated the cultural captivity discussed in chapter one. However, this does not necessarily mean that none of the elements of their theology or practice are essential or that on other issues a progressive strategy has been or would be adequate, and it may well indicate the need for stronger connections to the broader church and its tradition. Hull nevertheless argues that Mullins’ main emphases have “stood the test of time”: individualism, pragmatism, democracy, American exceptionalism, and “the will to become responsible participants, not only in our own salvation, but in the betterment of the world in which we live,” that is, what James called “the will to believe,” which entails “the release of individuals from traditional hierarchies to serve as self-reliant actors on the stage of history.” Thus his agenda is central to not just the Baptist story but “the overarching story of what our nation is struggling to become.” Like Mohler, Hull presents an either-or dilemma: “For Baptists, the options are once again sharply defined and the choice is there for each of us to make.”\footnote{Hull, “Mullins and Mohler,” 323-24.}

Not every moderate is as unqualified in their praise. E. Glenn Hinson asserts that the axioms provided a “clear definition” of Baptist theology in relation to the voluntary principle but warns that they should be treated with caution because “individualism …
has grown wild in the modern day, making it increasingly difficult to effect any kind of social harmony.” Yet most tend to pass over the doctrinal content of Mullins’ theology and appeal to its spirit as well as a list of reductive distinctives, which suggests that he did “set the stage” for theology to be minimalized and privatized and therefore almost endlessly fluid and almost hopelessly captive to the “overarching story” of America. As Fisher Humphreys says, Mullins explained the respective Protestant, revivalist, and Baptist heritages at length but “seemed to think that the universal Christian heritage needed little or no exposition, only a strong defense.” He thought so because he failed to see that the particular form of knowledge-giving experience he described “is widespread, in part, because it is carefully fostered in the reviverl tradition. Christian experience is possible because Christ acts in people’s lives; the conversionist structure of experience is possible because it is managed by a church committed to it.”

The Inevitability and Invisibility of the Church

The religious axiom explains the ecclesiastical axiom in that a right to direct access to God entails “a right to equal privileges in the church,” and together these axioms determine the nature of the church, “a community of autonomous individuals under the immediate lordship of Christ held together by a social bond of common interest, due to a common faith and inspired by common tasks and ends, all of which are assigned to him by the common Lord.” Whereas the state must localize its authority in order to act in matters of general interest, the church can function as a “pure democracy” because it is also an “absolute monarchy,” meaning that “the Scriptures are the rule of


48 Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” 199.
faith and practice and the omnipresent Spirit the interpreter.”

The principles of the kingdom of God all concern a personal relationship, but the first stage is the proclamation of the gospel through preaching and teaching, meaning that “the human mediator does not come through sacraments and exclusive religious privileges between the soul and its God, but enters by the truth and love into the life to redeem it. Thus man again incarnates the word.” Proclamation and incarnation lead to faith, not blind or implicit (i.e., Catholic) faith but “faith in the biblical sense of an intelligent response to the revelation of truth from person to person.” Those who respond are not only regenerated by the Spirit and brought into the kingdom but also “inevitably drawn together by spiritual affinity.” Thus the church is not strictly a voluntary association but “the institutional embodiment of the principles and ideals of the kingdom for practical purposes,” and its polity is not a matter of expediency.

Mullins essentially reduces the questions of polity and authority to a conflict between the Baptist idea of “direct access to God” and the Catholic idea of “religion by proxy.” In a word, “From beginning to end Romanism conceives of the human spirit as dependent in religion upon other human spirits. It regards the soul as incompetent to deal alone with God.” The term “Romanism” reflects the anti-Catholicism of the era that was related to factors such as the definition of papal infallibility, the establishment of parochial schools, and an influx of Catholic immigrants, the first two of which Mullins invokes frequently. At any rate, he cites John Henry Newman, a leader in the Oxford


Movement in the Church of England who converted to Catholicism, as a representative of the Catholic position. Newman theorized that church teachings had been developed under the guidance of the Spirit from ideas implicit in Scripture. Unfortunately, Mullins does not examine Newman’s theory and instead simply claims that New Testament churches were democracies and that such theories are based not on Scripture but on the inference that polity changed because it had to change. Newman erred not in recognizing the reality of development but in attempting to justify his conversion, and “every doctrine of development which passes beyond democracy and autonomy in the church repeats Newman’s mistake in greater or less degree, because it localizes authority somewhere outside of Christ.” Mullins justifies his own view on the basis of the success of democracy, adding that because congregations can “attend to all judicial matters,” denominational bodies have no need or power for “creed-making” and can “transact the Lord’s business” efficiently and without “church politics.”

Protestants are being asked to choose between the “authoritative absolutism” of Catholicism and the “absolute individualism” of modern subjectivism. The latter is admirable but incorrect, for reasons already discussed and because “all human experience inevitably becomes socialized. Its outward expressions take the form of laws and institutions and traditions and canons, rules of action which inevitably become authoritative for society.” This process is evident in literature, ethics, science, and government as well as religion, which provides truth that is “definite and clear in

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53 Mullins, Axioms of Religion, 146-47.
meaning” and therefore may be turned into authoritative doctrines. Mullins criticizes certain subjectivists for not only excluding religion but also conflating the Catholic form of authority with biblical authority: “Nothing, in other words, is to be accepted merely because it is the funded experience of the spiritually competent. Such experience when urged upon our acceptance in science no one thinks of questioning. The consensus of the scientifically competent is ample warrant for acceptance.” This could seemingly apply to tradition, but the Bible is unique because it is written:

Literature, or recorded thoughts, is the nearest approach to the nature of spirit which is at the same time reliable as a medium of transmission. Tradition is utterly unsafe. The Roman Catholic doctrine of tradition is the concrete proof of this assertion. Unwritten tradition is always colored and transformed by the medium through which it passes. An unwritten gospel would be subject to all the fluctuations of the spiritual life of man and most likely gravitate downward from the spiritual to the carnal and formal. Institutions may symbolize or embody truth, but without a written standard they always tend to become external means of grace, or sacraments.

Among the questions raised by this argument is one Bloom asks and Mullins acknowledges: “Why not go directly to Christ, since he is available apart from the Scriptures, and be rid once for all of controversies about a book?” Yet he sidesteps it by simply claiming that both historical attempts to do so, medieval Catholicism and

54 Mullins, *Freedom and Authority in Religion*, 31, 40, 53.


rationalism, have failed.\textsuperscript{57} Another question is whether or not the Scriptures were themselves partly a product of tradition, which Mullins implicitly answers in claiming that “if the present canon of Scripture should be disintegrated, no doubt the parts would coalesce again,” not through the exercise of ecclesiastical authority but through “the operation of a law of spiritual affinity.”\textsuperscript{58} As to the unclear authorship and dating of some of those parts, which seemingly blurs the distinction between the apostles and the later church, he says only that criticism has not obscured the “life-experiences and life-adjustments” that gave rise to and have been created by the literature.\textsuperscript{59}

Mullins rebukes scholars such as Adolf von Harnack who argue that the individual is sufficient, thereby creating a “churchless Christianity,” and English Christians who argue that observance of believer’s baptism and the Lord’s Supper is nonbinding, thereby reducing the church to a “society of the spiritual.”\textsuperscript{60} Yet he says very little about church practice and does not include a chapter on ecclesiology in his systematic theology.\textsuperscript{61} He does summarize the characteristics of the church in \textit{Baptist Beliefs} (1912), a restatement of creeds “in common use among us,” namely, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742) and the New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833). After distinguishing between the use of creeds as expressions of experience and

\textsuperscript{57} Mullins, \textit{Freedom and Authority in Religion}, 353-54.

\textsuperscript{58} Mullins, \textit{Freedom and Authority in Religion}, 355-56.

\textsuperscript{59} Mullins, \textit{Freedom and Authority in Religion}, 358-59.


their use as means of compelling assent, he states that congregation and denomination alike have a right to establish certain beliefs as conditions of membership: “The enforced continuance of an individual with the larger group after radical and hopeless divergence of belief has arisen is a tyranny equal with the enforcement of the beliefs of the group upon the individual.”  

He also acknowledges a universal church, which “is not an outward organization at all” and “has no earthly ecclesiastical functions or powers,” and mentions church discipline, which is “simply the group protecting itself against the individual.”  

The key aspect of the moral axiom, “to be responsible the soul must be free,” is that it is the soul or self that is free: “Freedom is self-determination. Of course it does not mean that the will is without bias, or that human choices are uninfluenced by external forces or other human personalities, or by divine influences of grace. It only means that when a man acts he acts for himself,” which is true in all spheres, not just the religious.  

Here Mullins sharply separates the body, which is merely physical, from the soul, which spiritual and transcendent: “Man was made a spiritual being in God’s image and not as the product of matter. … His body is the connecting link between man and the physical universe, just as his soul is the connecting link with the spiritual universe.” This separation is evident in an excursus on Christian nurture, a response to Bushnell that follows the moral axiom and distinguishes between the family, which molds character, and the church, which “implies personal relations between actual individuals and

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62 Edgar Young Mullins, Baptist Beliefs (Louisville, KY: Baptist World, 1912), 6-8.
63 Mullins, Baptist Beliefs, 63, 65.
64 Mullins, Axioms of Religion, 153-54.
Prior to conversion and baptism, the role of the church primarily consists in making the child aware of sin:

Natural heredity connects us with Adam through the physical bond. Spiritual heredity connects us with Christ through the mediation of teachers and preachers. Now, there is a revealed method by which the soul becomes personally related to Christ and a partaker of the spiritual heredity. This includes the attitude of faith, of repentance, the recognition of God as Father and Christ as Saviour. Much is said in favor of the child’s becoming unconsciously a Christian. But the child should become consciously a Christian also. Doubtless there are those who are genuine Christians who do not remember the time and place of their conversion, but unless they carry consciously the elements of the relationship necessary to the Christian life, they are sadly deprived.

Mullins nevertheless adds that “there should be created an environment of the child which will predispose it to Christ and the church.”

These comments are particularly interesting in light of an autobiographical essay in which Mullins identifies two reasons why he is a Baptist. The first is heredity because “it was, of course, not likely that I would escape being a Baptist if I became anything religiously.” Yet he says nothing about the environment that predisposed him in this way and instead proceeds to the second reason, beginning with the intellectual difficulties that were “simply transcended in a new spiritual experience.” Only afterward could he become a Baptist, recalling his father’s insistence that one did so “as a result of one’s own personal and free choice, based upon an intelligent consideration of the reasons behind the act.” Mullins also says nothing about how he was able to interpret his experience and instead rehearses Baptist principles. Although he came from several

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69 Mullins, “Why I Am a Baptist,” 726.
generations of Baptists, was taught what it meant to be a Baptist, and could hardly escape becoming a Baptist, he insists that the only essential element in being a Baptist is experience.

The overall impression is that the church is merely instrumental, a means to facilitate personal salvation and social progress. It arose to spread the principles of the New Testament over against the presumptions of ancient states, but after Constantine its “spiritual calling” was supplanted by an “ecclesiastical empire,” and “once more the worth of the individual, Christ’s ideal, passed into a long eclipse. The organization was everything, the individual nothing.”70 It seems that despite the “unbroken line” of Christians having experiences, the church was not really the church at all. Yet continuity was in fact maintained by a succession of “heretical sects” that stood for “the worth of the soul, its salvation through Christ, the necessary outcome in a holy character and a purified society.” From the Reformation followed a series of positive steps, including the reemergence of the ideal with the Puritans in England and America and its ongoing spread throughout the world. Consistent with the spirit of the era, Mullins declares that “society can be, must be, reorganized in the interests of humanity,” under the leadership of Christ, because “the kingdom of God is coming.”71

Freeman contends that Mullins would not recognize the libertarian outcome of his method and could have averted it by describing “the habits and skills which a competent soul would need to possess in order to read the Bible wisely” and “the sort of community

70 Mullins, Why Is Christianity True, 353-54.

71 Mullins, Why Is Christianity True, 354-55.
and spiritual formation that are necessary to initiate and sustain converted souls in the Christian life”:

Why the silence? Liberals and fundamentalists may contend it is because Mullins championed libertarian principles. But perhaps he says nothing because the safeguards of character and community were givens, part of the evangelical consensus of his day, constitutive elements of the Baptist understanding of the Christian life that he thought needed no explanation to his readers. If so, the consensus of Mullins’ generation has long since dissipated, and the usefulness of soul competency as a navigational tool is severely limited.\textsuperscript{72}

Mullins also says nothing because he trusts that these safeguards inevitably result from individuals reading the Bible and having experiences. As chapter four shows, neither is an adequate foundation for knowledge of revelation because foundationalism itself is untenable. God relates to individuals, and only Christ can save them, but the relationship is \textit{always} mediated by community, tradition, culture, and so on; \textit{every} source of knowledge, not just tradition, is “colored and transformed by the medium through which it passes.” One individual cannot decide or act for another, but deciding and acting are inseparable from character formed in the same context. Mullins occasionally came close to recognizing these points but was hindered by his “navigational tool” and cultural and denominational confidence.

Freeman also contends that Mullins invented not just the doctrine but the \textit{myth} of soul competency in that “it served as a metanarrative that supported the revisionism of the past which had located the roots of soul competency in earlier Baptist and primitive Christian soil,” much as a successionist reading of ecclesiastical history did for the Landmarkists. Contrary to his claim, then, it “does not accurately represent the picture of

\textsuperscript{72} Freeman, “Siren Songs of Modernity,” 34.
earlier Baptist spirituality in either the British or American context.” That picture is beyond the scope of this chapter, but Philip E. Thompson convincingly argues that despite beginning with a theological principle instead of a historical succession, Mullins repeated the Landmarkists’ subordination of the broader Christian heritage in that he “privileged Baptist sensitivities and sensibilities as normative for all ecclesial life.” The practical effect was not only to present other Christian bodies as false or defective but also to obscure the “catholic spirit” of the early English Baptists, who saw themselves as responsible to the doctrine and liturgy of the church and its tradition, evident in the writings of leaders such as Thomas Grantham and confessions such as the Orthodox Creed (1678). The first weakness of this principle is that

if soul competency is the way to Baptist participation in the larger Christian tradition, that participation will, by its own logic, require that all others come to Baptist ideals. The second weakness is that it prematurely forecloses the possibility that early Baptists understood the catholicity of the church better than their descendants have. Their voice is effectively silenced along with the rest of the catholic tradition. What are Baptists’ options? They could continue to accept a self-understanding that has proved time and again to quench the catholic spirit. Or, by listening anew to the forebears, they may receive a Baptist witness to catholicity of mind and spirit.

Mullins saw the same basic idea behind both the sacraments and establishment. Yet Thompson demonstrates that early Baptists possessed a sacramentalism of their own that “informed the parameters within which they spoke of religious liberty.” They resisted establishment not so much because it violated the individual conscience as because it usurped the divine prerogative, which entailed a “principle of mediation” in

73 Freeman, “Siren Songs of Modernity,” 35.


75 Thompson, “New Question in Baptist History,” 58.
which “God is free to work in and through the things of earth,” primarily the sacraments and especially baptism, which “relativized all other political expressions by locating the true politics within the church.” However, Baptists in America gradually shifted the grounding of religious liberty from an ecclesiology centered on divine freedom to an empirical or rational foundation of human freedom and ironically came to link church and state insofar as either could encroach on the conscience. “Given the guarantee of institutional separation of church and state, however, Baptists seemed to believe that the more present danger was that presented by the church.” The combination of trust in the state and suspicion of the church means that the outworking of soul competency “is seen in the state at least as much as in the church,” and indeed “the church has become superfluous, merely a religious expression of tendencies present in the politics of the earthly city.” Thompson may overstate the point, but the church in America is certainly not as free as Mullins maintained.

The Harmony of the Individual and the State

The religio-civic axiom of “a free church in a free state” is the only one for which Mullins does not make a theological argument. Rather, he simply equates it with the principle of church-state separation, which is the product of a Baptist-led struggle and “is so well understood and is accepted by the people of the United States so generally and so heartily that it is unnecessary to spend time in pointing out at length what the axiom


implies.” The church and the state both express God-given moral relations and promote moral ends and indeed “might in a perfect society coalesce into one.” For now, however, they have distinct functions: “One is for the protection of life and property, the other for the promotion of spiritual life.” Although these functions occasionally overlap, “this does not destroy the freedom of either Church or State. The Church is compatible with the State but entirely independent of it.” Here Mullins focuses on contentious issues such as public funding of parochial schools, but elsewhere he states that separation is primarily about restricting the state:

A godless state becomes impossible when it grants freedom of worship. For freedom of worship implies that God is higher than the state. If the state, in other words, is the highest authority, then no restraint will be upon it in dealing with its subjects or citizens even in their religious life. The highest interest will control. Expediency will dictate every policy. The ancient ideal of the state is inevitable save on the basis of belief in God. Worship of the state is always the practical outcome in its absence.

Finally, the social axiom, “love your neighbor as yourself,” conveys the duty of a free church, or rather a free individual, in a free state. Although Mullins mostly speaks of the kingdom of God in generalities, his sympathy for the Social Gospel is evident in his identification of graft and child labor as “social sins,” and his confidence in the SBC is evident in his position that “the vast missionary and educational enterprises of the Christian denominations present an opportunity and enforce an obligation for social service unparalleled in the history of the world.” With the qualification that “to regenerate the individual is the sole condition of permanent moral progress in the social

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sphere,” he insists that “no moral interest lies outside the sphere of the church of Christ” and that “the Church ought to exert a powerful influence upon the State.” Yet he does not specify any interests the church is to address as a body and elsewhere asserts that it “cannot become the organ of social reform save indirectly.”

His focus is instead on the duty of the individual Christian “[to] be a force for civic, commercial, social, and all other forms of righteousness. Thus Christianity in America will become the religion of the State, although not a State religion.”

The duty of the church, then, is “to produce righteousness in individual character,” a duty to which congregational polity is ideally suited because “the simpler the ecclesiastical machinery the better. The more completely the church’s function is specialized in the direction of producing righteousness the more efficient does it become.”

Ethics is ultimately a personal matter between the soul and God in that it is an extension of religion to society, which are not the same but “unite in the Christian experience.” Mullins says that through this unity “duty becomes primarily duty to God”; therefore Christian ethics is distinct from the two main modern theories: “It does not deny the assertion of intuitional [deontological] ethics that virtue is inherently worthy of pursuit, nor the utilitarian plea that the moral life secures happiness or even pleasure. It rather asserts both, but grounds the virtue itself in the divine and exalts pleasure to the plane of moral and spiritual values.” However, his conception shares with these theories

82 Mullins, Axioms of Religion, 204-5; Baptist Beliefs, 77.

83 Mullins, Axioms of Religion, 207.

84 Mullins, Axioms of Religion, 210-11.
the premise that ethics is about *individual* acts; against Schleiermacher he contends that “all moral acts … are the direct result of the action of God upon the soul.”

Mullins presents Baptists as a historical movement advancing soul competency and thereby the church and the state alike, such that “we may regard American civilization as a Baptist empire, for at the basis of this government lies a great group of Baptist ideals.” In other words, the two are institutionally separate but *fundamentally congruent*, and Baptists are particularly responsible for this relationship. Not only did they best interpret the Reformation by rejecting establishment and infant baptism, they discovered and taught the “idea of liberty”—from early Baptists in England to Roger Williams in Rhode Island and on to John Leland and others in Virginia—that provided “the spiritual analogues of our entire political system,” beginning with “the competency of the citizens to work out their political destiny” and including all six axioms. The connection dates back to the New Testament: “One might in a certain sense say that the primary election which determined whether or not there should be an American government was held on the shores of the Mediterranean when the little Baptist democracies assembled to worship.” It also looks forward to the consummation of history:

> The Baptist axioms of religion are like a stalactite descending from heaven to earth, formed by deposits from the water of life flowing out of the throne of God down to mankind, while our American political society is the stalagmite with its base upon the earth rising to meet the stalactite and formed by deposits from the same life-giving stream. When the two shall meet, then heaven and earth will be joined and the kingdom of God will have come among men.

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From Mullins’ perspective, then, “We are approaching the Baptist age of the world, because we are approaching the age of the triumph of democracy.” It is little wonder that he referred to World War I as “fundamentally a Baptist war.”

In conflating Baptist theology and American democracy, Mullins did not quite reach the level of “worship of the state,” but he did come close to replacing the church beyond the local with the state as the locus of Christian reasoning. Lee Canipe notes that in dispensing with theology in favor of conventional wisdom his discussion of the religio-civic axiom “reflects the relative security available to someone speaking comfortably within the mainstream of society.” When earlier Baptists wrote about freedom of conscience and religious liberty, they did so as dissenters from the status quo. In contrast, “When Mullins wrote about ‘a free church in a free state,’ he did so as a Baptist completely at ease with the world around him.” Thus his account of Baptist theology served to confirm its compatibility with American democracy:

If John Leland’s individualistic understanding of religion decisively transformed the identity of Baptists in America, reinterpreting the principles of Baptist theology in harmony with those of liberal democracy and bringing Baptists into the mainstream of American culture, then it was Mullins who fully and systematically integrated the democratic ideals of individual sovereignty and absolute freedom into Baptist theology.

The problem is neither that church-state separation does not improve on earlier arrangements nor that soul competency does not convey the historical Baptist emphasis on freedom of conscience; the problem is that being “at ease” allowed Mullins and, by

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extension, Southern Baptists to shift the location of their identity from the practice of baptism to a belief in soul competency, thereby handing over politics and the body to the state and all but eliminating the possibility of social involvement or dissent by the church, not merely a few isolated individuals or interest groups.

Simply put, the more Baptists identified themselves with America, the less free they were to identify themselves clearly as Christians called by God to form new communities of redeemed, regenerate believers, visible manifestations of the body of Christ in the world charged with proclaiming in word and deed God’s reign over all temporal powers. Bound to America by the promise of religious liberty, Baptists willingly entered theological captivity in the land of the free.  

To be clear, Mullins helped his people become more engaged in ecumenism, social ethics, and intellectual debate. However, his stance not only manifested the cultural captivity that had marked them from their beginnings but also furthered the theological captivity that was created by American individualism. Such captivity has become a greater problem now that they are no longer “a remarkably homogenous people” who have similar experiences and arrive at similar beliefs owing not only to the indwelling Spirit but also to the congregations that embody the heritage of the Baptist and Christian traditions. Still, the fragmented state of Baptist life, not to mention American culture, encourages self-reflection regarding where they might have gone wrong.

The Contradictions of Soul Competency

Mullins used the platform provided by *The Axioms of Religion* to great effect. Moderate historian C. Douglas Weaver concludes that he “did not speak to social problems with the frequency or priority that is found in a Walter Rauschenbusch” but nevertheless “was clearly a part of the social Christianity/social reform movement of

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Southern Progressivism at the turn of the twentieth century."\(^9\) He led Southern Seminary to adopt a “moderate Social Gospel,” which included hiring progressives such as Charles S. Gardner and William Owen Carver, publishing favorable reviews of Social Gospel leaders in the seminary’s journal, and challenging racial mores, albeit in a restrained and paternalistic manner.\(^9\) Many faculty and, by extension, many students followed his approach to theology, which “divided the realm of physical science and historical criticism from the realm of religion” and thereby encouraged pietism. According to Wills, “At a popular level, Southern Baptists generally accepted Mullins’s approach and erected the same wall, and they did not worry much over the apparent contradictions,” while Gardner and Carver criticized this approach and believed doctrinal adjustment was needed.\(^9\) For his part, Mullins was uneasy with modernism, but he also underestimated the strength of fundamentalism and even contributed an essay to *The Fundamentals*, the collection that coalesced the movement, although George M. Marsden notes that “the inclusion of his work, together with a number of other mediating essays, shows that the trenches were not yet deeply dug for the coming fundamentalist battle. Later, in the heat of the 1920s, mediating positions such as Mullins’s would be no-man’s-land."\(^9\)

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\(^93\) Ellis, *Man of Books*, 87-88.

\(^94\) Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, 252-53.

Mullins’ optimism endured for some time, balanced with “his fear that religious liberalism would lead to a weakening of the role of Christianity in the world.”\textsuperscript{96} In his final book, \textit{Christianity at the Cross Roads} (1924), he again argued for the validity of religious knowledge against “scientific absolutism,” a term borrowed from James.\textsuperscript{97} He also addressed the failures of science and modernism but took no clear position on Darwinism and consequently was criticized by fundamentalists such as prominent Southern Baptist pastor J. Frank Norris, a graduate of Southern Seminary, and Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen. Anticipating Mohler’s criticism and displaying his Common Sense perspective, Machen argued that Mullins had conceded to the shift in modern thought from objective or scientific facts to subjective experience, meaning that, for example, one could speak only of belief in the resurrection and not of knowledge of the resurrection itself. Marsden explains that from Machen’s perspective, “compromisers like Mullins … seemed to place themselves ‘in the full current of present-day anti-intellectualism.’ Some, including Mullins himself, Machen conceded, would not be swept away, even in letting go their firm hold on facts. ‘But,’ he added, ‘it would never be safe for us.’”\textsuperscript{98}

Machen’s review did not appear until 1926, the year after the decision in the Scopes Trial and the adoption of the Baptist Faith and Message, which had been drafted by a Mullins-chaired committee in response to the agitation of a Norris-led faction that

\textsuperscript{96} Ellis, \textit{Man of Books}, 187.


opposed denominational expansion as well as Darwinism. Mullins had already played a major role in drafting an unofficial statement of faith, part of a 1914 report on ecumenism that rejected the idea of organic union and instead urged Southern Baptists to devote themselves to “fostering and multiplying denominational agencies at home and abroad in full denominational control and in full harmony with the spirit and doctrine of the churches contributing funds to our Boards.” World War I and its attendant financial difficulties as well as fundamentalism had inhibited such expansion, but in 1925 Mullins had recently finished a term as president of the SBC, and “[his] prestige and power in the denomination was at its height.” He had long wanted the convention to adopt a confession in order to pave the way for reunion with Northern Baptists but did think it should do so in order to mollify fundamentalists, and he resisted to the point that schism appeared imminent. As James J. Thompson says, Mullins and other denominational leaders “trod a treacherously narrow path, for in rejecting fundamentalism they had to avoid the appearance of endorsing modernism.” Once in charge of the committee, Mullins made sure that it skirted the issue of evolution.

Wills states that the Baptist Faith and Message not only thwarted fundamentalists but also “expressed its commitments with sufficient indefiniteness to prevent the exclusion of most progressive Southern Baptists.” In addition to its ten new articles, it differed from its source, the New Hampshire Confession, in an important respect:

100 Ellis, *Man of Books*, 194.
102 Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, 290, 292.
whereas the latter insisted that civil government ought to be honored and obeyed “except [only] in things opposed to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only Lord of the conscience, and the Prince of the kings of the earth,” the former omitted the idea and, echoing Mullins’ own work, insisted that “the gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends” and that the state need only honor “the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power.”

The statement did not end debate; the convention adopted a strong antievolution statement the following year. According to William H. Brackney, however, it had a stabilizing effect in that it “did quietly lay to rest doctrinal disputes during the next three decades of unprecedented growth and missions outreach of Southern Baptists.”

Ellis remarks that “no issue or controversy healed the cleavage in the Convention as did the nearly unanimous Southern Baptist anti-Smith campaign in 1928.” Al Smith, a Catholic, was defeated in a landslide by Herbert Hoover less than three weeks before the death of Mullins, who “was tormented by a loss of prestige and position in his last years.” Although his impact continued to be felt through his books and students, his work receded into the background until conflict arose in the convention in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Meanwhile “Baptists outside the SBC were accepting, qualifying, or

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104 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1926* (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce, 1926), 18, 98.


rejecting ‘soul competency’ as the fundamental Baptist principle.”¹⁰⁷ British theologian H. Wheeler Robinson noted that “most Baptists” would accept Mullins’ principle but cited his emphasis on experience as evidence that

Baptists as churchmen are still largely dominated by an eighteenth-century philosophy of society, disguised under their traditional interpretation of Scripture. That pronounced individualist, Jean Jacques Rousseau, discussed the social forms of life as if they were the arbitrary and voluntary creation of a number of unitary individuals, instead of being the cradle in which the individual life is nurtured and the breast at which it sucks. Similarly, it is possible to talk of conversion and the work of the Holy Spirit as if it occurred in a social vacuum, in order that a number of unitary products might subsequently be brought together to form a Church. But this ignores the fact that in personality there are the two elements of individuality and sociality growing side by side from the very beginning, and not less in religious than in biological and cultural and moral development. The family is already a social environment, and without it there could be no individual life, yet it is possible for a Baptist [Mullins] to write, “fatherhood and sonship are relations expressive of individual and not of corporate experiences.”

