

ABSTRACT

Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity

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This dissertation is an exploration of a contemporary approach to Baptist theology which some have dubbed “Bapto-Catholic.” The Bapto-Catholic sensibility is described as an attempt to respond to the collapse of the Enlightenment project and its influence on modern Baptist thought. It provides an alternate narrative of the Baptist identity by drawing upon the resources of seventeenth century Baptist theology and the breadth of the Christian tradition in order to find solutions to the current difficulties in Baptist theology. The study proceeds in four major sections. The first section provides historical context for the movement, surveying the debates among Baptist historians, and between conservative and moderate Baptists, about the nature of the Baptist identity. Special attention is given to the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention in the final decades of the twentieth century and the effect that the resulting schism had on Baptist self-conceptions. The second section assesses the Bapto-Catholic conversation, focusing on its initial programmatic work, the *Baptist Manifesto*, and its chief proponents and critics. Various conceptual “marks” of Baptist catholicity are also suggested. The third section explores Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique of modernity and his philosophical

account of the nature of tradition. This section notes MacIntyre's influence on Bapto-Catholic thought as well as his potential as a resource for future theological developments, especially with regard to the role of conflict and historicism in Baptist thought. The final section revisits the central question driving this study: what is Baptist Catholicity? It is suggested that the controversies surrounding the Baptist identity since the late twentieth century, and the emergence of the Bapto-Catholic project as an alternative proposal, are an excellent example of what MacIntyre calls an "epistemological crisis" wherein a tradition's coherence is tested through internal conflicts and encounters with rival traditions. For this reason, the future vitality of the tradition is at stake and the Bapto-Catholic sensibility is an important attempt to discover new conceptual resources for the tradition. The future of the movement, however, may depend on its ability to provide a coherent account of authority and Baptist ecclesiology.

Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition
and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity

by

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To my family

And I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

from The Nicene Creed

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

An Identity Crisis in Baptist Life

Can a Baptist confess the Nicene Creed? The question might seem a bit misguided. In point of fact, Baptists have made use of the ancient creeds from time to time. One notable example is the seventeenth century General Baptist confession of faith, the *Orthodox Creed*, which reproduces the Nicene, Athanasian, and Apostles' Creeds and commends their use.¹ Another example is the first act undertaken by the inaugural meeting of the Baptist World Alliance meeting, when the attendees rose to their feet and recited the Apostles' Creed corporately.² However, the important question is not whether Baptists *have used* the creeds, but whether they *can use* them, at least with clear consciences and with their essential principles intact.

There are several reasons why one might suppose that a Baptist ought not use a creed. Some might balk at the potential for “creedalism” and its tendency to stifle the believer’s freedom to interpret scripture. Others might see the creeds as a rival to the sole authority of Scripture as a guide for the Christian life and faith. Then there are those who might find a cause for alarm in the penultimate clause of the Nicene Creed: “And I

¹See: Curtis W. Freeman, “God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33.3 (Fall 2006), 326-7; Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 36 n.43, 77-80; K. W. Clements, Rupert Eric Davies, and David Michael Thompson, *The Truth in Tradition: A Free Church Symposium*, (London: Epworth Press, 1992) 11.

²See: Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 9; Keith Clements, *Truth in Tradition*, 11.

believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” In light of the self-proclaimed schismatic nature of the Baptist identity, what might it mean for a Baptist to confess a belief in the church’s oneness or its catholicity?

This question is part of a much larger issue that Baptist theologians and historians have pondered with special urgency for the past few decades: the issue of the Baptist identity. The essential issue is what it does (and does not) mean to be a Baptist, an especially complicated issue given the aforementioned Baptist propensity for multiplication by division. Complicating the question further are the political realities facing Baptists in the wake of the breakup of the world’s largest Baptist denominational body—once a synthesis of conservatives and moderates—the Southern Baptist Convention. Since the final decades of the twentieth century, it has been even more difficult to describe what it means to be Baptist because the parties in the debate have incommensurate visions of the Baptist identity.

Out of the debates between conservatives and moderates a third option emerged. The suggestion was not a *via media* between the two rivals, but an entirely different approach to the Baptist identity. It sought to retain what it considered to be the best of the Baptist heritage, especially certain elements of the seventeenth century thought, while also drawing from the vast resources of the Christian tradition. The goal was to discover a shape for “Baptist catholicity” that would honor the distinct emphases of the Baptist witness, while recognizing an authoritative role for the ancient confessions and practices of the church. One might say that these “Bapto-Catholics” set out to answer the opening

question in the affirmative: yes, a Baptist can—and should—recite the Nicene Creed with a clear conscience.³ The present study is an exploration of the nature of that attempt.

Defining “Bapto-Catholic”

Although a later chapter is dedicated to exploring the meaning of the Bapto-Catholic project more fully, perhaps a brief word of definition will be helpful at the outset. The key term employed in this study—“Bapto-Catholic”—is of recent coinage.⁴ Although other phrases have been used to describe this movement,⁵ in this study Bapto-Catholic is the preferred term. Not only is the compound word grammatically flexible, but its awkwardness captures the unusual nature of the project, constructing a Baptist identity that is influenced by the whole of the Christian tradition by way of the ancient creeds, liturgical practices (e.g., the church calendar), and theological concepts (e.g., the sacraments). These theologians profess a strong allegiance to the Baptist heritage, but criticize prevailing interpretations of the Baptist identity as unduly influenced by corrosive aspects of Enlightenment philosophy rather than solid biblical or theological reasoning.⁶ This perspective was given its first formal articulation in the corporately authored document, “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist

³The relevance of the Nicene Creed for Baptists is defended in: Curtis W. Freeman, “A Confession for Catholic Baptists,” in Gary Furr and Curtis W. Freeman, *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1994), 83-96.

⁴Bapto-Catholic is a favorite self-designation of Ralph Wood. Its genesis in print is rather difficult to establish.

⁵For other variations, see the discussion below, p. 120.

⁶The Enlightenment is a complex philosophical movement that is not easily summarized or critiqued. Indeed, MacIntyre’s philosophical oeuvre is in part dedicated to the task. See the relevant summaries of MacIntyre’s argument (p 151-155) and the Bapto-Catholic appropriation of it (p 134-140) below.

