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Baptist Identity as Reformational Identity[1]

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This essay contributes to contemporary discussions of Southern Baptist identity by offering a reformational exposition of core Baptist distinctives. It draws upon both Scripture and Reformation theology and emphases, especially the five solas and the priesthood of all believers. The essay represents a partial, preliminary exercise in retrieval theology for the sake of renewing contemporary Southern Baptist identity, though much of what is argued can also be applied to other Baptist groups. The purpose of the essay is to contribute to the ongoing renewal of Southern Baptist identity in the aftermath of the "conservative resurgence" that took place from 1979 to 2000, an important task in an increasingly post-denominational age.

Key Words: baptism, Baptist distinctives, Baptist identity, priesthood of all believers, Reformation, regenerate church membership, sola fide, sola gratia, sola Scriptura, solus Christus

Introduction

For as long as there have been Baptists, there have been writings about Baptist identity. Baptists have been debating and refining their identity ever since the founding of the earliest Baptist churches in the seventeenth century. Baptists have always written confessions of faith to distinguish their beliefs from other movements around them. They have drafted church covenants that identified their congregations as free communities of disciples rather than parishes of an established church. And they have written hundreds of treatises about their identity, reflecting upon Baptist distinctives as a form of "confessional theology."[2]

What is true of Baptists in general is true of Southern Baptists in particular. William Estep suggests that, "the Southern Baptist historical experience can best be understood as a search for identity."[3] Most of the

[1] This essay was originally delivered as a paper at the Reformation 500 Conference, Union University, March 11, 2017. It has been revised for publication.

[2] R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2001), 24.

[3] W. R. Estep, "Southern Baptists in Search of an Identity," in *The Lord's Free People in a Free Land: Essays in Baptist History in Honor of Robert A. Baker*, ed. William R. Estep (Fort Worth, TX: Evans, 1976), 145.

internal controversies Southern Baptists have experienced boil down to debates about Baptist identity.[4] Southern Baptists publish a steady stream of books and essays about their identity, while seminaries and universities host periodic conferences on the topic. The nature of Baptist identity remains a pressing issue for Southern Baptists in a post-denominational age.

This essay contributes to contemporary discussions of Southern Baptist identity by offering a reformational exposition of core Baptist distinctives, drawing upon both Scripture and Reformation theology and emphases, especially the five *solas* and the priesthood of all believers.[5] In doing so, it represents a partial, preliminary exercise in retrieval theology for the sake of renewing contemporary Southern Baptist identity, though much of what is argued applies to other Baptists as well.[6] These reflections are intended to be more pastoral rather than polemical, and more constructive rather than controversial. The purpose is not primarily to win contemporary debates, an agenda that too often leads to simplistic views of Baptist history.[7] Rather, revisiting the Reformation with a sympathetic, yet critical eye is for the sake of contributing to the ongoing renewal of Southern Baptist identity in the aftermath of the "conservative resurgence" of the previous generation.[8]

[4] Nathan A. Finn, "Debating Baptist Identities: Description and Prescription in the American South," in *Mirrors and Microscopes: Historical Perceptions of Baptists*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2015), 173–87.

[5] The five *solas* include *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fidei* (faith alone), and *soli Deo gloria* (the glory of God alone). They are commonly cited to summarize the key theological differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

[6] Retrieval theologians argue that earlier doctrinal insights function as diagnostic tools to identify alleged "misdirections" in modern theology and provide resources for overcoming them. See John Webster, "Theologies of Retrieval," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 585. See also W. David Buschart and Kent Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

[7] For more on this theme, see the essays in Keith Harper, ed., *Through a Glass Darkly: Contested Notions of Baptist Identity*, Religion and American Culture (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2012).

[8] See Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2000); Paige Patterson, *Anatomy*

The Baptist Distinctives

Baptists affirm the Lordship of Christ and the supreme authority of Scripture. Though these two principles are not unique to Baptists, they are foundational to how Baptists understand their distinctives.[9] Most of the classic Baptist distinctives are ecclesiological, and they have been shaped, sometimes implicitly, by the reformational principles of *sola Scriptura*, which Baptists apply to matters of church order, as well as an expanded view of *solus Christus* that speaks not only to salvation but also to Christ's total Lordship over believers and local churches.

Almost all Baptists affirm the same cluster of beliefs as central to their identity, though they differ at times over finer points of nuance. The five Baptist distinctives include regenerate church membership, believer-only baptism, congregational polity, local church autonomy, and liberty of conscience. While none of these convictions are found only among Baptists, they are normally considered principles that distinguish Baptists from other traditions. Wherever you find these distinctives affirmed as a coherent identity, you find a "baptistic" church, even if that congregation does not call itself Baptist, participates in diverse ministry networks with non-baptistic churches, or even claims to be non-denominational.[10] The remainder of this essay introduces each Baptist distinctive, engages with reformational emphases that inform the distinctive, and offers some initial constructive suggestions regarding Baptist faith and practice, with emphasis on post-resurgence Southern Baptists.