How can there be a father before there is a son, or son before there is a father? The truth is rather that the social relation implied in fatherhood and sonship is just as much a capacity of personality as the individual consciousness. If it were not for such relationship as the family and the clan and the State imply there could be no development of the individual consciousness at all. These things are, of course, the commonplaces of sociology to-day, but they are singularly ignored in many discussions of the “separated” Church. The only difference is that the application in this case is to man’s highest interests. The Church is not an arbitrary “extra,” a sort of religious club he may choose to join; it is the crowning religious expression of that sociality which is part of his very constitution. … Baptists must and will continue to stand for the truth of a regenerated Church membership expressed in believers’ baptism; but they will never make that testimony as effective as it ought to be until they have added to it a nobler Church-consciousness, and a profounder sense of the whole group, as well as of the individual life, as the arena of the Spirit’s activity. … Baptists need an “Oxford Movement” of their own order, so as to give their truth of an individual relation to God its complementary truth of a social relation to Him.¹⁰⁸

As for Northern Baptists, by 1959 historian Winthrop Still Hudson was deeply concerned about the pervasiveness of soul competency, which he interpreted as a

¹⁰⁷ Garrett, Baptist Theology, 427.

manifestation of the “radical individualism” of Jeffersonian democracy expressed by Reformation-era leaders Isaac Backus and Leland and later theologians Francis Wayland and Alvah Hovey as well as an idea that “was derived from the general cultural and religious climate of the nineteenth century rather than from any serious study of the Bible.” Thus it “served to dissolve any real concept of the church,” and “the practical effect … was to make every man’s hat his own church.” Hudson also observed that the climate of individualism had allowed the founders of the American (Northern) Baptist Convention in 1907 to avoid the questions raised by a new level of polity, with the result that the “shibboleths” of soul competency and local church autonomy “linger on to create confusion, introduce dissension, inhibit action, and prevent any intelligent statement of the theological undergirding of denominational life from being formulated.”

Regardless of whether Hudson was right about American Baptists, the denominational unity strengthened by growth and expansion delayed the “practical effect” of soul competency among Southern Baptists.

Carrell claims that “Mullins’s debt to Enlightenment epistemology does not have to nullify his emphasis on the necessity of the testimony of the Spirit,” the true core of his theology. Although all experience is in fact “an embedded and complex mix of empirical, cultural, linguistic, and interpretive elements,” God does address the individual through experience, and without such an emphasis “it is difficult to see how Baptists will avoid a


stale and lifeless rationalism or an ecclesiastical authoritarianism.” There is some truth to this claim in that the testimony of the Spirit is important and the dangers of rationalism and authoritarianism are real, but it not only forecloses other ecclesial possibilities but also underestimates other dangers. Mullins’ theology is Gnostic insofar as it divides the soul from the body and indeed all matter, which he faulted Catholicism for incorporating into religion. Such a division makes it easy to spiritualize the Christian life and to default to personal inclinations, cultural norms, or political and economic agendas, not to mention lose the meaning of the Incarnation and salvation history. Although Mullins was attempting to harmonize the Calvinist rationalism of Baptist theology with the subjectivism of revivalism, both of which preceded him, he deserves a measure of blame for not saying more about the church—local, universal, and historical—and taking for granted the consensus of his generation, which dissipated along with the “communitarian features” outlined by George. Yet the mediums of southern culture and especially the Southern Baptist subculture, the subject of the next chapter, meant that it took time for the dissipation to become apparent, and Baptists largely continued to practice their faith in the manner Bloom finds enigmatic, that is, to not make each of their hats their own churches.

CHAPTER III
THE MEDIATION OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST SUBCULTURE

This chapter analyzes the social and theological background and historical development of the Southern Baptist Convention, particularly the subculture that emerged within the convention in the first half of the twentieth century and endured throughout the second half. In addition to describing the subculture, it argues that Southern Baptist theology was inseparable from the denominational body and the Baptist and Christian heritages embodied and mediated by that body despite principles or distinctives such as soul competency and congregational autonomy. It also argues that the subculture both facilitated and inhibited captivity to southern culture before dissolving in the face of internal conflict, cultural changes, and an account of Baptist identity that failed to recognize the irreducibly historical and communal nature of theology. Finally, it offers some lessons to be learned by Baptists from the history of the subculture.

Two Senses of Mediation

In 1858 the nascent Southern Baptist Theological Seminary adopted a binding Abstract of Principles for its faculty that constituted the first formal statement of faith by Southern Baptists, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) having been founded just thirteen years before. The principle on the mediator, the seventh of the abstract’s twenty principles, asserts that “Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is the divinely
appointed mediator between God and man.” The doctrinal summary that follows indicates that this principle is primarily soteriological: Christ alone brings about reconciliation, the most common meaning of “mediate,” between holy God and sinful humanity.¹ Subsequent principles focus on assent in the mind and the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, which indicates that mediation in this sense is between God and individuals. Thus the principle on the mediator is secondarily ecclesiological in that it establishes an order elaborated in the principle on the church, which asserts that “the Lord Jesus is the Head of the church … and in Him is invested supremely all power for its government. According to His commandment, Christians are to associate themselves into particular societies or churches.” Individuals are first saved by faith in Christ and then obligated to join a congregation under his lordship.

James Petigru Boyce, the founder and first president of Southern Seminary, planned to use the Charleston Confession of Faith (1767), a modified version of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742), as a binding statement for the faculty, partly to counter the influence of Arminianism and the Restoration movement. However, he became convinced that a simpler abstract was needed to ensure agreement and instead drew on two earlier English Reformed statements, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and a revised version by Baptists, the Second London Confession (1688). Apart from the principles on election, the Fall, and perseverance of the saints, the content of the Abstract of Principles would be familiar to later, less Calvinist generations, and virtually every Baptist would affirm the salvific mediation of Christ alone without qualification. Yet “mediate” can also mean to convey a message or to form a link, and mediation in this

sense is evident in the principle on the Bible as well as that on the church, which also asserts that “to each of these churches [Jesus] hath given needful authority for administering that order, discipline and worship which He hath appointed.” Southern Baptists of the day regarded joining a congregation as voluntary in that one could not be coerced to do so, but they also regarded it as a matter of obedience and believed that congregations were responsible for enacting a certain polity and preserving a certain theology.

The ecclesiology reflected by the abstract was consistent with that of early Baptists, who treated congregations as independent on the understanding that their members were bound together by a covenant with God and that they mediated authority granted to them by Christ. A confession composed by the very first Baptist, John Smyth, declares that “the church of Christ has power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating.”² Such an ecclesiology is likewise evident in the Second London Confession and other seventeenth-century English Baptist confessions, which, according to Philip E. Thompson, were more than summaries of what a given group believed at a given time; they “enabled collective self- and world-understanding by emergent movements in unsettled times” and “[set] forth doctrinal boundaries within which the world may be conceived and negotiated, legitimating certain ways of understanding the world and delegitimating others.” Noting the apologetic and polemical environment inhabited by early Baptists, Thompson states that “in this crucible they forged their identity,” which included producing confessions that showed their theology to be both

consistent with Protestant orthodoxy and distinct from that of other free-church groups such as Anabaptists and Quakers.\(^3\)

William H. Brackney acknowledges that confessions have always been part of Baptist life, that some of them “became universally recognized as accepted versions of the beliefs and ethics of a group,” as in the case of the London confessions, and that a few even “took on the facility of providing a standard by which judgments were made to determine doctrinal questions.” Yet he contends that in this way they went beyond their “original intention” and became creedal and coercive.\(^4\) It is difficult to imagine that Baptists repeatedly misconstrued the intention of their own practice, and their desire to forge identity is also evident in the popular confessions among early Southern Baptists, the Charleston Confession and the New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833), the basis of the Baptist Faith and Message (1925), the first confession adopted by the SBC as a whole. Similarly, Walter B. Shurden acknowledges that the Charleston Confession “became a consensus of Baptist theology in the South” but contends that it “was never intended as a creed to bind a Baptist conscience.”\(^5\) It is unclear how a creed can bind a conscience in the absence of an established church. At any rate, Southern Baptists long used confessions in ways since labeled “creedal” by some of their descendants, especially

\(^3\) Philip E. Thompson, “Seventeenth-Century Baptist Confessions in Context,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 337-38. He is responding to W. J. McGlothlin’s assertion that Baptists’ confessions “are, strictly speaking, statements of what a certain group of Baptists, large or small, did believe at a given time, rather than a creed which any Baptist must believe at all times in order to hold ecclesiastical position or be considered a Baptist.” *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), xi.


moderates such as Shurden who were on the losing side of the controversy that split the SBC. They did not regard them as binding at the denominational level, however, and instead assumed that congregations would maintain unity by, among other things, voting on the admission of candidates for baptism and membership and administering discipline when members crossed certain doctrinal or moral boundaries.

The decline in the status of confessions was both a factor in and a consequence of the gradual transformation of Southern Baptist identity. The growth of Baptists in general was primarily a product of the Second Great Awakening and the democratic milieu that made it possible. Although their leaders subsequently created new institutions and organizations, it took several generations to involve considerable numbers in efforts beyond missions. According to conservative historian Gregory A. Wills, “For most Baptists prior to the twentieth century, Baptist identity derived almost entirely from the shared belief and practice of their churches,” which they regarded as constituting a single fellowship that was expressed through membership in local associations long before the formation of any denomination-wide organizations. Southern Baptist leaders moved slower than their northern counterparts in this regard but also created a more centralized body. By the time the Baptist Faith and Message was adopted, they had derived a new understanding of Baptist identity from individual freedom and denominational participation, centered on cooperative missions. This approach worked for about two generations because of the proliferation and reach of denominational programs, which “produced a powerful Southern Baptist subculture that fostered tribal identity. Churches made Southern Baptists by careful nurture. They were born into the group, nurtured in the

rituals and practices of the group, and completed the certified rites of passage. Belief became subordinate to belonging and participation.”

Just prior to the outbreak of the conservative-moderate controversy, Martin E. Marty surveyed the “relative intactnesses” of Protestant subcultures in the United States, noting that “the more intact a subculture is the more decisive will be the acts of valuing or the regularities of behavior.” The most intact subcultures were those of Mormonism, black Protestantism, and southern Protestantism, and Marty added that “it is possible to speak of the Southern Baptist Convention as being ‘the Catholic church of the South,’ so pervasive is its influence in so many dimensions of the culture.” Its cultural influence had become so pervasive largely because its subcultural formation was so effective. Moderate historian Bill J. Leonard recounts that “growing up Southern Baptist once seemed relatively easy. Elaborate denominational programs created a surprising uniformity among an otherwise diverse and highly individualistic constituency. In churches throughout the American South, Southern Baptist young people were taught how to behave in the church and in the world, on Sundays and throughout the week.” They attended similar congregations, participated in similar activities, and “studied the same lessons from the same literature.” If you were one of them, “You probably believed in segregation, states’ rights, soul-winning, and going to a Southern Baptist church, one local expression of the greatest evangelistic endeavor since the time of the apostles.”

As Marty’s comment suggests, southern culture influenced Baptists at least as much as they influenced it, so much so that historians came to refer to them as being in a state of “cultural captivity,” the subject of chapter one. Leonard argues that they “formed a denominational unity based less on rigid doctrinal synthesis than on denominational and regional identity,” allowing for a variety of views of faith and practice, and subsequently “evolved into something resembling the Established Church of the South,” only to see the region’s identity fragment in the second half of the twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, then, they shared the “cultural disillusionment” of many southerners that contributed to the resurgence of theologically conservative evangelicalism and consequently to the controversy, which marked the beginning of the end of their subculture. It turned out that Southern Baptist identity made little sense apart from an intact southern culture, and conservatives responded to increasing cultural and religious pluralism by attempting to make explicit beliefs that had been implicit but widely held, while moderates responded by contending that some if not all of those beliefs were optional and that the denominational structure and missions enterprise mattered most. Cultural fragmentation undermined the standing of the latter party, and the former triumphed, ending the “old denominational coalition” and gaining control of the SBC, but in doing so, they “merely hastened the inevitable fragmentation of the denomination itself.”

Conservatives view the “old denominational coalition” differently, of course. Either way, interpreters typically acknowledge the identity-forming capacity of the Southern Baptist subculture but ignore its mediation of the Baptist heritage and elements

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10 Leonard, God’s Last and Only Hope, 8, 15.
11 Leonard, God’s Last and Only Hope, 24.
of the broader Christian heritage even as practices such as the use of confessions faded. Although the subculture was somewhat insular, it hindered captivity to southern culture by mediating the authority of Christ through denominational programs and, by extension, the congregations into which those programs reached, thereby serving as another source of identity. In this sense, the denominational body marked a development in Baptist ecclesiology, but Southern Baptists generally viewed it as merely a means to certain ends related to evangelism, education, and social reform and thus instrumentalized an aspect or manifestation of the church, such that they assessed its worth largely in terms of numerical growth and public success instead of faithfulness. By the time the denomination and its subculture began to decline, the churches that formerly mediated authority were all but gone, leaving only an individualistic and pluralistic culture to form Baptists. Therefore the following sections describe the subculture and assess its significance for the future of those who no longer enjoy its benefits or endure its detriments.

The Grand Compromise

Moderates have insisted that the SBC was a theologically diverse coalition from the outset. After identifying four distinct traditions that have contributed to Southern Baptist identity, Shurden says that it was marked by sectionalism as well as “cooperative denominationalism,” particularly a structure that was “more connectional, more centralized, and more cooperative than any heretofore known among Baptists,” which created an environment comparable to the medieval synthesis. Yet its posture was “anti-confessional,” at least until 1925, and its synthesis of those traditions was “missionary, not doctrinal, in nature,” a reality unrecognized by contemporary “fundamentalists”
Leonard notes that the SBC was an instance of the nineteenth-century phenomenon of the Protestant denomination, “a new way of understanding the nature of the Christian church. It reflected an ecclesiastical category distinct from traditional church-sect typologies. The denomination was neither church nor sect but a new method of organizing and identifying multiple religious groups in a society where disestablishment and religious liberty prevailed.” This method was a response to a new situation in which all such groups “were forced to work out their own identity in relationship to and competition with each other.”

Such typologies have limited usefulness, but the fact that denominations were ultimately neither churches, which were established and coercive, nor sects, which dissented from establishments, partly explains not only the growth of the SBC and other evangelical bodies but also the ambiguity of their seemingly having ecclesiological significance on the one hand and being regarded as strictly pragmatic on the other. Although Leonard identifies two additional traditions, he agrees with Shurden about the nature of Southern Baptist unity:

The convention was a means to accomplish an evangelical end. Baptists were particularly concerned that the denomination never supersede the local congregation as the basic source of ecclesiastical authority. Nonetheless, convention programs served to unite diverse congregations across the South in a joint endeavor involving evangelism and missions. Churches that tenaciously guarded their autonomy were willing to join in denominational cooperation in order to accomplish broader evangelical and missionary tasks than their individual resources could sustain. The denomination created a certain catholicity of action among various Baptist churches in the South.

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12 Shurden, “Southern Baptist Synthesis,” 6-8. The four traditions are the Charleston (SC) tradition, the Sandy Creek (NC) tradition, the Georgia tradition, and the Tennessee or Landmark tradition.

13 Leonard, God’s Last and Only Hope, 26-27. Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch developed the first church-sect typologies in the early twentieth century, and H. Richard Niebuhr synthesized the first popular typology while criticizing the concept of the denomination in The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Henry Holt, 1929).
Southern Baptist leaders were concerned above all to subordinate differences among their traditions for the sake of fulfilling a calling to evangelize the world and indeed Christianize society. “In the process, they created a particular programmatic and organizational identity which, with southern culture, bound the constituency together” and enabled them to resist modernity longer than most denominations.\textsuperscript{14}

As Leonard acknowledges, “In the minds of most Southern Baptists, the convention’s ‘synthesis’ was both missionary \textit{and} doctrinal. In popular perception, the denomination was united around the great theological truths of the Baptist-biblical tradition.”\textsuperscript{15} Yet he asserts that those truths were intentionally expressed in general terms at the denominational level, allowing for different specific theories of biblical inspiration, the atonement, the millennium, and so on at the congregational level. Boyce, for example, stated that outside the “universally prevalent” principles in the abstract, “upon no point, upon which the denomination is divided, should the Convention, and through it the Seminary, take a position.”\textsuperscript{16} Because each group or tradition “could believe that its way was the Baptist way,” this approach “was less a synthesis than a Grand Compromise based in an unspoken agreement that the convention would resist all attempts to define basic doctrines in ways that excluded one tradition or another, thereby destroying denominational unity and undermining the missionary imperative.” Thus the “Grand Compromise” served to maintain the status quo, which helped the convention to expand

\textsuperscript{14} Leonard, \textit{God’s Last and Only Hope}, 29, 31. The two additional traditions are the evangelical denominational tradition and the Texas tradition.

\textsuperscript{15} Leonard, \textit{God’s Last and Only Hope}, 37.

\textsuperscript{16} James Petigru Boyce, “The Two Objections to the Seminary, V,” \textit{Western Recorder}, June 20, 1874.
but frustrated Baptists who wanted to bring about change of one kind of another within it or to use it to push for change in society at large. Furthermore, because the compromise attempted to retain almost every faction that arose, “the SBC always lived on the edge of controversy and potential schism as representatives of one particular theological viewpoint sought to impose their interpretation on the entire body,” and it fell to “denominationalists” to keep “ideologues” at bay while using the system to accomplish certain ends.\(^{17}\)

Leonard contends that the first denominationalists had learned from the schism with Baptists in the North and that their approach to leadership “is evident in generation after generation of prominent Southern Baptists, particularly during periods of controversy.” He offers several examples, notably E. Y. Mullins, the subject of chapter two, who “personifies the Grand Compromise” and “helped shape Southern Baptist public, if not popular, theology” and whose contested legacy is only further evidence of enduring theological diversity.\(^{18}\) One question raised by this interpretation is whether the mediating theology developed or represented by Mullins, grounded in the concept of “soul competency,” ultimately permitted not simply beneficial diversity but detrimental pluralism or heresy, as conservatives claim. Another is whether an “unspoken agreement” actually existed among more than a few leaders, given that diversity is ascribed to intangible traditions and substantial unity is obvious among congregations and associations. If it did, and certain groups actually were led to believe that the entire

\(^{17}\) Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 38-39.

convention shared their beliefs when this was not true, then they cannot simply be
explained away as “ideologues.”

The Grand Compromise is a plausible explanation for how a people committed to
congregational polity remained united for so long, albeit not without losing frustrated
constituents along the way, but regardless of the extent to which it existed, the SBC was
able to forge a “programmatic and organizational identity” that paralleled southern
identity. Apart from the founding of the Domestic and Foreign Mission Boards along
with the convention itself in 1845, the key step was the creation of the Sunday School
Board in 1891. According to Shurden, “No institution has done more to
denominationalize and synthesize Southern Baptists. It lassoed every interdenominational
movement that came down the churchly pike in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries and promptly ‘Southern Baptistized’ it,” with the qualification that it respected
and even encouraged diversity.19 Not only did the board produce a Sunday School
curriculum that quickly displaced that produced by Baptists in the North, it gradually
took on responsibility for books, congregational music and supplies, denominational
statistics and research, discipleship programs such as Baptist Training Union, and more,
and it worked through the state conventions to ensure the wide adoption of these
publications and programs. Other important steps included the creation of the Woman’s
Missionary Union in 1881, that of the Executive Committee for coordinating institutions
and administering policies in 1917, and especially that of the Cooperative Program for
raising and dispersing funds in 1925, which further centralized the system and solidified
the relationship between the state conventions and the national convention.

The fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s also brought in significant numbers of Baptists from outside the South, contravening longstanding territorial agreements with Northern Baptists and setting the stage for post-World War II geographic expansion. Wherever Southern Baptists found themselves, however, they found congregations that felt like home. Moderate sociologist Nancy Tatom Ammerman asserts that “although Southern Baptists vigorously claimed to be a ‘nonliturgical’ denomination, there was a liturgy as predictable as in any church with a prayer book. Like the Latin Mass, it provided a universalizing experience for those who participated in it.” Common programs were even more important, to the point that “there was simply a Southern Baptist way to do everything.”

Liturgy and programming were in fact interrelated; the Sunday School Board provided worship materials and designated certain Sundays for recognizing and giving to various efforts. “Since most Southern Baptist congregations eschewed the traditional liturgical calendar of the larger Christian community, these denominational holy days served an important and unifying purpose. For example, Christmas was characterized less by traditional Advent observances than by an emphasis on foreign missions.”

Such programmatic unity would seem to depend on a prior theological unity, and the scholarly consensus is that Southern Baptists agreed on basic Christian and evangelical doctrines, not to mention many practices that correlated with those doctrines. The Abstract of Principles and Baptist Faith and Message represented that agreement, even if understanding of the doctrines and especially awareness of the statements were

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21 Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 54.
limited. Baptists have never been known for formal theology; their dissenting status justified other priorities before the achievement of religious liberty, and their rapid growth did the same afterward. Southern Baptists in particular were characterized by theological “elasticity” within a general framework, and “the denomination’s religious language often combined dogma, piety, and rhetoric in such a way as to make theological precision extremely difficult to maintain.”

Factions periodically expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of precision. For example, after being elected president of the SBC in 1988, conservative pastor Jerry Vines remarked that “liberals” (moderates) in the convention “use our vocabulary, but not our dictionary.”

There may have been less elasticity than Leonard says, but precision was not all that necessary to maintain unity and relative uniformity among a people who were known for vibrant churches. The sort of confessional and disciplined congregations or “covenant communities” that the Abstract of Principles took for granted were already in decline by start of the twentieth century, as a host of complex social and theological factors led to a greater emphasis on the freedom of the individual and a growing variety of options in every facet of life from which he or she could choose. The SBC remained stable much longer than most denominations, a tribute to the solidarity of its congregations as well as the homogeneity of its culture. As the century progressed, however, its programs and organizations mediated more and more of what its members affirmed, supplanting other kinds of formation, with mixed results.

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Although Southern Baptists tended to have convictions that mirrored those of their parents, ministers, fellow congregants, and millions of other Southern Baptists, they tended to presume that they thought entirely for themselves in theological and ethical matters, a presumption bolstered by the perpetual appeal to Baptist “distinctives.” Leonard refers to such distinctives, not any of the traditional Christian or evangelical doctrines in the above confessions (e.g., the Trinity, justification by faith), as Southern Baptists’ “foundational beliefs.” Unlike many moderates, he recognizes that those beliefs are neither exclusively Baptist nor true in themselves; he argues instead that they are both distinctively Baptist and true in that they “are held together in a kind of creative tension,” that is, balanced in pairs such as biblical authority with soul competency, confessionalism with anticreedalism, pastoral authority with the priesthood of all believers, dramatic conversion with gradual nurture, and dissenting tradition (religious liberty and separation of church and state) with establishment status. The principle of congregational autonomy allowed for diverse interpretations of the distinctives according to the will of the majority, such that Southern Baptists in the same town could justify holding opposite positions on any number of issues and that any minority was free to join and could easily find a like-minded church. In this context, the convention “represented a via media by which churches stressing diverse expressions of the basic Baptist distinctives were bound together in common Christian endeavor.”

Conservative scholars L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles identified one of the flaws in this view early in the controversy:

Baptist confessions do not have as their primary purpose the setting forth of “Baptist” distinctives; their primary purpose is the setting forth of true doctrine. If

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24 Leonard, God’s Last and Only Hope, 73-74.
that results in some distinctiveness, then so be it. Baptists have nothing to be proud of if they cannot show that their beliefs are true to the biblical teaching on every Christian doctrine.

For Baptists, confessions are not immutable documents. They are not static, absolute, complete, exhaustive or final summaries of all that Baptists believe. They are expressions, declarations, or affirmations of the Christian faith as Baptists understand it.\(^\text{25}\)

Two points are worth noting here. First, not only is the goal of confessions to set forth truth, the goal of distinctives is, or rather was, to facilitate the discovery of truth, and competent souls and autonomous churches were expected to consult the Bible and discover roughly the same truth. In other words, they were expected to end up with a “shared dictionary,” despite the danger of its definitions being too narrow or poorly prioritized. Truth is necessarily expressed doctrinally, although it is not known absolutely or completely and does not require a doctrine of biblical inerrancy, as conservatives such as Bush and Nettles contend. Second, confessions reflect an inheritance from the Christian faith, not just the Baptist faith. Covenant communities and the subculture mediated this inheritance and connected Southern Baptists to the broader church and its tradition, however inadequately.

Subcultural Expansion and Cultural Captivity

The theological consensus represented by the Baptist Faith and Message gradually dissipated between 1925 and 1979, but denominational unity and uniformity remained similar, at least in degree. Meanwhile programmatic expansion increased, especially in the postwar era, as Southern Baptists became upwardly mobile and created a bureaucracy to match, going so far as to hire a prestigious management consulting firm (Booz, Allen,

and Hamilton) to help reorganize their structure. Referring to denominationalists of the
1950s and 60s, Ammerman says that

the agencies they headed and the reports they brought were shaped by the most
modern, efficient, and rational of procedures. They work they reported was
successful as measured by the criteria of management. And an increasingly urban,
middle-class constituency wanted to hear the goals and the numbers that
demonstrated their denomination’s success. What that generation of leaders
accomplished was a remarkable bridge between the world of past and present,
between the efficiency of bureaucracy and the inspiration of the pulpit. It was a
bridge that bound together an increasingly unwieldy and disparate constituency.26

This bridge was remarkable, but it had unintended consequences. Conservative
theologian David S. Dockery identifies the emergence of a program-oriented approach to
ministry as one of two major changes in Southern Baptist life in this era, the other being
the acceptance of the practice of historical-critical studies in colleges and seminaries. As
the programs succeeded, “a movement away from theological commitments to pragmatic
ones consciously or unconsciously began to take place. … Orthodoxy was understood in
terms of ‘doing the right program’ rather than articulating the right belief system. What
resulted was not so much a heterodox people but an ‘a-theological’ generation” that
lacked the “theological understanding” necessary to deal with conflicts over the nature of
Scripture and other issues.27

One does not have to reject the historical-critical method or accept the
conservative “belief system” outright to recognize that there was a lack of theological
understanding or interest among denominationalists, but it is important to acknowledge
the good accomplished by expansion and the sense of belonging fostered by participation.

26 Ammerman, Baptist Battles, 63.

As Leonard says, “Being Southern Baptist is not only a way of believing, it is also a way of behaving,” and this identity, acquired in a manner similar to Catholic indoctrination, produced “generations of the faithful that could no more forsake their Southern Baptistness than they could relinquish their southernness,” even as diversity turned into pluralism and “identity became both elusive and illusive throughout denominational life.”28 As the culture changed, the programmatic approach displaced the earlier focus on shared belief and practice and permitted leaders to promulgate views that were out of step with the rank and file while claiming to be committed Southern Baptists, which conservatives found unacceptable. Moreover, it fostered a tribal identity that served to exclude those who were not “born” Southern Baptist, as denominationalists liked to say. This became clear to Wills, a convert from Methodism, at his ordination council: “I could never really be Baptist. Although I had belonged to Southern Baptist churches for about six years at the time, I was not ethnically Southern Baptist. I was not born Baptist. I was not nurtured in the ways of the tribe … and my misguided belief that I could be Baptist by joining a regular Baptist church and agreeing with orthodox Baptist doctrine corroborated my outsider status.”29

It is difficult to say how common such experiences were, and it is likely that they were not that different from those of converts to other religious bodies. However, a tribal identity or cultural ethnicity partly explains not only the frustration of conservatives that led to the controversy but also the psychological damage sustained by moderates during the controversy, when their identity was seemingly taken from them, as well as the

28 Leonard, God’s Last and Only Hope, 101-2.

respective courses charted after the controversy, when, roughly speaking, conservatives continued to emphasize believing, moderates belonging. Unfortunately, neither party has perceived the ecclesiological significance of the denomination and its subculture. In developing a means of cooperation, Southern Baptists rediscovered an ecclesial body that extends beyond the local and contemporary and more fully mediates the historical truth of Christianity and relativizes other loyalties. Although being a part of this body is always important, it is particularly so in the context of pluralism, that is, in the absence of a broadly Christian culture and a denominational subculture. Yet conservatives and moderates alike have developed individualistic and ahistorical conceptions of theology and ethics, with the former emphasizing unmediated access to truth through an inerrant Bible, the latter through personal experience. Not only do these conceptions depend on a characteristically modern philosophical foundation, they reduce loyalty to Christian communities, institutions, and traditions by obscuring the mediation of the church.

