

## Interview with Timothy George

*Editor's note: Timothy George originally gave this interview as a presentation to the 2022 Baptist Dogmatics Roundtable participants. Through the interview, he shares formative impact of his upbringing, pastoral ministry experience, and academic pedigree to tell the story of how he became a theologian. He was a Baptist boy from the backwoods who grew up to pastor a church in inner city Boston while being shaped by the most significant movers and shakers of mid-20th century American theology. He has practiced convictional ecumenism in contentious contexts and tutored a generation in theological retrieval before many of us knew dogmatics existed. At the end of the interview, he provides a critical engagement of the Baptist Dogmatics Manifesto. We have taken his feedback with great sincerity and made changes to the Manifesto. The revised version of the Manifesto will be published in Confessing Christ.<sup>1</sup>*

*Tell us about how you became a theologian.*

Well, I never intended to be. Karl Barth tells us that when he was 10 years old, he went into dinner one night with a complete plan of his, all of his “collected works” to present to the family. Jaroslav Pelikan was a mere 14 years old when he went to see Wilhelm Pauck at the University of Chicago and said, “I want to do a PhD with you” and on the spot outlined *The Christian Tradition*, in its entirety.

There are some people like that, but I’m not one of them. Luther said, “I became a theologian not by reading or writing or speculating, but by living, dying and being damned—this is what makes one a theologian.” So how did that happen to me? It did not happen easily and not by any predictable line of progression.

*How do you think your early life impacted your development as a theologian?*

Growing up in the American South, I was nurtured in a community

of faith that was part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, but had no idea that this was so. I never heard those words used to describe the church. We were separatist Baptists. We were also dogmatic, but in a very bad sense of that word—being quarrelsome, self-assertive, guilty of the two major diseases that afflict the church today: amnesia and myopia. That was the background I brought to the study of theology as a young student. It began very early for me, even though I came from a family that was, in every sense of the word, on the margins of respectable society.

We lived in a neighborhood that was actually racially integrated in the 1950s. It was integrated, not because we were uppity liberals trying to make a social statement, but simply because we couldn’t afford to live anywhere else. There was a small Unitarian church in my neighborhood, and I remember stopping by there one day to challenge the minister as to why he did not baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the Bible says one should. I recall being surprised to discover that not only did he not baptize in the name of the Holy Trinity, he didn’t baptize at all. This was a strange kind of church! There was also a Roman Catholic church in my town, and I remember calling the priest one day to ask why the Roman Catholic Church had such unbiblical teachings about purgatory, Mary, and the Mass.

For some reason, those kinds of questions were percolating in my mind at that very early age. But it was really through my great uncle, Willy Nash, who lived next door to me in that same little community, that I really learned to become a theologian. Uncle Willy was a Mormon, a convert to Mormonism. He devoted his life to converting me to becoming a Mormon preacher, or as he would put it, a Mormon missionary.

He brought the missionaries from his church to give me religious instruction. We talked about all kinds of things—golden plates, marriage in the temple, the celestial underwear, baptism for the dead, and where the Baptist church came from. We discussed those issues at great length. I scoured the Bible for deeper answers and also read from first to last the Book of Mormon.

This was my introduction to theology. When I think about it now, that’s how I learned to become a theologian—by arguing about theology with Uncle Willy and the Mormon missionaries on the front porch in the hot summertime in a section of Chattanooga, Tennessee, called Hell’s Half Acre.

After finishing high school, I enrolled at the state university in my hometown where I majored in history and philosophy. Almost all of my teachers were graduates of the University of Chicago. This was in the sixties, near the end of the so called “Death of God” movement. It was

<sup>1</sup> Steven A. McKinion, Christine E. Thornton, and Keith S. Whitfield, eds., *Confessing Christ: An Invitation to Baptist Dogmatics* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academics, forthcoming).

there, before I went to Harvard, that I experienced a real crisis of faith and faced issues I had never before encountered in my devout Baptist culture.

*How did your experiences at Harvard Divinity School shape you as a theologian?*

I wish I had \$5 for every time somebody has said to me, “How did a person as conservative as you are study at Harvard Divinity School?” The quick answer is I went through there, but I didn’t come from there! I came from people who believed the Bible, who loved Jesus Christ, and were committed to the church. Somehow the real stuff of the Christian faith was conveyed to me by osmosis.

Then, when I went to Harvard Divinity School, I discovered several other things that contributed greatly to my becoming a theologian. One is the importance of doing theology in stereo. I was not only studying day in and day out for seven years, I was also a pastor of an inner-city church in Boston—First Baptist Church of Chelsea, Massachusetts. So, as I was learning to study the Scriptures and the patterns of Christian faith throughout history, as my mind was being stretched in all kinds of ways, I’d have to come home at night to deal with what we call the street kids, many of whom became attached to our little church. These were young people that had been won to faith in Christ from the streets of Chelsea. Many of them came from a life of drugs and dysfunction.

