

The Free Church Form of Dogmatics: Covenant and Conscience under Christ

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Abstract: *This article explores the distinct dogmatic framework of free churches within the context of their personal and congregational commitment to the illuminated Word of God. The study draws from Acts 15 and the early Church Fathers to emphasize the church's role in adjudicating interpretations of the Word and highlights the significance of covenant in English Baptist and evangelical Anabaptist traditions. Focusing on covenantal freedom, the article underscores the need for a recovered understanding of this concept within Baptist theology, especially regarding dogmatic construction. By referencing Paul Fiddes's conceptualization of the "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions of covenant, the study traces the development of covenant theology and ecclesiology in Baptist thought. Emphasizing the harmonization of personal justification and communal Christian life, the article demonstrates how covenant theology informs various aspects of Baptist doctrine. The analysis also addresses the anthropological challenges faced by free churches and advocates for the integration of intellectual doctrine and moral practice through the lens of progressive revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit within the covenanted community of faith.*

Key Words: *Anabaptist, Baptist theology, covenant, covenantalism, dogmatics, English Baptist, free church theology*

For the free churches of Jesus Christ, dogma is formally established only in the context of covenant life in, with, and under the Lord Jesus. In the free church context, which today includes Baptists, Churches of Christ, Mennonites, Methodists, and other communions which historically championed religious liberty in their early days, the practice of church dogma is intricately bound with the problems of church authority and freedom of conscience. The burden of this essay is to describe how the free churches have a distinct form of dogmatics which derives from their simultaneously personal and congregational commitment to be faithful to the Word of God illuminated by the Spirit. The thesis of this essay is that free church dogmatics is characterized by a dynamic dialectic between communal covenant and liberty of conscience where Christ is present to his people and offers them blessings.

A Biblical Basis for Dogma

In Acts 15, various *δόγματα*, “dogmas” or “decisions,” were promulgated by a local church acting as a democratic body to consider disputed teachings. The church of Jerusalem was led in its discussions by the apostles and elders, but the whole church deliberated, agreed to James’s summary of the matter, and affirmed the dogmatic letter sent to Antioch (vv. 4, 12, 22).¹ Jerusalem’s dogmas were received with joy, thus necessarily according to free conscience, by the other New Testament churches (Acts 15:30–31; 16:4–5).

The Word of Christ proclaimed by the apostles and elders, and by the various evangelists, prophets, and pastors and teachers given by God to the church, was the sole normative authority for the construction of the early churches’ dogmas. The body of Christ was assigned the sole adjudicatory responsibility under Christ to decide between disputed interpretations of the Word among its various preachers (cf. 1 Cor 14:29–33; Eph 4:7–16). From the perspective of authority, the doctrinal systems crafted by individual theologians remain personal and speculative enterprises which carry no dogmatic weight. Dogma is determined through the interpretive authority of the church, and the church is necessarily a covenantal body.

A Distinct Reformation Strand of Churches

In 2017, Paul Fiddes of the University of Oxford, the leading British Baptist theologian, gathered several Baptist scholars to consider the “Fourth Strand of the Reformation.” Fiddes argued that a certain group

¹ The two views of church polity advocated by Daniel L. Akin (Single-Elder-Led Church) and James Leo Garrett Jr. (Congregation-Led Church) are ultimately compatible as demonstrated by those authors and in the experience of multiple Southern Baptist Churches. Replying to Akin, Garrett agreed, “Congregational polity is fully congruent with effective pastoral leadership of a servant type, wherein mutual trust, mutual accountability, and Christian love and forbearance are the norm.” “Response by James Leo Garrett Jr.,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2004), 79. Replying to Garrett, Akin showed great admiration, even as he offered friendly criticisms. “In sum, Dr. Garrett does an excellent job in defending Congregational polity.” “Response by Daniel L. Akin,” in *Perspectives on Church Government*, 198. The models advocated by Akin and Garrett are compatible not only with each other, but with the historic dogmatic model uncovered in this essay.