Southern Baptists became less provincial and more socially involved in the postwar period through such organizations as the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the Christian Life Commission, both of which were formed out of earlier efforts. They even made tentative steps toward challenging segregation, but their stance on race remains a counterpoint to admiration of their subculture. Moderate scholar and former missionary E. Luther Copeland argues that the “original sin” of the defense of slavery is largely responsible for their “most grievous faults,” including racism, missionary paternalism, anti-ecumenism, sexism, and “theological restrictiveness,” each of which he treats at length. He also notes that the most serious and continuing evils … occurred long before the present controversy and the shift to rightist leadership. During most of our history,
moderates, or at least a diverse majority including moderates, held the reins of power in a denomination which claimed to be democratic. If some Southern Baptists protest that they did not agree with these wrongs and opposed them at the time, or that they were too young to have participated in them, even they can hardly deny their identity as Southern Baptists. Is self-righteousness an option for any of us?  

Copeland oversimplifies the history of the SBC but nevertheless displays an intuitive grasp of what it means, or should mean, to belong to a denominational body, even one regarded as strictly pragmatic its constituency, such that one cannot simply disavow members with whom one disagrees. He also criticizes the programmatic identity or “cultus” for inhibiting participation in the ecumenical movement by convincing Baptists that expansion was a natural extension of the “New Testament church” that they alone had preserved and that the Cooperative Program in particular was not just a means to finance such expansion but “the ‘outward sign’ of a mystic entity in which Southern Baptists participated and which itself partook of the sacred.” The main reason for nonparticipation was not the belief that true unity is spiritual but “the lack of a will to unity” owing to “a kind of ecclesiastical ‘Docetism’” that constitutes “a denial of the real body of Christ, a denial that there needs to be a visible expression of Christ’s body, the church.” This denial is closely related to “the Southern Baptist tendency, reinforced by Landmarkism, to deny or ignore the doctrine of the universal church,” which is absent from the original Baptist Faith and Message and an “afterthought” in the revised version of 1963. In a word, the SBC’s leaders “promot[ed] loyalty to the denomination as an end in itself, and not to the whole body of Christ.”

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31 Copeland, *Judgement of History*, 64-65, 81-82.
Notwithstanding these criticisms, the revised statement did suggest a shift in thinking about. According to Brackney, “While in the heritage of E. Y. Mullins, terms like ‘autonomy,’ ‘democratic processes,’ and ‘equally responsible membership’ became canonical, the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message moved the doctrine of the church away from the local church-protectionism of the New Hampshire Confession.”

Not only did the revised article on the church state that “the New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages,” that on baptism and the Lord’s Supper couched these ordinances in ecumenical terms, as “acts of obedience” related to church membership. In 1940 the SBC had responded to an invitation to join the new World Council of Churches by asserting that it “has no ecclesiological authority” and that such involvement “[would] imperil the growing spirit of co-operation on the part of our churches.”

Copeland calls the former assertion both a rationalization in that, like its churches, the convention was autonomous and a contradiction in that it claimed to have no authority to vote for joining the council but exercised authority in voting against doing so. It also declined out of a sense of distinctiveness and self-sufficiency exemplified by then-president J. B. Gambrell in 1919:

“The supreme, undelegated authority of Jesus Christ is the true and unbending organizing principle of every Baptist church. This principle stands as an impassable barrier between Baptists and other bodies. Baptists never did symbolize with other bodies built on human wisdom contravening divine wisdom

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34 *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1940* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1940), 99-100.

and the authority of Jesus Christ. They never can. What relation have Baptist churches to other ecclesiastical bodies? None. …

Baptists are not to blame for this separation. They remained with the New Testament and others went away from it. For long, weary centuries they have stood by this principle, even to blood and death. Meantime, they have been the torch-bearers to light the world back to the simplicity of New Testament faith and practice. Baptists should today, candidly, lovingly and boldly, accept their ecclesiastical isolation and proclaim it for the benefit of the present and future generations. They are the trustees of the truth and are bound to hold it and to hold it forth.  

Participation in the Protestant ecumenical movement is hardly the sole measure of a relationship to the universal church, and although Copeland illustrates the inadequacy of the subculture, what about its significance? After all, Southern Baptists may have been ecclesiastically isolated, but they were not theologically so, as their confessional ancestors recognized, and the subculture carried on the mediation of the Christian heritage. Yet Copeland repeats the moderate refrain of “creeping creedalism,” a trend that supposedly dates back to the adoption of the Baptist Faith and Message and contradicts the “basic Baptist principle” that confessions are merely summaries of commonly held beliefs.  

As he sees it, creedalism is closely related to the “enforcement of orthodoxy” that has periodically demanded the sacrifice of leaders who “rightists” declare to be “heretics.” The first “victim” was Crawford Howell Toy, a professor at Southern Seminary, who was forced out in 1879 for teaching the Darwinian theory of evolution.

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37 Copeland, *Southern Baptist Convention and the Judgement of History*, 113-14. He cites the statement by the SBC’s founding delegates that “we have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion to all creeds but the Bible” and Lumpkin’s assertion that “the Baptist Movement has traditionally been non-creedal in the sense that it has not erected authoritative confessions of faith as official bases of organization and tests of orthodoxy.” *Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845* (Richmond: H. K. Ellyson, 1845), 19; *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 16.
and the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.\textsuperscript{38} For his part, Wills likewise identifies Toy as a harbinger of progressivism but says that the conflict between conservatives and progressives did not begin in earnest until the dismissal of thirteen Southern Seminary professors in 1958.\textsuperscript{39} Other moderates have identified the first victim as William Heth Whitsitt, the seminary’s third president, who was forced out in 1899 for challenging Landmarkism despite many leaders agreeing with his views; James H. Slatton even says that the Whitsitt controversy “evokes a haunting sense of \textit{déjà vu}.”\textsuperscript{40}

As the label “fundamentalist” suggests, interpreters have most often identified the fundamentalist-modernist controversies as creating or revealing a divide between two parties in the SBC. Whatever the origin of this divide, it is often regarded as a kind of interpretive key, meaning that the conservatives who finally destroyed the Grand Compromise were more or less successors of those who threatened it almost from the outset and continued to do so throughout its history, resulting in a series of distinct but related conflicts. Copeland claims that the majority of Southern Baptists possessed a conservative mindset long before they produced a formal confession and that the climate in which the SBC originated and developed explains the apparent contradiction between noncreedalism and the desire to enforce orthodoxy:

> The more closely the SBC became identified with its surrounding culture as the “Established Church of the South,” the more it took on the intolerance of that culture. And this intolerance was born of the slavery system and its defense. The absence of an explicit creed gave all the more opportunity for the enforcement of

\textsuperscript{38} Copeland, \textit{Judgement of History}, 119-20.


\textsuperscript{40} James H. Slatton, \textit{W. H. Whitsitt: The Man and the Controversy} (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 323.
an unwritten one. And the lack of specially recognized persons or positions of authority turned loose upon the SBC the pressures of an alleged majority.

Furthermore, “the unitive strength of the cultus helped to counteract the demand for conformity to the unwritten creed of majority views,” but this demand, driven by a fear of social change, eventually won out over the desire for cooperation.⁴¹

It is unfair to link contemporary conservatives with slave-owners, even indirectly, especially given that, as Copeland acknowledges, moderates share in the wrongs of the SBC. It is also strange to be averse to creeds and orthodoxy on the one hand and concerned with hierarchical authority, ecumenical cooperation, and the visible universal church on the other, especially given that moderates tend to be averse to these things as well. For one thing, shared practice is not sustainable without a considerable degree of shared theology. Although a “catholicity of action” can have good results, it is not a true catholicity insofar as its ends and means are determined by the culture, not the church. For another, the adoption of the Baptist Faith and Message signified not an increase in restriction but a shift of unity from the congregational level to the denominational.

Perhaps the main problem with Copeland’s interpretation is that it takes for granted the two-party perspective discussed in chapter one, which not only oversimplifies ideas and events but also makes conflict intrinsic to the church. Furthermore, once one identifies with a certain mindset or party, it becomes easy to adopt partisan positions or agendas and to dismiss or attack the other party without critical and prayerful examination. This was certainly the case during the controversy, which played out in such a way as to make it virtually impossible to avoid bipolar language.

The Dissolution of the Subculture

To be sure, most white Baptists shared a desire to preserve a way of life that was inseparable from slavery and later segregation, and many rationalized it biblically or theologically, so it may well have been manifested in the defense of a certain version of orthodoxy. Yet this does not mean that orthodoxy necessarily leads to “grievous faults”; nor does it mean that that version was fatally flawed; cultural captivity cannot be overcome simply having the right beliefs. Becoming at home in America allowed Baptists to absorb an individualism that resulted from democratization and revivalism but resonated with some aspects of their tradition and ultimately subordinated others. It also allowed them to limit the scope of theology to evangelism, Baptist distinctives, and personal piety and morality. Southern Baptists in particular were long associated with opposition to dancing, drinking, gambling, and a host of other practices, earning them a reputation as moralizers. The main problem was not that such involvement sometimes extended to trivial matters but that it did not extend to systemic ones, notably the plight of blacks. Leonard argues that

too much attention to corporate sinfulness would require a response to institutional racism in southern society. Racism was a major challenge to Southern Baptist piety. Indeed, the emphasis on personal piety and individual morality meant that preachers could urge believers to treat blacks with Christian kindness, while avoiding the question of racism perpetuated by the entire culture. … It is one of the great paradoxes of Southern Baptist piety and ethics that a people who sought to follow the teachings of Jesus so closely and sincerely should have participated in racism, bigotry, and segregation so willingly.42

This is not so much a paradox as a predictable consequence of a hermeneutic that emphasized the individual when the typical Baptist was a born and bred product of the South. Such individuals were certainly influenced by their pastors and congregations, but

42 Leonard, God’s Last and Only Hope, 108-9.
they were generally isolated from the broader church and even Baptists outside their local area, making it unlikely that they would dissent from cultural norms. Their subculture countered isolation in some respects but reinforced it in others; for example, the reach of its publications meant that “readers across the South were introduced to a common core of theological definitions that were distinctly Southern Baptist.” Pride in their identity meant that “Southern Baptists avoided extensive involvement with other Christian denominations, even other evangelicals, lest such entanglements dilute their brand of Baptist identity and solidarity.” Isolation and a sense of self-sufficiency would have been less problematic if Baptists had recognized their dependence on doctrines and practices inherited from other Christians, but they did the opposite, asserting their personal and communal independence, which presented obstacles to their cooperation. “Local church autonomy, individual conversion, and democratic polity created a context in which populist sentiments flourished. This spirit had the potential to enlist Southern Baptist multitudes in denominational crusades or to turn them away from denominational bureaucracy.”

Not only was the denomination dependent on popular opinion, individuals and congregations had ready excuses to ignore or disavow actions of which they disapproved and to separate their interests from those of society at large. Charles Marsh gives the fascinating example of Douglas Hudgins, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Jackson, “the single most powerful religious institution in Mississippi,” from 1946 to 1969, when several prominent segregationists—including the governor who defied the order to

43 Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 112.

44 Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 113.
desegregate the University of Mississippi and the owners of the state’s two largest newspapers—were members. In a context of quasi-establishment, Hudgins’ ecclesiastical position not only made him “the state’s preeminent Southern Baptist preacher” but also gained him civic positions including director of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce and chaplain of the Mississippi State Patrol. Unsurprisingly, then, his reasoning typified white indifference to black disenfranchisement, and moreover, he grounded it in an “austere piety” that placed segregation and other public matters on a wholly separate plane, that of the material rather than the spiritual. “Hudgins preached a gospel of individual salvation and personal orderliness, construing civil rights activism as not only a defilement of social purity but even more as simply irrelevant to the proclamation of Jesus Christ as God.”

Despite having studied at Southern Seminary at a time when several professors were urging social involvement and espousing racial equality, and despite addressing prohibition and other issues, Hudgins adopted a theology that authorized him to largely ignore the civil rights movement. Early on he unwittingly found himself in the position of casting (in absentia) one of the few votes against a resolution in support of the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education at the 1954 annual meeting of the SBC. Speaking to First Baptist, he appealed to congregational autonomy to claim that the resolution was nonbinding and to church-state separation to claim that the decision was irrelevant to a religious body. As agitation increased, especially in Jackson, his stance was tested, but time after time he declined to denounce the actions of segregationists,


46 Marsh, God’s Long Summer, 99-100.
even his own congregants, and instead invoked the spiritual nature of the Gospel. According to Marsh, Hudgins’ “piety of the pure soul” reflected the understanding that “the Christian life is about personal union with the saving God, secured in one decisive but continually repeated encounter with the risen Jesus. Nothing else matters. If the Christian admits other concerns into the event of salvation—like good works, doctrinal or creedal confession, or mediations like church tradition and hierarchy—then the purity of the soul’s intimacy with God becomes threatened.” Marsh notes that this understanding has “the imprimatur of the Baptist theologian E. Y. Mullins” in that Hudgins specifically identified the primary concern as soul competency, with the qualification that he applied it in a manner Mullins would have deplored.47

The point is not that the principle of soul competency necessarily produced racism or other faults; Hudgins is only one example, and the fact that some Southern Baptist leaders who affirmed this principle also supported desegregation shows otherwise. The point is that it obscured the “mediations” that were actually shaping attitudes, for better or for worse. Regarding congregational autonomy, an extension of soul competency, Marsh argues that in the absence of an external authority to judge the decisions of congregations, “the Holy Spirit, in the form of the Board of Deacons, inevitably shapes the congregation in its own image,” adding that “this kind of autonomy put extraordinary pressure on Baptist ministers throughout the South to maintain the status quo” despite their supposed freedom. The assumption of Baptists who focus on the experience of personal regeneration is that “other equally transformed individuals will bring from their solitary encounters a common conviction and a common identity.” However, in the case

of Hudgins and, by extension, many of his contemporaries, conviction and identity were essentially products of “the accidents of race, class, and custom.” In the end,

The soul that breaks free from the authorities of scriptural interpretation, hierarchy, and state, not to mention from the demands of justice and mercy, cannot tolerate the limitlessness of its possibilities. … So the church is created as a depository of shared feeling—local and autonomous—determined by whatever traditions and customs prevail. To be sure, Hudgins would not concede this point for a minute. … Yet although Hudgins (for obvious theological reasons) must locate final authority in the individual congregation as governed by the Holy Spirit, and not in the individual person, the cards are stacked against the move. Final authority on matters of Christian faith and practice resides in the individual’s soul competency before God, configured in community by the historical and social contingencies of the self. The theological content of personal regeneration vaporizes under close scrutiny. All that is left of the experience is the individual’s inchoate longing for holiness, a holiness which, in Hudgins’s case, approximates the Southern Way of Life.48

The belief that the social order ought to mirror the spiritual order led Hudgins to connect the purity of the soul and the community to states’ rights and decentralized government and to racial homogeneity, meaning that his ideas not only were shaped by his culture but also followed from his theology.49 Again, the point is not that Baptist principles had to be interpreted in this way but that the subculture did not challenge the ambiguity of those principles. At points of conflict, its programmatic and organizational identity was rarely a match for the “Southern Way of Life.” It also did not challenge the fundamental trust in the state that led Hudgins and others to treat the church as either apolitical or merely instrumental in pursuing political ends. Meanwhile it maintained the illusion of an intact culture even as it lowered expectations in order to incorporate as many people as possible. By the 1970s the Cooperative Program was struggling to keep up, and many congregations had begun to reconsider their contributions because of


49 Marsh, God’s Long Summer, 111-12.
budget problems or concerns about a drift toward liberalism, while many individuals who
*had* advocated for civil rights were coming to grips with the resistance they had faced.

According to Ammerman,

> There would be an unspoken bond among these crusaders, a conviction that the churches that had nurtured them into the Christian faith had also been terribly wrong. Many, for the sake of conscience, would not remain in the denomination of their birth. Some of the brightest and most committed of the denomination’s young leaders of the 1950s would put their talents to use in the service of others. And some of the activists who stayed would move out to the very fringes of the denomination.

Other younger Baptists of the 1960s and 1970s continued to be nurtured in their commitments to progressive change within the denomination. They made the Baptist Student Union their home or found an outlet for their energies in programs of the Home Mission Board. The BSU, a campus-based ministry of the Sunday School Board, provided the influx of baby-boom college students with a place to air their doubts and work out a faith that made sense of the intellectual and social world in which they lived. BSU students in the 1960s challenged all the assumptions under which they had been raised, and materials and leadership from Nashville offered resources for their journeys.\(^{50}\)

Thus the formative power of the subculture is evident in a number of Baptists who developed views that were less captive to southern culture, albeit sometimes mistaken at certain points. It is worth noting that most of them first encountered this aspect of the subculture through higher education, to which many other Baptists had no access. At any rate, there were enough progressives or “dissenters” to constitute a second minority or “subversive subculture,” and David Stricklin argues that figures such as Will D. Campbell, Clarence Jordan, and Carlyle Marney “posed personal and institutional threats to the mainstream power structure of Southern Baptists and helped prompt the rise to power of a fundamentalist faction within the SBC.” In a word, progressives dissented from what had become “a subculture of accommodation to the larger culture of southern

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\(^{50}\) Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 66.
Although this taxonomy is imprecise, it suggests that conservatives did not merely want to impose their theology on the SBC but had been excluded from its “mainstream power structure.” Of course, many had separated themselves by supporting the institutions and publications of the evangelical subculture that had developed in the wake of the fundamentalist-modernist conflict, often in lieu of contributing to the Cooperative Program. “Some were in small country churches that had always been isolated from the denomination. Others were in huge ‘mega-churches’ that were almost denominations in themselves. Their structural independence facilitated (and was facilitated by) their growing criticism of Southern Baptist schools and materials.”

It is difficult to determine the extent to which conservatives were angered by opposition to the Vietnam War or support for women in ministry, for example, let alone the extent to which they resented the outcome of the civil rights movement or possessed a desire for control, as some scholars have asserted. It is easier to see that they perceived a threat to their understanding of biblical authority and that a series of incidents helped galvanize them into action, even if many had not been aware of or interested in denominational affairs apart from missions. The first incident occurred in 1961 when Broadman Press, a division of the Sunday School Board, published a book by Ralph H. Elliott, a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in which he advocated a nonliteral reading of certain passages in Genesis. The ensuing outcry led to the dismissal of Elliott and the formation of a committee charged with revising the Baptist


52 Ammerman, Baptist Battles, 73.

Faith and Message. Prominent pastor Herschel H. Hobbs, then the president of the SBC, chaired the committee and made a point of invoking the legacy of Mullins, who had chaired the original committee. Yet the strategy did not work as well in 1963 as it had in 1925 and indeed played into a growing mistrust of bureaucracy on the part of many Southern Baptists. Furthermore, conservatives objected not only to Elliott’s views but also to denominationalists’ apparent indifference to their concerns and were determined to continue the fight.

In 1969 Broadman published a commentary on Genesis and Exodus in which the authors relied on the historical-critical method, prompting another outcry. That same year, however, it also published Why I Preach That the Bible Is Literally True by W. A. Criswell, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas. Criswell had denounced the resolution supporting the Brown decision but had been elected president of the SBC in 1968 after changing his position on desegregation, and he presided over the 1970 annual meeting that voted to withdraw the commentary and proceeded to rally kindred spirits under the banner of biblical inerrancy, which served as a shorthand for the rhetorically effective argument that many denominationalists were liberals. They soon realized that they had little capacity to effect change, but toward the end of the decade, Paul Pressler, a judge from Houston, and Paige Patterson, the president of a Bible college founded by Criswell, devised and implemented a ten-year plan to replace moderate leaders by repeatedly winning the convention presidency and thereby gaining the power to appoint


members to denominational boards. Whatever the degree of diversity in the convention, as moderate historian Barry Hankins says, “conservatives were able to force rank-and-file Southern Baptists to make a choice, and when forced to choose, the majority sided with the conservatives.” The rest is history, so to speak.

The rise of the conservative movement in the SBC certainly paralleled and benefited from the rise of the religious right as well as the resurgence of the Republican Party in the Reagan Era, meaning that it was related to the postwar revival of evangelicalism and the backlash against civil rights and the counterculture of the 1960s. At a deeper level, however, it reflects the close identification of Baptists with their nation and its politics. Using surveys taken during the controversy, Ammerman notes strong correlations between differences over strictly theological issues (other than basic doctrines) and those over social or political issues, but she concludes that the theme that runs through all of them is that of “individual freedom versus strict codes of belief and conduct” and therefore that the “root issues” over which the parties were fighting were biblical inerrancy for conservatives and soul competency for moderates. Of all the factors involved, divergent responses to the “new cultural situation” revealed by the weakening of the Bible Belt were crucial:

Each side was seeking out a viable place in the newly pluralistic world in which they found themselves. To accept the modern rules of religious civility and individual choice was indeed to make a home for oneself in the modern situation, even if other aspects of modernity were questioned. This is the world to which moderates sought to adapt themselves. They were willing to leave their Southern church-like status to become a denomination in the larger American religious mosaic. The dissidents within this denomination, however, were responding


57 Ammerman, Baptist Battles, 112.
differently to change. In a newly pluralistic setting, they were seeking to reestablish homogeneity. They would recreate inside the religious world what was no longer viable in the world outside.⁵⁸

There is considerable truth to this interpretation, but it underestimates the goals of conservatives. For the first generation, theology, particularly inerrancy, was central to their criticism of denominationalists. However, whereas Criswell was a thoroughly homegrown leader, a number of younger conservatives ventured outside the Southern Baptist world, literally and figuratively, and came to identify with northern evangelicals who were offering a robust critique of American culture. Hankins argues that these conservatives sensed the growing unease in their own denomination and responded by developing “a new Southern Baptist public personality or posture”:

This is not to deny that theology played a major role in the SBC conservative movement. But, why did these leaders decide that theology was so important, and why did so many Southern Baptists agree that if the theology of the denomination were not narrowed and more clearly defined, the denomination would lose its ability to function as an instrument of God in this world? The short answer is that conservative leaders came to believe that America, including the South, was in the throes of a cultural crisis that necessitated a warlike struggle against the forces that were hostile to evangelical faith. The first step in the process of engaging the popular culture was to reestablish a theological foundation for resistance. The second step was to win control of the denominational machinery that would be put into the service of cultural warfare. The third step was to fight and win that culture war.⁵⁹

**The Theological Bind of Post-Subculture Baptists**

No culture-war issue motivated conservatives more than abortion, despite the fact that they had all but ignored it until after the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, which even Criswell initially supported. Yet it did not take long for them to come

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⁵⁸ Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 166.

to believe that “the legalization of abortion signaled that something was profoundly wrong with American culture,” leading them to ask, in Hankins’ words, “how could some moderate professors and denominational bureaucrats buy into the pro-choice argument?” The short answer was that those leaders had bought into the “secular progressivist impulse,” which indicated to conservatives that there was also a theological problem within the SBC. It is true that some had done so, partly because progressives had been on the right side of the race issue, but more were simply unwilling to pursue legislation that would enforce their convictions. Although they based this position on Baptist principles, Hankins argues that they were also influenced by the liberal political theory of philosopher John Rawls, in which personal convictions grounded in comprehensive doctrines, religious or secular, that attempt to explain all of life are deemed unable to function as sources of public policy, and thus limitations on individual freedom, in a pluralistic society because agreement about them is impossible. Regardless of the extent to which they consciously appropriated Rawls, moderates developed a pro-choice argument that not only resulted in the abortion debate in the convention mirroring the liberal-communitarian debate in American society but also “played directly into the hands of the conservatives who were attempting to unseat them from positions of power.”

The most prominent example of a moderate who advanced a Rawlsian argument is Foy Valentine, a former executive director of the Christian Life Commission, who had advocated for civil rights throughout the 1960s and urged the SBC to adopt a resolution

60 Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon, 44-45.

taking a pro-choice position in 1971. Valentine “repeatedly emphasized the grave moral nature of abortion, rejected the notion that it was a purely private and individual matter, and pointed out that, increasingly, Americans were not comfortable with the abortion-on-demand status quo.” However, he linked the pro-life position to both the religious right and the Catholic Church and led the commission to uphold a contrary position until he retired under pressure in 1987.  

A far more ardent example is Paul D. Simmons, a professor at Southern Seminary from 1969 to 1993, when he was forced out. In Birth and Death (1983) Simmons takes a somewhat measured approach to the abortion debate; in an earlier article incorporated into the book, however, he claims that the involvement of fundamentalism in that debate has produced “a type of neo-fascism that threatens the very foundations of American life,” adding that it is “Puritanical” and anti-science. He associates pro-life fundamentalists with nationalism (and Catholicism), including “hawkish foreign policy” and a “crusade ethic,” and accuses them of lacking a concern for justice in that “focusing on a moralistic issue such as abortion avoids confronting the great moral problems of the day such as racial injustice, ecocide, the threat of nuclear war and world hunger.”

According to Simmons, the main problem with the pro-life position is that it misinterprets the Bible, which portrays the human person as “a complex, many-sided creature with the godlike ability and responsibility to make choices.” Not only does the fetus in general not meet these characteristics, “not every fetus has the potentiality for reflecting the image of God,” meaning that abortion is needed in cases of “radical fetal

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62 Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon, 172.

deformity.” The one who does meet them is the pregnant woman, who, as “steward” of procreative powers and “co-creator” with God, has the right and responsibility to decide what is good “for herself, the fetus, and the future of humankind itself.” This understanding is supported by the principles of the priesthood of all believers and soul competency as well as two related factors, “the experiential basis of religious and moral judgments” and “the role of conscience in personal moral decision-making,” all of which are applicable to euthanasia and other bioethical issues.64 In a later article in which he refers to abortion opponents as “anti-choice” and cites Rawls in support of his argument, Simmons also claims that “without ever saying so, Roe v. Wade was an exercise in protecting religious liberty.”65

A critique of Simmons’ argument is beyond the scope of this chapter, and like Hudgins he is only one example, and a relatively extreme one at that. Still, he does show that there were persons in high-profile denominational positions who promulgated views that most Southern Baptists would have found not merely mistaken but abhorrent. More to the point, he represents several problematic developments in moderate theology, which has been defined by oppositional rhetoric, has reflected polarized social and political discourse, and has lent itself to being construed in exceedingly individualistic ways. Simmons tends not to mention Baptists by name despite invoking principles widely associated with them. Writing in a volume of reflections on the controversy, however, he asserts that “I am a Baptist to the core of my being, believing in personal conversion,


65 Paul D. Simmons, “Religious Liberty and the Abortion Debate,” Journal of Church and State 32, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 577, 581.
individual soul competence, direct responsibility to God, and freedom of conscience” and that “my teaching and writings were fully consistent with Baptist beliefs from Roger Williams to E. Y. Mullins.” These beliefs mean that on any issue, “the believer is the responsible moral agent who must decide in faith how to resolve the questions posed by a particular problem,” with guidance from the Bible, the Christian community, and the Holy Spirit.66 Discussing euthanasia in another recent book, he credits Baptists for making a claim for the rights of the individual conscience in matters of faith against the “imperial church,” then asserts that “my commitment is to the belief that each person has equal access to God, thus making each person an authority unto his or her own self in matters of conscience or belief. Personal autonomy, not heteronomy, wins out in human rights.”67

Hankins notes that for Simmons and like-minded Baptists, “Rawlsian liberalism usually results in individual rights trumping all competing claims.” Furthermore, his argument that a pro-choice stance was morally good, based on a Rawlsian “public reason” that happens to coincide with biblical teaching and Baptist history but effectively renders them irrelevant, belied moderates’ claim that it was morally neutral and consistent with a view of government that left ethical decisions to individuals. Although they may not have noticed this point, “conservatives did recognize, intuitively at least, that what moderates called neutrality was actually the legitimation of a pro-choice stance


that was anything but neutral." Since the controversy, moderates have taken an approach that undermines any attempt to address social and political issues on theological grounds and removes much of the incentive for listening to a community or denominational body with respect to any ethical issue. They have done so partly because they have continued to accept the characteristically modern view that ethics primarily concerns individual decision-making as well as the peculiarly Baptist view that the individual has direct access to God and partly because they have forgotten the earlier Baptist view that the church is sometimes radical in relation to the state. Valentine, for example, argued that whereas early Christians “were far too few in numbers and much too weak in influence to affect Caesar’s decisions, shape Caesar’s policies, or guide Caesar’s government,” Christians in America are able and indeed obligated to do these things, to commit to “responsibility” rather than “withdrawal,” because “the alternative is to leave the running of the land to the wisdom of unbelievers, and this alternative is unacceptable to the people of God.”