Communities in North America” commonly known as the *Baptist Manifesto*.⁷ The *Manifesto* became a touchstone for other Bapto-Catholic thinkers who have sought to develop Baptist theology in conversation with the broader Christian tradition.⁸

Purpose and Significance

Bapto-Catholic theologians have begun to produce a body of literature that suggests ways that the Baptist identity might adequately respond to current philosophical challenges while pursuing catholicity and unity in the Body of Christ. The goal of this dissertation is to explore the Bapto-Catholic project and its philosophical influences. Three principal issues will be discussed in the pages that follow: 1) varied conceptions of the Baptist identity, 2) theological characteristics of Bapto-Catholicism and its contested place within the Baptist identity, and 3) Alasdair MacIntyre’s philosophical work and its influence on the the Bapto-Catholic project, especially with regard to its understanding of tradition.

⁷The document is sometimes also called the *Baptifesto*. Here it will be referred to simply as the *Manifesto*.

⁸In this study the use of the term “catholic” does not imply Roman Catholicism exclusively. The Bapto-Catholic project also engages Eastern Orthodoxy (see xxx below) and other protestant traditions. Nevertheless, it is important to note that as a Western dissenting tradition, Baptists have a greater degree of genetic kinship to (though not necessarily a greater degree of agreement with) Rome than Constantinople. Therefore, while the interlocutor in this study will often be Rome, the use of the little “c” catholic is intentional, indicating a wider scope (see pp 125, 142 below). A word of clarification is necessary for the use of Baptist as well. Some figures associated with the Baptist Manifesto (most notably, James Wm. McClendon Jr. and Curtis W. Freeman) are fond of the term “little ‘b’ baptists,” indicating the diverse free-church tradition (see p 20 n19 below). While I find the term useful, and I will engage these thinkers and adopt their spelling when appropriate, the focus of this study is big “B” Baptist identity, (i.e. self-identified Baptists). At the same time, I agree that the insights of the Bapto-Catholic project may resonate with, and be beneficial to, the varied free-church bodies.

Although the goal of this dissertation is to explore emerging Bapto-Catholic thought, the significance of this project is not limited to Baptists. Since understandings of tradition are a central concern of the ecumenical movement, this project has relevance for the broader ecumenical conversation, especially dialogue between Catholics and free-church Christians and those Evangelicals who have experienced what Martin Marty has called “baptistification.”⁹ Also, since tradition has been a central issue involved in the recent spate of conversions to Catholicism by prominent Protestant theologians,¹⁰ it would seem that a Baptist exploration of the issue is timely.

Objections to Bapto-Catholicism

It would be foolish to overlook the fact that “Bapto-Catholicism” is an unsettling neologism; the term joins together two traditions with a long and troubled history. Given that history, the very idea of “Baptist Catholicity” is often viewed askance. Some may consider “Bapto-Catholicism” an untenable paradox. Others might interpret the term in a more sinister light as an ecumenical equivocation, a sly attempt to dress up the Baptist tradition in the trendy, ill-fitting garb of pluralism. Others might assess the term more grimly still, as an indication of one’s intent to smuggle in ideas and practices that are antithetical to the Baptist identity, constituting a threat to the very future of Baptist life. These are no small objections, and each deserves due consideration.

⁹Martin Marty, “Baptistification Takes Over,” *Christianity Today*, 27 no 13, (September 2, 1983), 33-36.

¹⁰Jason Byassee, “Going Catholic: Six Journeys to Rome,” *The Christian Century Magazine*, 123 no 17, (August 22, 2006), 18-23.

As the Anglican theologian, Paul Avis, notes, “To some, the phrase ‘Baptist Catholicity’ poses an intriguing paradox; others see it as a contradiction in terms.”¹¹ Those who see it as a contradiction have good reason to do so; the Baptist heritage often has been described as the utter opposite of Catholicism. One famous example is found in the speech delivered by George W. Truett in 1920 from the east steps of the United States Capitol building in Washington D.C.. Delivered in conjunction with that year’s national Southern Baptist Convention meeting, Truett’s speech was heard by an audience of ten to fifteen thousand people, and in it he extolled the historic Baptist commitment to religious liberty.¹² To clarify the difference between Baptists and other Christian traditions in this regard, Truett critically engaged other denominations. He pointedly cited the collusion of church and state in the lands descended from the Reformation and their frequent persecution of dissenting groups of Baptists and Anabaptists. His harshest words, however, were reserved for Roman Catholicism:

The Baptist message and the Roman Catholic message are the very antipodes of each other. The Roman Catholic message is sacerdotal, sacramentarian, and ecclesiastical. In its scheme of salvation it magnifies the church, the priest, and the sacraments. The Baptist message is non-sacerdotal, non-sacramentarian, and non-ecclesiastical. Its teaching is that the one High Priest for sinful humanity has entered into the holy place for all, that the veil is forever rent in twain, that the mercy seat is uncovered and opened to all, and that the humblest soul in all the world, if only he be penitent, may enter with all boldness and cast himself upon God. The Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration and transubstantiation is to

¹¹Paul Avis, Foreword to: Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), xv.

¹²For a description of the event, see J.B. Gambrell’s introduction to: George W. Truett, *Baptists and religious liberty : an address delivered from the east steps of the National Capitol at Washington, D.C., on Sunday, May 16th, 1920, in connection with the annual session of the Southern Baptist Convention, and at the request of the Baptist churches of Washington*, (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1920), 3.

the Baptist mind fundamentally subversive of the spiritual realities of the gospel of Christ. Likewise, the Catholic conception of the church, thrusting all its complex and cumbrous machinery between the soul and God, prescribing beliefs, claiming to exercise the power of the keys, and to control the channels of grace—all such lording it over the consciences of men is to the Baptist mind a ghastly tyranny in the realm of the soul and tends to frustrate the grace of God, to destroy freedom of conscience, and to hinder terribly the coming of the Kingdom of God.¹³

In its day, this speech was hailed as a fair and accurate assessment of the Baptist vision.