of churches arising during the Reformation possessed a unique identity in contrast with the magisterial identities of the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican strands of the Protestant Reformation. While Fiddes analyzed the covenantal identity of the English Separatists, Bill Brackney and I evaluated covenant within the English General Baptist and evangelical Anabaptist traditions.² That conference recalled the previous studies of covenant by Champlin Burrage,³ Charles Deweese,⁴ and, more succinctly, Jason Lee.⁵ It also coincided with the recent doctoral treatments of Baptist covenant theology by Samuel Renihan⁶ and Baptist covenant ecclesiology by Travis Trawick.⁷ I herein build upon those previous studies.

In the final chapter of my earliest systematic monograph, I identified five historical-theological themes which derive from the Great Commission and require further deliberation in the Baptist theological context: missions and evangelism; church polity; Trinitarian revelation; personal salvation; and covenantal freedom. In both expected and surprising ways, those five themes continue to prompt deliberation by Southern Baptists in both popular and academic venues. For instance, as widely expected, the Calvinist-Arminian debate continues to unfold in discussions of personal soteriology. But in a surprising development, many of us now perceive the classical doctrine of the Trinity has been challenged by a peculiar anthropology of male hierarchy which fuels the theological error of Eternal Functional Subordination.⁸

² Paul Fiddes, ed., *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation: The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists, and Early General Baptists* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018).

³ Champlin Burrage, *The Church Covenant Idea: Its Origin and Its Development* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1904).

⁴ Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990).

⁵ Jason K. Lee, "Baptism and Covenant," in *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches*, ed. Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 119–36.

⁶ Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists, 1642–1700* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018).

⁷ Travis H. Trawick, "The Regenerate, Gathered, Baptized Congregation of Christ: A Theology of Church Covenant" (PhD Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021).

⁸ Keith S. Whitfield, ed., *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Application* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019).

This essay shall focus on the fifth Baptist theme of covenantal freedom vis-à-vis dogmatics, a theme faced by all the churches with some connections, even if perhaps only through inspiration, to the Reformation's fourth strand. I noted in *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* the challenges to covenantal freedom presented by misshapen ideas of authority and religious liberty as well as the divisive anthropology which fueled my own denomination's historic racial hypocrisy.⁹ Those challenges have yet to be adequately addressed in doctrine or in practice. Developing the covenantal basis of our dogma may help prompt answers to recurring and often horrifying challenges.

In the following sections, I presume the need for the recovery of covenantal freedom in Baptist life, particularly regarding dogmatic construction. We must address the shape of covenantal dogmatics, the scope of covenantal dogmatics, and the blessing of covenantal dogmatics. These were outlined in the historic covenants adopted by the churches.

The Shape of Covenantal Dogmatics

Two Aspects of Covenantal Dogmatics

The shape of covenantal dogmatics must account for at least two parts in the covenant. John Smyth, the first Baptist theologian and first pastor of the first Baptist church, identified the two parts of the covenant as, "1. respecting God and the faithful. 2. respecting the faithful mutually.... The first part of the covenant respecting God is either from God to the faithful, or from the faithful to God.... The second part of the covenant respecting the faithful mutually conteyneth all the duties of love whatsoever."¹⁰ Paul Fiddes accordingly refers to these two parts as the "vertical" and the "horizontal" dimensions of the covenant.¹¹ The two parts of the covenant sometimes go by the names of the eternal "covenant of grace" and the earthly "local church covenant." I shall refer to these two related aspects of covenantal dogmatics as covenant theology and covenant ecclesiology.

⁹ Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 195–203.

¹⁰ John Smyth, *Principles and Inferences*, 1:254; cited in Lee, "Baptism and Covenant," 127.

¹¹ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 22.

But what is the bond between these two parts of covenantal dogmatics? Fiddes, following Barrie White, argues Robert Browne the Separatist was the first English Reformer to develop the local church covenant idea, but the eternal covenant was left disconnected. John Smyth, however, was the first to “fuse together” the eternal covenant with ecclesiology through making a covenant in time. Thomas Helwys, the first pastor of the first Baptist church on English soil, clearly united the practice of believers’ baptism with the making of the covenant.¹² The shape of the covenant, therefore, requires a connection between the doctrine of the eternal covenant and the doctrine of the local church covenant. This linkage is located internally with personal conversion and externally in water baptism.