The point is not that the people of God should avoid politics altogether, that government never uses its power for good, or that Valentine and other Baptists were incapable of opposing it but that a posture of service to the state is very dangerous for the church. Perhaps the most notable Southern Baptist to challenge both this posture and the above views is James Wm. McClendon, Jr., the subject of chapter four, who argues that because foundationalism is untenable and there is no such thing as an unmediated relationship with God, the communities and narratives in which the individual

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68 Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon, 178, 180-81.

participates, including those of the church and the state, are far more consequential than his or her ability to make decisions. McClendon and Simmons were contemporaries, but their understandings of ethics diverged considerably, which is evident in Simmons’ review of McClendon’s *Ethics*. After acknowledging the validity of McClendon’s criticism of the method of “decisionism” when grounded in reason, Simmons defends such a method when grounded in experience, then all but dismisses the narrative approach for not dealing adequately with method:

Even stories must be analyzed for their value and normativeness for Christian ethics. What norms are yielded by a story? How do we deal with conflicting interpretations? Even one’s selection of stories reveals ethical bias which is not always examined. The problem is never simply one of time and circumstance (we live two millennia after the biblical stories), nor is it a matter of lacking integrity or fidelity to the central narrative (people of good faith, impeccable integrity, and superior intelligence disagree as to their meanings). The problem is one of epistemology and imaginative application. Our story is never quite the same as their story. It cannot be both by the nature of faith, which is an ongoing pilgrimage of discovery, and because of the time and circumstance gap. There is often no story to deal with contemporary problems—as in the dilemma of women in the church or bioethical issues.\(^70\)

Simmons identifies some real deficiencies in McClendon’s work, but what stands out is his claim that “there is often no story to deal with contemporary problems,” which suggests that Christians can and must address them with little or no guidance from the Bible, the church, or tradition. Again, this is only one example, but it illustrates the bind created by Baptist theology as it has developed in America, especially in the South. To their credit, conservatives recognized that the new cultural situation demanded a new, more theological and ecumenical approach to Baptist life earlier than moderates did, if the latter recognized it at all. As Leonard says, “The protective cocoons of cultural and

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\(^70\) Paul D. Simmons, review of *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics*, by James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Review and Expositor* 84, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 333-34.
denominational solidarity could not endure indefinitely. As the statistics became less impressive and the constituency less southern, as participation in denominational programs became less uniform and the old myths no longer provided a sense of identity, the time was ripe for remythologizing Southern Baptist identity.”71 For their part, Hankins says, conservatives “are remythologizing the whole of America, not as a Christian entity, but as a culture that has ceased to be broadly Christian and relatively intact” and, in tandem, “seek to fashion an identity that is more confessional than tribal.” In doing so, “They have recaptured the Baptist tradition of dissent that was lost when the denomination dominated the South.”72

For all the positives of a confessional identity and a critique of culture, the biblical-inerrancy and culture-war stances adopted by conservatives are questionable at best. The former is just as dependent on foundationalism as the soul-competency stance adopted by moderates, while the latter has failed just as completely as the adaptation or accommodation stance. More important, neither party has recognized that the dissolution of the subculture demands a reassessment of Baptist ecclesiology, and both are becoming further mired in cultural captivity as they lose the ability to catechize and socialize their members into a shared way of life. After all, Simmons and others may have insisted that Baptists could make good decisions independent of external authority, but most were in fact predisposed to make certain decisions, good and bad, by the mediation of their congregations and denomination. Today, however, they are far less capable of dealing with complex issues and indeed everyday life as the church rather than as isolated

71 Leonard, God’s Last and Only Hope, 176.
72 Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon, 272-75.
individuals who treat congregations and denominations as mere affinity groups. In the
case of moderates, stubborn adherence to Baptist distinctives only exacerbates the
problem. In the absence of an interpretive community, particularly one connected to other
communities, soul competency reduces theology and ethics to a matter of the individual
will even as it obscures the social forces that shape that will. Therefore the Bible usually
ends up meaning what the individual decides that it will mean, and this decision rarely
challenges how he or she already understands the world apart from divine revelation. A
pressing question, then, is whether there is another way to remythologize or reenvision
Baptist identity after the dissolution of the subculture, a way not defined not by the story
of America and its culture but by that of the church in its catholicity.
CHAPTER IV
A POSTMODERN BAPTIST VISION

This chapter discusses the theological project of James Wm. McClendon, Jr., who responded to the cultural and philosophical captivity of his fellow Southern Baptists and members of other believers churches by re-envisioning Baptist identity as modeled on New Testament and Radical Reformation communities and engaged with other Christian traditions. It first situates McClendon in the context of the Southern Baptist subculture and then analyzes his theology, particularly the critique of philosophical foundationalism and the conception of the baptist vision developed in his Systematic Theology. It argues that McClendon understood the nature and implications of the postmodern turn in philosophy and the post-Christian trajectory of culture more fully than his contemporaries and was able to demonstrate two theological imperatives: first, discarding modern notions about the Bible and personal experience while retaining the historical convictions of the Baptist heritage with respect to the individual and the community, and second, bringing that heritage into contact with the broader Christian heritage in order to recover the distinctiveness of the church in contrast to the world. It also argues that although adoption or renewal of the baptist vision could be an important first step in liberating Baptist theology and communities from captivity, recognition of the mediation of the church throughout history will require a catholic vision as well.
The Struggle of Baptist Theology

The late Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr. (1924-2000), begins *Ethics*, the first volume of his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, by asserting that "theology means struggle":

The struggle begins with the humble fact that the church is not the world. This means that Christians face an interior struggle, inasmuch as the line between the church and the world passes right through each Christian heart. It nevertheless means that the standpoint, the basic point of view, the theology of the church is not the standpoint, basic point of view, theology of the world. The church’s story will not interpret the world to the world’s satisfaction. Hence there is a temptation (no weaker word will do) for the church to deny her “counter, original, spare, strange” starting point in Abraham and Jesus and to give instead a self-account or theology that will seem true to the world on the world’s own terms.¹

These ideas are relevant to Christians of all kinds, in all times and places, but they convey something more specific in light of McClendon’s background. As chapter one explains, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) had long been marked by “cultural captivity,” that is, an intertwinement with southern culture and consequent inability to dissent from its norms. That McClendon begins his exploration of theology in general and ethics in particular with the fundamental contrast between the church and the world and the need for the former to remain distinct suggests that he has his own Southern Baptist people in mind. He neither demonizes the “world,” which signifies the fallen nature of creation as a whole, nor idealizes the church, because “a second humble fact is that Christianity itself is not one congruent whole. If the world is divided, so is the church.”² Yet he insists that a major task of theology is to pursue the unity of the church, and not exclusively on


Baptist terms, in order for Christians to be able to criticize or resist the world without withdrawing from it.

The central theme of *Systematic Theology* is the baptist (with a lowercase “b”) vision, which defines and animates a type of Christianity that is distinct from both Protestantism and Catholicism and comprised of Baptists and other groups (e.g., Brethren, Mennonites) with origins in the Radical Reformation, a type sometimes designated the “Believers Church” or the “Free Church.” Christianity of any type entails the acquisition of a new vision. After all, “the world is not Christian … but the eyes through which we Christians see the world are redeemed eyes; it is through these eyes that we must be trained to look if we would see without double or narrow vision.” The designation “baptists” may be inappropriate, given that it does not refer to a concrete ecclesial body and therefore may hinder the reception of McClendon’s project by its intended audience. However, it reflects his sincere assessment of his tradition and sincere commitment to ecumenism. As Baptist theologian Barry Harvey says, it is “a concession to the fact that at present ‘Christianity itself is not one congruent whole,’ but without capitulating to a divided church.” It also reflects his experience as a Southern Baptist, beginning with an episode during his childhood in Shreveport when his family’s maid, who was black and a Baptist, was turned away from a revival service at First Baptist Church, his mother’s congregation (his father was a Methodist). McClendon had been deeply involved at First Baptist, but he never viewed it or other southern white churches

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the same way again: “Though I could not name it, I was ashamed of the system, the whole wrong entrenched system of division in Christ’s church.”

McClendon was a freshman at the University of Texas and an active member of a Southern Baptist church when the United States entered World War II, and he promptly joined the Naval Reserve but did not board a combat ship until the day the war ended. Once in Japan he saw the devastation caused by the firebombing of Tokyo, an experience that made little impression at the time but was significant in retrospect. After finishing his tour of duty, he matriculated at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he studied with ethicist T. B. Maston, an advocate of civil rights, and was later ordained by a Southern Baptist congregation. He returned to Southwestern Seminary after earning a second master’s degree at Princeton Theological Seminary to pursue a doctorate in theology under the direction of W. T. Conner, who had completed his own doctorate under the direction of E. Y. Mullins. Conner died soon after, however, leaving McClendon essentially on his own, and he made the best of the situation, reading widely in contemporary theology. In 1954 he began teaching at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, but in 1966 he was forced to resign from his tenured position for helping send several students to march with Martin Luther King, Jr., in Alabama. He obtained another position at the University of San Francisco, becoming the first Protestant to teach theology at a Catholic college in the United States, only to be terminated again for

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leading a group of faculty in publishing an open letter opposing American involvement in Vietnam and supporting students in antiwar actions.

As he moved from temporary appointment to temporary appointment over the next few years, McClendon’s perspective continued to change. He recounts that “I found myself teaching a January session on the ethics of war and peace in an eastern college. There it dawned upon me that I had come to oppose not only Asian wars, not only unjust wars, but all wars.”

After finally obtaining another permanent position at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, he found himself “theologically uncomfortable” with the Episcopal institution’s both-Protestant-and-Catholic ethos and wondered, “Was the old Baptist claim that we were neither Protestant nor Catholic correct? Did our often-denied root in Anabaptism, the Radical Reformation, exist after all?” McClendon’s Southern Baptist teachers had denied this claim, but he reconsidered it after reading Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* in the mid 1970s. “Implicit in it I found all the old awareness of being part of a Christianity somehow unlike the standard-account sort I had worked so hard to learn and to teach, yet somehow like what I had known as a youth growing up Baptist.” In a word, he had undergone a “second conversion” and become an “‘Anabaptist’ Baptist.”

McClendon soon set out to construct a theology that would represent the Radical Reformation heritage. Although he incorporated Baptists into that heritage, thereby taking a position in the long-running debate about whether their origins were Anabaptist in addition to Puritan Separatist, he never taught at another Baptist institution, and

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8 McClendon, “Radical Road One Baptist Took,” 506.

although he acknowledged that it would be accurate to describe him as an “alienated, left-wing Southern Baptist,” he preferred to be known as a “radical Christian” who had more in common with Anabaptists, Pentecostals, and so on. His alienation was related to his sense that both “wings” in the SBC were equally misguided with respect to theology, but he was intimately familiar with the strengths of the Southern Baptist subculture as well as its weaknesses. Mennonite theologian Mark Thiessen Nation concludes that “McClendon never ceased being Southern Baptist. … And although his theology was quite deliberately written for a broad ecumenical audience and rooted in the baptist tradition, McClendon never intended it to be something other than Baptist theology. He really did believe that there could be no “theology-in-general.” This is evidenced by the embrace of his theology by a significant number of Baptists who identify with the moderate, losing side of the controversy that split the SBC in the late twentieth century.

McClendon perceived that his people, along with many other Baptists, had become captive to culture not because they had failed to adopt a “progressive” approach to theology and ethics but because they had failed to nurture the vision of a people who had borne subversive witness for three centuries, a failure closely related to their support for the American experiment. Once religious liberty had been achieved, Baptists in America gradually lost the ability to discern the line between the church and the world, but they remained confident in the sociopolitical arrangement even as the broadly


11 Mark Thiessen Nation, “James Wm. McClendon, Jr.: A Particular Baptist Theologian,” Journal of European Baptist Studies 1, no. 2 (January 2001): 54. He cites an unpublished essay, written in 1978, in which McClendon states that he would consider again “being in name, as I have never ceased to be in fact, a Southern Baptist theologian” and that “there is no theology-in-general, only the theology which consciously or otherwise springs from engagement with a particular community.”
Christian culture and, in the case of Southern Baptists, their own subculture dissolved. They no longer knew how to embody a distinct way of life, let alone what theology they needed in order to do so. Systematic Theology is structured in response to this situation in that it begins with Ethics, not Doctrine, and concludes with Witness. As Catholic theologian Robert Barron says, McClendon contends that “the conversation with the wider culture will never be effective unless Christians clearly know what it is that they teach and that they will never know what they teach until they have practiced the Way of Jesus.”¹² This is one reason why he includes biographies of flawed but compelling “witnesses” in each volume. According to Baptist theologian Kimlyn J. Bender,

Theology is struggle because it is a call to obedience in the ambiguities of life, and it begins with the recognition that this call is not first one to partake in a profession or conduct a research program, but to live into and thus discern and articulate a proper manner of discipleship for the people of God and oneself against what can only be called, with more charity than deserved, the lesser angels of our nature. Realizing that this is the struggle of theology … would go a long way in helping those who themselves struggle with understanding how a volume entitled Ethics can precede a volume titled Doctrine when both are subtitled Systematic Theology.¹³

Furthermore, McClendon perceives that captivity to American culture is inseparable from captivity to modern philosophy, especially the notion that individuals can acquire indubitable knowledge through unmediated reason or experience, and he situates Systematic Theology in the context of the so-called “postmodern turn” in theology. In his words, its stance “reflects a wider conceptual shift from a strictly modern understanding in which all knowledge is supposed to rest upon some universally

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available foundations, to an understanding some have labeled postmodern … in which claims to knowledge are less breathtaking or absolute, but are more integrally tied to the actual tasks at hand.”14 Its structure also implicitly critiques foundationalism, for in treating Ethics chronologically (and pedagogically) first, it eschews modern appeals to logical propositions or sense impressions. The relationship between structure and stance is not entirely clear until Witness, in which McClendon comments that some readers “charitably thought that like a good house builder I must surely have poured a complete concrete foundation before erecting the rest of the structure, only I had concealed it till the end, meaning to show last what had really come first. That was not so.”15 The following sections examine his explicit critique of foundationalism before turning to his conception of the Baptist vision.

The Postmodern Turn in Theology

Following Stephen Toulmin, McClendon argues in Witness that modernity began in the seventeenth century and proceeded not in one wave, as is commonly thought, but in two, one prior to the Renaissance and one subsequent to it. The second wave is associated with Isaac Newton and especially René Descartes, who concluded that although traditions disagreed and senses deceived, he could not doubt his own existence (“I think, therefore I am”); the implication was that “science and philosophy alike rested not on churchly authority but on a self-authorizing rationality.” Scientific rationalism or “Cartesian modernity” not only emerged in tandem with the nation-state but also


15 McClendon, Witness, 7-8.
discarded valuable features of the Renaissance and thus constituted “a step down from still earlier modern times.” Importantly, their descendants may have been children of the Enlightenment, but “the baptists of the sixteenth century [i.e., Anabaptists] were children of the Renaissance. Their return to origins was the central motif of their own times; their call for an authentic Christian morality was the very goal of contemporary humanists; their persisting (and if need be, defiant) Christian faith appeared in the midst of an age of renewed faith.” Overall, Cartesian modernity should now be recognized “not as the achievement of timeless philosophical truth but as a contingent response to the circumstances of its own time,” a time of great instability that welcomed the promise of “a universal reason, free of partisan politics and religion, that could restore civility and sanity.”

The second wave of modernity split into two main streams, both of which retained Descartes’ mind-body dualism. The rationalist stream followed him in arguing that a foundation of clear and distinct ideas could be found in inmost thoughts or intuitions; the empiricist stream followed Francis Bacon in arguing that it could be found in sense data or experience. During the Age of Enlightenment, some thinkers (e.g., John Locke) were optimistic about the acquisition of knowledge, others (e.g., David Hume) were skeptical, and still others (e.g., Immanuel Kant) attempted to bridge the divide with a priori concepts, to the point that the original goal of a universal reason was “largely forgotten.” Three distinctive features mark this wave. The first is a preoccupation with certainty or locating a foundation of indubitable ideas, that is, an epistemology or theory of


17 McClendon, Witness, 205, 207-8.
knowledge that can be mapped as an axis with optimistic foundationalism at one end and the response of skepticism at the other. The second is a concern for making language representative of those ideas and therefore universally available, that is, a theory of language that can be mapped as an axis with representationalism at one end and the response of expressivism or emotivism—the theory that words have significance not insofar as they represent objects but insofar as they express attitudes, emotions, and intentions—at the other. The third is the conviction that knowledge and indeed science, politics, and philosophy itself can be reduced to the solitary individual, that is, a metaphysic that can be mapped as an axis with individualism at one end and the response of collectivism (e.g., Karl Marx) at the other. Each feature contrasts with the dominant view of the Middle Ages, for which “truth and certainty lay in authority, language functioned (on the realist view) by participation in that which it represented, and reality was not atomistic but formed a hierarchy.”

The second wave of modernity profoundly affected many Christians and was reflected in the “dual foundationalisms” of fundamentalism and liberalism. Among baptists, the referential theory of language exemplified by Locke “was reflected positively in the role of narrative experience displayed in baptist piety (singing ‘I love to tell the story’), but negatively in a thin and diminishing discourse about God,” and religious individualism “captured both these threads and wound them together in a new metaphysical individualism (as in E. Y. Mullins’s ‘soul competency’).” Meanwhile a third wave of modernity, associated with the Romantics and G. W. F. Hegel, arrived to criticize the Enlightenment in the early nineteenth century and was later appropriated by

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liberation theology. Postmodern thought arrived in the mid twentieth century and soon split into analytic and Continental streams. The latter—associated with the poststructuralism and deconstruction of Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—is more well-known, but McClendon concludes that it shares enough of the features outlined above to be considered a fourth wave of modernity. He then turns to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein to describe the promise of one sort of analytic postmodernity for theology.

McClendon’s description of modernity is debatable, his portrayal of Wittgenstein as a genuine, albeit unorthodox, Christian highly so. Yet his use of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy to juxtapose three distinctive features of postmodernity with those of modernity is helpful. Whereas the latter are marked by polarization, the former are marked by interrelatedness. The first feature of postmodernity is the displacement of metaphysics that are strictly individual with a metaphysic that is also communal. After writing the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), an attempt to define the relationship between language and reality, Wittgenstein remained troubled by the doctrine of Cartesian privacy, “the belief that the self knows itself, and secondarily knows other matters, from a standpoint of sovereign isolation. If this was correct, then (1) the universe consisted of isolated individuals, (2) language was essentially a private affair, and (3) wanting sure foundations, doubt about everything lurked everywhere.” He overcame this doctrine in the posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) by arguing against the reduction of the meaning of a sentence to “the psychology of a particular subject whose

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thought just happens to ‘fit’ that sentence, irrespective of its use in any current language-game (§138). So the crucial move has been made: ‘Subjects’ have been turned into speakers whose roles in language are social.” The implication was that “no human self was alone in a private world. Solipsism was unthinkable.”

The second feature of postmodernity, then, is a new account of language. Here Wittgenstein contradicted his claim in the *Tractatus* that matters of religion, ethics, and aesthetics were inaccessible to philosophy and overcame two modern assumptions represented by his teacher, Bertrand Russell: that “language had an essence (such as referring)” and that “religious beliefs belonged to a private, inner sphere.” He overcame the first by showing that words do not constitute propositions that make up the world but are part of the world and come together in activities or “language-games.” No language-game “can even be understood as a human activity (no proper sense of ‘meaning’ can arise from its words) apart from the *forms of life*, practices such as building, shopping, playing, or fighting, that make up human endeavors. Together these practices constitute our world.” Wittgenstein overcame the second modern assumption by showing that the Cartesian separation of body and soul is untenable and that there is no such thing as a private language in which a soul or mind names a sensation “pain,” for example, in order to communicate it to other souls. It is not that words do not refer to anything but that reference is only one move among many in language-games, which designate a wide range of phenomena but nevertheless account for the conditions in which a certain


vocabulary has meaning in everyday life. Along with J. L. Austin’s more exact account of speech acts, Wittgenstein’s account shows language “not on the Tractatus model of propositions picturing clusters of atomic facts, but on a model thoroughly woven into the fabric of (linguistic and other) activity. Language-games proceed (like other games) according to rules; not to observe its rules is to fail to play any game. The rules of a language are so commonly recognized that they have a special name—we call them grammar.”23 Whereas classical thought generally regarded ideas as determining both reality and language, and modern thought regarded experience as determining ideas that in turn determined language, this sort of postmodern thought regards language as enabling both ideas and experience.

Although Wittgenstein saw that Christianity was more about life than thought, he also saw that the relationship of language to practices meant that “one could make sense of Christianity’s teaching as well as of its ethics,” provided that one had faith.24 In his words, it “offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe!”25 The third feature of postmodernity, then, is the avoidance of both foundationalism and skepticism. According to McClendon, Wittgenstein realized that “religious knowing and believing and confessing were all interior to language-games and practices. There could be no settling of the accuracy or verity of religious beliefs apart from participation in the forms of life that were constituted in part by these very beliefs.” Like some other beliefs, religious beliefs often rest not on the same ground as ordinary beliefs but on interconnected


24 McClendon, Witness, 254.

“pictures” within the context of a community’s form of life. This does not mean that such pictures are unreasonable, providing grounds for skepticism; it means that they must be confirmed not on the basis of logical propositions or sense impressions but in relation to a whole system. It also does not mean that such beliefs are indecipherable by those who do not share a form of life; it means that “to understand the convictions one must know the grammar of their utterance.”26 Theology, for example, must study how terms such as “God” and “true” are used in Christian forms of life and how those uses restrain or shape ideas about and experiences of God. In Wittgenstein’s words, “one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house.”27 Thus he replaced modern foundationalism with “a web of understanding, interdependence, and shared practice that marked his invention of the postmodern world.”28 The idea of a web or net of beliefs is associated with W. V. Quine, whose epistemological holism differs from that of Wittgenstein in certain respects but resembles it in those discussed here.29

This summary of McClendon’s account may raise as many questions as it answers. Still, the point is not that Wittgenstein provides a new “Christian philosophy” but that he represents a sort of postmodernity that can help Christian theology navigate the fragments of modernity without succumbing to relativism. For one thing, he makes it easier to see that the only foundation on which theologians may build is Jesus Christ and that such building must be undertaken in community and within forms of life, of which

26 McClendon, Witness, 256-57.


28 McClendon, Witness, 259.

the Southern Baptist subculture is an example. For another, he “escaped from intellectual modernity without being thrown back upon unacceptable premodern alternatives— without antiquating himself,” thereby closing the gap that had emerged as philosophers ceased to be supportive of Christianity, or at least religion in general, and began to harshly criticize it, primarily for not meeting the epistemological standards of the modern paradigm. Some Christians responded by continuing to seek a theology that would meet those standards; others began to seek one that would be sealed off from philosophy and thus from relativism, effectively becoming fideists.\(^30\) Relativism is a real concern, of course, and McClendon responds to it at length in a book coauthored with atheist James M. Smith but summarizes that response by stating that “relativism fails, is defused, not because the fact that it seizes upon (a plural world in which convictions differ from group to group) is mistaken, but because relativism cannot tell what to do with that fact. … It tries to occupy a standpoint (‘the view from nowhere’) from which it can survey all possible standpoints and find them ‘relative,’ while at the same time it claims that there is no such standpoint.”\(^31\)

In an article that preceded *Witness*, McClendon and Nancey Murphy (his wife) assert that the upshot of a postmodern theology with respect to ethics would be, echoing Alasdair MacIntyre, the replacement of the modern question “How shall I decide what to do?” with the question “What kind of people are we to be?”

Moderns assume that any individual (given the basic sensory and intellectual equipment) is as competent as any other to form justified beliefs and speak the language. Society’s knowledge and language are merely the collection of the


individuals’. However, in postmodern thought the community itself plays an indispensable role. … It is the community (and not merely a dominant collective or a tyrannical majority) that must decide where to make changes in the Quinian net of beliefs. The conventions, the language games, in which one participates precede individual speech and determine what can and cannot be said by individuals in that community. In short, language and the search for knowledge are practices, dependent upon tradition—they are communal achievements.32

The use of the word “competent” may be intentional, given the dominance of the notion of soul competency in Southern Baptist theology. At any rate, although McClendon apparently became less comfortable with MacIntyre’s conception of tradition and was too dismissive of “premodern alternatives,” his account of postmodern thought prepares the way for considering the question “What kind of people are Baptists to be?”

The Future of the Baptist Vision

McClendon frames the baptist vision as a response to a problem, namely, why baptists have produced so little formal theology relative to other Christian traditions. Early baptists may have been preoccupied with survival, but Baptists in America were limited by, among other things, the Calvinist-Arminian and fundamentalist-modernist polarities that resulted from the emergence of revivalism and that of historical criticism and Darwinism, respectively. In the end, however,

the baptists in all their variety and disunity failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices, their own guiding vision, a resource for theology unlike the prevailing tendencies round about them. Some baptists were attracted to current fashions and tried theologizing in those fashions. The results were disappointing, and the consequence was further distrust of theology … Failing in this way, baptists became the victim of ideologies left and right—and thereby became less

themselves, spiritually impoverishing both themselves and their neighbors in other Christian churches. It is worth noting that McClendon understands the renewal of the baptist vision to be important for the catholic (with a lowercase “c”) church, not just baptists.

Few if any baptists were shaped by these polarities more than Southern Baptists, and not just because of their cultural captivity. McClendon remarks elsewhere that the “fissure” between foundationalisms meant that “Baptists (large or small b) might by the grace of God survive the modern era, 1650 to our own time, but only with great difficulty could they be baptists in it.” The opposing sides in the SBC have exemplified these foundationalisms even as they have claimed to be protecting the Baptist heritage from the other side. Two examples must suffice. On the conservative side, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., describes the controversy as a “conflict of visions”:

One group, identified here as the “Truth Party,” roots Baptist identity in a deep appreciation for our Baptist heritage and bold identification with the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The Truth Party insists that Baptist doctrine and polity are inescapably attached to a prior affirmation of biblical truth, to a clear understanding of biblical authority, and an affirmation of revealed truth as demanding our belief in certain doctrinal essentials.

The “Liberty Party” as described here roots Baptist identity in an ethos of individual liberty. The platform of this party is established upon an aggressive assertion of individual rights to interpretation, theological formulation, and experience. Though many members of this party give public assent to our most cherished doctrines, the central thrust of this group insists that personal experience is more important than propositional truth.

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33 McClendon, Ethics, 24-26.


Mohler then links the “liberal Protestantism” of the Liberty Party to the Enlightenment, not recognizing that his own brand of conservative Protestantism, particularly the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, is equally indebted to it.

Embodying Mohler’s portrayal of moderates, William E. Hull argues that “by emphasizing that their faith is a matter of experience, Baptists are affirming that Christianity is accessible to the senses if one will only pay attention, such as by hearing the gospel, reading Scripture, and observing the witness of the church. … But each individual must grapple with the claims made by these sensory impressions and come to convictions regarding their meaning.” He then criticizes rationalist theologies for emphasizing “ideas that may have come from thinkers living in any period and in any part of the world” instead of “[being] profoundly influenced by its immediate context.”

Hull’s kind of empiricism allows, even urges, Baptists to ignore the collective wisdom of their tradition and the church as a whole; Mohler’s kind of rationalism does the same by treating the Bible as a repository of propositions that can be known directly and with certainty by the individual. Moderates such as Hull also associate the former with the right to dissent: “Just as Baptists insist that the approach to God be direct and immediate, so must the access to Scripture be just as open and unencumbered without first filtering its truth through the lens of the reigning consensus. Only in this way does the unfettered Word retain its freedom to reform the church itself.”


37 Hull, Meaning of the Baptist Experience, 16.
provide a measure of freedom, it does not foster the communal identity necessary for thoughtful and substantive dissent.