J.B. Gambrell, president of the Southern Baptist Convention at the time of Truett's speech, gave his assessment of its merits in his foreword to the published version:

There was no trimming, no froth, no halting, and not one arrogant or offensive tone or word. It was a bold, fair, thorough-going setting out of the history and life principles of the people called Baptists. And then, logically and becomingly, the speaker brought his Baptist brethren to look forward and take up the burdens of liberty and fulfill its high moral obligations, declaring that defaulters in the moral realm court death. His address advances the battle line for the denomination. It is a noble piece of work, worthy the wide circulation it is sure to receive. Intelligent Baptists should pass it on.¹⁴

Since many Baptists assume that the Baptist identity is diametrically opposed to Catholicism, it is no wonder that some might regard a term like “Bapto-Catholicism” and Bapto-Catholic attempts to engage theological concepts like the sacraments with puzzlement, if not contempt.¹⁵

¹³Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁴Truett, 4. This speech has enjoyed enduring significance. At a recent gathering sponsored by the Baptist Joint Council on Religious Liberty, Truett's speech was read publicly in Washington D.C. by several Baptist leaders. Interestingly, the ecumenically divisive passages, such as the one cited, were omitted. See: John Pierce, “Truett's Famed Religious Liberty Sermon Recreated at D.C. Event,” Associated Baptist Press, article posted June 29, 2007, <http://www.abpnews.com/2622.article> (accessed June 11, 2008)

¹⁵One can only imagine how Truett may have responded to a volume with essays by a variety of Baptist theologians entitled: *Baptist Sacramentalism*. It seems safe to assume that the response would not have been favorable. See: Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003). See also: Anthony R. Cross, *Baptist Sacramentalism 2*, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster,

Others who find themselves reflexively uneasy with the pursuit of Baptist Catholicity might locate their discomfort in the prospect of watering down Baptist identity for the sake of ecumenism. As James Leo Garrett, Jr. has noted, ecumenism has typically not been a priority for Baptists, whether with Catholics or with other Protestants:

Dialogue has both its opportunities and its dangers. It calls for patience and realism. It is natural that Baptists should be slow to enter upon dialogue with Roman Catholics, not only because they stand at opposite theological and ecclesiastical poles, but also since many Baptists have had the Church of Rome identified for them as “Babylon the great, mother of harlots” (Rev. 17:5, RSV) and the pope as “the man of sin” (2 Thess. 2:3-10) and the “antichrist” (1 John 2:22; 4:3). Southern Baptists have an even greater problem than certain other Baptist conventions and unions in that by not participating in the Ecumenical Movement they are not experienced in dealing with Protestants and the Eastern Orthodox, much less with Roman Catholics. It is not altogether impossible, though ironical, that Southern Baptists may learn by talking to Roman Catholics how to talk with Protestants!¹⁶

In fact, as Wendell Holmes Rone notes, some Baptists’ reluctance to engage in dialogue with Catholics may stem from their judgment that other Protestant groups are simply an inconsistent mixture of Baptist and Catholic principles:

2006); and Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2002).

¹⁶James Leo Garrett, *Baptists and Roman Catholicism* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1965), 44-45. Although the engagement has been limited, some ecumenical conversation has taken place. See: Baptist-Catholic Regional Conference, *Speeches from a Baptist-Catholic Regional Conference at Daytona Beach, Florida February 1-3, 1971*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1972); also, Catholic Church, and Southern Baptist Convention, *Issues in Southern Baptist-Roman Catholic Dialogue, Review and Expositor* 79.2 (Louisville, Ky: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982); and, Catholics and Baptists in Ecumenical Dialogue, and J. William Angell, *The Proceedings of Catholics and Baptists in Ecumenical Dialogue, Belmont Abbey, Belmont, N.C., May 14-16, 1973* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University, 1973).

One readily sees that the Baptists and Catholics are poles apart on the subject of authority in religion, and a compromise between the two positions is untenable and impossible. It seems, from all indications, that the Christian world will resolve itself into these two antagonistic positions—the authority of the New Testament on the one hand, as believed and taught by Baptists; or the authority of the Church of Rome, as expressed through the Hierarchy, on the other hand. All other denominations hold a somewhat dualistic position between the two, as their doctrines are made up of the teachings, more or less, of both Baptists and Catholics.¹⁷

For this reason some might regard ecumenical conversations that result in changes in Baptist thought and practice as a loss of Baptist distinctives, a surrender of Gospel truth, and a repetition of the errors and half-measures that characterize all other Protestant groups. Although many Baptists might be uncomfortable with the extremity of Rone's position, certainly, many would resonate with the sentiment that watering down certain Baptist principles would not only constitute a loss for the denomination's heritage, but also a loss of valuable truths to which Baptists have witnessed historically.

Finally, there are those who would reject the Bapto-Catholic project on simple, but persuasive, grounds. These might say: "you are free to believe what you want to believe, but don't call it Baptist." In other words, not all developments of a tradition are beneficial. In fact, some changes may be considered devolutions, or worse, discontinuous alterations that are so out of keeping with the tradition they must be considered outside the tradition. Yet, a strong judgment of this sort is only possible with a

¹⁷Wendell Holmes Rone, *The Baptist Faith and Roman Catholicism*, (Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1952), 275. Equally telling is the anecdote he cites to illustrate his assertion: "An Episcopal Bishop said in San Antonio, Texas, some years ago: 'There ought to be but three denominations in the world: The Catholics on one side standing for the authority of the church; the Baptists standing on the other side for the authority of the Bible; all the other denominations should be united, for the difference between them is the difference between tweedledum and tweedledee.'" Ibid., quoting George W. McDaniel, *The People Called Baptists* (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1919), 93.

clear sense of the identity of a particular tradition, which provokes the vexed question of the Baptist identity.

The basic impulse behind the literature addressing the Baptist identity is the desire to identify what is essentially Baptist and to defend these principles from corruption. Both conservatives and moderates have written works of this sort in the attempt to undermine each other's influence in the aftermath of the splintering of the Southern Baptist Convention. Similar critical works have been written in opposition to Bapto-Catholic thought.

It is understandable why a critique of this sort might be made of Bapto-Catholics. As observed above, less than a century ago Baptist theology was declared to be non-sacramental by authoritative Baptist voices like George W. Truett. It seems reasonable, then, that some would interpret proposals to re-imagine Baptist identity along sacramental lines to be subversive corruptions of Baptist thought. Judging whether an argument of this sort is a viable development of the tradition, or a betrayal of it, is a complicated endeavor. To do so, one must consider several factors. Aside from describing Bapto-Catholic proposals rightly, one must also determine the nature of the Baptist identity (i.e., whether it is fixed or fluid), the weight accorded to tradition (whether the Baptist tradition or the broader Christian tradition), and the means of adjudicating fidelity (viz., who makes evaluative decisions, by what criteria, and on what authority). The task is especially challenging given the Baptist aversion to the regulatory power of creeds in tension with its desire to maintain the boundaries of Baptist "orthodoxy." The task is also difficult because the project itself is quite young and its

arguments are still taking shape. In the end, it may be too early to judge whether the Bapto-Catholic project is viable.