Regenerate Church Membership

Most Baptists affirm the doctrine of the universal church. However, Baptists have always emphasized the priority of the local church, which is

of a Reformation: The Southern Baptist Convention, 1978–2004 (Fort Worth, TX: Seminary Hill Press, 2004).

[9] Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 325–44. This essay's summary of the five Baptist distinctives draws from this chapter.

[10] For example, see Keith G. Jones and Ian Randall, eds., *Counter-Cultural Communities: Baptistic Life in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2008). Stan Norman is less convinced that baptistic groups evidence all of the Baptist distinctives, or at least does so with the same consistency, as convictional Baptists. See R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2005), 186–88.

a contextual expression of the universal church and an embassy of Christ's kingdom that is already present but awaits its full consummation.[11] In both the New Testament and the Baptist tradition, the normative practice is for believers to identify with the one body of Christ through membership in a local community of disciples who are intentionally walking together for the sake of worship, witness, and service.

Baptists believe a local church's membership should be comprised only of individuals who provide credible evidence of regeneration. This ecclesiological principle is called the believer's church or, more commonly, regenerate church membership. Baptists argue that regenerate church membership is evidenced in several biblical passages (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:26–27; Acts 2:39–47). Equally important, however, Baptists argue a regenerate membership is assumed throughout the New Testament and regularly and uniformly implied by the text of Scripture.

Many Baptist scholars agree that regenerate church membership is the foundational Baptist distinctive; for example, John Hammett calls this principle "the Baptist mark" of the church.[12] Regenerate church membership argues that formal identification with the body of Christ is for those who have acknowledged Christ's Lordship over their lives by faith. Believer's churches take the reformational principles of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and make them prerequisite to membership. While interested or curious unbelievers should be welcomed into many church activities, and while the unconverted children of members should be considered an important part of the faith community, membership and its privileges is reserved for those who claim to have been justified by grace through faith.

The reformers rarely embraced regenerate church membership during the Reformation. Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans were clear on the *solas* in question, but assumed a mixed assembly of both believers and unbelievers and offered forms church membership to unconverted children. For their part, the Anabaptists required personal faith for membership, but were sometimes unclear on the *solas*. Many of the Anabaptists still affirmed an essentially Catholic view of justification based upon both

[11] For more on the idea that local churches are kingdom embassies, see Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

[12] John S. Hammett, "Regenerate Church Membership," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, Malcolm B. Yarnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2007), 21. See also John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2005), 81–131.

faith and works that flowed from faith.[13]

Today, numerous trends undermine regenerate church membership. Two examples will suffice, each of which is common among Southern Baptists. The cheap grace offered by easy believism, as well as a general lack of discipleship among new believers, have combined to erode regenerate membership and redemptive church discipline.[14] For example, as of 2016 the Southern Baptist Convention claimed around 15.2 million members, but only about 5.2 million people were regularly present for weekly worship.[15] One doubts that all of the absentee members are devout believers who are sick, homebound, traveling, or deployed for short-term military service on any given Sunday. Furthermore, the number of attendees includes non-members such as young children and visitors; fewer than 5.2 million *members* attend weekly worship on average. In addition to serial non-attendance, many churches having active members who are engaged in unrepentant sin that is widely known and perhaps scandalous, yet are not subjected to biblical church discipline. The lack of discipline is astounding in a denomination that once championed the practice as a virtual ecclesial distinctive.[16]

Fortunately, numerous Southern Baptists have written on the importance of recovering meaningful church membership, including the practice of church discipline.[17] Perhaps more important, in 2008, the SBC

[13] See James A. Patterson, "Anabaptist Kinship Revisited: Implications for Baptist Origins and Identity," in *Reformation 500: How the Greatest Revival Since Pentecost Continues to Shape the World Today*, ed. Ray Van Neste and J. Michael Garrett (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 31–44. For an alternative perspective, see Michael Whitlock, "Justification by Faith and Early Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

[14] Easy believism comes in many forms, but in Southern Baptist circles the most common form emphasizes a momentary spiritual decision rather than emphasizing that faith is a matter of repentance from sin and trust in the saving work of Christ that leads to a lifetime of discipleship. The classic evangelical critique of this form of easy believism is John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). For a recent critique from a Southern Baptist perspective, see J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved* (Nashville: B&H, 2013).

[15] See "Fast Facts about the SBC," available online at http://www.sbc.net/BecomingSouthernBaptist/FastFacts.asp.

[16] See Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785–1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[17] For example, see *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*; Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); idem, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus*

Annual Meeting adopted a resolution "On Regenerate Church Membership and Church Member Restoration," signaling a wider recognition among Southern Baptists that these are problems that need to be addressed.[18] Recovering a robust commitment to salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is a key ingredient in the antidote to easy believism and truncated discipleship. Furthermore, a commitment to *sola Scriptura* should lead Southern Baptists to take church discipline more seriously, since the practice is clearly taught in Matt 18:15–20, 1 Cor 5:1–13, 2 Cor 2:5–7, and Gal 6:1.