Not only do both sides neglect the dependence of knowledge on forms of life, the illusion of unmediated truth ironically leaves individuals and, by extension, democratic congregations and denominations exceedingly susceptible to the “reigning consensus” of the “immediate context,” not to mention their own prejudices and presuppositions, especially in the absence of formation according to a narrative that transcends that context. In 1986 McClendon stated that “in the current battle among Southern Baptists, some are acting out of cover stories, stories whose roles in their lives are not clear to their owners or to others, either, so that the point of the struggle will not be reached, or its divisive features removed, until these unnoticed stories are brought out and brought under the schooling of the determinative narrative of Jesus Christ.”38 For the most part, those stories have yet to be brought out, but the dissolution of the Southern Baptist subculture presents an opportunity to reconsider “schooling” in the narrative of Christ as well as the heritage of baptists.

Anticipating the objection that “variety and disunity” makes a distinct theology impossible, McClendon acknowledges that baptists “are distinguished by no authoritative creed; no single set of doctrines marks them off from all others; no finespun theory particularizes their way of life; no private ‘revelation’ separates them from other Christians.” However, this is not a problem because their theology is properly defined not by doctrines or theories but by a shared vision, “vision” meaning “the guiding pattern by which a people (or, as here, a combination of peoples) shape their thought and practice as

that people or that combination. … The vision should serve as the touchstone by which authentic baptist convictions are discovered, described, and transformed, and thus as the organizing principle around which an authentic baptist theology can take shape.”

McClendon lists five themes commonly identified as distinguishing marks of baptists—biblicism, liberty, discipleship, community, and mission or witness—each of which has been proposed as an organizing principle by various scholars. He does not mention that conservatives and moderates have seized on biblicism and liberty, respectively, but he does state that the basic principles of free churches identified by Ernst Troeltsch—separation of church and state, voluntarism, and liberty of conscience—represent a formulation of identity that, although not inaccurate, “comes closer to providing a political theory than a theological organizing vision.” Furthermore, “What Troeltsch saw politically, Edgar Young Mullins had conceived in religious terms … Yet Mullins’s anthropocentric motto, ‘soul competency,’ was framed too much in terms of the rugged American individualism of Theodore Roosevelt to do justice to the shared discipleship baptist life requires.”

Whereas other traditions emphasize one or another of the marks, the baptist vision embraces all of them. Still, biblicism, rightly understood, is central in that Scripture in this vision effects a link between the church of the apostles and our own. So the vision can be expressed as a hermeneutical principle: shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community. In a motto, the church now is the primitive church and


the church on judgment day; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is our liberty, our obedience, till time’s end.

This is not meant as a denial of the facts of history, nor a rejection of their significance; it is a claim for the historic significance of this present time in the life of the church and therefore by implication of every other present time in its life. So far from rejecting the church’s history as some have charged, this baptist vision claims importance for every chapter of it.

The vision attempts to account for “every chapter” of Christian history by “[not] committing itself to literal eras of fall and datable periods of restitution,” as many baptists have.

Although McClendon frequently invokes the notion of a “Constantinian shift” to refer to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire and that of “Constantinianism” to refer to forms of Christianity that seek an alliance, formal or otherwise, with government power, he does not invoke them to describe an ontological fall, as if the church essentially ceased to exist between the reign of Constantine and the Reformation.

McClendon contends that the baptist vision can accommodate other interpretations of the marks without taking them to extremes such as rejecting historical-critical studies or “finding history’s meaning, with Troeltsch, chiefly in the social by-products of the church’s witness.” It can avoid “a dogmatic bibliolatry which could substitute attention to the book for participation in the life” (i.e., inerrancy). It can even accept Mullins’ theme of soul competency while avoiding his “anthropocentric individualism.”

Baptist philosopher Timothy D. F. Maddox asserts that McClendon’s biblicism “is not at odds with Mullins” because “a prior commitment to the notion of individual competence must be acknowledged, however tacitly, before notions of

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41 McClendon, Ethics, 30-31.

42 McClendon, Ethics, 31.
interpretation and appropriation of Scripture can be considered.”^43 Although it is true that the individual can interpret Scripture, to be of value soul competency would have to be detached from metaphysical individualism, which would be difficult if not impossible.

At any rate, McClendon not only avoids the false choice between modern foundationalism and postmodern relativism but also “eludes the simplifications of both the right and left in Baptist life” by reconstituting their “seemingly opposed” principles in a larger framework.^^44 However, it is not clear that this framework accounts for Christian history as fully as McClendon believes. He initially offers two illustrations of the baptist vision. The first is the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist in which “the bread (and wine) upon the altar, when consecrated, is the body (and blood) of Christ. Not ‘represents’ or ‘symbolizes,’ but is.” He quickly contrasts the Catholic sense in which the present church “is” the apostolic church with the baptist sense, which is “neither developmental nor successionist, but mystical and immediate.” The second is Peter’s declaration at Pentecost that “this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel [in Joel 2:28]” (Acts 2:16).^45 He later offers another illustration, the instruction to a Hebrew child to keep the law because “we were slaves” (Deut. 6:21) despite several generations having passed since the Exodus, then asserts that “history is real, history matters, exactly because in God’s mysterious way the past is present. … Here is a mystical vision, mysterious exactly because it does not deny the facts of history but acknowledges them.”^46

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^44 Bender, “Theology for Pilgrims,” 288.


^46 McClendon, *Doctrine*, 466.
The baptist vision is an organizing principle and “not merely a reading strategy by which the church can understand Scripture.” It is as a strategy, however, that it conveys McClendon’s postmodern approach to history. According to Graham B. Walker, Jr., McClendon argues that Enlightenment thinkers consistently sought to ‘de-narrativize’ the content of religion” in order to discredit the myths or inaccuracies in the biblical text and find the facts behind it, but they missed the truth of religion because they “overlooked the power of the scriptural story to shape the lives of persons in community.” McClendon says that the resulting conflict over the veracity of Scripture further obscured the historical “plain sense” hermeneutic in which “its stories were read as (in the main) real stories about real people; its history, real history; its declarations about God and God’s creatures as saying what they meant and meaning what they said.” Alongside or within the plain or literal sense was the “spiritual sense” of the text, which referred to “the way the plain words bore upon readers’ lives in relation to all that God had done and would do in their regard.” A third “figural sense” also accounted for the means by which readers moved between the first two. The “this is that” strategy is a version of this sense, which, unlike historical-critical exegesis, links the text to the church and “sees the past figurally present, and sees the future in terms of that present and past so joined.” In literary terms, God is the narrator, the church the readers or hearers, and the Bible “a single, great story, united by characters, setting, and plot.”

47 McClendon, Ethics, 33.


49 McClendon, Doctrine, 36, 40.
Not only is interpretation a communal practice instead of a private duty, each community of baptists “is” the community in the text. Yet “there is no single, distinct body of people called ‘believers church,’ or ‘baptists,’” and not all the bodies to which McClendon applies this designation share the vision.\(^{50}\) Like most baptists, he locates the essence of Christianity “in no hierarchical body or single theological tradition, but in the faithful church, where ‘church’ (\textit{ekklēsia}, \textit{koinōnia}) means first of all congregation, local assembly of disciples.” Moreover, he is inclined to believe that “the baptist vision is more often caught from the Scriptures than taught by a tradition,” as he remarks when discussing the radical conclusions reached by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the face of Nazism.\(^{51}\) Unlike Mullins and many others, however, he believes that baptist identity arises not from individuals arriving at convictions or having experiences and subsequently joining together but from them grasping the vision of a community that has made the biblical narrative its own and in which they are already participating.

A community is postmodern in the sense McClendon describes not in forgoing a standpoint but in understanding that their common convictions arise from and are validated by their common life. A community is also historical in sharing the baptist vision; any other organizing principle (e.g., soul competency) fails because it neglects the reality that the past is not merely restored or replicated but mystically \textit{present}. McClendon believes that members of such a community will disagree not on the level of “the church’s self-understanding as a continuation of the biblical story” but on that of “its application in the present age.” He is also confident that they “can know what the church

\(^{50}\) McClendon, \textit{Ethics}, 33-34.

\(^{51}\) McClendon, \textit{Doctrine}, 42; \textit{Ethics}, 203.
must teach to be the church.”\textsuperscript{52} Stanley Hauerwas sums up McClendon’s contribution by describing him as a “master craftsman” who shows that the church must relinquish its modern assumptions in order to be the church: “For in a world without foundations all we have is the church. That such is the case is no deficiency since that is all we have ever had or could ever want.”\textsuperscript{53} So what does it mean for baptists to be the church?

The Powerful Practices of Baptist Communities

The line between the church and the world is ethical as well as theological; in McClendon’s atypical ordering, the question “What must the church teach to be the church?” is important, but the prior question is “How must the church live to be the church?”\textsuperscript{54} He certainly believes that the baptist vision must incorporate the wisdom of the past, from within and beyond baptist groups. However, he qualifies his call to teach necessary doctrines by stating that “Christian teaching cannot reduce itself simply to parroting Scripture, or simply replicate itself as tradition, or simply propagandize its claims, for its practice is nourished by a healthy fear of self-serving beliefs, ignorant claims, or comforting falsehoods.”\textsuperscript{55} He also frequently warns against “antiquating” the church’s reasoning, just as he praises Wittgenstein for not antiquating his reasoning, out of a concern that focusing on the past with respect to theology leads to neglecting the present with respect to ethics. “The Great Story is just that, a story that we live out, and

\textsuperscript{52} McClendon, \textit{Doctrine}, 44, 46.


\textsuperscript{54} McClendon, \textit{Ethics}, 46.

\textsuperscript{55} McClendon, \textit{Doctrine}, 47-48.
stories go on, they do not go backward,” which is what MacIntyre means by “traditions” but is very different from the “fundamentalisms” and “traditionalisms” of the twentieth century. McClendon asserts that “MacIntyre is misunderstood, badly misunderstood, when he is treated as one who wants ethics to revert to the past. True stories can recall the past but … they cannot return to it.” Therefore the reality that modernity is “near its end” demands “a fresh claim upon the ethics of the Great Story.”

Regardless of whether McClendon is right, he borrows several concepts from MacIntyre, who in After Virtue (1981) establishes that “the coherence of the virtues in a definite moral character and way of life … requires the grounding of the virtues in the shared practices and commonly acknowledged goods of a particular ‘traditional’ community.” Although life in general is sustained by the virtue of hope, for example, hope itself is not sustainable without particular content. “Thus Christian hope has its telos or direction as the way of the storied community following Jesus Christ.” In Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry (1990), then, MacIntyre contrasts modern standpoints that he designates “encyclopaedia” and “genealogy” with that of tradition, in which rational inquiry requires a moral community that imparts skills to its members and is extended over time. According to McClendon, MacIntyre demonstrates that “the content of philosophical thought is inseparable from its history,” which indicates that in Christianity such a community “is a necessary condition of a believer’s knowledge of and

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56 McClendon, Ethics, 75-76.

57 McClendon, Ethics, 115; Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
knowing interaction with God. The community shares practices that form its life and inform its teaching.”

Tradition-dependent moral communities are particularly important because baptists find themselves in the midst of what McClendon terms a “tournament of narratives” and, with respect to American culture, a “contest of stories.” Although the cultural story has laudable qualities, it nevertheless “contrasts sharply” with the biblical story, notably in the area of war and peace: “In the story Americans tell themselves, every great problem from independence to slavery to totalitarian threats is finally resolved by the ultima ratio of war. … In surprising contrast, the biblical master story pivots upon a slave people who ran away ‘in urgent haste’ (Deut. 16:3), upon a Savior who enters the capital city riding on a donkey and who is called the Prince of Peace.”

This illuminates McClendon’s sympathy for the idea that his people originated with the Anabaptists and thus prior to the nation-state. Following James Robert Coggins, he argues that after John Smyth became convinced that discipleship required nonviolence and left to join the Mennonites, Thomas Helwys and the first Baptists developed a characteristically modern theology that divided the human person into a body, which was subject to earthly rulers and allowed to take up the sword, and a soul, which was concerned solely with spiritual matters. The remnants of this theology circumscribe the witness of Baptists today who trumpet freedom of conscience. Alluding to Mullins’ *The Axioms of Religion* (1908), McClendon states that “whether baptist truth is discovered in the pages of Scripture or in a philosopher’s table of self-evident axioms matters a good


deal both to Christian doctrine and to political theory; for example, an appeal to the rights of the individual conscience … provides no adequate defense of the children of pacifist Mennonites or Hutterites who seek to live on the land in communities free from military conscription.”

One does not have to be a pacifist to recognize points of conflict, and the question is “if one is committed to a master story as attractive as the American story is, can one learn to follow another, different story?” Here McClendon offers an analogy: an expert on cricket who watches baseball for the first time would observe many similarities but ultimately be unable to follow the baseball game because at certain times differences in the rules would make doing so impossible. Following Bernard Suits as well as MacIntyre (and Wittgenstein), he also describes practices in terms of games, which include four elements—the end, the means, the rules, and the attitude or intention to play—function as ends in themselves, and are social in character. Furthermore, “Only followers are in a position to judge the truth about the game, and part of that truth is whether one is a player or only a spectator.” The end or telos of Christian practices in particular is the biblical vision of the kingdom or “rule” of God, making eschatology central to theology. To “be the church” is not only to look back to the New Testament and Christian history but also to receive Jesus’ announcement that the kingdom is “at hand” (Mark 1:15) and to anticipate the day when the biblical vision comes true “on earth as in heaven” (Matt.

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61 McClendon, Witness, 362.

6:10). God’s rule involves individuals but is shared in community; its claim is “‘inner’ in the sense of going to the heart of each disciple, ‘social’ in the sense of involving each with others in an ordered way of life together, and indissolubly both these at once.”

Anticipation of the kingdom means that the baptist vision involves not only “this is that” but also “then is now”: the former “declares the present relevance of what God has previously done,” while the latter “does not abolish the future but declares the present relevance of what God will assuredly do.”

Individuals grasp the baptist vision through practices, which give rise to and are constituted by virtues or “skills for living” necessary to achieve the end, and both are embedded in narratives and traditions. “If practices are cooperative human activities that are internally linked to certain virtues, and if practices require of participants characteristic intentions … then the lives of those who engage in these practices must have at least enough continuity and coherence to permit the formation of those virtues and the sustaining of those intentions.” Such a “narrative tradition” would seem to require institutions, but McClendon responds to MacIntyre’s warning that institutions tend to corrupt practices by suggesting that social structures such as churches, hospitals, and school are better understood as institutionalized practices—the practices are ongoing, while the institutions are “forever being rebuilt”—that are associated with the biblical “principalities and powers.” This wariness of institutions is somewhat understandable, given McClendon’s own experience, but nevertheless leads him to downplay their role.


64 McClendon, *Ethics*, 176-77.

For example, commenting on the inclusion of Dorothy Day, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, as a “witness,” McClendon posits that “historically many have come to more or less baptist styles of thought and life while institutionally Catholic … no ecclesiastical definition can cage God’s truth.” He also slights Day’s self-understanding by speculating that she converted to Catholicism not only because it was the church of the poor and the immigrant, as she claimed, but also because “it was all she knew.”

McClendon’s wariness of institutions also provides a convenient excuse to ignore the fact that there are no churches or other institutions with “baptist” in the name. From his perspective, the poverty of baptist theologies corresponds to a flaw in baptist ethics as well as one in baptist metaphysics, meaning that cultural captivity and philosophical captivity are inextricable. However, even Baptists (with an uppercase “B”) can hardly produce an “ordered way of life together” as their institutions fail, especially insofar as they regard the individual as the locus of authority and the state as broadly Christian. Still, McClendon does make clear that the contest of stories cannot be resolved by simply choosing one over the other(s). Rather, the confrontation with the “powerful practices” of the world “requires almost infinite adjustments, distinctions, and gradations.” The community must neither confuse the city of God with the earthly city, as “Constantinian Christianity” has done, nor abandon the latter to corruption, as “sectarian Christianity” has done, but engage it with discernment. The church has no grand strategy for ushering in the kingdom and instead relies on its own powerful practices, not only the “remembering signs” of preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper but also forgiveness,

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which makes possible both life together and dialogue with others: “Disciples will share in
the common life and practices of the church. They will also share other commonalities
with other neighbors, and in those settings Christian ways can overflow into the wide
society. Taken to the full, the analogy will be both to individual members of other
communities and to the relation of communities, nations even, to one another.”68

The goal of Christian ethics is not the replication of a modern consequentialist or
deontological formula for individual decision-making but “the discovery, understanding,
and creative transformation of a shared and lived story, one whose focus is Jesus of
Nazareth and kingdom he claims.”69 The unavoidability of mediation by stories—
cultural, ecclesial, or otherwise—raises the question of authority, and baptists have
largely failed to regard the community as, like Scripture and experience, a “proximate”
authority that mediates the “ultimate” authority of God. Consistent with his
epistemological holism, McClendon argues that reason, the fourth source in the so-called
“Wesleyan quadrilateral,” is not such an authority but “a name for the thought processes
by which we seek to maintain order in any sphere of conversation.” Each authority
depends on the others, and most significant for Baptists, experience is not only qualified
by the biblical narrative but also “presupposes a community of interpretation or
discernment.” A prophet may arise to judge the community, but the community likewise
judges the prophet:

If we were to argue that in the final analysis the private judgment of each must
have the last word, we would leave no place for authentic community life and
would deny as well the very ground just gained, namely the real, objective
authority of experience and Scripture as these mediate to us the final authority of

68 McClendon, Ethics, 236.

69 McClendon, Ethics, 330.
God. Correspondingly, we affirm that God is not only Ultimate Love (or Father) and Compelling Presence (or Son); God is also Cohesive Spirit, the Holy Spirit that creates holy fellowship. By that creation, the entire community of faith, like the voice of evangelical experience and the written word of Scripture, becomes a bearer of proximate authority. For if we agree that no authority, including that of the solitary believer with his or her conscience, must find its place on a great moving circle, a Ferris wheel of discernment, interpretation, obedience, and action that has no top chair, no priestly summit—not “the clergy,” not the solitary “believer-priest” with his or her Bible, not “the whole church in council,” since each of these is secured to and depends on others in the wheel, and since each in turn must swing beneath the discerning judgment of God.70

How does tradition, which links communities through time, fit into McClendon’s scheme? Harvey contends that the baptist vision relates past, present, and future through the church, which “does not simply have a hermeneutic for interpreting world and Bible, but … is that hermeneutic. It is the ongoing life and language of the church that establishes the coming to be and the passing away of human existence as history, thereby giving to the world its identity as world, that is, as a fallen yet cherished creation.”71

Similarly, Pentecostal theologian Telford Work concludes that the vision accomplishes this link through the community’s performance of Scripture, such that “baptist Christianity distinguishes itself from other varieties of Christianity primarily by its view of Scripture’s relationship with tradition.”72 At times, however, McClendon seems to relate them “so asymmetrically that postbiblical tradition becomes merely a series of suggestions,” such that even the canon is grounded in Scripture itself. “Like all biblicists, whether radical or Calvinist, McClendon is in the unstable position of privileging the Tradition that is Scripture, but not the tradition that created, canonized, and enlivened

70 McClendon, Doctrine, 458-59, 462, 478.
71 Harvey, “Beginning in the Middle of Things,” 255-56.
Scripture.” At the same time, “this is that” and “then is now” are “endorsements of Holy Tradition” because the process of identification conveyed by McClendon’s illustrations “is prior to Scripture, in that it is precisely the reason Scripture is created, preserved, and used.”73 Yet it seems that the church is the church only insofar as it possesses the vision, implying that there is no true continuity—a position that is hardly unusual but does not account for the importance of every chapter of the church’s history or its status as a human and divine institution.

These issues merit further investigation, but aside from them, McClendon recognizes that the response to the present situation must be ecumenical, not least because divisions among Christian bodies defy Jesus’ prayer for unity: “May they all be one” (John 17:21). He also notes that “theology must accept its share of the discredit for these divisions and do what it can to repair the fault,” which the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century set out to do.74 Of course, Catholics largely declined to participate out of a sense that ecumenism and catholicity were fundamentally different, while Southern Baptists did so out of a belief that the visible church was entirely local. Yet McClendon argues that the baptist vision must be catholic as well as radical and that catholicity is linked to orthodoxy within Christian identity. So what does it mean, or should it mean, for baptists to be catholic?

Baptist Catholicity

Whereas Mullins simply dismissed the argument of nineteenth-century Catholic theologian John Henry Newman, McClendon appreciates aspects of it even as he depicts

73 Work, Living and Active, 281-82.

74 McClendon, Doctrine, 332.
Newman as a rationalist who shared with the experientialist Friedrich Schleiermacher the false belief that “every attempt at Christian theology must be validated by Christian history,” that is, unbroken continuity through authentic experience or original orthodoxy.  

Newman theorized that the Catholic Church not only originated with the apostles but also exhibited seven “notes” of doctrinal development that Protestant bodies did not. McClendon identifies two questionable presumptions underlying this theory: first, that “there was some one ecclesial institution, one ‘true church,’ which had merely to outshine its rivals in order to authenticate its claim to truth”; and second, that “the ‘idea’ of Christianity was at heart doctrinal, that it was a teaching or set of teachings which, when duly preserved, brought Christ to present light.” Yet he adds that Newman “made it more clear what an adequate account must provide,” namely, an explanation of doctrinal development.

According to McClendon, development creates the possibility of unity that is neither static nor instantaneous. However, whereas Newman argued that the link to the past must be institutional, and the magisterial reformers argued that it must be restorative, the radical reformers argued that it must be typological or mystical, involving “inward sharing of the apostolic convictions together with visible display of such marks of original Christianity as believers baptism and a voice for each in the church.” If the church is to be true to the New Testament with respect to the identity of Christ, for example, it must teach the lordship of Christ, the unity of God, and “the reality of

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77 McClendon, Witness, 330.
believers’ share in his risen life.” Moreover, different “christological models” have sometimes been required to express these teachings in different “cultural settings.”

McClendon goes so far as to say that “two-natures Christology has had its day, and we need not return to it save as to a monument of what has gone before,” then proposes a “two-narratives” model that refers to the intersection of divine and human in the person of Jesus Christ. Bender cites this as evidence that McClendon “is more given to looking to a new future and staking out a distinct vision than appreciating the church’s common past,” then notes that in moving beyond the ontologies of Nicaea and Chalcedon, he also ignores their theological grammar, “an odd thing for a Wittgensteinian to do, for it is difficult to see how one can move forward felicitously in a language game when established grammar is set aside.” Therefore he has difficulty tracing the “common threads and abiding concerns” regarding these topics.

McClendon’s ambivalence toward the past is also evident in his analysis of two models of Christian history. The first model, Newman’s, is that of a “living, growing tree,” which not only cannot account for “known failures to extend the original tree” but also is based on the “modern myth” of “early, undivided Christianity.” The second, McClendon’s, is that of a watershed:

On this rivulet-and-river model of Christian history, varied Christian formations begin, but their outcomes are not identical. Some streams dry up, some go underground for good. Others flow on in majestic solitude or flow together to constitute a deeper, wider stream of ecclesial life which may combine with yet others before the course is run. On this model, Christian unity is a future goal, not a reality lost in the past. … Although for this model there need be no single true

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79 McClendon, *Doctrine*, 276-77.
80 Bender, “Theology for Pilgrims,” 288-89.
stream of Christianity, every stream will be judged by its outcome, its yield. There may be good reason, then, to float our hopes on some particular stream, though we had better hope as well for a still-coming unity of waters of Christian faith. He also claims that the Catholic, Protestant, and baptist streams are all “provisional,” meaning that “in a sense not true of other doctrines of the faith, Christian ecclesiology is provisional ecclesiology; it looks toward a fulfillment not yet achieved.”

Barron appreciates the baptist vision but questions it on this point, invoking Newman’s growing-tree model to explain why “McClendon’s ‘this is that’ stirs up my Catholic suspicions. Does the Holy Spirit compel us to lay the primitive church, pristine and fully-realized, as an interpretive grid over successive eras of ecclesial life, or does the Spirit rather guide the development of the ecclesial form as it unfolds throughout space and time?” The point of Newman’s model is that, in McClendon’s terms, “‘this’ is a development of ‘that,’ ‘this’ bears an analogous relation to ‘that,’ and in some cases, ‘this’ is a more adequate and fully-realized display of ‘that.’” Here McClendon’s primary concern is avoiding Constantinianism, a concern shared by some Catholic theologians. Terrence W. Tilley, for example, states that “Catholic life and thought is riddled with Constantinian presumptions” and must learn from a tradition that is not, and McClendon “provides a free-church theology … especially accessible to American Catholics.” However, Tilley also criticizes him for equating social structures or institutions and practices and points out, somewhat ironically, that “baptism is an

81 McClendon, Witness, 333-34.
82 McClendon, Doctrine, 344.
institutionally bound practice; the Christian churches are the only institutions in which baptism is a sacramental practice." Not only are practices enabled or disabled by institutions, some build up institutions while others destroy them, as in the case of Southern Baptists harming the SBC by using “cover stories.” “The church is not merely a motley of the practices undertaken within its walls, but an institution with a life distinguishable from the histories of Christian practices inculcated in Christian communities. … The pressing need is to give a non-Constantinian account that does not confuse ecclesial community with ecclesial institution.”

Yet the notion of Constantinianism remains problematic despite McClendon’s denial of a literal fall, and not just for Catholics. Responding to the first edition of Ethics, Reformed theologian David Wayne Layman asks, “Does a ‘mystical’ defense of restitutionism work any better than a ‘historical’ defense? What is to be said about—what is to be said to—the claim that a ‘baptist’ faith is the direct, immediate response to the Lordship of Jesus because it is historically and institutionally unmediated?” Layman then comments that McClendon’s argument, along with Yoder’s, is in fact characteristic of “mainstream American piety,” a product of Puritanism or revivalism. After all, “in America (particularly nineteenth-century America) the baptist theological agenda did prevail.” He proceeds to consider McClendon’s account in light of John Williamson Nevin’s critique of the Puritan or revivalist “sectarian” type. Briefly, sects “wanted to have it both ways,” that is, to deny the authority of tradition while assuming absolute authority as a body with respect to certain claims, as it was “the very nature of the

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86 David Wayne Layman, “The Inner Ground of Christian Theology: Church, Faith, Sectarianism,” Journal of Ecumenical Studies 27, no. 3 (Summer 1990), 483, 487.
church” to do. Furthermore, they justified this denial on the basis of a notion of private judgment that they did not and in fact could not consistently practice, because “there must always be some context, some center of interpretation.” In the end, they were “too parochial,” possessing only a “limited vision” that they equated with the whole of Christian truth.  

McClendon takes pains to avoid strictly private judgment and parochialism. However, Layman invokes Nevin’s argument that sects that did not posit an ontological fall to evade the historicity of the church instead simply bound over the apostolic era against McClendon, who, despite his assertion to the contrary, effectively establishes “an immediate relationship with the Jesus of apostolic faith.”  