Nevertheless, if one hopes to engage in a sympathetic reading of this movement, he or she must attempt to understand what Bapto-Catholics believe is at stake in the conversation. Beyond their desire to respond to the challenges of modernity, it seems that these theologians are haunted by the same sort of question that Bonhoeffer describes to his friend Eberhart Bethke:

...it became quite clear to me again that the struggle regarding the church government [Kirchenregiment] is actually the question necessarily emerging from church history regarding the possibility of a Protestant church for us. It is the question whether, following the separation from papal and worldly authority in the church, an ecclesial authority can be erected that is grounded in word and confession alone. If such an authority is not possible, then the final possibility of a Protestant church is gone; then there truly remains only a return to Rome or a state church or the way into isolation, into the “protest” of true Protestantism against false authorities. It is no accident but rather divine necessity that the question today has to do with the authority of true church government.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer recognizes the challenge facing those who would conceive of the church in terms of Word and confession alone; it is a problem of authority. Can a conception of authority be discovered that would preserve the truths of the faith and the shape of the tradition, apart from an external authority structure? If not, then Bonhoeffer sees only three alternatives remaining, a return to Rome, a return to the state church (which can hardly be an option for Bonhoeffer given its cooption by the Nazi regime), or the solitary way of “‘protest’ of true Protestantism against false authorities.” While a Baptist reader may be tempted to view the third option proudly as Bonhoeffer’s validation of the Baptist vision, that interpretation would miss his point. Bonhoeffer suggests that if one cannot

¹⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940-1945*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, eds. Jørgen Glenthøj, Ulrich Kabitz, Wolf Krötke, and Mark S. Brouck, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, vol. 16 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 78.

discover a proper understanding of authority in word and confession alone the final hope for a Protestant *church* is gone. Dissent as a constitutive principle can lead only to the way of isolation and to the solipsistic faith of radical individualism. Bapto-Catholics, who are committed to the vital role of the Body of Christ in the economy of salvation, are similarly concerned to discover the proper nature of authority in word and confession. They recognize that should they be unable to do so, the alternatives are limited.

Overview

To provide the ecclesial context for Bapto-Catholicism, in chapter two I will assess the Baptist identity conversation. Because it was an especially formative period for Southern Baptists, the focus of the chapter will be on the Controversy that erupted in the SBC in the late twentieth century and the Baptist identity literature that it spawned.

In chapter three I will focus on the Bapto-Catholic movement, surveying its key documents and chief critics. Drawing upon these central documents I will also propose five defining marks of Bapto-Catholic thought.

Chapter four will survey the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and his influence on Bapto-Catholic theology. Special attention will be paid to his critique of the Enlightenment and its legacy in modern culture. The chapter will also address his particular understanding of tradition. Both issues are vitally important for understanding the work of these theologians.

The concluding section, chapter five, will draw these insights together and address unresolved issues that emerge out of the study. Attention will be given to difficult questions concerning the Bapto-Catholic project, especially the nature of authority.

CHAPTER TWO

The Baptist Identity Conversation

Introduction

Bapto-Catholicism can only be understood in context. If one hopes to comprehend the nature of its ecumenical convictions, intra-denominational criticisms, and liturgical recommendations, one must first be acquainted with the Baptist identity conversation out of which the movement has grown in the United States.¹ The conversation about Baptist identity is an old one and the literature it has produced is as diverse as the theological tradition that it describes, taking varied approaches and arriving at a host of conclusions. This heritage of self-reflection, in all its diversity, paved the way for the Bapto-Catholic movement.

The concern of this chapter is to survey and assess the significant works that reflect conservative and moderate interpretations of the Baptist identity as they developed in the midst of the great controversy in Southern Baptist life in the final decades of the twentieth century. After exploring the Baptist quest for self-definition, chapters three and four will address the Bapto-Catholic project and its most important philosophical influences.

¹The scope of this dissertation is limited to the development of Bapto-Catholic thought in the United States, which, as will be demonstrated in this chapter and the next, emerged primarily, though not exclusively, out of the conflict in Southern Baptist life. Several British Baptist theologians can also be classified as Bapto-Catholic. Harmon identifies J.E. Colwell, A.R. Cross, C.J. Ellis, P.S. Fiddes, and S.R. Holmes as the most identifiably Bapto-Catholic of the British Baptist theologians. Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 17.

Ways of Approaching the Baptist Identity

A common refrain in the Baptist identity literature is a lament about the difficulty of the task. The preface to one Baptist theology reader begins by saying “This book grew out of an attempt to answer a single question. Do Baptists have a theological heritage?”² Of course, the answer was affirmative, as attested by the thick volume that followed; however, the question the editors pose is instructive. At issue is not the paucity of Baptist works but their diversity and the resulting question of which can be considered “authentically Baptist.” What does it mean to be Baptist and what are the boundary markers for the Baptist identity? How are those boundaries drawn, and who has the right to draw them?

Edwin Gaustad said, “Baptists appear to have more problems than most as we endeavor to locate that distillation, that essence, that defining difference which constitutes being Baptist.”³ Walter Shurden, a Baptist historian and one of the most prolific authors on the topic of Baptist identity, explains why: “Baptists do not agree on where they came from, who they are, or how they got that way. In other words, Baptists do not agree on their historical origin, their theological identity, or their subsequent denominational history.”⁴ It is significant that even Baptist “insiders,” the historians and theologians, are hard pressed to define what is essential to the tradition; however, the lack

²Curtis Freeman, James W. McClendon, Jr, C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva, *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), ix.

³Edwin S. Gaustad, “Toward a Baptist Identity in the Twenty-First Century,” in William H. Brackney, ed., *Discovering our Baptist Heritage*, (Valley Forge: American Baptist Historical Society: 1985), 86-89.

⁴Walter B. Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and The Baptist *Manifesto*,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 25.04 (Winter, 1998), 321.

of consensus is not simply the result of the pugnacity of Baptist academicians. Defining the tradition is difficult simply because every possible identity marker is contested.