Believer-Only Baptism

While regenerate church membership is the foundational Baptist distinctive, baptism is almost certainly the most recognizable Baptist belief. Historically, Baptists have focused their attention mostly on the subject and mode of baptism. For example, Baptists wrote numerous treatises on the topic during the height of interdenominational debates with pedobaptist groups in the nineteenth century.[19] Modern works also treat the subject and mode of baptism, though they often frame these topics in wider discussions about biblical covenants, the history of baptismal practices, and the recovery of meaningful membership.[20]

(Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); John S. Hammett and Benjamin L. Merkle, eds., *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012); Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013); Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

[18] "On Regenerate Church Membership and Church Member Restoration," SBC Annual Meeting, Indianapolis, IN, at http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1189/on-regenerate-church-membership-and-church-member-restoration.

[19] Examples of this genre include Adoniram Judson, *A Treatise on the Mode and Subjects of Christian Baptism* (Worcester, MA: William Manning, 1818); Alexander Carson, *Baptism in its Mode and Subjects* (New York: C.C.P. Crosby, 1832); Patrick Hues Mell, *Baptism in its Mode and Subjects* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1853); John E. Massey and J. D. Coulling, *Baptism: Its Mode, Subjects and Design* (New York: Sheldon, 1861).

[20] See Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Fred A. Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2003); Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007); Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015).

In terms of the subject of baptism, Baptists affirm believer-only baptism, which is applying baptism only to individuals who bear credible testimony to personal faith in Christ. Baptists argue there is no evidence in the Bible of a *known* unbeliever being baptized; of course some professing Christians turned out to be false believers (2 Cor 11:13–15; 2 Tim 4:10; Titus 1:16). In terms of baptismal mode, the first generation of Baptists poured or sprinkled water over one's head, practices that were carried over from adult baptismal rites in the Church of England and possibly confirmed by interaction with Continental Anabaptists. However, since the early 1640s, Baptists have almost universally practiced immersion as the only valid form of baptism and have codified this view in their confessions and catechisms.[21]

Baptists argue believer's baptism by immersion is the closest contemporary practice to New Testament baptism because the Greek word *baptizo* literally means to immerse, dip, or submerge something in water. When pedobaptists argue that believers and their children should be baptized, Baptists typically respond that any attempt to argue infant baptism from the New Testament amounts to eisegesis rather than straightforward exegesis. Furthermore, Baptists point out that pedobaptists cannot agree among themselves on a theology of infant baptism; Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox disagree with each other on why they baptize infants. To Baptists, infant baptism seems like *a practice in search of a theology to support it*.

By contrast, nearly all credobaptists contend that baptism is for professed disciples alone because it is a symbolic depiction of the gospel, is an outward sign of the new believer's spiritual transformation, and marks the public identification of a believer with the body of Christ. Baptists draw upon numerous New Testament texts to articulate their doctrine of baptism. Matthew 28:18–20 and Acts 2:39–47 evidence the pattern of belief before baptism. Acts 8:26–40 points to both believer's baptism and the mode of immersion. Romans 6:3–5 demonstrates how baptism testifies to spiritual transformation resulting from regeneration, using language that is more consistent with immersion than either sprinkling or pouring.

For Baptists, believer's baptism is closely tied to regenerate membership, and as such the practice is also informed by the reformational themes of grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone. A key purpose of baptism is to make public the fact that the one being baptized claims to have been justified by grace through faith in Christ, and the church has

[21] Chute, Finn, and Haykin, *The Baptist Story*, 18–25.

recognized that claim as valid based upon credible evidence of regeneration. Furthermore, because Baptists appeal to New Testament example for their baptismal convictions rather than speculative theological systems or the weight of church tradition, the principle of *sola Scriptura* is also important in the Baptist view of baptism. Baptists remain unconvinced of the validity of infant baptism because they see no clear biblical example of an infant being baptized.

As with regenerate church membership, many threats undermine believer-only baptism. The aforementioned easy believism is certainly a problem, as evidenced in several trends such as unclear gospel presentations, appeals for intellectual assent to some facts about the gospel without calling for repentance, manipulative or quasi-sacramental understandings of practices such as the sinner's prayer and the altar call, and insufficient discernment of evidence of regeneration in practices such as so-called spontaneous baptismal services. Another threat is the trend of baptizing children at increasingly younger ages—sometimes under five years of age. While few would question that God converts very young children, baptism is reserved for those who give credible evidence of regeneration. It is at best difficult to discern such evidence in young children who make few independent decisions and are prone to want to impress parents, pastors, and teachers.[22]

As with regenerate church membership, recovering the reformational principles of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* will go far toward cutting the legs out from under easy believism and mitigate against the temptation to rush small children (or anyone else) into the waters of baptism. A firm commitment to *sola Scriptura* should stave off the temptation to either baptize infants or make normative any mode of baptism besides the full immersion of a professed disciple.