Doing divinity school and at the same time serving as a pastor was very important for me. It still is important for how I understand what theological education should be about. It’s not simply pursuing the life of the mind and learning, what used to be called the body of divinity. It also has to do with the stuff that happens on the street corners and in the neighborhoods.

*Who were some of the people at Harvard Divinity School who had the most significant impact on you?*

I did come in contact at Harvard with some of the great figures of the day in terms of theology. Let me just mention four or five of them. They’ll be known to some of you. First of all, my Dean at Harvard Divinity School was Krister Stendahl, a Lutheran who later became the Bishop of Stockholm in Sweden. He was certainly not an evangelical in my sense of the word, but he was a person of the church and a great scholar of the Gospel of Matthew.

Every Friday morning in Divinity Hall, he would put on his elaborate Lutheran vestments and lead a Eucharistic service. There were never any more than five or six people who went. I was one of them. I said to him one day, “Krister,” (He wanted us to call him Krister. This was the six-

ties.) I said, “Krister, why do you do all this? There are only a handful of us that have any interest in what you’re doing on Friday mornings, and you go to all this trouble for just five or six of us.” And he said, “I do this because it is a part of my job as the Dean of Harvard Divinity School—to be a leader in the spiritual life and worship of the community.” That made a deep impression on me at the time and it still does today.

Another great teacher I had during those years was David C. Steinmetz. He spent a year or two at Harvard as a visiting professor and ended up on my doctoral examination committee. To this day, I’ve never had a better classroom teacher than David Steinmetz. He made history and theology come alive in the way he lectured, showing what was really important about the ideas and figures we were talking about. From David Steinmetz I learned that it was a mortal sin for teachers to make the study of history boring!

Another person was Heiko Augustinus Oberman. He was from the Dutch reformed tradition—a great Reformation scholar, a person who was very passionate about what he believed and how he dealt with students. I was his teaching fellow and several times had to intervene when things got very sticky in his dealings with students. But he taught us to bring everything we do as scholars—reading, thinking, lecturing, publishing—into the presence of the living God.

The fourth person I would mention was Jaroslav Pelikan. He was at Yale and not Harvard (no one can be perfect). Even so, he became a friend and mentor to me, and I probably learned more from him than anyone else about the craft of historical theology.

Finally, my major professor was George Huntston Williams, best known for his book, *The Radical Reformation*, first published in 1962 and still in print today. It is a *magnum opus* by any reckoning of that term. However, he considered that not to be his greatest work, but simply as he put it a “fresh trench” he had to dig to get on to other things. He was a medievalist by training.

He had been grounded in patristics by his teachers and later explored Celtic monasticism, American Christianity, and much more. He had the idea that a historian should be a generalist. He aimed to write a book which he would call, *The New Testament People and Ecumenical History of Christianity with Allusion at all Important Nodal Points with Judaism and Islam*. He got around to writing the title but he never finished the book. You can see why it never was completed! It belongs to the ranks of unfinished masterpieces like the great *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*.

George Williams had a tremendous influence on me, not only histor-

ically in terms of his methodology, but also because he gave attention to the people on the margins—the people who didn't really matter. The big names he knew well, but he was interested in the Anabaptists or the Celtic monks, or the Polish Brethren. He said, "No group is too small. No group is too particular. No group is too weird but that it deserves your full unguarded attention." Relatedly, he said that "Heresies, even heresies, serve a constructive purpose in the life of the church." These are ideas I still retain today.

George Williams was also a Protestant observer at all five sessions of the Second Vatican Council and became a personal friend with Pope John Paul II when he was still a Bishop in Poland in Krakow. It was Williams who introduced me to that world and in some ways infused in me the bug of ecumenism that still inhabits me today.

*We all know you as both a Reformation scholar with deep Protestant convictions, but also as a person of the church with a passion for ecumenism. Can you share some of your thoughts on the Reformation and ecumenism?*

When you think about the Reformation and ecumenism, Pelikan gave us a phrase helpful to think about—the Reformation as a "tragic necessity." I like that term a "tragic necessity." Now there are many people who will latch onto one side of that or the other—the Reformation as a tragedy because of the division, because of all of the mutual recrimination. There are others (I would put myself in this category) who want to talk about the necessity of the Reformation—the good things that we garner from the Reformation, like the unfolding of the great doctrine of justification by faith alone. There's a necessity about this teaching that is rooted in the gospel itself. In our ecumenical discussion we are often tempted to jump over the Reformation, to leapfrog back to the early church.