Baptist life began amid the tumult of seventeenth century dissent from the English church; as a result there is a great deal of debate about what influences shaped its earliest formation.⁵ Although there were important leaders in the formative days of Baptist life (e.g., John Smyth and Thomas Helwys), Baptists had no singular founder like Luther, Calvin, or Wesley who embodied the tradition and whose writings gave it a definite shape. Also, even though Baptists have produced significant confessional statements, they have no authoritative documents like the *Thirty-nine Articles*, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Westminster Catechism*, or the *Book of Concord*, to which Baptists can point as an authority—a lack that is by design.⁶ Not only is there great theological diversity among the various Baptist groups, but given the frequently quoted motto, “no creed but the Bible,”⁷ Baptists’ own confessional statements have a questionable status as theological authorities in Baptist life.

⁵Tom Nettles notes that whereas the question of Baptist identity is currently a source of much debate, the question of Baptist origins was previously the chief preoccupation in Baptist scholarship. See, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity*, Vol. 1: Beginnings in Britain (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 11-12.

⁶Bill Leonard suggests that a key factor in the longevity of the SBC synthesis of moderates and conservatives is “a reliance on certain doctrinal statements that were defined broadly enough to allow for a variety of diverse theological outlooks” and “a strategy for resolving disputes that retained the loyalty of adherents on both sides of an issue” Bill Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 134.

⁷As Harmon notes, although it is a popular sentiment among Baptists, this motto originated with the Restorationist movement of Barton W. Stone, Walter Scott, and Alexander Campbell. *Toward Baptist Catholicity*, 4 n. 9.

For all of these reasons, it is difficult to discern universally shared doctrinal commitments. William Brackney offers a sober assessment of Baptist practice and the challenge it presents to those who seek coherence in the Baptist identity:

If all Baptists share a common denominator in our doctrine of baptism, we must also painfully admit that we are, beyond that affirmation, hopelessly fragmented. Theological, political and social realities are such that Baptists have spread in many directions and categories. While we have pressed our basic principle successfully, we have blunted our concern for scriptural Christianity by disagreeing on virtually every detail mentioned in the Bible.⁸

Given the disagreement on “virtually every detail” of scriptural interpretation, how do scholars assess the Baptist tradition and find unity amid the diversity?

“Principles” and “Centers”

Shurden, notes that there are generally two approaches to the task. Some identify a cluster of principles that best capture the Baptist ethos, while others attempt to find a thematic center through which one can interpret the Baptist story.⁹

Shurden mentions several authors who have approached Baptist identity by way of enumerating essential Baptist principles. These include lists found in Robert G. Torbet’s *A History of the Baptists*,¹⁰ William Bullein Johnson’s *The Gospel Developed*

⁸William H. Brackney, “Commonly, (Though Falsely) Called...”: Reflections on the Search for Baptist Identity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13.4 (Winter 1986), 81. Brackney goes on to explain how Baptists have managed to maintain coherence despite the radical diversity: “The solution to this fragmentation has been the natural clustering of churches into associations or communions which can agree on enough principles to cooperate in fellowship and service.” Ibid.

⁹Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 322.

¹⁰Torbet’s principles, include: “(1) the authority of Holy Scripture; (2) a regenerate church membership; (3) baptism by immersion as the sign of new life in Christ and membership in the church; (4) the autonomy of the local congregation; (5) the priesthood of all believers; and (6) religious liberty.” Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 1993), 3. Drawn

through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ, A. H. Newman's *A History of the Baptist Churches of the United States*,¹¹ Henry Cook's *What Baptists Stand For*,¹² and "Towards a Baptist Identity: A Statement Ratified by the Baptist Heritage Commission of the Baptist World Alliance," also known as the "Zagreb Statement."¹³ Of

from Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950), 15-34. Bill Leonard notes that Torbet omitted this list of principles from subsequent editions. *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 15, n. 14.

¹¹Newman begins his Baptist history with a discussion of Baptist distinctives. He says: 1) "Baptists of all parties have, from the beginning, persistently and consistently maintained the absolute supremacy of the canonical scriptures as a norm of faith and practice." He adds that it was never enough to prove that something did not contradict Scripture; there must be a "precept or example to command their allegiance or secure from them a recognition of its right to exist." 2) Consistent application of the first principle results in a rejection of infant baptism as a scripturally unattested perversion of the ordinance. 3) Baptists have even more strenuously advocated a regenerate membership. "This principle, far more than the rejection of infant baptism, or insistence on believer's baptism, or contention for the precise New Testament form of baptism, has always been fundamental with Baptists." 4) Because faith is a matter between the individual and God, there cannot be any attempt to force the conscience or compel belief. 5) "Insistence on immersion as the only allowable form of baptism should not be omitted from an enumeration of Baptist principles; neither should it have the prominent place that many opponents are wont to give it...Anything short of complete immersion [Baptists] have long been unanimous in regarding as an impertinent substitute for that which Christ appointed, and as voiding the ordinance of its true symbolical significance." Beyond these five principles Newman also discusses Baptists relations to other Christians in which he discusses the role of creeds, the division between Calvinists and Arminians, and a Baptist understanding of Christian union. He suggests that Baptists hope for union, but only through an increase of scriptural understanding among all the churches. He suggests that scholars of all major denominations (including the Roman Catholics) are nearly in agreement with Baptists, and as the church grows more unified, it will more approximate the Baptist position. A.H. Newman, *A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1894), 1-8.

¹²Cook's entire volume treats the question of Baptist identity. For a brief summary, see the Postscript. Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1958), 212-216.

¹³After a discussion of the Scriptures, and the nature of the Gospel, the church, and discipleship, the conclusion of the Zagreb Statement includes a brief list of principles:

Baptists are:

these proposals for essential Baptist principles, Shurden considers Torbet's account the most helpful.