Layman oversimplifies matters by lumping in the baptist vision with positions that regard the post-apostolic church as apostate, but he is right to reiterate Nevin’s point that “faith in the church, as such, requires the affirmation of God’s presence in the church, even where and when it does not appear to be present.” Nevin believed that “catholic” means “universal” not in the sense of “all” or an aggregation of distinct entities (i.e., denominations) but “whole” in the sense of an organic unity that transcends them; therefore “sects are sectarian not because they are organizationally separate but because they refuse to share in the catholic—the whole—life of the church, which in turn is truly whole insofar as it is one with the life of Christ as a transcendent presence and power.” In a word, such a refusal amounts to a denial of the Incarnation insofar as it is manifested in history. “Nevin would

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argue that McClendon, in leaping over the history of the church, *prima facie* denies that God is present and active in that history. If God were not present in the past, on what grounds does McClendon believe and affirm that God is present now?“89

Layman’s salient criticism is that the baptist vision precludes true catholicity. Yet McClendon argues just the opposite, first in a response coauthored with Yoder that points out the irony of contrasting their theology with that of Nevin’s Mercersburg Theology, which “projected a normative vision that existed nowhere then—and certainly exists nowhere now.”90 Building on this response, McClendon outlines three ancient Christian meanings of “catholic” (*katholikē*) that correspond to approaches to Christian unity and that he designates catholicₐ, “whole or authentic”; catholicᵤ, “all-inclusive or universal”; and catholicₚ, “the claim of one particular party to be in itself all-inclusive.”91 Whereas Newman, for example, took a catholicₚ approach and the ecumenical movement has taken a catholicᵤ approach, baptists lay claim to catholicₐ, the earliest sense, “a catholicity which is not first of all the wholeness of belonging to a league, or accepting a hierarchy, or sending delegates or messengers to a convention, but is rather the character that is complete or authentic or prototypically Christian.” They may possess catholicₐ unity or “baptist catholicity” in the present, but they must continue to seek catholicᵤ unity, the unity prayed for by Jesus and sought by first-century Christians, the monastic movement, and the radical reformers, including early Baptists in England, who possessed a “catholic spirit.” Thus McClendon proposes a bottom-up approach: “Let us all, congregation by


congregation, local church by local church, Christian group by Christian group, seek to embody the completeness that is found in Christ Jesus and in his true saints ancient and modern. When we do we shall of necessity come closer to one another.\textsuperscript{92}

Baptists would undoubtedly benefit from taking this approach, provided that they do so in dialogue with other groups, but that does not mean that they already possess a “complete or authentic” catholicity through the baptist vision. For one thing, “this is that” seems to treat Christian history as ultimately dispensable, thereby reducing it to a repository of resources from which baptist communities may pick and choose. Consider McClendon’s illustrations, which ignore the history between Peter’s declaration and Joel’s prophecy or the Exodus and the Hebrew child as well as, in Catholic Eucharistic doctrine, the mediation of the real presence by the sign of bread and wine. The latter illustration also rejects the “developmental and successionist” interpretation of “this is that” in favor of a “mystical and immediate” one and, perhaps consequently, fails to account for the relationship between the Eucharistic body of Christ and the ecclesial body. Yet only a body that is visible and historical is capable of being non-Constantinian. According to Catholic theologian William T. Cavanaugh, the Eucharist not only makes the church into the body of Christ but also calls it to realize its true nature as “a locus of social practices … capable of resisting the discipline of the state,” precisely because it is both invisible and visible. “In the Eucharist the Kingdom [of God] of irrupts into time

\textsuperscript{92} McClendon, \textit{Witness}, 336-37.
and ‘confuses’ the spiritual and the temporal. The Eucharist thus realizes a body which is neither purely ‘mystical’ nor simply analogous to the modern state.”

Using the work of Henri de Lubac, Cavanaugh traces the complicated history of the doctrine of the mystical body. Briefly, patristic and early medieval tradition made a threefold distinction between the historical or physical body of Jesus of Nazareth, the sacramental or mystical body of the Eucharist, and the ecclesial body of the church, with the latter two being closely linked and separated by a “gap” from the unique historical event of Jesus. In this understanding,

Christians are the real body of Christ, and the Eucharist is where the church mystically comes to be. The church and the Eucharist form the liturgical pair of visible community (corpus verum) and invisible action or mystery (corpus mysticum) which together re-present and re-member Christ’s historical body. The gap is a temporal one. The link between past event and the present church is formed by the invisible action of the sacrament. The “mystical,” then, is that which … brings the Christ event into present historical time in the church body, the corpus verum.94

Late medieval tradition inverted the corpus verum and corpus mysticum, thereby separating the ecclesial body from the historical and sacramental bodies and allowing it to come to be regarded as “truly” mystical, the Eucharist as a spectacle rather than that which incorporates Christians into the true body of the church. This understanding remained dominant until the Second Vatican Council, with deleterious effects for how the church understood itself in relation to the state.


Cavanaugh acknowledges that the church is always unfaithful or sinful but insists that “the danger does not lie … in the identification of the church with the body of Christ, but rather in the complete identification of the earthly body with the heavenly,” and its unfaithfulness is often a result of “its failure to take itself seriously as the continuation of Christ’s body in the world,” that is, a historical body.

The church is the body of Christ, as Paul makes abundantly clear (I Cor. 12), but it is also called to become the fulfillment of Christ’s body in history. The church is always mandated to become in time what it already is in God’s eyes. The Eucharist makes the church, but not in the sense that the church is not the body of Christ until construction is completed. …

… The Eucharist enacts the presence not simply of what Christ did in the past, but also and especially the future fulfillment of Christ’s work through the Spirit. The past and present receive their significance and continuity from the future, when Christ’s salvific will is manifested in full in a new heaven and a new earth. In Eucharistic time the past is not simply an historical object, a given quantity to be parsed by the community; nor is the future Kingdom something simply to be awaited patiently as we muddle through history. In the Eucharist, past and future simultaneously converge, and the whole Christ, the eschatological church of all times and places, is present.95

There are obvious similarities between this understanding and “this is that,” in which the church in the present “is” the church in the past and the future in a manner analogous to the real presence, albeit only in the mystical sense, and Cavanaugh emphasizes that the church is not merely a matter of continuity. Yet it is quantitative all the same and thus visible regardless of its faithfulness in the present time; it is this ongoing sacramental visibility that enables it to be faithful. Claiming that “this” has been “that” throughout Christian history without accounting for the continuity of the Christian tradition puts McClendon in the difficult position of also claiming that the baptist vision is not the province of actual baptists and must be “caught from the Scriptures,” which is not that far from the sort of ahistorical biblicism he wants to avoid. Bender rightly

95 Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist, 233-34.
identifies the main issue as “the normativity of prior church decisions and how tradition might be evaluated,” which requires some degree of continuity with the ancient past of the church, about which McClendon is less clear than he is about discontinuity. “Here as well McClendon points to the way forward, yet not only constructively, but also in setting up a warning that not only the distinctiveness of the ‘baptist’ vision, but its unity with the broader church’s past, needs to be taken up in future theological work. This remains for others to do.”

Resolving the differences between McClendon’s view and the others mentioned above is beyond the scope of this chapter, not least because “catholicity is an essentially contested concept.” Suffice it to say that McClendon does not go as far as Baptist theology needs to go on the subject of ecclesiology, especially with respect to historicity and catholicity, but he does go quite a bit farther than Mullins and most moderates in at least three ways: first, by identifying the “catholic spirit” and non-modern reasoning of early baptists; second, by demonstrating the unavoidability of mediation by the church; and third, by suggesting a path down which to proceed dialogically toward the promise of genuine unity. The baptist vision presupposes not only that baptists are not the only Christians but also that their theology is in some sense incomplete. At the same time, it justifies their participation in the ecumenical task on the basis of their own convictions. For this baptists of all kinds ought to be grateful. What hope is there that Baptists in particular will come to appreciate his project? Perhaps they must first come to recognize

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96 Bender, “Theology for Pilgrims,” 291.

97 McClendon, Witness, 338.
the changes in the religious landscape described in the introduction, but the good news is that it was not so very long ago that Baptists lived on the cultural margins.
CHAPTER V
THE CATHOLICITY OF THE BAPTIST TRADITION

This chapter investigates the parameters and possibilities of the concept of tradition in Baptist theology in light of the dissolution of the Southern Baptist subculture, which mediated the collective wisdom of both the Baptist tradition and the broader Christian tradition during most of the twentieth century. Taking the theology of James Wm. McClendon, Jr., as a starting point, it considers the work of Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and Baptist theologian Steven R. Harmon in order to clarify the relation of tradition to history and ecclesiology. It argues that although the Baptist tradition remains somewhat viable, Baptist theories of tradition must recover and be brought into greater harmony with historical Christian understandings, especially concerning catholicity, as well as Baptist practices, which presume the operation of tradition but fail to account for it. It also argues that this recovery may be accomplished partly through, as Harmon suggests, a new Oxford Movement alongside a renewal of Baptist communities.

Baptists and Tradition

On July 12, 1905, prompted by Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren, the assembly of approximately 3,000 at the inaugural Baptist World Congress in London stood and
recited the Apostles’ Creed, a summary of the liturgical confession of the early church.¹ The meeting was initially proposed by Southern Baptists and was attended by Southern Baptist luminaries such as E. Y. Mullins. It also led to the formation of the Baptist World Alliance, the closest thing to a worldwide communion of Baptists, which was supported by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the world’s largest Baptist body, until 2004, the year after the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), a group that broke away after the conservative-moderate controversy in the SBC, was accepted as a member body. Although the recitation of the creed met with some criticism on the grounds of the supposed anti-creedalism of Baptists, it was repeated at the Centenary Baptist World Congress in 2005.² These recitations were not binding, but they were important instances of recalling the concern for catholicity evident in early Baptist confessions such as the Orthodox Creed (1678), which declares that “the visible church of Christ on earth, is made up of several distinct congregations, which make up that one catholick church, or mystical body of Christ” and that the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed “ought thoroughly to be received, and believed.”³ Furthermore, as moderate theologian Steven R. Harmon says, each recitation was intended as “a demonstration of the solidarity of the Baptist tradition with the larger Christian communion.”⁴

Unfortunately, such instances have been all too rare among Baptists in America. Christians began using the word catholic—from the Greek word *katholikē*, meaning “universal”—in the second century to refer to the visible unity in one church of every local church that was inseparable from the celebration of the Eucharist and the presence of a bishop and came to entail confessional orthodoxy as well. Early Baptists rejected only the hierarchical aspect of this unity, but their descendants increasingly regarded the church in the universal sense, if they acknowledged it at all, as merely an invisible aggregate of the saved. The combination of a restorationism renewed by the Second Great Awakening and a triumphalism bolstered by missionary success led them to regard Christian unity as an imminent Baptist achievement and to decline to participate in the ecumenical movement, although a similar spirit was behind the formation of the Baptist World Alliance. Over against Catholicism and Orthodoxy, Protestant ecumenism has generally insisted that the church has not been qualitatively catholic since at least the patristic era and that its many divided communions already share in its quantitative catholicity, but it has sought to realize a visible unity in faith and order and has made laudable progress with respect to resolution of doctrinal disagreements and mutual recognition of ministers and sacraments. Yet it has not produced a unity tangible enough to convince Baptists that they lack anything significant even as the conditions that allowed them to flourish have eroded denominational bodies and seemingly rendered visible unity between them moot.

This situation makes the ecumenically-minded baptist (with a lowercase “b”) vision of the late theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr., the subject of the previous chapter, even more remarkable. However, to claim that Baptists are capable of
rapprochement with other Christians on the basis of the biblical imperative of visible unity and not merely that of spiritual kinship or pragmatic alliance is to presume that they constitute a tradition that is sufficiently cohesive to participate in the broader Christian tradition. In other words, it is to presume that the name “Baptists” designates more than a collection of individuals who happen to share certain convictions. It is also to presume that history is in some way intrinsic to theology and that being Baptist involves not merely replicating the beliefs or experiences of New Testament Christians or early Baptists but identifying with the church in every time and place. These are tenuous presumptions, not least because, as Philip E. Thompson laments, “Baptists have come to make a tradition of rejecting tradition, Baptist or otherwise.”\(^5\) Moreover, as Bill J. Leonard approvingly states, democratic government and the “ever-present reality” of dissent have meant that “Baptists have been plagued by schisms, divisions, and intra- and interchurch feuds that have led to new churches, associations, and groups.”\(^6\) Southern Baptists in particular suffered a conflict and eventual split that involved reductive conceptions of identity: a doctrine of biblical inerrancy, in the case of conservatives, and an equally flawed list of so-called “Baptist distinctives,” in the case of moderates. Regarding the latter, the individualism and separatism implied by soul competency, local church autonomy, and so on makes fostering unity difficult, especially following the dissolution of the subculture that bound Southern Baptists together even as their congregations all but abandoned confessions.


At the same time, the unanticipated consequences of the kind of faith long encouraged by Baptists as well as the criticisms of modern epistemology represented by McClendon’s work have awakened some scholars to the importance of catholicity for the future of Baptist theology. Unsurprisingly, given the historical emphasis on believer’s baptism as well as the recent interest in sacramentalism among British Baptists, these scholars have focused more on the sacramental aspect of catholicity than the historical aspect, that is, tradition.\footnote{See Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., \textit{Baptist Sacramentalism} (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003); \textit{Baptist Sacramentalism 2} (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2008).} In addition to the obstacle of the “tradition of rejecting tradition,” a role for tradition in Baptist theology raises a number of issues, including the proper sources of its content, the manner in which it is to be constituted and sustained, the extent to which it is to be doctrinally and institutionally formalized, and the proper location of its authority. Although McClendon made considerable progress concerning these issues, he struggled to explain the relationship between the Christian past and the Baptist present, and those who have responded favorably to his interpretation of the Baptist tradition have considerable work left to do. Therefore the following sections examine the understandings of tradition offered by Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, from whom McClendon borrows several concepts, and Harmon, who follows McClendon’s lead, and propose a future path for this work.

\textbf{Tradition as a Version of Moral Inquiry}

No thinker is more responsible for the resurgence of interest in tradition among philosophers and theologians than MacIntyre, and tradition is central to the project of \textit{After Virtue} (1981), \textit{Whose Justice? Which Rationality?} (1988), and \textit{Three Rival Versions}
of Moral Enquiry (1990). One goal of this project is to overcome the dilemma presented by liberalism, the dominant expression of moral philosophy in the West, and the responses of relativism and perspectivism. Although liberal societies retain simulacra of the virtues, they have lost the grammar that makes moral discourse intelligible, as evidenced by the proliferation of interminable disagreements. Yet MacIntyre argues that it is possible to accept postmodern critiques of foundationalism and ahistoricism while maintaining the objectivity of rationality within and among traditions. His developed the account of tradition in After Virtue prior to his conversion to Catholicism but subsequently acknowledged a “massive debt” to the account of John Henry Newman, who “has generally been ignored by both Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theorists, because the particular tradition within which he worked, and from whose point of view he presented his theorizing, was theological.”

Even before coming to share Newman’s point of view, however, MacIntyre narrated a declension from classical and medieval thought through the Enlightenment and into the present that is reminiscent of Newman’s work.

Aristotle, who represents the classical tradition, argued that “every activity, every enquiry, every practice aims at some good” and that the end or telos of human beings toward which “they move by nature” is the highest good or eudaimonia, usually translated “happiness.” The truly rational person is also truly moral (good) and vice versa, and moral inquiry requires a community or polis that teaches such a person how to forgo his or her immediate good and to acquire the virtues necessary to achieve

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eudaimonia. According to MacIntyre, “It is for the sake of achieving this latter good that we practice the virtues and we do so by making choices about means to achieve that end. ... Such choices demand judgment and the exercise of the virtues requires therefore a capacity to judge and to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way.”9 Yet even Aristotle did not recognize that the teleological nature of moral inquiry means that it is also historical and tradition-dependent:

It is central to the conception of such a tradition that the past is never something merely to be discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past in which the past, if necessary and if possible, is corrected and transcended, yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by some yet more adequate future point of view. Thus the notion of a tradition embodies a very unAristotelian theory of knowledge according to which each particular theory or set of moral or scientific beliefs is intelligible and justifiable—insofar as it is justifiable—only as a member of an historical series.10

In a word, there is no such thing as tradition-independent rationality or moral inquiry; the question is which tradition, which past, is informing one’s inquiry.

MacIntyre credits medieval Christian thinkers, especially Thomas Aquinas, for the notion of tradition-dependence. Like Aristotle, Thomas regarded the virtues as skills and habits acquired by the individual over time from authoritative teachers in a process akin to that of apprenticing to a craft and through membership in a moral community, a condition of which is the exclusion of fundamental dissent. Unlike Aristotle, however, he was consciously committed to a particular tradition of inquiry. While he inherited the Augustinian, will-oriented approach to morality, he also appropriated the Aristotelian, virtue-oriented approach recently reintroduced to the West. Thomas argued that the fallen

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10 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 146.
will does not naturally direct the intellect and desires toward the good but requires redirection by God, so faith must precede rational understanding. From a standpoint of commitment rather than neutrality and out of the conviction that morality comes to human beings through both reason (nature) and revelation (grace), he proceeded to integrate the two traditions “into a single systematic mode of thought” and to reimagine the virtues as expressions of divine law, grounded in the biblical narrative and directed to the heavenly city of God as well as the earthly polis. His goal was to provide resources for members of a sacred community who were inescapably part of secular communities as well. “For Aristotle the overall science within which enquiries about practical reasoning and justice find their place had been politics, and the necessary milieu for their experience had been the polis; for Aquinas the concerns of politics had to be understood in the framework of a rational theology, and the civitas had to be understood in relation to the civitas Dei.”

The integration accomplished by Thomas epitomizes the traditioning process, but it was subverted by late medieval theology and challenged by the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The former despaired of moral achievement, while the latter sought tradition-independent standards of moral justification, particularly a universal rule or set of standards that was available to any person who employed the correct logic and therefore possessed indisputable authority. For David Hume, for example, this rule was the passions, for Immanuel Kant, pure reason, and for Søren Kierkegaard, radical choice. Yet all portrayed the self as an autonomous moral agent and shared the presupposition of inevitable progress epitomized by the Ninth Edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica

11 MacIntyre, Whose Justice, 164-65.
(1875-89) or simply “encyclopaedia,” which constitutes one of two modern rivals to tradition, the other being “genealogy.” Interestingly, MacIntyre outlines these three versions of moral inquiry in his Gifford Lectures, which were inaugurated to promote natural or scientific theology:

For [Scottish advocate and judge] Adam Gifford and almost all his educated Edinburgh contemporaries it was a guiding presupposition of thought that substantive rationality is unitary, that there is a single, if perhaps complex, conception of what the standards and the achievements of rationality are, one which every educated person can without too much difficulty be brought to agree in acknowledging. The application of the methods and goals of this single and unitary conception to any one particular subject matter is what yields a science. 

Notwithstanding Thomas’ own understanding, the early stages of the neo-scholastic or neo-Thomist revival begun by Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) were marked by an equally modern understanding of rationality. At any rate, every attempt to locate a universal rule proved “far too thin and meager” to produce consensus; thus modern inquiry has amounted to “a history of continuously unresolved disputes, so that there emerges no uncontested and incontestable account of what tradition-independent morality consists in and consequently no neutral set of criteria by means of which the claims of rival and contending traditions could be adjudicated.”

Although liberalism purports to be a replacement for the ostensible “tyranny of tradition,” it turns out to be another tradition, “a tradition whose continuities are partly defined by the interminability of the debate over [its] principles.” The problem is that modern thinkers continue to regard it as the neutral adjudicator of conflicting conceptions of the good, any of which “may up to a point be held as a private theory by individuals or


groups, but any serious attempt to embody it in public life will be proscribed."\textsuperscript{14} This explains the predominance of the liberal conception of the good, which “is no more and no less than the continued sustenance of the liberal social and political order. Thus liberalism, while initially rejecting the claims of any overriding theory of the good, does in fact come to embody such a theory.” Yet this theory fails to provide the promised neutral ground from which to produce moral agreement, a failure that further demonstrates “that there is no such neutral ground, that there is no place for appeals to a practical-rationality-as-such or a justice-as-such to which all rational persons would by their very rationality be compelled to give their allegiance. There is instead only the practical-rationality-of-this-or-that-tradition and the justice-of-this-or-that-tradition.”\textsuperscript{15}

MacIntyre memorably describes the resulting milieu as the triumph of emotivism, “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling.” Even analytic philosophers, who have resisted emotivism as a doctrine, insist that each individual must make a criterion-less choice of first principles, meaning that morality is “in the end an expression of the preferences of an individual will and for that will its principles have and can have only such authority as it chooses to confer upon them by adopting them.”\textsuperscript{16}

MacIntyre adds that the emotivist milieu obscures the reality that equally “rational” moral agents reach incompatible conclusion, partly by consigning “facts” to the natural sciences. “In the domain of fact there are procedures for eliminating disagreement; in that

\textsuperscript{14} MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice}, 335-36.
\textsuperscript{15} MacIntyre, \textit{Whose Justice}, 345-46.
\textsuperscript{16} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 11-12, 20-21.
of morals the ultimacy of disagreement is dignified by the title ‘pluralism.’” Not only does pluralism foster the kind of consumeristic religion summarized in the introduction, it enables moral principles to function as instruments of what Friedrich Nietzsche named the “will to power.” In On the Genealogy of Morality (1887), the representative text of the third rival version of inquiry, Nietzsche concluded that if the notion of autonomy is a fiction and morality is arbitrary, then “let will replace reason and let us make ourselves into autonomous moral subjects by some gigantic and heroic act of the will.” MacIntyre asserts that although this view is not yet pervasive, the lack of a moral consensus means that “modern politics is civil war carried on by other means.”

One response to emotivism is to substitute a different telos, as utilitarianism does in evaluating moral actions solely in terms of consequences. Another is to elevate practical reason, as pragmatism does in evaluating them in terms of means grounded in empirical facts or mathematical relations. The problem with both responses is that they define morality in terms of principles (e.g., justice) that may be noble but nevertheless rely on the procedural rationality of the nation-state and the efficiency of the market, which reduces convictions to mere preferences. Bureaucracy is therefore the primary obstacle to unmasking the delusion of liberalism, which has been attempted by two main views. One is relativism, the view that “if the only available standards of rationality are those made available by and within traditions, then no issue between contending traditions is rationally decidable.” Any tradition is as “true” as any other. The other is perspectivism, Nietzsche’s view that “if there is a multiplicity of rival traditions, each

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17 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 32.

18 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 114, 253.
with its own characteristic modes of rational justification internal to it, then that very fact entails that no one tradition can offer those outside it good reasons for excluding the theses of its rivals.” No tradition is “true,” but truth can be derived from the aggregate of traditions.  This more substantive view is characteristic of deconstructionist philosophers who claim to uncover the false prejudices of morality masked by Enlightenment notions of objectivity and stability. According to MacIntyre, however, “The genealogical stance is dependent for its concepts and its modes of argument, for its theses and its style, upon a set of contrasts between it and that which it aspires to overcome.”20 The problem with both views is that they invert Enlightenment rationality but retain its “antagonism to all tradition” and consequent inability to discern “the kind of rationality possessed by traditions.”21 The burden of his project, then, is to demonstrate the coherence of this kind of rationality.

Tradition as Argument

MacIntyre contends that the rationality of a genuine tradition is grounded not in an indubitable foundation but in a contingent history of development in pursuit of certain ends and goods. Such a tradition therefore exhibits certain characteristics:

It will have some contingent historical starting point in some situation in which some set of established beliefs and belief-presupposing practices, perhaps relatively recently established, perhaps of long standing, were put in question, sometimes by being challenged from some alternative point of view, sometimes because of an incoherence identified in the beliefs, sometimes because of a discovered resourcelessness in the face of some theoretical or practical problem, sometimes by some combination of these. So the beliefs will be further

19 MacIntyre, Whose Justice, 352.

20 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions, 215.

21 MacIntyre, Whose Justice, 11, 352-53.
articulated, amended, modified, and added to in order that, in a newer, revised form, they may provide some answer to the question thus raised and in that form transcend the limitations of their earlier version.

There is disagreement within a tradition, but it “characteristically takes place against a background of agreement and the agreement required to constitute a community of enquiry always has moral as well as intellectual dimensions.”22 The tradition itself, not tradition-independent norms, makes progress possible, and when the process fails, the “epistemological crisis” can be overcome only through “the invention or discovery of new concepts and the framing of some new type or types of theory.” There are three requirements for such a theory: first, it must solve the problem; second, it must explain why the tradition was unable to do so; and third, it must exhibit “some fundamental continuity of the new conceptual and theoretical structures with the shared beliefs in terms of which the tradition of enquiry had been defined up to this point.”23

A genuine tradition has standards by which it evaluates and adjusts itself when confronted by internal or external difficulties. It also comes into contact with other traditions, but the distinctness of traditions means that communication between them requires not merely translation but the learning of a “second first language.”24 As for individuals, they must not only learn a tradition’s language but also commit to the tradition before they can grasp its rationality, and “the conclusions which emerge as enquiry progresses will of course have been partially and crucially predetermined by the nature of this initial commitment.” What makes an individual’s morality intelligible, then,


is participation in a community. “One cannot think for oneself if one thinks entirely by oneself, that it is only by participation in rational practice-based community that one becomes rational.”

MacIntyre somewhat tediously defines a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.” In chess, for example, players may compete for external goods, but the community shares in certain internal goods because they form relationships by playing chess. Authority for determining who plays well is derived not from money, power, or status but from standards internal to the game, and good players possess the experience to recognize those who have mastered the relevant virtues, a virtue being defined as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”

MacIntyre acknowledges that practices require institutions to be sustained but insists that the two “must not be confused,” specifically because “the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution” and “the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.” On the one hand, the virtues are qualities that enable individuals to “resist the corrupting power of institutions” through practices. On the other

25 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions, 60; Whose Justice, 396.

26 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187, 191.
hand, “It is always within some particular community with its own specific institutional forms that we learn or fail to learn to exercise the virtues.” The question, then, is what sort of communities and institutions are needed. Whereas from the standpoint of liberal individualism “a community is simply an arena in which individuals each pursue their own self-chosen conception of the good life, and political institutions exist to provide that degree of order which makes such self-determined activity possible,” from that of tradition “political community not only requires the exercise of virtues for its own sustenance, but it is one of the tasks of parental authority to make children grow up so as to be virtuous adults.” Indeed, liberal individualism is so attractive partly because the modern state is so obviously incapable of fulfilling the role of “moral educator.” The exercise of virtues by individuals sustains the institutions that are the “social bearers” of practices, and the exercise of vices likewise corrupts those institutions. “The virtues are of course themselves in turn fostered by certain types of social institution and endangered by others.”

The point is that the individual is necessarily related to some community and some tradition that pursues some end, and the practices in which he or she participates and the qualities (virtues or vices) that he or she acquires are largely determined by these relationships. Whereas from the standpoint of liberal individualism “I am what I myself choose to be,” from that of tradition “I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point.” This starting point is narrative-dependent, because “the story of my life is always embedded in the story of

27 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194-95.
those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try and cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide.” MacIntyre contends that “what I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present,” meaning that every individual is both “part of a history” and “one of the bearers of a tradition.”

At the same time, individuals reshape the tradition by participating in the common life of the institutions that bear the practices of the tradition, that is, by engaging in debates and attempting to advance, even redirect, the tradition. “To be an adherent of a tradition is always to enact some further stage in the development of one’s tradition.”

MacIntyre carefully distinguishes his account from ideological invocations of the stability of tradition over against the conflict engendered by modern reason, which obscures the fact that “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition.” A tradition without both continuity and conflict is “dead or dying,” so what constitutes a “living” tradition?

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life.

28 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 220-21.
29 MacIntyre, Whose Justice, 11.
30 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 221-22.
In other words, “We, whoever we are, can only begin enquiry from the vantage point afforded by our relationship to some specific social and intellectual past through which we have affiliated ourselves to some particular tradition of enquiry, extending the history of that enquiry into the present.” Regarding justice and rationality, the question is: “To what issues does that particular history bring us in contemporary debate? What resources does our particular tradition afford in this situation?”

MacIntyre’s account concerns more than intellectual argument within traditions and among rival traditions, regardless of the importance of such argument; it concerns the historical nature and ongoing maintenance of traditions. Christian communities in the present do not look exactly the same as those that have gone before. However, they are the same church, not merely because they mystically identify with the church in the past or the future, as McClendon argues (i.e., “this is that,” “then is now”), but because they share a history in which certain commitments and practices have been refined. McClendon accepts many elements of MacIntyre’s theory, including the role of practices, the communal and narrative- and tradition-dependent nature of rationality, and the dynamic process of traditioning. Yet he overlooks or downplays the role of institutions as well as the need for a “specific past,” a “historical series,” and a “fundamental continuity.” Furthermore, the fact that traditions are strengthened or weakened by individuals exercising virtues such as courage, justice, and truthfulness means that they require an additional virtue, that of “having an adequate sense of the traditions to which one belongs or which confront one.” This virtue manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present. Living traditions, just because they continue a not-yet-

completed narrative, confront a future whose determinate and determinable character, so far as it possesses any, derives from the past. In practical reasoning the possession of this virtue is not manifested so much in the knowledge of a set of generalizations or maxims which may provide our practical inferences with major premises; its presence or absence rather appears in this kind of capacity for judgment which the agent possesses in knowing how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.\textsuperscript{32}

Here MacIntyre’s account is relevant for Baptists who are attempting to reconstitute their identity after the resolution of the SBC controversy and the dissolution of the Southern Baptist subculture and for whom the main problem is not the lack of familiar virtues but the lack of this additional virtue. The traditions to which they belong and with which they are confronted include the believers-church (baptist), Baptist, and Southern Baptist traditions as well as the Christian tradition and various cultural traditions. Most Baptists undoubtedly have at least some awareness of these traditions, but even the ever-decreasing number who still regard being Baptist as important tend to rely on one or another of the sets of “generalizations or maxims” mentioned above.