The Anabaptists were, historically, the first of the free churches to correlate the highly personal nature of evangelical justification with a vigorously communal understanding of the Christian life. Their key biblical text was 1 Pet 3:21, which Luther translated as *der Bund eines guten Gewissens mit Gott*, “the covenant of a good conscience with God.” Modern scholars agree that Peter’s ἐπερώτημα, “appeal” or “response,” is best understood as “pledge” or “promise,” thus affirming Luther’s choice of *Bund*, “covenant.”¹³ Peter Davids says the apostle Peter was referring to “the pledge of oneself to God as a response to questions formally asked at baptism.”¹⁴

Third and Fourth Aspects of Covenantal Dogmatics

The conscience, which personally obligates the human person to the judgment seat of God, is relieved of its crushing burden through justify-

¹² Fiddes, “Covenant and the Inheritance of Separatism,” in *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation*, 78. On the dynamic view of the human conscience in the life and witness of the earliest community of Baptist churches, see Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “We Believe with the Heart and with the Mouth Confess: The Engaged Piety of the Early General Baptists,” *Baptist Quarterly*, 44 (2011): 36–58; Yarnell, “Political Theology among the Earliest Baptists: The Foundational Contribution of Leonard Busher, 1614–1616,” in *Freedom and the Powers: Perspectives from Baptist History Marking the 400th Anniversary of Thomas Helwys’ The Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and John H. Y. Briggs (Didcot, Oxon: The Baptist Historical Society, 2014), 23–34.

¹³ Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The Covenant Theology of the Early Anabaptists, 1525–1527,” in *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation*, 35–37.

¹⁴ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 145.

ing faith in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The transformed state of a cleansed conscience before God is then manifested before humanity in water baptism. The human being receives baptism from the church and pledges herself to God with the church. John Smyth thus concluded, “the true forme of the Church is a covenant betwixt God & the Faithful made in baptisme in which Christ is visibly put on.”¹⁵ According to Lee, “Baptism fulfills the role of agreeing to the church covenant for Smyth because he now sees that baptism will demonstrate a person’s agreement to the eternal covenant.”¹⁶

If I might supplement the historical consensus, I would add that we need to speak of four parts in the covenant. The first three aspects of covenantal dogmatics are affiliated, as we have just described them, with theology proper, ecclesiology, and soteriology. Covenant theology and covenant ecclesiology are connected through covenant soteriology, for it is salvation to a right relationship with God that determines a person’s right to participate in the local church covenant. First, covenant theology considers the works of God in his covenants with humanity. Second, covenant ecclesiology considers the church as the place of God’s covenantal relationship with his redeemed community. Third, covenant soteriology considers the transformation of the human conscience by the Spirit’s gift of faith through the proclamation of God’s Word.

However, the theological, soteriological, and ecclesiological aspects of the covenant require a personal anchor. We must recall the exalted place of Jesus Christ as the sole mediator between the eternal God and rebellious humanity. Therefore, we must be careful to incorporate a necessary fourth component of covenantal dogmatics, the preeminent component of covenant Christology. The cup of the Supper represents “the new covenant in my blood,” he said (Luke 22:20). It is in the Christological center of covenantal theology that we may also find requisite resources for addressing the anthropological problems which yet plague the free churches of Jesus Christ. Christ’s saving presence in the human conscience is the key to our salvation, for he brings us before the eternal throne through the covenant of grace. Christ’s saving presence in the human conscience is the key also to the Christian life, for Christ unites redeemed humanity not only with God but with one another.

Covenantal baptism in the Holy Spirit through faith in the resurrected God-Man forms the believer’s internal union with God, while cove-

¹⁵ Smyth, *The Character of the Beast*, 2:645.