Congregational Polity

Polity is a word used to describe a church's basic structure and patterns of leadership. Congregational polity, or congregationalism, argues that local churches are governed by their own membership. The Baptist Faith and Message (2000) offers a concise summary of congregationalism:

[22] One Southern Baptist church that has put careful thought into child baptisms is Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, KY. See Jared Kennedy, "When Should We Baptize Kids?" Sojourn Kids, February 11, 2011, http://www.sojournkids.com/blog/2011/02/when-should-we-baptize-kids. This blog post also links to recent debates about childhood baptism, as well as Sojourn's position paper on the topic.

"Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord."[23] Congregationalism differs from presbyterian polity, which invests final authority in church courts comprised of elders, and episcopal polity, which affirms the final authority of bishops. Historically, congregationalism carried over into the Baptist movement from the English Separatists, a group that practiced congregational rule and eventually evolved into the denomination later called the Congregationalists (with a capital "C").[24]

Discussions of church polity should include an important caveat: no model, including congregationalism, perfectly mirrors New Testament polity.[25] The polity of the earliest churches could best be described as a combination of congregationalism and the direct rule of apostles; the specifics varied somewhat, depending upon context. Congregationalism is an attempt to adapt the polity of the earliest churches to a world without apostles in the New Testament sense of that office. Baptists and other congregationalists believe their views represent the most faithful adaptation of New Testament polity.

Several New Testament passages imply a form of congregationalism. In Matt 18:15–20 and 1 Cor 5:1–13, two aforementioned passages related to church discipline, the entire church is called upon to excommunicate a wayward member. In Acts 6:1–6, the entire Jerusalem church sets apart seven men to serve the congregation in a diaconal role. In 1 Tim 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9, churches are provided with specific qualifications by which to vet potential pastors and deacons. Based on these passages, Baptists argue that, at minimum, the Bible suggests the entire church is responsible for maintaining its membership and selecting church officers. Prudentially, most Baptist churches also affirm the church budget and approve major expenditures by the will of the full congregation; other matters are contextual and vary from church to church.

[23] The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), article VI: The Church, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp.

[24] For more on the English Separatists, including their congregationalism, see B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1971), and Hunter Powell, *The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–44* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015).

[25] This is admittedly a minority view among Baptists, most of whom argue (or at least imply) that the New Testament includes a fully developed congregationalism.

For Baptists, congregationalism is a corporate expression of the reformational principle of the royal priesthood, more often called the priesthood of all believers.[26] Presbyterian theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has argued that the royal priesthood "amounts to a virtual sixth *sola*: *sola ecclesia* (church alone)," by which he means, "*the church alone is the place where Christ rules over his kingdom and gives certain gifts for the building of his living temple.*"[27] While Vanhoozer is mostly concerned with how the royal priesthood influenced interpretive authority, his insights can also be retrieved in service of Baptist identity; indeed, his language might even reflect a crypto-baptistic reflex in his own thinking.

In Exod 19:6, the Lord refers to Israel as a "kingdom of priests," and in 1 Pet 2:9, Peter calls the church a "royal priesthood." Based on this theme, the Reformers argued against the "sacerdotal" view of medieval Catholicism that affirmed a special priestly class that mediated God's grace to the laity through administration of the sacraments. The Reformers argued for what might today be called an "every-member ministry" that affirmed the dignity of all vocations as ways to glorify God, proclaim the gospel, and serve others. Anabaptists, English Separatists, and Baptists alike each filtered their understanding of the believers' priesthood through Matt 18:15–20, which they understood to point to congregationalism. For Baptists, congregationalism is a corporate expression of the royal priesthood.[28]

Sometimes Baptists use democratic language when they speak of congregationalism, such as in the Baptist Faith and Message, but this can be misleading; this is why Baptists need to intentionally draw upon the reformational themes of faith alone and Christ alone.[29] Rather than a spiritual

[26] For helpful brief introductions to the royal priesthood written from a Southern Baptist perspective, see Timothy George, "The Priesthood of all Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity," *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (Spring 1989): 283–94; Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "The Priesthood of Believers: Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Royal Priesthood," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, 221–44.

[27] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 29 (emphasis original).

[28] The classic historical survey of Reformation and post-Reformation understandings of the royal priesthood is Cyril Eastwood, *The Priesthood of All Believers: An Examination of the Doctrine from the Reformation to the Present Day* (1960; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009).

[29] See the critique of democracy language in Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, Doing Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 100–04; Jonathan Leeman,

democracy, each local church is a "Christocracy" under the ultimate kingship of Christ and is to be comprised only of believers who take ownership of the church's mission. Healthy congregationalism thus assumes a church is committed to Christ's Lordship and is striving to maintain a regenerate membership. When these priorities are not affirmed, congregationalism can easily devolve into a *mere* democracy where various special interest groups try to outvote one another in church meetings. However, when congregationalism is practiced correctly, the church's members confirm to each other Christ's plan for their church as they seek to follow his will through submitting to his written Word.