Although even a problematic principle such as soul competency can have value within the context of a moral community, any conception of identity that posits autonomous agency and unmediated rationality will be incapable of maintaining a tradition. To lose the Baptist or Christian traditions is to leave only cultural traditions, notably the American story, to provide moral education and the power of the state and the market to produce whatever unity can be had among like-minded individuals.

The witnesses produced by the Baptist tradition are evidence enough that it has been a “historically extended, socially embodied argument” to some extent. Yet the fact that this tradition so easily dispenses with the concept of tradition suggests that it is

\textsuperscript{32} MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, 222-23.
inadequate to the task of inculcating the needed “capacity for judgment” in the absence of a broadly Christian culture. Having learned from MacIntyre and others, McClendon recognizes the failures of Enlightenment rationality, and he both brings out oft-neglected elements within the Baptist tradition and emphasizes its participation in and contributions to the Christian tradition, which offers additional resources in the present situation. He also rightly contends that the church is mystical as well as historical. However, in essentially bypassing its “Constantinian” period—as if it is not unavoidably dependent on that period and every other period in Christian history—he ultimately does not reconcile the Baptist witness to the “specific past” of the church catholic. Other Baptist scholars are attempting to do just that.

Tradition and Catholicity

No Baptist scholar in the United States has considered the concept of tradition in greater depth than Harmon, who begins *Towards Baptist Catholicity* (2006) by asserting that “much Baptist thought has proceeded on the basis of a radicalized *Sola Scriptura* hermeneutic that dichotomizes Scripture and tradition, with the result that many Baptists reflexively regard any post-biblical theological development as superfluous, theologically suspect, and possessing no authority for Christian faith and practice”; therefore tradition is a “new horizon” in Baptist thought.³³ The context for this horizon is a group of theologians who identify with the moderate party but reject the oppositional stances that resulted from the controversy, which Harmon experienced as part of Baptist congregations and institutions in Texas, in favor of engagement with the “Great

Tradition” of the church. He describes his own argument as “an attempt to chart a course
towards Baptist ‘catholicity’—i.e., towards a reclaimed consciousness that Baptists
belong to what the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed confesses is the ‘one, holy,
catholic … and apostolic church’ and that they must strive after the realization of these
marks of the church.” By “reclaimed” he means that early Baptists and related groups
(i.e., baptists) “could not help but read the Bible through the lenses of the ancient regula
fidei” clarified by the creed. However, their descendants embraced the anti-tradition
hermeneutic of the Enlightenment, such that both liberal and fundamentalist Baptists in
America claimed “access to truth unmediated by any sort of interpretive horizon.”

Harmon only mentions his debt to McClendon with respect to the postmodern
critique of this hermeneutic, but it is apparent in his use of the terms “Baptist vision” and
“catholic Baptists” to designate his perspective and associates. Appropriately, given his
call to strive after the marks of the early church, he identifies seven marks of a “catholic
Baptist” theology that are evident throughout his account. One mark is recognition of
tradition as a source of authority, and Harmon acknowledges that there is neither a
“singular Baptist understanding of authority” nor “universally authoritative sources”

34 Harmon, Towards Baptist Catholicity, 3-4.

35 Harmon, Towards Baptist Catholicity, 5-6. As the source of the term “catholic baptists,” he cites
spelling of “baptists” with a lowercase “b” from James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Systematic Theology, vol. 1,
Ethics (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986). McClendon himself previously used the term “Catholic baptists”
to refer to both Anabaptist theologian Balthasar Hubmaier and certain contemporary Catholics. “Balthasar
Hubmaier, Catholic Anabaptist,” Mennonite Quarterly Review 65, no. 1 (January 1991): 20-33. For his
part, Harmon spells “catholic” with a lowercase “c” but capitalizes “Baptists” because “the theologians to
whom I apply this categorization belong to the Baptist tradition proper.” In addition to McClendon and
Stanley J. Grenz, he applies this categorization to eight living theologians in the United States and five in
the United Kingdom. Towards Baptist Catholicity, 6n15, 17. For a study of the former, see Cameron H.
Jorgenson, “Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity” (PhD diss.,
Baylor University, 2008).
among Baptists and that there is a tension “between the Baptist tradition of dissent and liberty of conscience on the one hand and the Baptist indebtedness to post-New Testament and pre-Reformation doctrinal tradition on the other.” Yet early Baptists were careful to demonstrate their continuity with the church in its catholicity as they composed their own confessions.36 Moreover, although Baptists tend to specify Scripture as the “supreme authority” and not to explicitly identify other sources, their “actual hermeneutical practice,” better understood as Suprema Scriptura, implies other sources “to which members of the community may turn, consciously and unconsciously, when they interpret the Scriptures together.” Catholic Baptists simply seek to make this practice explicit and to show that tradition is “inescapable” in that all who prize the authority of the Bible read it “through the lenses of the traditions that have been mediated to them by various expressions of Christian community, with results both good and ill.” The main issue, then, is how to “distinguish between healthy and harmful sources of tradition.”37

Harmon insists that the gap between Baptist churches and the academic circles in which this mark has been discussed can be bridged through another mark, location of the authority of tradition in the community, by way of the longstanding principle that “the local congregation as a community gathered under the Lordship of Christ possesses a certain derivative authority, subordinate to the Scriptures, for the ordering of its faith and practice.” If Baptists accept this principle and the existence of a universal church, then they can come to accept the idea of the communio sanctorum, that is, that “the larger

36 Harmon, Towards Baptist Catholicity, 24, 26-27.
37 Harmon, Towards Baptist Catholicity, 31-32, 34.
community of all the saints through all the ages” possesses a similar derivative authority. To move in this direction will require a “postmodern Baptist hermeneutic of tradition,” partly because the “collapse of modernity” has called into question certain Baptist distinctives. Baptists who champion soul competency, for example, “would be shocked to discover how similar their hermeneutic of tradition is to radically secular expressions of postmodern deconstructionism.” Briefly, the postmodern hermeneutic, on which MacIntyre’s influence is obvious, has three facets: first, the normative function of the *communio sanctorum*; second, the vehicle of the narrative and grammar of the community; and third, the critical function of the argument of the community. Harmon offers two chapter-length examples of this hermeneutic at work: one on the patristic development of the doctrine of the Trinity and another on patristic exegesis of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He also notes that the canon itself is a product of “traditioning processes,” meaning that Baptists who accept the authority of the Bible thereby accept that of “at least one post-biblical doctrinal tradition”—the same kind of tradition that produced the conciliar creeds.

A third mark of a catholic Baptist theology is pursuit of a place for creeds in liturgy and catechesis, and Harmon sets out to prove three historical theses concerning the continuities between the creeds that summarize the patristic tradition and the confessions of early English Baptists: first, these continuities “are found primarily in echoes of Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology”; second, they were not intentional but “were retained from the ecclesiastical bodies out of

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which the confessing Baptist communities came or by which they were influenced”; and third, they are most evident in the earliest Baptist confessions and, with the exception of those related to Trinitarianism and Christology, faded with the Act of Toleration in 1689, after which “Baptists no longer had to justify the ecclesial legitimacy of their separate existence,” and especially with the Enlightenment and the growth of “radical individualism” in America.\footnote{Harmon, \textit{Towards Baptist Catholicity}, 72, 77, 80-81.}

Regarding a fourth mark, engagement in constructive retrieval of tradition, Harmon offers three proposals, of which the first is “any new Baptist confession of faith should be conceived as a Baptist exposition of the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed, sans the Filioque clause,” which would be ecumenically significant in that this creed is accepted by Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and many Protestant denominations.\footnote{Harmon, \textit{Towards Baptist Catholicity}, 81-82, 83, 86.} This proposal reflects a fifth mark of a catholic Baptist theology, advocacy of a “thick” ecumenism that does not settle for lowest-common-denominator agreements. The second proposal, to re-envision the nature and function of creeds, has been addressed, but the third, to likewise re-envision the place of tradition in Baptist theology, raises a major issue: the fact that Harmon all but ignores the medieval tradition. Importantly, he does affirm D. H. Williams’ criticism of the “fall paradigm” in which the church is corrupted by Constantine’s conversion and restored with the Reformation, but he refers to nothing beyond the fifth century as being bypassed.\footnote{Harmon, \textit{Towards Baptist Catholicity}, 42; D. H. Williams, \textit{Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants} (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).} McClendon employs a version of this paradigm, although he would likely criticize Harmon for appealing to the myth of an...
undivided early church. At any rate, Harmon criticizes Williams for not offering “a strategy for incorporating [the patristic] tradition into specifically Baptist faith and practice,” and because Baptists as a whole “lack a tradition of tradition” in this sense, they must dialogue with other strategies, of which he reviews nine, including those of Karl Barth, MacIntyre, and the *nouvelle théologie* movement in mid-twentieth-century Catholicism.\(^{43}\)

Harmon’s preferred dialogue partner is Barth, who, like McClendon, regards tradition as a relative authority, meaning that it “is therefore not a body of authoritative propositions faithfully transmitted from one generation to the next by the church but rather is the church itself, in all its fallibility, as the community gathered in subordination to the Word of God.”\(^{44}\) Barth’s retrieval of patristic tradition is certainly a promising paradigm, not least because “[his] third way beyond liberal and fundamentalist versions of modernism provided a theological haven for many Baptist theologians,” and Harmon describes it as “much closer to home” than the *ressourcement* (“return to the sources”) agenda of the *nouvelle théologie*.\(^{45}\) It is also safer, however, and allows him to avoid a more challenging approach to tradition, not least because *ressourcement* involved medieval as well as patristic sources, which he mentions only in relation to Henri de Lubac’s reconsideration of patristic and medieval hermeneutics. He also oddly labels the *nouvelle théologie* as modern but Barth’s retrieval as proto-postmodern for exemplifying

\(^{43}\) Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 46. The other six paradigms are those of Methodist theologian Thomas C. Oden, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the Radical Orthodoxy movement, Catholic theologians Leonardo Boff and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright, and the postliberal theology movement.

\(^{44}\) Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 50-51.

\(^{45}\) Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 130.
MacIntyre’s idea of a “living tradition.” Whereas Baptists and other evangelicals “tend to characterize tradition primarily in terms of the more static sense of tradition as *tradita*, the ‘things handed over,’” Barth did so “more in terms of *traditio*, ‘a handing over,’ the dynamic process of traditioning.”

Harmon also highlights MacIntyre’s notion of learning a “second first language,” that of “the Christian traditions that consciously live in continuity with the catholic tradition: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism.” Such a language would help Baptists avoid treating tradition as a repository of resources from which they can pick and choose, but it would also require already knowing a *first* first language—a tenuous assumption in the case of post-subculture Baptists and an indication of an ambiguity or tension. On the one hand, Harmon insists that the authority of the *communio sanctorum* “is not limited to the writings of ‘doctors of the church’ or the creeds and canons of ecumenical councils or any other body of orthodox propositions, but rather resides in the community as a whole and therefore in every denominational branch thereof.” The latter claim implies that Baptists are as catholic as any other “branch” of the church—a claim that is contentious at best and might lead Baptists to wonder why they ought to bother with his proposals. On the other hand, he says that their “consciousness” of catholicity is inadequate, and affirming that tradition involves argument and that “even the heretic and the schismatic belong in some sense to the

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“tradition” may not be enough to overcome this inadequacy. After all, are Baptists not schismatics insofar as the church is visible? Do most not dissent from not only the idea of authoritative goods or *tradita* but also the process of argument or *traditio*, even if they once engaged in it through congregational practices such as church discipline and denominational institutions such as colleges, which have become sites of conflict about identity that he cites as evidence of “contested catholicity”? Harmon addresses this ambiguity in his concluding chapter, which he begins with two quotations from prior to Newman’s conversion to Catholicism before discussing why he has not converted. On the one hand, he acknowledges not only that “the fuller catholicity that I wish for Baptists is not yet exemplified by any specific Baptist congregation” but also that other bodies “are in fact already living that which I seek” and indeed pose no theological obstacles. On the other hand, he insists that to convert would be to move “from one imperfect communion to another”:

I am of the considered opinion that before the separated churches can move towards visible unity, they must first go deep within their own traditions in order to recover elements of catholicity that once characterized their own churches but have been subsequently neglected and in order to identify the sources of present barriers to a mutually realized catholicity. This can happen only if theologians commit themselves to remaining with the communions of their nurture and calling, warts and all, and with great patience work to help their churches towards something that will probably not be realized within the temporal span of any living theologian’s ministry. Ecclesiology and ecumenism are inescapably eschatological: they belong to the tension between the realized and the as-yet-unrealized aspects of the reign of God in which the church participates.

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Harmon echoes McClendon in treating being catholic (katholikē) in the universal sense as a future reality, not a past one, but differs in emphasizing a narrower sense that refers to “the fully orthodox pattern of faith and practice that distinguished early catholic Christianity from Gnosticism, Arianism, Donatism, and all manner of other heresies and schisms,” a sense that is “the closest the post-New Testament church has come to a full realization of ‘visible unity in one faith and Eucharistic fellowship,’” the goal of Protestant ecumenism, meaning that catholicity concerns “a qualitative fullness of faith and order” expressed in such fellowship.\(^{52}\) The remaining marks of a catholic Baptist theology are advocacy of a sacramental theology and attention to liturgy as the primary context for formation, and Harmon contends that regular observance of the Eucharist “may help Baptists not only to narrate the story of the Triune God more fully but in doing so may also help counter the Gnostic tendencies in American expressions of Baptist life.”\(^{53}\) Although he also echoes McClendon in describing a qualitative rather than quantitative catholicity, he emphasizes its doctrinal and sacramental aspects and associates the latter with the incarnational character of the church. Yet he neglects the institutional aspect that is intrinsic to the bodies that are “already living” catholicity, historically and globally, and was central to the subculture that provided a measure of catholicity to Southern Baptists. Like McClendon, he preserves the primacy of Scripture while grounding it in tradition, a position that corresponds to the Catholic position, particularly after Newman, who emphasized the historical process, not simply the doctrinal content, of tradition. In Catholicism, however, institutions, chiefly the

\(^{52}\) Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 204.

\(^{53}\) Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 163.
magisterium, determine whether certain innovations are authentic developments or harmful distortions and perform other essential functions.

Catholic theologian Nicholas M. Healy explains that Harmon uses “tradition” in two different senses. The first, which Healy designates “Tradition 1,” refers to the beliefs, practices, and so forth of the community that “can be understood and lived out in a wide variety of ways, some of which may conflict.” The second, “Tradition 2,” refers to an orthodox or qualitative catholicity governed by certain criteria and norms that Christians hold in common and about which they argue. Thus Harmon describes a “hierarchy of authorities” that proceeds from the Triune God to Scripture, then Tradition 2, and finally Tradition 1. The problem is that authority works according to a different hierarchy when it comes to our discernment of the truth, a hierarchy that moves largely in the opposite direction. The Christian community must interpret its doctrines and practices, even those it regards as basic and normative, and it must claim to do so with some authority. The churches decide which doctrines are the most significant, which relatively less so. The same applies to Scripture: the community interprets Scripture according to its interpretation of its doctrines, and—so Harmon’s claim rightly goes—the community decides for its members how to read Scripture and therefore how to construe Tradition 2.54

In this respect, Tradition 1, not Tradition 2, is primary, which is why the Catholic Church and other bodies accord certain members greater authority. Such authority is subject to human frailty, but rather than deny or ignore it, Christians should “try to make sure that those making such judgments are those most suited for doing so, and, further, that those who might be more adversely affected by the implications of their judgments are also given some kind of authority.” The latter area is precisely where Baptists could contribute to the broader church by retaining their emphasis on individual interpretation while

placing it “within a stronger understanding of catholicity than hitherto.” If they intend to actually learn a second first language rather than merely invent an intangible identity, they would be wise to begin with the Catholic understanding.

A New Oxford Movement

The most striking part of the concluding chapter is Harmon’s comment that Newman’s Oxford Movement “may offer the most appropriate model” for Baptists who hope to renew the qualitative catholicity of their tradition. He says little about what such a movement would involve, but elsewhere, replying to the symposium of which Healy’s essay was a part, he acknowledges that “Baptist Catholicity—that is, communion with the bishop of Rome—is indeed, but in a qualified sense, the ultimate goal of the envisioned ‘Baptist catholicity’” and that his theory of tradition is not specific enough to guard against a cafeteria-style “selective catholicity.” However, he adds that this goal is “qualified” in that it entails the recognition of being Baptist as “a distinctive way of being Catholic” and that “I believe that our own congregations are fully church, that the catholic church subsists in them, and that our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper are indeed valid Eucharists.” Harmon’s participation, along with other catholic Baptists, in the recent official conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World


56 Harmon, Towards Baptist Catholicity, 211. He does not cite British Baptist H. Wheeler Robinson’s much earlier judgment that “Baptists need an “Oxford Movement” of their own order, so as to give their truth of an individual relation to God its complementary truth of a social relation to Him.” The Life and Faith of the Baptists (London: Methuen, 1927), 174.

57 Steven R. Harmon, “Why Baptist Catholicity, and By What Authority?,” Pro Ecclesia 18, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 387, 389, 392.
Alliance indicates a serious commitment to dialogue.\textsuperscript{58} If Baptists are already “fully church,” however, it is unclear whether they need to do anything other than increase their consciousness of their own catholicity, whereas Catholics need to fundamentally alter their ecclesiology.

None other than Charles E. Curran, a Catholic theologian known for his dissent from the magisterium, states that although the Catholic Church has more explicitly recognized the role of the individual, “A truly Catholic ecclesiology can never reduce the church to a voluntary society in the sense that individuals join the group merely to nurture and sustain their Christian life. The church is the way God has chosen for us, not the means we voluntarily embrace to help ourselves as individuals.” Curran adds that the Catholic Church is catholic in two senses, “catholic” (with a lowercase “c”) referring to “the broader catholicity that [it] shares with many other churches,” “Catholic” to “the totality of its Catholicity including its origins and unique history … and its difference from other churches.”\textsuperscript{59} This difference centers on two characteristics, hierarchy and especially mediation, which is also described using the terms “sacramentality” and “analogical imagination” and is “the most distinctive aspect of Roman Catholic theology and self-understanding”:

The Catholic understanding of the church illustrates the reality and importance of human mediation. As in Jesus the divine became incarnate in the human, so too in the church, the divine works in and through the human. The church is not


\textsuperscript{59} Charles E. Curran, \textit{The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis} (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999), 4. He was removed from a tenured faculty position at the Catholic University of America in 1986 for his dissent from Catholic teaching on several moral issues but insists that he remains loyal to the Catholic Church and its teaching authority, a position he explains in \textit{Loyal Dissent: Memoir of A Catholic Theologian} (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006).
primarily an invisible reality involving a relationship between God and the saved. Nor is the external aspect of the church merely a coat or garment to cover over the divine element. The divine aspect and the human, the invisible and the visible, are united. The church is a visible community with visible structures that mediate God’s loving presence in our world.⁶⁰

Mediation in this sense is Catholic, not merely catholic, in that it is this church that uniquely mediates God’s presence and has done so throughout Christian history. Although Harmon and other catholic Baptists do not regard the church as a mere voluntary society, many if not most of their fellow Baptists do, and any conception of Baptist identity that ignores “visible structures” risks such an interpretation.

One way to describe this basic difference is, as Curran mentions, Catholic sociologist Andrew M. Greeley’s distinction between the Catholic analogical imagination and the Protestant dialectical imagination.⁶¹ Another is Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich’s distinction between the “Protestant principle” and the “Catholic substance.”⁶² Catholic theologian Avery Dulles restates the latter as a “Christian substance” with two distinct but related principles. Whereas the Protestant principle warns against too closely identifying the human and natural with the divine, the Catholic principle warns against minimizing the presence of the divine in the human and natural:

The Catholic principle is an acceptance of mediation, and indeed of visible mediation. It asserts that God ordinarily comes to us through the structures that are given, especially those to which his gracious promises are attached, such as Incarnation, Scripture, sacrament, and apostolic ministry. The first attitude of the believer toward Christ, the Bible, the Church, and tradition ought not to be one of

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⁶⁰ Curran, Catholic Moral Tradition Today, 10.


suspicion but, on principle, one of trusting receptivity. If it later appears that there are reasons for suspecting that the mediation has been faulty, the time will come for criticism and even protest. But if criticism comes too early it can be corrosive of faith.\(^{63}\)

Baptists in America were once nurtured in contexts marked by “trusting receptivity” but, because of their proclivity for criticism or conflict and their belief that God “ordinarily” comes to us through a direct or unmediated relationship, are now more likely to experience contexts that are “corrosive of faith,” if “faith” means that “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). As Dulles says, “The ‘Catholic principle’ enables the Christian to adhere to the fullness that has been given,” meaning the unity, holiness, and apostolicity of Catholicism in addition to the universality of catholicity.\(^{64}\)

Surveying the history of the concept, Dulles explains that from the Reformation to the mid twentieth century, Protestantism in its various forms posed the principal challenge to catholicity. Since then, however, pluralism, technology, and other factors have posed a new crisis, “possibly more serious than the crisis that had arisen from the break-up of the ‘undivided Church’ at the end of the Middle Ages,” in response to which the Second Vatican Council reinterpreted catholicity in the ecumenical manner summarized in the conclusion.\(^{65}\) Baptists and other evangelicals who seemingly benefited from the weakening of Catholic and Protestant churches are not immune to this crisis and now find themselves further weakened by a legacy of revivalism and fundamentalism as well as captivity to an increasingly individualistic and consumeristic culture. If they are to renew their own catholicity, let alone move toward the Catholic form, they would do


\(^{64}\) Dulles, Catholicity of the Church, 8-9.

\(^{65}\) Dulles, Catholicity of the Church, 18.
well to consider the four facets outlined by Dulles: height, given by God, particularly in the Incarnation; depth, given by God in nature and reshaped by the Catholic Church; breadth, sought in the universal church; and length, extended through time in a process of development that preserves continuity. Catholicity in breadth pertains to Harmon’s argument and Baptists’ typical behavior in that it refers to the quantitative aspect that “is opposed to schism, sectarianism, and whatever would tend to confine or isolate Christians in a closed, particularist group” and therefore involves a missionary effort to more fully realize its already-present qualitative aspect through “inculturation” in every region and among every people. Here Dulles remarks that nationalism has been “a frequent source of schism and a major impediment to its healing” and cites the Oxford Movement’s “reassertion of the spiritual independence of the Church.”

Given Harmon’s comment about a Baptist version of the Oxford Movement as well as Baptists’ tendency to view Christian history through the prism of primitivism or restorationism, catholicity in length is particularly relevant. As a transnational or global church relativizes parochial interests and loyalties without necessarily dismissing them, so a truly historical church relativizes contemporary preferences and anxieties. Dulles states that “continuity in the temporal dimension corresponds to communion in the spatial,” meaning that the church is the center from which the fullness of life in Christ radiates and toward which creation gravitates to express this fullness, which implies a distinctive “catholic attitude” toward time as well as place. Patristic and medieval theologians generally recognized the church’s transcendence, but since the Reformation,

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Protestants have neglected it in favor of the church’s faith, while Catholics have done so in favor of its hierarchy. Again, Vatican II made strides toward recovering the older tradition that regards the church as prefigured from creation, prepared by ancient Israel, established as an institution by Christ, and to be consummated at the eschaton, when the institutional element will pass away. Until that time, the church participates in a real but imperfect manner in the coming fullness of God’s gift in Christ, which makes continuity and communion possible and preserves the distinctive character of communities in different times and places. Therefore its history is neither one of decline from an original purity that must be restored nor one of anticipation of a future, post-institutional age of the Spirit. Dulles cites Lutheran historian Robert Louis Wilken:

> We cannot discover what Christianity “is” by an exegesis of biblical texts or by uncovering the earliest strata of the Christian tradition. The Christian movement can be understood only in light of its historical development, i.e., what it became within the course of its history. The New Testament has a future as well as a past. What becomes of a historical phenomenon is as much a statement of what it is as what it was at the beginning.  

Like Newman before him, Wilken has since converted to Catholicism. Along with other Anglo-Catholics, Newman shared the Orthodox position that prioritized the consensus of the Church Fathers but came to believe that this consensus “gave only feeble support to certain basic beliefs of the Church of England, such as the Trinity, original sin, and the real presence” and that the Fathers also recognized the authority of the papacy, which Anglicans rejected. In a word, he concluded that, in Dulles’ words, “the principle of development, if it applied to the early centuries, must apply to

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68 Dulles, Catholicity of the Church, 89-90.

subsequent centuries as well. The truth or falsehood of a doctrine could not be established by the date when it came to be believed, but by other criteria.”70 For Harmon and other Baptists to adopt the interpretive horizon of tradition is to raise the same questions Catholics have long asked Orthodox and Anglicans regarding the “realities of history” and the assertion of continuity “notwithstanding the vicissitudes the Church has undergone in its two-thousand-year history.” At the same time, it is to present an opportunity in that catholicity is not homogeneous but heterogeneous unity; it is unity in difference. Catholicity in time, therefore, includes an element of discontinuity. Just as the Church’s geographical catholicity requires a variety of cultural forms, so her temporal catholicity calls for responsiveness to the times and seasons. …

Carrying this thought a stage further, we may perhaps surmise that each major era of Church history has a special task or vocation. By living out the integral Christian reality in its own way, it makes a distinct contribution to the ongoing tradition.71

To suggest that Baptists themselves might make “a distinct contribution to the ongoing tradition” as part of the larger contribution of the present era is not the same as asserting that being Baptist already is “a distinctive way of being Catholic,” which, frankly, it presently is not. Still, as Dulles makes clear, Catholic theology, especially after Vatican II, interprets catholicity in a way that invites dialogue about the convictions that are central to Baptist theology. Perhaps the distinct contribution of Baptists might concern local communities. At the conclusion of After Virtue, MacIntyre argues that in a liberal society that lacks a moral consensus, “the nature of political obligation becomes systematically unclear,” and moreover, “the tradition of the virtues is at variance with central features of the modern economic order and more especially its individualism, its

70 Dulles, Catholicity of the Church, 97-98.

71 Dulles, Catholicity of the Church, 99, 101-2.
acquisitiveness and its elevation of the values of the market to a central social place.” On the whole, our time parallels the dawning of the so-called Dark Ages, which led to emergence of monasticism:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.  

Similarly, shortly before his election to the papacy, Joseph Ratzinger participated in a dialogue with atheist philosopher Marcello Pera, then President of the Italian Senate, regarding Pera’s proposal of a new civil religion to combat cultural relativism. After contrasting the European and American conceptions of the church-state relationship and crediting the advocacy of the “free churches” (e.g., Baptists) for the latter, Ratzinger asserts that the fading of Protestant denominationalism has brought not the cultural unity that was promised but a mere cultural affinity. In a de-Christianized Europe, “If a civil religion] is no more than a reflection of the majority’s convictions, then it means little or nothing. If instead it is a source of spiritual strength, then we have to ask what feeds this source.” He then turns to the concept of “creative minorities,” borrowed from British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, who argued that civilizations grow because of minorities who creatively respond to challenges and break down not because of external attack but because of internal decay after creative minorities become dominant. However,

72 MacIntyre, After Virtue, 254, 263.

minorities can also arise to renew civilizations. Based on the premise that “something living cannot be born except from another living thing,” Benedict proposes that the Catholic Church should neither attempt to reclaim its former status nor retreat into a “ghetto” but adopt the strategy of a creative minority, or rather minorities, that “are formed when a convincing model of life also becomes an opening toward a knowledge that cannot emerge amid the dreariness of everyday life. … There is nothing sectarian about such creative minorities. Through their persuasive capacity and their joy, they reach other people and offer them a different way of seeing things.”

Ratzinger offers four corollary theses to this proposal, three of which bear on contemporary Europe and the need for dialogue, while the fourth is directly relevant to this chapter: creative minorities—from primitive Christian and medieval monastic communities to the present—“can clearly neither stand nor live on their own” but “live naturally from the fact that the Church as a whole remains and that it lives in and stands by the faith in its divine origins … [and] recognizes them as a gift that it is duty-bound to transmit. The minorities renew the vitality of this great community at the same time as they draw on its hidden life force, which forever generates new life.” In other words, the church and its tradition require creative minorities and vice versa. The historical and institutional aspects of the church create a space for such minorities to critique culture and, when necessary, the church itself while presenting its living tradition in ways that others may find compelling. Ratzinger concludes that Friedrich Nietzsche was right and that many Europeans have abandoned Christianity in favor of relativism not because it

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has been invalidated by science or philosophy, as some believe, but because “its model for life is apparently unconvincing.” There is therefore a need for “creative minorities that enrich this model of life, present it in a convincing way, and can thus instill the courage needed to live it.”