I think this is a grave and tragic mistake because we cannot go from our present moment back to the pristine early church without going through the struggles and the hardships of the 16th and 17th centuries because that's our history too. There's a verse in the Gospel of John which describes Jesus's going from Galilee to Jerusalem saying, "he must needs to go through Samaria" (John 4:4). That's the King James Version. He had to go through Samaria. There was another way he could have gone, but no, he must needs go through Samaria. He had business to accomplish there. Well, we must needs also to go through Samaria, through the Reformation, in our effort to recover the Great Tradition.

This is true theologically as well. Again, I'll quote Pelikan, "If the Holy Trinity was as holy as the Trinitarian dogma taught, and if original

sin was as virulent as the Augustinian tradition said it was, and if Christ was as necessary as the Christological dogma implied, then the only way to treat justification in a manner faithful to the Catholic tradition was to teach justification by faith alone."<sup>2</sup> Now, those are the words of a Lutheran who's thought a lot about the Reformation.

Pelikan later ceased to be a Protestant and became Eastern Orthodox. We need not follow him in that way, but he makes good sense to me when he talks about how the Reformation message, the central material principle of the Reformation, is itself an implication of the dogma of the early church.

*We know that you've read our Baptist Dogmatics Manifesto. Do you have any responses or suggestions for our project?*

Thank you for sharing it with me. I have four or five comments.

The first has to do with definitions. I would encourage you to make a distinction between three different terms: Dogma, dogmas and dogmatic.

First of all, dogma. Dogma, as I see it, is the presupposition of all theology, the whole living act of Christ and his saving work, his self-revelation as the Savior and Lord within his church. That's the Dogma, capital D.

Another word which you use in your document is deposit of faith, *depositum fidei*, the saving happening of Jesus Christ, attested in Holy Scripture. This is the fundamental fact, the central dogma from which all other dogmas and subsidiary doctrines derive. That's what we mean when we talk about the Dogma that is at the heart of the Great Tradition.

Second, dogmas are what is expressed in our creeds and confessions of faith, our liturgies and hymns, which we examine from various perspectives. We study them, their historical origin, their theological language, their theological intent, their interconnectedness, always knowing that the dogmas point beyond themselves to something greater than themselves.

When our children were quite small, our family lived in Switzerland for a year. We bought an old car, and I tried to drive across the Alps on a number of different occasions. It was scary and dangerous. If you've ever gone from Zurich to northern Italy, you'll encounter a lot of twist and turns along the way. I became ever more appreciative of the guard-

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 50–51.

rails that kept us on the road, that kept us from making a horrible turn here or there leading to imminent death. That was always a danger, but the guardrails were our friends. They were there to protect us. They were there to guard us from making terrible mistakes.

In some ways I think of the dogmas, the creeds and confessions of the church as like those guardrails. They serve a protective function for us. Now we don't drive on them. We don't take our car and try to drive on the guardrails. If we do, then we are in danger of imminent death, but we stay on the road and the guardrails help us to stay on the road. The road is Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but we need those guardrails on both the right and the left to keep us on the road.

Third, dogmatics is the recovery of Dogma through the reverent and critical study of the dogmas. I want both of those words to be underlined. We don't just come to the task of dogmatics apart from having first wrestled with these.

In your manifesto, I'd like to hear you say a little more of what you mean about the fact that you're not pursuing here a speculative or constructive work. I think I know what you mean, and I think I agree. Dogmatics is not speculative in the sense that there's no ground for wandering here or there. This was Calvin's great warning to the church of his day. We're not going to engage in speculation.

We do theology within the limits of revelation alone, but surely it's constructive in some ways. It should obviously not be destructive. What you mean by "not constructive" is that you are not constructing something on your own apart from authorized authority. Both of those are well taken points that you make in the Manifesto, a dogmatics that is neither speculative nor constructive, but that dogmatics is *derived*. It's derived in its authority, from the written Word of God, read in the life of the community of faith across time, as well as within the local covenanted congregation.

Let me say a word about another emphasis you make right up front in your document. You say that you're concerned with the final intention of a Baptist dogmatics: spiritual formation. I think you can't overemphasize that too much. Part of the problem of interpreting this to Baptist people in the pews or those who may read your books is that they will be looking with suspicion at what you're writing and see it as somehow a kind of arid intellectualism divorced from the life of faith, divorced from the life of prayer.