Today, congregational polity has become perhaps the most controversial of the Baptist distinctives among Southern Baptists. One reason is because of a perceived incompatibility of congregationalism and pastoral authority.[30] According to 1 Thess 5:12–13 and Heb 13:17, Christians are to honor and submit to their leaders; many wonder how this can be done when a pastor's employment is dependent upon the will of the members. Another reason some Baptists downplay congregationalism is experience with unhealthy expressions of this polity. Many have endured combative church conferences where the congregation evidenced little love for Christ or one another. Others have witnessed (or endured) mean-spirited votes of "no confidence" in a pastor or other staff members, often for unbiblical reasons. Still others have seen ineffective congregationalism where the members voted upon even the most mundane decisions.

Unhealthy versions of congregationalism are troubling, but the answer is not to abandon congregational polity. *Congregationalism comes down to trust.* The membership selects and holds accountable her pastors, so there is indeed a sense in which the members have authority over their pastors. But it is also true that the members select pastors *to lead them*. Pastors are not mere employees, but are leaders who are called upon to "shepherd the flock of God," "oversee" the church, and "rule well" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1–2; 1 Tim 5:17–19). So there is also a sense in which pastors have authority over their members. The congregation trusts the pastor or pastors who lead them, and the pastors trust the members not to act in an unbiblical manner toward their leaders.

Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 9–12.

[30] For works that balance congregational authority and pastoral authority, see Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members*; Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds. *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2014); Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2014).

A culture of trust, in the context of a regenerate membership in submission to Christ's final authority as revealed in Scripture, will help to ensure that congregationalism is expressed in healthy ways that focus on kingdom priorities. To that end, consider the following "organizational chart" as embodying a healthy, Christ-centered congregationalism:

> Each local church should be ruled by Jesus Christ,
> governed by her members,
> led by her pastor(s), and
> served by her deacons

For Baptists, congregational polity is simply living out the priesthood of all believers in the context of the local church, which is a community of disciples formed by grace alone through faith alone, and is under the Lordship of Christ alone.

Local Church Autonomy

Local church autonomy claims that every church is free to determine its own agenda apart from any external ecclesiastical coercion. Baptists believe local church autonomy reflects the biblical pattern when the office of apostle is not taken into consideration. As Stan Norman notes, "The Bible makes no reference to any entity exerting authority above or beyond the local church."[31] Positively stated, churches have the freedom to follow the Lord's leading in their worship and witness. Put more negatively, no denomination or convention or association can force a church to do something she does not wish to do.

Local church autonomy is rarely considered a reformational principle. The magisterial reformers all held to some version of the territorial church where secular leaders played a role in proscribing the religion of their subjects. In fact, this principle is the reason that Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans are considered *magisterial* reformers: the magistrates, or public officials, were key allies in implementing and enforcing religious reforms. During most of the sixteenth century, local church autonomy was identified more with the so-called radical reformers, especially the Anabaptists who founded free churches without the support of magistrates, frequently resulting in their persecution at the hands of magisterial reformers and Catholics alike.

However, in England, radical Puritan movements were abandoning their efforts to reform the Church of England by the 1580s and beginning to form autonomous churches that were in the broader Reformed tradition rather than identifying with Anabaptism. These included the English

[31] Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 104.

Separatists from whom the first Baptists emerged in the generation between 1609 and 1645. Thus, some second-generation reformers, at least within English Nonconformity, rejected magisterial support in favor of local church autonomy. This principle is also influenced by reformational emphases at least implicitly through its relationship to the other Baptist distinctives. The whole congregation of regenerate saints (*sola fide* and *sola gratia*) takes ownership of the church's ministry (the royal priesthood) with the understanding that Christ alone is Lord of the church (*solus Christus*) and his will as revealed in the Scripture is the ultimate standard by which the church's faithfulness is measured (*sola Scriptura*).

The greatest threat to healthy local church autonomy is what might be called the "soft sectarianism" of overemphasizing a church's independence. Some Baptists, especially in North America, have sometimes stressed that local church autonomy means any ecclesial relationships beyond the local church are unbiblical.[32] Some Landmark and fundamentalist Baptists have held this position. More common is the view that interchurch cooperation is undertaken for purely pragmatic reasons, which is probably the majority opinion among Southern Baptists. For example, one often hears this argument: the local church is primary, but we ought to cooperate in associations or conventions because we can accomplish more for the kingdom when we work together than when we go it alone. Though this idea is undoubtedly true, it is questionable whether this is the best case for autonomy.