The other approach Shurden mentions is the one he himself employs, identifying a "center," or a conceptual theme, around which one can unite the diverse phenomena of Baptist history.¹⁴ He mentions several authors who take this approach and he demonstrates how widely these hermeneutical motifs diverge:

Examples of some twentieth century interpreters and their "core values" are as follows: E. Y. Mullins, "soul competency"; James D. Freeman, "the sovereignty of Christ" and "His personal, direct, and undelegated authority over the souls of men"; Walter Rauschenbusch, "experimental religion"; W.T. Whitley, "the doctrine of the church"; H. Wheeler Robinson, "spiritual individualism"; a British Baptist statement of 1948, "the evangelical experience"; James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community";...E. Glenn Hinson, "voluntarism"; Glen Stassen, "the Lordship of Christ," and Philip Thompson, "the two-fold freedom of God."¹⁵

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- members of the whole Christian family who stress the experience of personal salvation through faith in Jesus, symbolized both in baptism and the Lord's Supper;
 - those who under the Lordship of Jesus Christ have bonded together in free local congregations, together seeking to obey Christ in faith and life;
 - those who follow the authority of Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice;
 - those who have claimed religious liberty for themselves and all people;
 - those who believe that the Great Commission to take the Gospel to the whole world is the responsibility of the whole membership.

Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 66.

¹⁴Shurden develops his "centered" approach in *Four Fragile Freedoms*, but concedes in "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," that identifying a center may be too ambitious a project: "The late Robert G. Torbet, revered American Baptist historian, suggested that, rather than pointing to one integrating factor, one must identify a group of principles that constitutes the Baptist identity. In the end, he may have been correct," 322.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 322.

Those who identify a central theme also tend to enumerate principles that extend from the center, thereby giving concrete shape to their portrait of the tradition. Shurden notes that these

integrative approaches have been more of an effort to construct a door of entrance to understanding the Baptist identity than a crusade to define dogmatically the denominational identity in any singular or exclusive way. The motif, in other words, functions in a hermeneutical, not reductionistic, fashion.... Surely personal preferences will pull a Baptist toward one motif or another, but one can, in my judgment, take any number of these several approaches as long as one draws near to the cluster of remarkably similar “principles” Torbet and so many others have identified.¹⁶

Shurden, therefore, suggests that establishing principles is a necessary part of describing the Baptist identity, yet thematic centers can provide helpful descriptions of what is most important to that identity.

A potentially problematic claim offered by Shurden at this point, however, is that the conversation is not—and presumably should not be—a dogmatic enterprise; instead, its goal is to search for illuminating ways to describe Baptists. The result is simply an array of motifs that, to greater and lesser degrees, sheds light on the Baptist experience. Yet, given the polemical nature of the Baptist identity conversation and Shurden’s own admittedly partisan role in the debate,¹⁷ one wonders whether his judgment that these

¹⁶Ibid., 323.

¹⁷Shurden says, “I claim no disengaged neutrality about what I have said in that little piece [“Twenty Reflections after Twenty Years”] and others of my writings regarding the controversy. Without apology, I am a partisan, a moderate when I write about the SBC controversy. I do not buy into the historiography that says that real objectivity is found only by those who write at a distance or who write without passion. War journalists describe something about conflict that later historians will never capture. And those in the middle of conflict are no more blinded by their prejudices than those who have no stake in the struggle. I have been amused by a few Baptists and non-Baptist historians who think that real “objectivity belongs to them because they were not part of the argument or that they have a point of view different from either the fundamentalists or the moderates. For me, all of these claims, spoken or unspoken, of “transcendent

works are simply descriptive is a bit off the mark.¹⁸ The conversation is descriptive in nature, but each proposal advances a certain conception of the Baptist identity to the exclusion of other options. Given the denominational context, these statements take on a prescriptive and polemical dimension.

“Practices”

Another approach is suggested in *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*. The editors—Curtis Freeman, James W. McClendon, Jr., and C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva—suggest that the best way to explore baptist¹⁹ identity is to name the “identifying *marks*, or better, [the] characteristic *practices*”²⁰ one observes in baptist life. This approach, they suggest, helps one to avoid the temptation to describe the distinctives in an “implicitly superior fashion (i.e., we are the *most* ‘reformed’ or *truly*

objectivity” smack of one of the worst forms of self-righteousness.” Walter B. Shurden, *Not an Easy Journey: Some Transitions in Baptist Life*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), x-xi.

¹⁸My issue with Shurden at this point is not that he is un-objective. The issue is that even his Baptist identity works—which are often presented as descriptive in nature, and therefore, as “objective”—evinced the same partisanship as his advocacy writings. The partisanship itself is not problematic; however, if history is to be used to make a case on behalf of a particular view it must make additional theological moves in which the case is appropriately argued. A partisan history without theological reasoning smacks of a “magisterial” use of history that advances its argument simply by pronouncing what a Baptist is or is not. This point will be explored further below.

¹⁹McClendon’s desire to cast the net broadly when speaking of the Baptist identity is evident in this collection’s occasional use of the un-capitalized *baptist*: “note the small *b*—a spelling we will sometimes use because not all who side theologically with Baptists are called by that name, just as not all Catholics are labeled Catholic.” Freeman, et. al, *Baptist Roots*, 1.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 5-6. Emphasis original.

‘rational’ church)”²¹ while paying close attention to the activities that express Baptist convictions, and reciprocally, shape the activities that constitute Baptist life.²² Several examples of this approach are mentioned: the list of practices mentioned in Donald Durnbaugh’s *The Believer’s Church*,²³ James McClendon’s baptist marks in his *Ethics*,²⁴ the practices enumerated in the “Baptifesto,”²⁵ Harold Bender’s description of the Anabaptist vision in his presidential address to the American Society of Church History,²⁶ and McClendon’s description of the classic baptist hermeneutical approach.²⁷

²¹Ibid., 6.

²²*Baptist Roots* is shaped by the Bapto-Catholic perspective and its emphasis on practices. This emphasis is evidence of a MacIntyrian philosophical influence. These issues will be explored in the two chapters that follow.

²³These include “voluntary membership, covenant discipleship, Christian works, faithful admonition, benevolent giving, and biblical authority.” Freeman, et. al, *Baptist Roots*, 6. From Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believer’s Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 32-33.

²⁴McClendon’s marks include: “Biblicism, mission, liberty, discipleship, and community.” Freeman, et. al, *Baptist Roots*, 6. From James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 28.

²⁵The practices proposed in the *Baptist Manifesto* will be explored at length in chapter three. Freeman, et. al, *Baptist Roots*, 6. The version that will be cited throughout this dissertation is: Mikael Broadway, Curtis W. Freeman, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip E. Thompson, “Re-Envisioning the Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24.3 (Fall, 1997), 303-10.