¹⁶ Lee, “Baptism and Covenant,” 135.

nantal baptism in water forms the believer's external union with the visible body of Christ on earth. It is through Trinitarian reconciliation with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit that we have reconciliation with one another: "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:18 EVS). With the Trinitarian shape of covenantal dogmatics manifested in four parts—covenant theology, covenant Christology, covenant soteriology, and covenant ecclesiology—we may now suggest how the scope of covenantal dogmatics proceeds aesthetically to encompass the whole of Christian theology.

The Scope of Covenantal Dogmatics

Evangelical systems typically begin either with revelation or with God. Because recent theological discourse, both liberal and conservative, has too often prioritized human conceptions of revelation and interpretation, it seems best now to begin with God. It is God alone who freely reveals himself by his condescension of grace. Arrogant men may never compel the Word to come down or the Spirit to open (Rom 10:6; 2 Pet 1:19–21), no matter how much historical critical method or historical grammatical theory they exercise. (This statement does not constitute a denial of the utility of these methods, but it flatly denies their fundamental independence.) Theologically, the grace of God necessarily precedes the knowledge of humanity, while philosophically, ontology necessarily precedes epistemology. We know God simply because God reveals himself by his Word and in his Spirit.¹⁷

The God which the covenanted churches have encountered and worship is the triune God. In the General Baptist tradition, John Smyth thus affirmed the Trinitarian shape of the covenant, as did Benjamin Keach in the Particular Baptist tradition. The Sandy Creek tradition codified the ontological Trinity in one of its covenants: "We take the only living and true God to be our God, one God in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."¹⁸ The most popular covenant in many Southern

¹⁷ In our forthcoming volume on revelation, David Dockery and I seek in part to demonstrate how Trinity and revelation integrate seamlessly. David S. Dockery and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *Special Revelation and Scripture* (Brentwood: B&H Academic, forthcoming 2024). In the first volume of my popular-level systematic theology, I put this claim in practice. Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *God*, vol. 1, *Theology for Every Person* (Brentwood: B&H Publishing, forthcoming 2024).

¹⁸ "Covenant of Grassy Creek Baptist Church" (1757), in Dewese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 202.

Baptist churches begins with a paragraph which unmistakably speaks in Trinitarian terms. In these covenants the Trinity is treated primarily in economic terms, for the Trinity is the God who saves.¹⁹ Theology and economy are integrated within covenantal dogmatics through our holistic Christological soteriology.

Before witnessing that integration in three historically significant local church covenants, we must note how the free churches correlated the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. Preserving the centrality of Jesus Christ, the free churches have continued to refuse Reformed attempts to conflate baptism with circumcision, the church with the state, and the Spirit with the flesh. Rather than parroting the Reformed, English Particular Baptists thus argued circumcision belonged to the covenant of works with Israel while the baptism of believers belongs to the covenant of grace with the church.²⁰ In choosing this route, they followed the Anabaptists who had already rejected conflating the covenant of grace with Old Testament stipulations. It was the Reformed tradition that created that novel move.²¹ Progressive revelation hereby undergirds Baptist dogma—the church follows Israel in time.

The scope of the dogmatics found in our written covenants does not typically follow a systematic format, but the various loci appear, nonetheless. When we turn to the formal confessions which the covenanted churches adopted, the central dogmas become evident. The covenanted churches' confessions consider the traditional systematic loci of God, revelation, creation, providence, humanity, sin, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, ecclesiology, and eschatology. But the confessions, like the covenants, also consider the practical theological matters of Christian worship, Christian mission, and Christian conduct in family, church, and world. The free church dogmatic claim is that both the mental and the moral, through their individual and communal expressions in the lives of the churches and all their members, must necessarily be integrated in covenantal dogmatics.²² The holistic assimilation of life with theology

¹⁹ Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "Baptists, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Christian Tradition," in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*, ed. Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 65.

²⁰ Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 324–27.

²¹ See my extended note on the priority of Anabaptist covenant theology in Yarnell, "The Covenant Theology of the Early Anabaptists, 1525–1527," 59–62.