Historically, English Baptists valued congregational freedom, but also affirmed a robust doctrine of the church universal and inter-church cooperation. For example, the Second London Confession says,

> To each of these Churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful, for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands, and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power.[33]

[32] See Stanley K. Fowler, "Churches and the Church," in *Recycling the Past or Researching History? Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005), 25–49; Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 104–8. See also Samuel Daley Tyson, "Dependent Independence: Toward a Theology of Southern Baptist Associationalism" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017).

[33] Second London Confession, Chapter XXVI: Of the Church, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd ed., ed. William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2011), 285–86.

This is a strong statement of the freedom of local churches to determine their own spiritual agendas. However, that same confession also claims the following concerning cooperation:

> As each *Church*, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually, for the good and prosperity of all the *Churches of Christ*, in all places; and upon all occasions to further it (every one within the bounds of their places and callings, in the Exercise of their Gifts and Graces) so the Churches (when planted by the providence of God so as they may injoy [*sic*] opportunity and advantage for it) ought to hold communion amongst themselves for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.[34]

The adopters of this confession affirmed the necessity of associations, not only for pragmatic considerations, but because cooperation is healthy and embodies the type of unity that will one day characterize Christ's church when it assembles at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:6–10). Associational cooperation is as much about ecclesiology and eschatology as it is mission and fellowship.

This view of ecclesiology carried over into colonial North America. The churches of the Philadelphia Association adopted a lightly amended version of the Second London Confession, including its affirmations of both autonomy and associationalism.[35] Many British Baptists continue to affirm the older ecclesiology, but during the course of the nineteenth century a majority of American Baptists moved in a more independent direction, especially in the South and Southwest. There are likely many reasons for this trend.

The American emphasis on freedom and individualism certainly played a role; Baptists frequently applied these principles to both congregationalism and autonomy. So did Landmark sectarianism, especially the frequent (but not uniform) denial of the universal church. Both liberalism and fundamentalism contributed to the trend. While these two movements differed greatly on doctrinal matters, both were thoroughly "modern" in that they placed a high premium on individual and congregational

[34] Second London Confession, Chapter XXVI: Of the Church, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 288–89 (emphasis original).

[35] See Francis W. Sacks, *The Philadelphia Baptist Tradition of Church and Church Authority, 1707–1814: An Ecumenical Analysis and Theological Interpretation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989).

freedom, albeit unto different ends.[36] The tendency among Southern Baptists to equate cooperation with financial stewardship since the advent of the Cooperative Program in 1925 has only furthered an overemphasis on independency and a mostly pragmatic understanding of cooperation.[37]

Reformational emphases offer some resources to aid Baptists in finding a healthier balance between autonomy and inter-church cooperation. One of the ongoing conversations during the Reformation was over the marks of a true church, a discussion that can inform how Baptists think about other ecclesial traditions and other churches within our own tradition. The Reformation was first and foremost about the recovery of the biblical gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and all the reformers agreed that the right preaching of this gospel is a necessary condition of a true church. Baptists should affirm this principle and recognize all churches that affirm the gospel are true churches and all people who embrace this gospel are true believers, even if they might disagree with those churches and individuals over secondary and tertiary theological matters.[38]

In addition to proclaiming the gospel rightly, various reformers also looked to the right observance of the sacraments as a mark of a true church. In the original historical context, this mark made sense because medieval Catholicism had intermingled soteriology (the gospel) with sacramentalism (the practice of the sacraments), as well as ascribed sacramental status to several practices that were either not instituted by Christ and/or were not material illustrations of the gospel. But evangelical renewal movements since the eighteenth century have rightly tempered at least some of the party spirit that has plagued Protestantism. While Baptists and other traditions take seriously their views of baptism and the Lord's Supper, they are—or at least they should be—far more hesitant to "de-church" a congregation because of deficient sacramental practices. Put another way, Baptists should affirm that incorrect understandings of

[36] See "Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America," which is included as an Appendix to Curtis W. Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24.3 (Fall 1997): 303–10.

[37] See Andrew Christopher Smith, *Fundamentalism, Fundraising, and the Transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1919–1925*, America's Baptists (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2016).

[38] Al Mohler helpfully addresses this issue with his paradigm of "theological triage." See R. Albert Mohler Jr., "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity," albertmohler.com, July 12, 2005, http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity/.

baptism and the Lord's Supper only threaten the true churchliness of a congregation if those aberrant views undermine the gospel itself. Baptists need a more fully developed category for true churches that are simply wrong about baptism—a serious matter, to be sure—but not one that results in a church becoming "not church," provided that the gospel is being rightly affirmed and proclaimed.[39]

Furthermore, Baptists should also look for as many ways to cooperate with fellow believers in other traditions in evangelism, ministries of justice and mercy, and cultural engagement. However, cooperation becomes trickier when it comes to placing pastors and planting new churches; those are matters best left among churches with a shared ecclesiology, including sacramental practices. For Baptists, this is where bodies such as associations and conventions come into play, as well as informal partnerships between two or more churches. Churches can and should cooperate with like-minded congregations so that they can accomplish more together than any one church can do alone, though this is not the only reason for inter-church cooperation. Local churches do not exist in isolation, but in most places they are part of the wider body of Christ in that county, town, or city. Churches need each other, especially when they are of substantially like faith and practice. Baptists need to come alongside one another when hurting churches have needs that can be served by sister congregations. Churches must be *humble* enough to ask for help, *selfless* enough to serve sister churches, and *biblical* enough to heed the sound counsel of other churches who lovingly point out errors and faults in theology or methodology.