²⁶Bender claims, “what was distinctive about Anabaptists was that they envisioned Christianity as discipleship, the church as a brotherhood, and the Christian ethic as love and nonresistance.” Freeman, et. al, *Baptist Roots*, 6. From Guy F. Hershberger and Harold Stauffer Bender, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1957), 20.

²⁷McClendon suggests that the baptist vision is characterized by a hermeneutical approach that says of Scripture, “the church now *is* the primitive church; *we* are Jesus’ followers; the commands are addressed directly to *us*.” Freeman, et. al, *Baptist Roots*, 6. From McClendon, *Ethics*, 33. Elsewhere McClendon claims that the baptist hermeneutic

Although “practices” and “principles” might look similar at first glance, they are significantly different. Practices are concrete expressions of the life of the community rather than abstract concepts; therefore they are not only observable, they arise out of the lived experience of the tradition.²⁸ Whether or not one chooses to adopt this method exclusively, at the very least this emphasis on characteristic and defining actions is a helpful addition in the effort to understand the nature of the Baptist identity.

“Tensions”

Another method for approaching the question of the Baptist identity was offered by Baptist historian Bill Leonard in his single-volume history *Baptist Ways*. He too notes the difficulty of defining Baptist convictions that results from the diversity one observes in the history of Baptist practice, and in response he offers an innovative approach to the problem. Although he ends his volume with a list of Baptist characteristics, he begins his treatment with a discussion of eight defining tensions that shape Baptist life. Leonard suggests that while there is diversity in the way various Baptist congregations and individuals answer the questions, these eight tensions provide spectrums on which

can be described as “the way the Bible is read by those who (1) accept the plain sense of Scripture as its dominant sense and recognize their continuity with the story it tells, and who (2) acknowledge that finding the point of that story leads them to its application, and who also (3) see past and present and future link by a ‘this is that’ and ‘then is now’ vision, a trope of mystical identity binding the story now to the story then, and the story then and now to God’s future yet to come.” From James Wm. McClendon, Jr. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 45.

²⁸A helpful analogy is the difference between “virtues” and “values.” Just as “virtues” are linked to concrete, habitual actions, “values” are abstract concepts.

Baptists locate themselves,²⁹ and it is their history of wrestling with this cluster of concerns that make Baptists a distinct people. Later in the chapter Leonard's proposal will be explored in greater detail.

Summary: Approaches to the Baptist Identity

These four methods of describing the Baptist identity—principles, centers, practices, and tensions—are all attempts to deal with the fact of Baptist diversity. Each approach has something to commend it, but drawbacks are apparent with each as well; a key issue is the degree to which these statements obscure their descriptive accounts with prescriptive preferences. For example, a “center” is a helpful pedagogical tool, reducing a complex story to a single, memorable theme for the sake of promoting denominational identity; but, despite the best intentions (and protestations) of the authors, the result is necessarily reductionistic and exclusive. Principles are helpful in that they can name various aspects of the Baptist identity in a less reductive fashion; however, as the aforementioned distinction between principles and practices indicates, the abstract nature of principles can lead to extending principles beyond their descriptive function to serve as prescriptive ideals. Practices are helpful indicators of identity because they are directly connected with the concrete acts of, and the experience of life within, a tradition; however, if the goal is a *descriptive* account of the Baptist identity in its historical diversity, this limited scope may not be best suited to the task. Of the four approaches, a focus on the tensions in Baptist life seems most profitable for a descriptive account, especially because it is the most attuned to describing the diversity of the phenomena, it

²⁹Tensions do not indicate an either/or polarity. The most helpful feature of a tension-based approach is its capacity to admit of degrees of affinity to either of the poles of the spectrum.

avoids reductionism, and it avoids prescription in favor of description. Clearly, it is less pedagogically helpful to enumerate eight conundrums than it is to describe Baptists according to a singular center, but the approach does lend itself to a more faithful rendering of the complexities of the Baptist story.

At stake in all of these approaches to the Baptist identity is the question, “what is a Baptist?” Yet, one ought not overlook the corresponding question that is implied: “what is a Baptist *not*?” This question is the source of the polemical undertones in the writings on the Baptist identity. It also provided the emotional charge for the controversy that erupted between conservatives and moderates³⁰ in the Southern Baptist Convention (henceforth SBC) in the late twentieth century.

The Controversy: Solidifying the Conservative and Moderate Identities

For all the turbulence that has characterized Baptist life throughout its history, no dispute since the nineteenth century conflict over slavery has had as decisive an effect as

³⁰How these factions are described says much about the inclinations of the author who uses them. The negatively charged terms “fundamentalist” and “liberal” are avoided here, preferring the terms each side uses to describe itself: conservative and moderate. The term “fundamentalist” is more pejorative than theologically descriptive, especially because it is used frequently to describe violent extremists of various world religions. “Liberal” is similarly unhelpful because, when compared to liberals in mainline denominations, many “left-leaning” Baptists are quite conservative. Of the various terms that have been used, perhaps the least satisfying is Carl L. Kell’s and L. Raymond Camp’s use of “loyalist” to describe conservatives and “dissident” to describe moderates, terms which they claim are “less polemical.” See: *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention*, (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 7. Not only is “dissident” a polemical term etymologically and denotatively, but Kell and Camp’s treatment is transparently hostile to the “New Southern Baptist Convention,” rendering their claimed attempt to avoid polemical labels quite curious. My goal for my account of these events is not to achieve a dubious “objectivity” or “neutrality” but to attempt fairness.

the conflict in the late twentieth century known simply as “the Controversy.”³¹ The Controversy ended with the splintering of the SBC, a monumental shift for an institution that once was hailed by Martin Marty as one of the most “intact” religious cultures in the United States, one with such cultural clout that it could be called the “Catholic Church of the South.”³² The longevity of the conflict and the nature of the institutional breakup served to cement the ideological divide between the combatants.

It has been noted that how one narrates the Controversy, including when one thinks the controversy began, reveals a great deal about one’s ideological perspective. As Scott Moore describes it,

[if] one saw the conflict principally over power rather than theology and beginning in the late 1970s, then this person probably described it as the “fundamentalist take-over” and the antagonists in this struggle were the Moderates and the Fundamentalists. If one thought this conflict was about restoring theological integrity to Baptist life, then for that person the conflict probably began in the early 1960s with the Elliot dispute, was probably referred to as the “Conservative Resurgence,” and the combatants were the Conservatives and the Liberals. (Those not involved in Southern Baptist life may be blissfully unaware of these fine-grained distinctions.)³³

³¹For a narration of the Southern Baptist story that emphasizes the definitional role of conflict, see Walter B. Shurden, *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 1995).