²² Demonstrating this unique Baptist and free church penchant for integrat-

can be seen in the following three important covenants from our free church tradition.

The First Anabaptist Covenant

The first known Anabaptist covenant, adopted in Zürich on January 21, 1525 with the recovery of believers' baptism, is described this way,

They came to one mind in these things, and in the pure fear of God they recognized that a person must learn from the divine Word and preaching a true faith which manifests itself in love, and receive the true Christian baptism on the basis of the recognized and confessed faith, in the union with God of a good conscience, and henceforth serve God in a holy Christian life with all godliness; also, to be steadfast in affliction to the end.²³

The subsequent Schleitheim Confession, literally *Brüderliche Vereinigung*, “Brotherly Union” or “Brotherly Covenant,” focuses on practical Christian life in the redeemed community witnessing to a fallen world.²⁴ The Anabaptist covenants presumed a common classical theology with other evangelicals but explicitly connected Christian salvation with Christian life, theology with practice. They emphasized “true faith” in opposition to the false faith they detected in unregenerate Romanists and antinomian evangelicals, including some Anabaptists. The affirmation of credal orthodoxy and the emphatic integration of discipleship is particularly notable among these early baptistic evangelicals.²⁵

An Early English Separatist Covenant

The Gainsborough Covenant recorded by William Bradford, the first governor of Massachusetts, tells us much about the covenantal dogmatics of the Separatist tradition and of Bradford's erstwhile pastor, John Smyth. Notice their focus upon community, upon obedience to Christ

ing theology with the Christian life, James Leo Garrett Jr. added chapters on both Stewardship and the Mission of the Church into his *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL, 2001), 405–28, 527–48.

²³ A. J. F. Ziegelschmid, ed. *Die älteste Chronik der Hutterischen Bruder* (Philadelphia: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, 1943), 46–49; trans. in John C. Wenger, *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1949), 24–25.

²⁴ Michael D. Wilkinson, “Brüderliche Vereinigung: A Brief Look at Unity in the Schleitheim Confession,” *SmJT* 56 (2014): 199–214.

²⁵ Yarnell, “The Covenant Theology of the Early Anabaptists,” 51–56.

as Lord, and upon the further light being shed upon God's Word. The assistance of divine grace, formal separation from the world, and heartfelt conversion are also evident. This covenant was adopted about two years before Smyth's church recovered covenantal baptism in Amsterdam.

So many, therefore, of these professors as saw ye evill of these things in the parts, and whose harts ye Lord had touched with heavenly zeale for his trueth, they shooke off this yoake of anti-christian bondage, and as ye Lords free people, joynded themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in ye fellowship of ye gospell, to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.²⁶

An Influential American Baptist Covenant

The influence of the 19th-century covenant of J. Newton Brown, subsequently reprinted for Southern Baptists by James Marion Frost, the first President of the Baptist Sunday School Board,²⁷ and broadly promoted by both James Madison Pendleton in his *Baptist Church Manual* and Edward T. Hiscox in his *The Baptist Church Directory*, is difficult to overstate. The popularity of Brown's covenant among Baptists in America remains without peer.²⁸

Note how this American Baptist covenant affirms the Trinitarian shape of dogmatics, along with its theological, Christological, soteriological, and ecclesiological parts, in its first paragraph. Demonstrating the same integration of thought and practice as the early covenants from the Anabaptists and the Separatists, the remainder of Newton's covenant confesses at length the need to “walk together” continually with other Christians in practical, responsible, and loving ways.

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour; and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of

²⁶ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1898), 13.

²⁷ J. M. Frost, *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1900).

²⁸ For the numerous reasons why Brown's covenant was so influential in both its 1833 and 1853 renditions, as well as various revisions, see Dewese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 61–63, 65–76.

the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, we do now, in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another, as one body in Christ.²⁹

The Blessing of Covenantal Dogmatics

When dogmatics is pursued in the context of the free churches' deep and abiding respect for both covenant and conscience, various tensions inevitably arise. These tensions, however, are God's providential means for blessing his church. Covenantal dogmatics evince blessings through the dynamic presence of Christ in the tensions over conscience and covenant, over the local church and the wider body of Christ, over liberty of conscience and life in communities, over consciences in various other covenants, and in the expected completion of dogmatics in the eschaton.