Rather than viewing autonomy as equivalent to independency, it is better to see autonomy as a means to greater freedom to proclaim salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Autonomy guarantees the freedom of individual churches to proclaim the gospel in whatever ways they see most fitting, in submission to the Lordship of Christ and with guidance from the Scriptures. Baptist associations and conventions should help churches to cultivate this sort of gospel-centered cooperative autonomy. Local church autonomy should spur churches on to greater faithfulness rather than tempting them to strike out in their own direction, as if the wider church does not exist and Christ is not the Lord of the whole church, wherever it gathers in local congregations.

Liberty of Conscience

Baptists have always argued that every person is free to follow his or

[39] Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 64–65.

her conscience in religious matters without any human coercion. The Abstract of Principles (1858) offers a good summary of this conviction:

> God alone is Lord of the conscience; and He hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His word, or not contained in it. Civil magistrates being ordained of God, subjection in all lawful things commanded by them ought to be yielded by us in the Lord, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.[40]

Baptists have sometimes called this principle by other names such as "soul competency," "soul freedom," or "soul liberty." These terms are more or less synonymous historically, though in recent years they have taken on different nuances, depending upon who is employing which phrase.

Liberty of conscience is not so much a clear biblical principle as it is a broader emphasis that undergirds the other Baptist distinctives. As Stan Norman argues,

> Our convictions about and commitment to biblical authority, the lordship of Christ, and the nature and practice of a New Testament church require that we advocate soul competency and religious freedom. Understood this way, religious freedom and soul competency are doctrinal corollaries of our other distinctive principles.[41]

Not only is soul liberty a doctrinal corollary of the other Baptist distinctives, but it is also a corollary of the reformational principles of Christ alone and the priesthood of all believers. It may seem unusual to tie liberty of conscience to the Reformation—after all, the magisterial reformers affirmed territorial churches, executed perceived heretics, and persecuted Anabaptists, the one group that did argue consistently for soul liberty. Nevertheless, though captive to some of the regrettable traditions it inherited from the medieval church and blinded by the nature of the religious and political conflicts of the era, liberty of conscience is a reformational principle. Three brief examples should suffice.

In 1521, Martin Luther affirmed soul liberty when he claimed that his conscience was captive to God's Word rather than the opinions of popes and councils.[42] Luther knew he would answer to Christ alone for his religious convictions. Throughout his public career, John Calvin tried unsuccessfully to disentangle the Genevan Reformation from the ever-changing whims of the magistrates so that he and other pastors would be fully free to reform the churches according to their understanding of Scripture.[43] By the 1580s, some Puritans were leaving the Church of England, in part out of concerns that the Crown had no right to force individuals or churches to conform to the *Book of Common Prayer*. When it comes to liberty of conscience, what the Reformation seeded, however imperfectly, came to full bloom in the Baptist movement about a century later.

Liberty of conscience functions at a personal level similarly to local church autonomy at the corporate level. Thus, it faces some of the same temptations toward an over-emphasis on individualism. Some Baptist thinkers, especially E. Y. Mullins, have been accused of reading American individualism into their understanding of soul competency, resulting in a view of freedom that is at least potentially untethered from accountability.[44] Though it is debatable whether or not Mullins was too individualistic in his views—he also championed congregational accountability—some Baptists have claimed his mantle in advancing highly personalized views of soul freedom.[45] Many progressive Baptists consider soul competency the most important Baptist distinctive, though their interpretation is strongly influenced by enlightenment views of human autonomy.[46] The

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[40] The Abstract of Principles, article XVIII: Liberty of Conscience, available online at http://catalog.sebts.edu/content.php?catoid=7&navoid=336.

[41] Norman, *The Baptist Way*, 158.

[42] Luther's famous speech before the Diet of Worms, where he made this claim of a conscience bound by Scripture, is recounted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 144.

[43] This more critical stance toward magistracy marked a clear difference between Calvin and the earlier Reformed theologian Ulrich Zwingli, who had a more positive view of magistrates. See William G. Naphy, "Calvin's Geneva," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25–37.

[44] See Curtis W. Freeman, "E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," in *Through a Glass Darkly*, 84–111; R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Baptist Theology at the Crossroads: The Legacy of E. Y. Mullins," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3.4 (Winter 1999): 4–22.

[45] For a defense of Mullins against his critics, see C. Douglas Weaver, "Introduction," to E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 21–29.