I once supervised a ThM thesis by Mark Dever on John Leadley Dagg. He was the person who wrote the first systematic theology textbook, the *Manual of Theology*, used at Southern Seminary when it was

founded in 1859. Dever quotes the opening lines of the *Manual of Theology*: "The study of religious truth ought to be undertaken and prosecuted from a sense of duty, and with a view to the improvement of the heart. When learned, it ought not to be laid on the shelf, as an object of speculation; but it should be deposited deep in the heart, where its sanctifying power ought to be felt. To study theology, for the purpose of gratifying curiosity, or preparing for a profession, is an abuse and profanation of what ought to be regarded as most holy. To learn things pertaining to God, merely for the sake of amusement, or secular advantage, or to gratify the mere love of knowledge, is to treat the Most High with contempt."<sup>3</sup>

Those words were written a long time ago, but I think they still are relevant today. Spiritual formation means that you have a lively sense of who God is and what he's about. You have what J. I. Packer used to call a full-sized view of God—a God who is greater than anything you can imagine. Where do we find such a God? In the Holy Scriptures? Yes. And in the world he has made, the creation. Both the *opera dei* and the *oraculua dei* bear witness to the God who spoke and speaks still.

This prompts us not simply to know in an intellectual way, but also with our heart and mind and soul. No one said it better than Saint Augustine in that wonderful 27th chapter of book 10 of the *Confessions* in which he addresses God, "You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished you fragrance, I grasped, and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace."<sup>4</sup> That's a person who has spent time in the presence of God and who calls us even in doing theology to do it, as Barth says in *Evangelical Theology*, with both a window wide open to the world and a skylight open to heaven above. I commend you on that desire to connect Baptist dogmatics to spiritual formation, not understood simply as a course in the curriculum, but as a whole modality of Christian life.

You also mentioned in the manifesto how the Great Tradition you're seeking to recover in a Baptist vein is connected to the four Baptist distinctives, or the four principles that give Baptists their distinctive casting

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<sup>3</sup> John Leadley Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 2012), 262.

within the body of Christ: religious liberty, believers' baptism, the regenerate church, and local church autonomy. I would gently suggest that you revisit the word "autonomy" and maybe think instead of something like the rule of Christ. That's really what we mean when we're talking about the rule of Jesus Christ in his church, isn't it? That might be a task you would want to take on as you explore this even further.

Religious freedom, believers baptism, a regenerate church membership, and the rule of Christ expressed in the congregation of God's people—how exactly are these four Baptist distinctives related to the Great Tradition of which we are a part, which we want to retrieve and reclaim and propagate for others in the past?

I have sometimes used the image of fences and foundations. There's a kind of Baptist theology and Baptist historiography that focuses on these distinctives as markers of Baptist identity over this or that denomination or church down the road. They're fences. We paint them. We're proud of them. Fences can also keep people out as well as keep people in.

At times we put so much emphasis on these fences that I think that we neglect the foundations. Now fences are nice and needed. But if the foundations are eroded, your fences are not going to be very good for very long. It's possible for one to accept all four of these Baptist distinctives and still be a raving heretic. Just take believers' baptism, for example. One of the people who advocated that and practiced that in the 16th century was Michael Servetus. He was not only an anti-Trinitarian. He was also an Anabaptist in the sense that he taught and practiced re-baptism by immersion.

These fences don't really serve the purpose of a robust sense of Baptist identity. I'm not arguing that you eliminate them, but that you find a connection to express them in terms of the Great Tradition.

Next, a word about Scripture. In your manifesto, you commit yourself to treating Scripture as both propositional and narratival. It seems to me that it's very important to hold onto both of those over against whatever trends that hermeneutics might be afoot today. John 1:14 brings them together beautifully: the Word, *Logos*, became flesh, *egenito sarx*.

Read the Bible alongside those who have come before us and be informed by them. The history of Jesus, isn't just an interesting side thing. It ought to be very central to the way we come and study the Scriptures. Not in any way compromising what James Leo Garrett taught us to call *suprema scripture*. I think that phrase was first found, as far as I can tell, in Benjamin Keach, but Dr. Garrett lifted it up and made it shine for many of us in our generation. That's what we mean when we talk about *sola*

*scriptura*, that Scripture is the supreme standard by which all other lesser authorities are measured.

The final thing I want to say is about the word "missional," because that word comes up in your description of what you were about. How could it not in a Baptist dogmatics? When we think of missional, we think of the Great Commission. We are most familiar with the Matthean version of this great text (Matt 28:19–20). But there's another variant, not as prominent in our discourse, but it's certainly there in the New Testament. It is the Johannine version in John 20:21, where Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so also send I you." We do missions, not simply to go and tell and baptize and teach, but we also do it in the way that Jesus did it. We do it in conformity to his pattern of mission of preaching and of teaching. We need to have *the habitus* of theology, not just the knowledge and not just the information we glean. We also need a demeanor, a virtue of gentleness, of meekness, of humility that allows us to be the missional people of God that we ought to be in a world of contention and craziness that we live in today.