The Dynamic Presence of Christ in the Tension

The New Testament doctrine of the covenant is both highly personal and highly communal. First, the covenant that believers have with God in Christ is highly personal: It is "the covenant of a good conscience with God" (1 Pet 3:21). Second, the covenant believers have with God in Christ is also highly communal: "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it shall be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Matt 18:19).

From an anthropological perspective, Paul Fiddes says this dual focus results in a set of "tensions" which foster a "dynamic" view of authority. A first tension occurs between the pastoral oversight of the community and the pastoral oversight of the church's officers. The second tension is found between the local congregation and the association of churches. These tensions can only exist in a context of "trust."³⁰

Fiddes has suggested something important here, which I would like to make more explicit: It is in the covenantal tensions of our faith that the presence of Christ brings blessings. The origin, transmission, and exercise of various authorities, as seen repeatedly in the history of Christianity must be perceived properly and handled delicately.³¹

²⁹ J. Newton Brown, *The Baptist Church Manual* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1853), 23–24; Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants*, 161–62.

³⁰ Fiddes, "Covenant and the Inheritance of Separatism," 65–68.

³¹ A recent example of it not being handled delicately is when the Executive

John Smyth understood that Christ gives power "to the body of the church" with the covenant.³² The important powers of communion of members and election of officers are always retained in the church, never transferred. Leo Garrett argues there are lesser powers which can be delegated when a congregation so decides democratically. I have argued that Christ retains all church authority even as the minister instrumentally exercises authority through proclaiming the omnipotent Word. "Simply put, the Word of God is the pastor's entire authority."³³

The Local Church and the Body of Christ

While Baptists find the direct presence of Christ to the congregation comforting and the authoritative theological source for local church autonomy, they also have understood that there is only one Christ over all his churches and, therefore, there is only one body of Christ. As the Particular Baptists of London early confessed, the power of the churches regarding one another is that of "counsell and help," made present "under Christ their onely head."³⁴

The sole headship of Christ over each congregation is clearly maintained in the Baptist covenantal tradition. Christ's Lordship is, moreover, displayed in his threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. This threefold office is "so proper to Christ, as neither in the whole, nor in any part there-of, it can be transferred from him to any other."³⁵ The unique mediation of Jesus and the inalienable and non-transferable as-

Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention proposed in 2021 that the Mission and Ministry Statement be amended to read, "The SBC Executive Committee seeks to empower churches to prioritize, elevate, and accelerate" Spence Shelton moved that the word "empower" be changed to "serve," for the local churches are the source of the authority in the convention. *Book of Reports of the 2021 Southern Baptist Convention*, 53; *2021 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention Daily Bulletin*, Wednesday, 3.

³² Smyth, *Paralleles, Censures, Observations*, 2:388–89.

³³ Garrett, "The Congregation-Led Church: Congregational Polity," in *Perspectives on Church Government*, 157; Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "Article VI: The Church," in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 60–62.

³⁴ The associational wording derives from the 1596 Separatist confession and was taken into the 1644 First London Confession. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 168–69.

³⁵ Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 159.

pects of his present headship to the covenanted church are inextricably bound to the Baptist and free church conception of communal authority. Christ's authority over the church's dogma remains perfect, entire, and continually active—the Word is alive an energetic (Heb 4:12).