[46] See Alan Neely, ed., *Being Baptist Means Freedom* (Charlotte, NC: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988); Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1993); H. Leon McBeth, "God Gives Soul Competency and Priesthood to all Believers," in *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charles W. Deweese (Franklin, TN: Providence 1996), 62–70.

result is an anthropocentric understanding of soul freedom too often separated from *solus Christus* and *sola Scriptura* and, at times, Christian orthodoxy.[47] A healthy view of liberty of conscience does not mean personal religious autonomy, though both believers and non-believers should be free to follow their convictions concerning ultimate things. For Christians, soul liberty is the freedom to follow Christ's will as it is revealed in Scripture, remembering that one day we will each stand before him to give an account for our faith and practice.

Liberty of conscience is difficult to maintain unless one is in an environment that values the convictions of all individuals (both believers and unbelievers), churches, and other religious organizations. For this reason, Baptists have historically argued that the best way to preserve soul liberty is to promote a formal separation between church and state. As the *Baptist Faith and Message* (2000) says, "A free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies 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."[48] This principle goes further than mere religious toleration, an idea with which many reformers had made peace once it became clear that the presence of Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and radical sects in Europe necessitated some degree of religious pluralism. Church-state separation means no state churches of any sort—even tolerant state churches that grant at least some individuals and religious movements the right to dissent.

Over the past four centuries, no other group of Christians has so consistently advocated religious liberty as a basic human right as the Baptists. Globally, Baptists have championed this principle and, alongside evangelism, made it central to a distinctively Baptist approach to mission.[49] Baptist thinkers have defended religious liberty in treatises, tracts, sermons, and confessional statements. Thousands of Baptists have been fined, jailed, tortured, and sometimes even killed for their commitment to this

[47] For two noteworthy examples of progressive Baptist departure from Christian orthodoxy, see R. Kirby Godsey, *When We Talk About God . . . Let's Be Honest* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1996); David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 2nd ed. (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Book, 2015).

[48] The Baptist Faith and Message (2000), article XVII: Religious Liberty, http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp.

[49] For example, the Baptist World Alliance prioritizes a holistic mission that includes both evangelism and discipleship on the one hand and human rights issues such as religious liberty advocacy on the other. See the resources available at the Baptist World Alliance, available online at https://www.bwanet.org/.

principle—often by traditions with historic ties to the magisterial Reformation. Today, most Christian traditions in the West have embraced liberty of conscience and its corollary, religious liberty for all.

Baptists have normally been willing to make cause with others who affirm church-state separation, though Baptists advocate religious liberty for spiritual rather than secular reasons. For Baptists, church-state separation is not intended to promote "a naked public square" devoid of religious voices.[50] Though different Baptists apply the principle of church-state separation in different ways, most agree that Christians are called to be "salt and light" who engage the broader culture (Matt 5:13–16). Southern Baptists have consistently challenged secularist visions of church-state separation that seek to undermine the public influence of Christians and other religious adherents. A proper understanding of church-state separation allows people of all faiths and no faith to live out their convictions without fear of coercion and persecution.

Russell Moore argues religious liberty is ultimately about the Great Commission.[51] Baptists believe church-state separation preserves their rights as individuals and churches to freely follow Christ's will as revealed in Scripture—Christ alone through Scripture alone! From an evangelistic standpoint, church-state separation also protects the freedom of Christians to proclaim the gospel to non-Christians and make disciples from people of all nations—grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!

Conclusion

This essay has retrieved reformational themes such as the five *solas* and the royal priesthood and put them in constructive engagement with Baptist distinctives. The goal is to strengthen contemporary Southern Baptist identity by more intentionally rooting some of its core convictions in reformational thought. Baptists are heirs of the Protestant Reformation, even if they "reformed the Reformation" by advocating a view of the local church more consistent with Reformation theology (and Scripture!) than

[50] Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

[51] Russell D. Moore, "Conservative Christians in an Era of Christian Conservatives: Reclaiming the Struggle for Religious Liberty from Cultural Captivity," in *First Freedom: The Beginning and End of Religious Liberty*, rev. ed., ed. Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 163.

views advocated by the magisterial Reformers.[52] However, this reformational identity is only one of the "building blocks" of Southern Baptists' "DNA" and other historic themes also need to be retrieved for the sake of renewing contemporary Southern Baptist identity. These include catholic convictions about primary doctrines that are rooted in the "Great Tradition" of classical Christianity, a restorationist impulse to recreate the best of the New Testament churches in today's churches, and evangelical emphases such as the full truthfulness of Scripture, the centrality of the gospel, and the importance of mission. Southern Baptists should strive to embody all of these aspects of their identity for the glory of God alone—a biblical and reformational theme that should be cherished by all Baptist and every other follower of Jesus Christ.

[52] Nathan A. Finn, "Reforming the Reformation," *Light* 3.1 (Summer 2017): 27–30.