Although Ratzinger has Catholics in mind, Baptists would seem to be capable of enacting this strategy, given their historical advocacy for religious liberty and emphasis on local congregations. In America, however, Catholics were in a minority position much more recently than Baptists, for whom the achievement of religious liberty paved the way for captivity to culture, especially in the South, and who largely forgot that freedom from coercion is inseparable from freedom for the disciplined community. To become a creative minority, then, Baptists must develop consciousness of their predicament as well as their catholicity, to whatever extent they possess it, and reconstruct “local forms of community” that understand the roles of the church and tradition in shaping rationality and mediating wisdom. They would do well to learn from the early church, early Baptists, medieval monastics, and so on in addition to contemporary movements such as the Catholic Worker and New Monasticism, a group of Protestant communities partly inspired by Baptist theologian Jonathan R. Wilson’s analysis of After Virtue, particularly the comment about St. Benedict. Reconstruction will be very difficult in the absence of denominational ties, and Baptists would also do well to reconsider how new structures might enable them to build a new culture that retains the positive aspects of the Southern Baptist subculture and intentionally participates in the broader church. Now is the time


77 Jonathan R. Wilson, Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From “After Virtue” to a New Monasticism, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), ix. The first edition was published in 1997.
for Baptists to contribute a fuller appreciation of the individual and congregation even as they receive a truly catholic vision and consequently re-envision and re-theologize their identity in a direction that might legitimately be called a new Oxford Movement, whether or not it eventually leads them across the Tiber.
CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have argued that the dissolution of the Southern Baptist subculture has left Baptists, especially those who left the Southern Baptist Convention in the wake of the conservative-moderate controversy, in a precarious situation in relation to the surrounding culture. They have also argued that this situation presents Baptists with an opportunity and indeed an imperative to reconnect with the broader church and its tradition in order to relearn the unavoidably communal and mediated nature of their faith. This conclusion revisits the major themes of those chapters—including catholicity, incarnation, mediation, and tradition—as a way of summarizing the argument of the dissertation as a whole and expressing its significance. It also focuses on the prospect of dialogue with Catholics in particular.

The Exact Opposite of Catholicism

On May 16, 1920, George W. (Washington) Truett, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and the figure for whom the seminary I attended would be named, ascended the steps of the United States Capitol and delivered an address entitled “Baptists and Religious Liberty” to an audience of more than 10,000, most of whom were in Washington for the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Truett began by asserting that, in addition to being “the supreme contribution of the new world to the old” and of America to civilization, the doctrine of religious liberty was “pre-
eminently a Baptist contribution,” as many historians and even John Locke supposedly recognized.¹ Importantly, this did not imply that Baptists were somehow better than members of “other Christian communions,” by which Truett meant evangelical denominations. After all, “The spiritual union of all true believers in Christ is now and ever will be a blessed reality, and such union is deeper and higher and more enduring than any and all forms and rituals and organizations. Whoever believes in Christ as his personal Savior is our brother in the common salvation, whether he be a member of one communion or of another, or of no communion at all.”² In other words, true Christian unity was individual and invisible and thus ultimately independent of “rituals and organizations,” including denominations and even congregations. A devoted denominationalist, Truett could not have anticipated the breakdown of Southern Baptist life and thought, but his dissociation of “spiritual union” from “communion” reflects a longstanding neglect of ecclesiology and tradition, the consequences of which are only now becoming fully apparent.

Truett’s address implicitly contrasted the Baptist stance with the Protestant ecumenical movement then underway, in which the SBC repeatedly declined to participate, and it epitomized the Baptist triumphalism then near its zenith, which was based not so much on the growth of the Baptist denomination, although it was growing,

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¹ George W. Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” in God’s Call to America: And Other Addresses Comprising Special Orations Delivered on Widely Varying Occasions, ed. J. B. Cranfill (New York: George H. Doran, 1923), 32. Without citing a source, he quoted Locke as saying that “the Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.” Northern Baptist historian Conrad Henry Moehlman later traced the reference to Baptists to English Baptist historian Edward B. Underhill and the reference to liberty to A Letter Concerning Toleration, which in fact criticizes Baptists and other English Dissenters for not practicing such liberty toward one another. “The Baptists Revise John Locke,” Journal of Religion 18, no. 2 (April 1938): 178-79.

² Truett, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” 33-34.
as on the spread of fundamentally Baptist ideas. Their advocacy of religious liberty was
“not an accident” but a corollary of their “essential and fundamental principles,” which
together constituted the “exact opposite of Catholicism”:

The Roman Catholic message is sacerdotal, sacramentarian and ecclesiastical. In
its scheme of salvation it magnifies the church, the priest and the sacraments. The
Baptist message is non-sacerdotal, non-sacramentarian and non-ecclesiastical. …
The Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration and transubstantiation are to the
Baptist mind fundamentally subversive of the spiritual realities of the gospel of
Christ. Likewise, the Catholic conception of the church, thrusting all its complex
and cumbrous machinery between the soul and God, prescribing beliefs, claiming
to exercise the power of the keys, and to control the channels of grace—all such
lording it over the consciences of men is to the Baptist mind a ghastly tyranny in
the realm of the soul and tends to frustrate the grace of God, to destroy freedom of
conscience and terribly to hinder the coming of the Kingdom of God.3

Truett then contrasted the dogma of papal infallibility, defined by the First Vatican
Council in 1870, with the belief in the authority of the New Testament, in which
“supreme emphasis is everywhere put upon the individual. The individual is segregated
from family, from church, from state and from society, from dearest earthly friends or
institution, and brought into direct, personal dealings with God.”4 His contemporary E. Y.
Mullins, who was in attendance, had named this emphasis soul competency, and Truett’s
address takes for granted the modern notion of unmediated knowledge described in the
preceding chapters.

After discussing the nature of baptism—and describing infant baptism as “a
corner-stone for the whole system of popery throughout the world” that, if discarded,
would soon result in the accomplishment of Christian unity—and the “incomparable
apostasy” of the union of church and state inaugurated by Constantine, Truett argued that

the promise of the Reformation culminated in the “lonely struggle” of Baptists for religious liberty:

They dared to defy traditions and customs, and deliberately chose the day of non-conformity, even though in many a case it meant a cross. They pleaded and suffered, they offered their protests and remonstrances and memorials, and, thank God, mighty statesmen were won to their contention, Washington and Jefferson and Madison and Patrick Henry, and many others, until at last it was written into our country’s Constitution that church and state must in this land be forever separate and free, that neither must ever trespass upon the distinctive functions of the other.  

Regarding the “right kind” of citizenship, presumably only in places that recognized religious liberty, Truett insisted that “happily, the record of our Baptist people toward civil government has been a record of unfading honor. Their love and loyalty to country have not been put to shame in any land.” He proceeded to offer advice to the nation and its legislators concerning matters such as economic markets and the League of Nations and to Baptists concerning Sunday schools and evangelism before concluding by celebrating that “democracy is the goal toward which all feet are traveling, whether in state or in church” and calling on the assembly to pledge that “we will give our best to church and to state, to God and to humanity.”

Truett’s reading of history was debatable at best, but he was hardly the first or the last to posit a direct connection between Baptist advocacy and the First Amendment or an essential harmony between Baptist theology and American democracy. Regardless of the extent to which Baptists influenced the republic, they undoubtedly exemplified the peculiar type of Christianity described by Alexis de Tocqueville:

The greatest part of English America has been peopled by men who, after having escaped the authority of the pope, did not submit to any religious supremacy; they therefore brought to the New World a Christianity that I cannot depict better than to call it democratic and republican: this singularly favors the establishment of a republic and of democracy in affairs. From the beginning, politics and religion were in accord, and they have not ceased to be so since.¹⁸

Truett’s address took for granted (and took credit for) this accord and has regularly been cited as the epitome of the self-definition of Baptists in America. At the time, an editorial in the Baptist Standard, the Texas Baptist newspaper, declared that “the setting and significance of the message made this the greatest hour ever witnessed in the Southern Baptist Convention.”¹⁹ Of course, a second editorial likened Truett to a “prophet of God” for “illuminat[ing] the dark pages of Rome’s shame with the light of God’s Truth” and related an anecdote of a denominational leader telling a nearby Catholic priest about the “uncontaminated Americanism” of Southern Baptists before Truett began to criticize Catholicism and the priest moved away.¹⁰

Truett was also hardly the first or the last Baptist to express anti-Catholic sentiment, which in his case was relatively tame. Although Baptists emerged nearly a century into the Reformation, they adopted the vitriol commonly directed at Rome and “popery” and sided with Protestants against Catholics despite being persecuted by both at times. They developed principles such as the primacy of the individual and the autonomy of the local church largely over against Catholicism and its remnants in Protestantism, and once they began to flourish in the United States, the former provided a perfect foil

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with respect to patriotism as well. The Catholic Church’s preference for establishment, reinforced by the *Syllabus Errorum* in 1864, provided an excuse to rally behind nativism in response to Catholic immigration, to oppose efforts such as parochial schools, and to incite fears of a papist plot to take over the government. From the perspective of Baptists like Truett, Catholics not only denied individual freedom in the religious and civic realms but also placed loyalty to the Church and the pope above loyalty to the state, which was irrational because, rightly understood, the two were compatible. Meanwhile, Catholics were in fact becoming more at home in America, to the point that some dreamed of converting it. Despite the condemnation of “Americanism” as a heresy by Pope Leo XIII in *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* in 1899 and the challenges of assimilating an immigrant population, by the 1960s they had joined the postwar consensus, achieved economic and political success that culminated with the election of John F. Kennedy, and seen their embrace of religious liberty vindicated by the adoption of *Dignitatis Humanae* by the Second Vatican Council.

Unsurprisingly, then, anti-Catholicism has abated since Truett’s address, and, perhaps somewhat embarrassed, contemporary Baptists have insisted that his defense of religious liberty can be separated from his characterization of Catholicism. Moderate historian J. David Holcomb, for example, argues that the latter “served primarily as a useful tool to highlight the Baptist tradition.” In contrast, moderate theologian Lee Canipe argues that “such revisionism clearly misrepresents Truett’s understanding of religious freedom, which was inextricably bound up with his perception of Catholicism.

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11 J. David Holcomb, “A Millstone Hanged about His Neck? George W. Truett, Anti-Catholicism, and Baptist Conceptions of Religious Liberty,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 43, no. 3 (Summer-Fall 2008): 69.
as the very antithesis of freedom.”

This perception has lingered among Baptists, especially moderates traumatized by the controversy, during which some referred to the conservative leadership as a “college of cardinals.” Many are among those for whom Truett’s address “has become … the definitive statement of the Baptist understanding of religious freedom.” At any rate, the perception that Catholics are anti-freedom has provided a convenient way for Baptists to dismiss Catholic theology and to justify an exaggerated notion of freedom bound up with continued loyalty to America. Former Southern Baptist missionary and seminary trustee Gladys S. Lewis, for example, reflects on her post-controversy “exile” as follows:

Current rules and dicta don’t affect us as Baptists moving in soul liberty and soul competency. A conscience-free Baptist can survive the wilderness captivity. I am still Baptist because soul competency allows me to work out my own faith positions when life gives me conditions not covered by doctrine. We are all Catholics pragmatically. We want someone to make the rules, tell us how to live in them, bless us when we succeed, and correct us with assignments for extra credit when we fail. In Baptist circles right now, we call that fundamentalism, but it is a Catholic position by ecclesiology, which would be decried by Baptists, and it is fascist politically, in its denial of liberty. The trouble with that kind of rigidity comes when life dishes up a serving of something without rules for solutions. I live on a plane daily where nothing of faith markers has been mapped. Soul liberty and competency allow me to be my own cartographer without losing my way on the journey.

Early in the controversy, moderate historian E. Glenn Hinson noted that “if you range denominations across a spectrum … you will find Baptists near the extreme

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14 Canipe, Baptist Democracy, 151.

voluntarist end alongside Quakers, and Roman Catholics on the extreme intentionalist end. Intentionalism considers the Spirit to work through composite structures—clergy and sacraments—and thus the Church assumes primary responsibility for the faith and life of believers.\textsuperscript{16} It could be argued that many Baptists have in fact considered the church to have at least equal responsibility for the faith and life of believers. Even if Hinson is only partly correct, however, Lewis’ comments indicate the emergence of an identity that is very different from that of historical Baptists but remains anti-Catholic with respect to theology and thoroughly captive to culture. Virtually all first-generation moderates are products of the Southern Baptist subculture discussed in chapter three and consequently tend to possess relatively orthodox “faith markers.” As Hinson recognized three decades ago, however, the subculture, including “a vigorous church training program devoted to teaching the Baptist heritage and fostering the denominational program,” was already dissolving, leading him to state, after warning of the danger of extreme voluntarism, that “we must find ways to inculcate the Baptist idea as church training once did.”\textsuperscript{17} Yet little other than voluntarism is being inculcated in post-subculture moderates, and to say this presents an obstacle to the kind of dialogue with Catholics, or for that matter any other Christians, proposed in chapter five is an understatement.

There are other obstacles to such dialogue, including not only anti-Catholicism but also the possibility that, rather than converting the nation, Catholics have taken on the characteristics of its post-Christian religious landscape, as evidenced by the surveys and


\textsuperscript{17} Hinson, “Future of the Baptist Tradition,” 192-93.
studies cited in the introduction and the phenomenon colloquially known as “cafeteria Catholicism.” Despite the alluring resources of their tradition, if they have become as individualistic and polarized as Protestants, bother to dialogue with them, when those resources could simply be appropriated at will? They may not have become that individualistic and polarized, but even if they have, Catholicism remains remarkably stable and concrete as a worldwide communion and a historical tradition, that is, a tradition that mediates the wisdom of the catholic (with a lowercase “c”) tradition shared by all Christians, Baptists included. Whether undertaken in direct communication with Catholics or not, a vital task for Baptists is to reconsider concepts that are central to Catholic theology but understood differently or ignored altogether by Baptist theology—catholicity, mediation, tradition, and so on—in order to lay the groundwork for constructive dialogue and re-theologizing.

The Promise of Evangelical Catholicism

Baptists and other Protestants have faulted Catholics for interposing sacraments, ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the intercession of Mary and the saints between the individual and God, thereby denying the sole salvific mediation of Jesus. Given the occasional historical excesses of Catholicism, they have not been without justification. Yet it is important not to misunderstand the Catholic view of mediation, particularly as articulated beginning with Vatican II, which Pope John Paul II summarizes in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990):

Christ is the one mediator between God and mankind … (1 Tm 2:5-7; cf. Heb 4:14-16). No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit. Christ’s one, universal mediation, far from being an obstacle on the journey toward God, is the way established by God himself, a fact of which Christ is fully aware. Although participated forms of
mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded, they acquire meaning and value only from Christ’s own mediation, and they cannot be understood as parallel or complementary to his.\textsuperscript{18}

The later declaration \textit{Dominus Iesus} (2000) clarifies that “participated forms of mediation” refers to the possibility that “the historical figures and positive elements of [non-Christian] religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation.”\textsuperscript{19}

This idea dates back to Vatican II and \textit{Lumen Gentium}. Less than fifteen years earlier, Pope Pius XII had asserted that “the Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same thing.”\textsuperscript{20} However, \textit{Lumen Gentium} states that Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. …

… This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.\textsuperscript{21}

That the Church “subsists in,” rather than “is,’ the Catholic Church means that other Christian believers and communities, referred to as “separated brethren” by the conciliar

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documents, participate in the economy of salvation and the movement toward unity. That the Church is also the “people of God” means that it possesses a catholicity of which “there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation.” Therefore Unitatis Redintegratio laments that “the divisions among Christians prevent the Church from realizing the fullness of catholicity proper to her.”

Lumen Gentium emphasizes that the Catholic Church is the unique, necessary, and embodied presence of Christ, who “affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed also the necessity of the Church … Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved.” To a much greater degree than prior Catholic teaching, however, it also emphasizes that, through the bishop and the Eucharist, the Church “is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament.” Most Baptists would disagree with the Catholic belief that the church is necessary for salvation and the Catholic definition of “legitimate local congregations,” but their own historical emphasis on such congregations suggests a way to renew their sense of participation in the mediation of Christ.

Furthermore, commenting on Lumen Gentium, John Paul II states that the context for participation is the missionary activity entrusted to the Church by Christ, to whose redemptive work it points:


It is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for salvation. Both these truths help us to understand the one mystery of salvation, so that we can come to know God’s mercy and our own responsibility. Salvation, which always remains a gift of the Holy Spirit, requires man’s cooperation, both to save himself and to save others. This is God’s will, and this is why he established the Church and made her a part of his plan of salvation.24

Most Baptists would disagree with the Catholic belief that sinful human beings are capable of cooperating in salvation, which explains why they tend to fixate on areas such as the role of the hierarchical priesthood and the intercession of Mary, which, according to Lumen Gentium, illustrates the reality that “just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, … so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source.”25 However, they would agree that the church is responsible for missionary activity, and their own historical emphasis on such activity suggests another way to renew their sense of participation.

The main theme of Redemptoris Missio is the call for a “new evangelization,” an idea introduced by the council, and in the earlier apostolic exhortation Christifideles Laici (1988), John Paul II outlines the challenges to the church posed by secularization, “a constant spreading of an indifference to religion, of secularism and atheism” resulting from greed and consumerism as well as the fact that the Christian faith, “while maintaining some of the externals of its tradition and rituals, tends to be separated from those moments of human existence which have the most significance, such as, birth, suffering and death.” Yet even in regions or nations where “many vital traditions of piety

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24 John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, sec. 9.

and popular forms of Christian religion are still conserved,” the faith is threatened by the spread of sects as well as secularization, meaning that such traditions and forms are inadequate on their own. “Without doubt a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world. But for this to come about what is needed is to first remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself present in these countries and nations.” Here the “lay faithful” have an essential role insofar as they learn how “to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life.”26 By “a mending of the Christian fabric of society,” John Paul II means what he describes in the encyclical Centesimus Annus (1991) as “sustaining culture in its progress toward truth and assisting in the work of its purification and enrichment.”27 The point is that only in attending to the church can an evangelization of culture be undertaken, notably through the building of “small, basic or so-called ‘living’ communities, where the faithful can communicate the Word of God and express it in service and love to one another; these communities are true expressions of ecclesial communion and centers of evangelization, in communion with their pastors.”28

Baptists certainly ought to rededicate themselves to making their congregations “centers of evangelization,” but they also ought to reconsider how those congregations can more fully participate in “ecclesial communion,” especially given the secularization, “sectification,” or “baptistification” of the religious landscape. Thankfully, they can do so


in dialogue with Catholics responding to the call for a new evangelization. Using a term coined by David J. O’Brien to describe Isaac Hecker, the nineteenth-century founder of the Paulist Fathers, Catholic theologian William L. Portier calls a segment of the Catholic population “evangelical Catholics.” These Catholics sometimes emulate traits associated with evangelical Protestants—holding revival meetings, utilizing technology, worshiping with contemporary music, and so on—and are part of a larger “reconfiguration” that includes such Protestants embracing “history, liturgy, and a sense of the church as a visible witness,” meaning that the future of the broader church is “both evangelical and catholic” (with a lowercase “c”). However, “evangelical” in this sense refers not to a theology but to an ethos developed in response to the imperative created by modern political conditions, one defined less by Vatican II than by the dissolution of the immigrant subculture that “tended to buffer American Catholics from the full effects of religious voluntarism.”

By “voluntarism” Portier means the absence of legal coercion in matters of religious affiliation or participation, that is, religious liberty, which, in turn, tends to make religion “voluntary” in the sociological sense that Ernst Troeltsch contrasted with “inherited” or “institutional” churches, thereby creating conditions favorable to the growth of denominations such as Baptists. Yet religious pluralism also brings problems, notably churches that “are not really free to engage fully with the world” because, being


regarded as voluntary and therefore “private,” they must develop theories to explain how they can be “public.” Overall,

Even as modern political conditions encourage evangelical forms, they tend to deform Christianity insofar as it is ecclesial and incarnate in a culture. Modern notions of tolerance tend to domesticate both the gospel that is being preached and the form of life it entails by treating them as simply one among many possible private “religions.” Soon religious pluralism transforms from a providential fact into a theoretical good, a natural state of things best left undisturbed. …

Pluralism’s inner contradictions pose a dual threat to evangelical Christians. On the one hand, they encourage evangelicals themselves to be individualistic and anti-institutional. On the other, they encourage Christians who are not evangelicals to internalize the implications of pluralism as a natural state and to distrust evangelical forms. For Catholics pluralism holds a further contradiction. They are in theory free to believe in Catholic ecclesiology, but the practices of pluralism form them in a Lockean ecclesiology in which the Church can only be a denomination, one among a nation’s many “voluntary associations of men,” rather than transnational or catholic.31

This passage raises a number of issues worth considering by Baptists, who bear some responsibility for the above conditions and epitomize the above contradictions, but the most important is the idea that Christianity is intended to be “ecclesial and incarnate in a culture” as well as “transnational or catholic.” Can Baptists, particularly ex-Southern Baptists, come to recognize and respond to an incarnational imperative in addition to the evangelical imperative? The latter seemingly no longer motivates them as it once did, partly because they are no longer being formed by a subculture not unlike the one described by Portier:

A network of parishes, schools at every level, hospitals and other agencies served as a buffer between most Catholics and American religious pluralism. Though geographically diverse, the subculture had a distinctive spiritual and intellectual topography. Not all Catholics went to Catholic schools. But whether they lived in New Jersey or Oklahoma, they participated in varying degrees in a shared religious culture. They learned similar practices of praying and thinking that added to their demographic distinctiveness. This Catholic world was surely not

31 Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 42-43.
airtight. But it helped to protect generations of immigrants from Nativism and anti-Catholicism even as it schooled them in how to be Americans.

He adds that the dissolution of the subculture, not Vatican II, is “the single most important fact in U.S. Catholic history in the second half of the twentieth century.” This dissertation argues that the dissolution of the subculture, not the controversy, is likewise the single most important fact in Southern Baptist history in the same period. So what are the implications of the parallel?

The irony is that the most promising dialogue partners for post-subculture Baptists may well be post-subculture Catholics whose theology no longer constitutes the “exact opposite” of their own and who nevertheless want to avoid the perils of pluralism as well as consumerist individualism. For various reasons, of course, such dialogue will likely be of interest to only a few members of these traditions. After all, most Catholics under forty are, according to a recent study cited by Portier, “spiritual and contingent” with a sense of theological boundaries that is “diffused and ambiguous.” In a word, “For many young adults, Catholicism is not so much a binding community of discipleship as a cultural tool kit of symbolic religion/spiritual wares from which it is possible to construct a personal religious identity.” The same is undoubtedly true of many Baptists, not to mention many other Protestants. For their part, evangelical Catholics are responding to a post-subculture situation in which “Catholic identity is the central issue.” They are not necessarily charismatics, converts, or neo-conservatives and cannot be dismissed as

32 Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 45-46.

33 Dean R. Hoge et al., Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 222-23, 226.

34 Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 54.
backward-looking traditionalists; some are Catholic Workers, others teach theology, and still others minister in parish and campus settings. Although they affirm the universal and christocentric character of the Catholic Church, they accept minority status, meaning not that they are “sectarians” but that their emergence marks the end of Americanism, that is, the quest to be regarded as “good Americans.”

Elsewhere Portier discusses the culmination of Americanism with John Courtney Murray, the chief architect of *Dignitatis Humanae*, whose death in 1967 is a “convenient marker” for the dissolution of the subculture and who has served as a “totem” for conservative and liberal Catholics alike in the struggle over the proper interpretation of the council. Writing out of the postwar consensus, Murray articulated a “theology of manners” that made it possible for a Catholic to become President but also served as a “theology of containment” that made it impossible for the Catholic Church to critique the social order. Portier contends that *Dignitatis Humanae* should be read not as an endorsement of liberalism or pluralism but as “a formal rejection of Christendom, ushering in a new ‘post-Constantinian’ age in the Church’s history” in which it is free to adopt a more evangelical posture. In a word, “The end of Christendom cannot mean the end of the Johannine incarnational imperative to make the word flesh. Catholicism cries out to be embodied in a culture at the center of which is the church. … By being the Church, Catholics might try to live a new culture—Pope John Paul II would have called it a ‘culture of life’ or ‘civilization of love’—in the shell of liberal culture.” Indeed, the late pope “embodies a post-Constantinian Catholicism, solemnly committed to religious

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36 Portier, “Theology of Manners,” 104-5.
liberty, and engaged with the world through the ‘evangelization of culture,’” and in doing so “reminds young Catholics that they belong to a larger global body that stretches far back into history.”

Young Baptists would benefit from being reminded of their past, but they must also develop a fuller sense of belonging to a global and historical body. Thankfully, at least a few are becoming dissatisfied with both the polarized theologies of older generations and the “personal religious identities” of their peers as well as even toned-down versions of the Americanism exemplified by Truett. Admonishing Catholic theologians, Portier asserts that “post-subculture students of theology are looking for a re-theologized theology,” one better suited to dealing with a pluralism that, for all its perils, embodies the “providential irony” of individuals being free to “come to know Christ and to know the church as more than a Lockean voluntary association.” The “catholic Baptists” described in chapter five have begun to provide such a “re-theologized theology” for young Baptists. However, although I share many convictions with and owe a personal debt to these scholars, I have not adopted the moniker and question whether it is appropriate, given that it designates Baptists who not only are not in communion with Rome but also are members of a tradition characterized by division, of which their own denomination is a recent product. Moreover, like the “baptist vision,” “catholic Baptist” is an abstraction. Whatever flaws the SBC may have had, it was comprised of congregations with longstanding historical, theological, social, and institutional ties, without which a “catholic” identity encourages the commodification it is intended to

37 Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 56-57.

38 Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 64.
resist. At the same time, the influence of catholic Baptists was a major reason that I studied with Catholic professors and students at a Catholic university, one of many signs that things have changed for the better, perhaps providentially.

Lest the reader perceive a belief that Baptist theology compares unfavorably with Catholic theology, it is important to assert that Baptists and Catholics are providentially situated to provide faithful witness. For one thing, they are the nation’s two largest religious groups in the nation. For another, they were longtime opponents with respect to religious liberty, with Baptists leading the charge and Catholics insisting that the consequences would be disastrous. Yet both came to understand themselves as playing a vital role in the American project even as they defined themselves over against what the other represented. Baptists triumphed insofar as religious liberty is protected and freedom of conscience permeates the culture, but Catholics were right insofar as Christian bodies struggle to build community and produce consensus in a religious landscape marked by pluralism and consumerist individualism. Whereas Baptists recognized the obligations of religious liberty earlier than Catholics, Catholics recognized the implications earlier than Baptists. Today they share more cultural and theological space that any time since the Reformation, and together, among the ruins of western Christendom, they face the challenge of reconstituting faithful Christian existence apart from an alliance, formal or informal, with the state.

Hopefully, a few who share my ecclesial location will recognize this convergence, for the potential contribution of this dissertation lies not in winning over scholars but in presenting post-subculture Baptists with a convincing narrative and compelling task. That task is to build “living” ecclesial communities rather than aggregates of the like-minded,
which are exceedingly vulnerable to the temptation of substituting alien agendas for the incarnational imperative and, practically speaking, struggle to locate a basis for the kind of formation that leads to moral consensus and effects personal and social transformation. Re-theologizing Baptist theology will require congregations committed to discipleship as well as theologians committed to the complementary approaches of ressourcement and aggiornamento that animated Vatican II. They must learn that ecclesial communities draw their life not only from the Bible and personal experience but also from the broader church and its tradition, to which they can contribute the best elements of their own tradition even as they receive wisdom that can help them alleviate cultural captivity and negotiate baptistification. Although few Baptists would be receptive to structures like those that Catholics possess, all could come to a new appreciation of their own structures, which represent the scandal of ecclesial division but nevertheless mediate stores of knowledge and memory and create spaces to freely discuss issues, arrive at common confessions, charitably negotiate internal and external differences, and ultimately incarnate a culture that participates in the mediation of Christ.


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