Liberty of Conscience and Life in Community

The unique headship and non-transferable mediation of Jesus Christ is also displayed in Christ's relation to each human person's conscience. Bill Leonard thus reminds us, "Biblical authority is mediated through individual and communal interpretation based on liberty of conscience."³⁶ God alone is Lord of the conscience, and each and every person remains ultimately accountable to humanity's sole Mediator for their own faith and practice (1 Tim 2:5). The early Baptist confessions make much of liberty of conscience even as they simultaneously retain communal responsibility for one another through voluntary life in covenant.³⁷

A continual dialectic of the authority of the conscience before God and the authority in the covenant before God in Christ with one another results in ongoing tensions which can only be lessened through faith in Christ alone and forbearance with one another. When individual Christians honor each person's radical dependence upon Christ for salvation and obedience, the tensions begin to disappear. The presence of Christ to the redeemed conscience through personal faith and the presence of Christ to the redeemed community through covenant belong together.

Christ as Lord of Conscience in Other Covenants

In the tension between conscience and covenant, freedom under Christ and freedom before one another coalesce. There is no real freedom outside the human person's eternal covenantal relation with God. And earthly covenants remain the only way in which human relations can be properly oriented, not only within the church, but also within the family and within human society at large.

The covenanted conscience retains freedom to voluntarily enter appropriate bonds with other humans precisely because Christ alone remains both Lord of conscience and Lord of covenant. There is perfect freedom in communal covenants when consciences find their freedom in continual dependence upon Christ alone and show irreducible respect

³⁶ Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 6.

³⁷ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 65–66.

for the sole Lordship of God over every conscience.³⁸

Dogma as Eschatologically Complete

A final tension requiring recognition concerns the certain yet incomplete nature of church dogma. Where Scripture speaks clearly to each conscience, covenanted Christians evince a strong sense of certainty. Dogmatic foundationalism in such certain areas does not necessarily offend. Indeed, convictional confessionism to the absolute exclusion of heresies regarding Trinity, Christ, and gospel are absolutely necessary.³⁹

However, covenanted Christians also recognize their own epistemological limitations. The Gainsborough Covenant, therefore, agreed "to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours." In other words, some truths are still in epistemological progress from the temporal human perspective. "Further light" must be cast upon the deep riches of God's Word, even as it remains perfect and eternal.

These various tensions call for faith in the Lord, patience with one another, and openness toward the work of the Holy Spirit within and beyond the covenanted community of faith. While some Christians are uncomfortable with tensions, others recognize that in the tensions themselves there is evidence that the God who is beyond human power, indeed the source of all power, works freely and sovereignly and is present in a personal and dynamic way to the community in covenant with Him. "For where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt 18:20).

Conclusion

Free church theologians recognize the way we approach dogmatics will sometimes be characterized by a different set of priorities than those of other communions. While we certainly hold to the Christocentric Trinitarian shape of dogma maintained by all true Christian churches, we also perceive an eternal covenant theology manifested in a covenant ecclesiology joined together through a highly personal covenant soteriolo-

³⁸ Article XVII of the Baptist Faith and Message begins, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it."

³⁹ Dockery and Yarnell, *Special Revelation and Scripture*, 369, 398–400; Yarnell, *God*, ch. 13.

gy. This encourages us to approach the whole scope of systematic theology with a deep appreciation for progressive revelation in the canon and a profound desire to integrate intellectual doctrine with moral practice.

Ultimately, free church dogmatics are stretched between two poles, a dynamic respect for free consciences on the one side and a real responsibility toward community on the other. The resulting tensions in authority between congregation and officer, between local church and association, and between certainty and incompleteness call us to depend upon the real presence of Christ to his covenanted community. Christ promised to be present with the community gathered under his authority, and we trust his presence in his offices will lead every faithful congregation into truth. Christ promised to be present to the covenanted church with his theological and moral dogmatic authority. However, the Lord always retains his divine freedom over every covenant and over every conscience. We would be wise always to listen to the Word in the Spirit, worshiping God and conforming to Christ.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ In a brilliant essay, Rowan Williams demonstrates why the presence of Christ to the community is real yet the actions of the community may never be identified entirely with Christ. Christ is present to his church in a paradoxical way, such that the power of Christ comes to the church with a “fundamental ungraspability.” This keeps humanity from pretending to possess divine authority. Rowan Williams, “Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne,” in *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 183–96.