³²Martin E. Marty, “The Protestant Experience and Perspective,” in *American Religious Values and the Future of America*, ed. Rodger van Allen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 40.

³³In the next sentence Moore clarifies his own location within the Baptist spectrum: “For all practical purposes, the ‘controversy’ in the Southern Baptist Convention has been over for almost ten years, and we Moderates lost.” From Scott H. Moore, “The Predicament and Promise for Young Baptist Scholars,” in *The Scholarly Vocation and the Baptist Academy: Essays on the Future of Baptist Higher Education*, edited by Roger Ward and David P. Gushee, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 190.

Both versions have much to commend them. The Controversy did not spring to life *ex nihilo*; long before 1979, conservative elements in the SBC were dismayed by the acceptance of modern scientific views and the use of critical methodologies in biblical studies. According to Barry Hankins, these voices on the far right and those who were on the furthest left leaning edge, were kept “safely” at the margins, while moderates held the reins of power in the denomination and the seminaries—a fact which bred resentment among the conservatives who perceived an elitist attitude among the moderate leadership.³⁴ The situation is described similarly by Leonard: “Such unity was grounded in a Grand Compromise in which ideologues on the right or the left were not allowed to control the center,” however, “like all compromises...it was always in danger of collapse.”³⁵ For this reason, a complex and volatile mixture of competing theological visions and political aspirations were simmering throughout most of the twentieth century.

The disparity between the views of these constituencies generated a great deal of tension; nevertheless, Leonard notes several cultural factors that enabled the Grand Compromise to endure as long as it did:

- (1) the unity of southern culture; (2) the power of denominational identity; (3) the hesitancy to appear creedal; (4) the pietistic concern for heart religion; (5) the commitment to missions and evangelism; (6) a reliance on certain doctrinal

³⁴“For most of the twentieth century the group of elites that controlled the denominational machinery were positioned in the middle of the Southern Baptist theological spectrum. Arrayed on either side of them were dissenters who prodded and goaded these moderate leaders.” Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*, (Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 3.

³⁵Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 8-9. Hankins draws upon Leonard’s description of the Grand Compromise, but provides a description that is a bit more generous towards conservatives.

statements that were defined broadly enough to allow for a variety of diverse theological outlooks; (7) an almost obsessive concern to avoid schism at all costs; and (8) a strategy for resolving disputes that retained the loyalty of adherents on both sides of an issue.³⁶

Despite preserving of structural integrity in the denomination in this way, there were indications that a future schism was possible. At several moments when conservatives were most concerned about positions taken by the SBC, they raised the issues through resolutions proposed at the national convention. In each of these instances, the conservative positions were affirmed by the vote of the assembled messengers.³⁷

Two vivid examples served as bookends for the 1960s and presaged theological conflicts that were to come.³⁸ Both dealt with the interpretation of Genesis. In 1961, Ralph Elliott published *The Message of Genesis*, which, due to its non-literal reading of the first eleven chapters of Genesis (e.g., rejecting the view that the seven days of creation were seven, twenty-four hour periods, and suggesting that Adam was a representative of humankind rather than a single historical figure) created a furor with conservative pastors and leaders in the SBC.³⁹ The result was a tumultuous SBC meeting in San Francisco in 1962 that resulted in the call for a revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message*, and heightened tensions between conservative and moderate factions within the convention; however, a further measure, demanding that the Sunday School Board recall

³⁶Ibid., 134.

³⁷Ibid., 71.

³⁸Shurden offers a brief overview of both controversies in *Not a Silent People*, 69-81.

³⁹Elliott offers his own account of the controversy in: Ralph Elliott, *The “Genesis Controversy” and Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992).

all copies of the book, failed.⁴⁰ In 1969 the same issues bubbled to the surface when the first volume of the Broadman Bible Commentary was published. The portion dealing with Genesis was written by an English Baptist, G. Henton Davies,⁴¹ and his interpretation was deemed by conservative critics to be as problematic as Elliot's.⁴² Just as Eliot's book caused a disturbance at the SBC meeting, a similar SBC convention firestorm resulted from the Broadman commentary in 1970, culminating with a vote that demanded the volume's recall and rewriting. Although the Sunday School Board commissioned Davies to rewrite his portion of the commentary, at the 1971 convention, a narrow majority voted to direct the Board to select an entirely new author. Through these incidents one can discern an increased polarization among the ideological factions of the convention and a greater willingness of the convention meetings to take quite direct action concerning the day-to-day decisions of the convention agencies, especially with regard to issues related to scriptural interpretation.

There was a discernable shift in tactics in 1979. Rather than raise individual concerns at the national conventions, a group of conservative leaders decided to, as Bill Leonard puts it, "purge all vestiges of liberalism from the convention."⁴³ Thus, the

⁴⁰Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, 74.

⁴¹Shurden suggests that the selection of an Old Testament scholar from outside the United States to write the Genesis portion of the commentary may have been an effort by the Sunday School Board to avoid a repetition of the Elliott controversy Ibid., 75.

⁴²Especially troubling to some readers was his interpretation of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. Davies indicated that God would never make such an inhumane demand, and therefore, Abraham was mistaken about the command's divine origin. Rather the call to sacrifice was the "climax of the psychology of his life." Ibid., 76.

⁴³Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope*, 4.

longstanding amalgam of diverse ideologies that characterized the SBC was finally broken apart.

Led by Paige Patterson (a professor and the strategy's theological architect and polemicist), Paul Pressler (a judge who served as the political strategist), and Adrian Rogers (a popular preacher and the first SBC president elected through this strategy),⁴⁴ conservatives executed an effective ten-year strategy to gain control of the executive leadership of the convention and the governing boards of all the SBC agencies, including the denominational press, the news services, and the six seminaries. The strategy focused on the role of the SBC president. Because the president has the power to appoint the Committee on Committees, which selects new board members for the various convention agencies, a decade of controlling the presidency would result in an exclusively conservative power structure in the denomination. Beginning in 1979, presidential elections in the SBC were a contentious affair. Conservatives and moderates warred for control with full knowledge of what was at stake in the contest. Over the next decade the conservatives won the elections at the convention—by narrow margins⁴⁵—and their effort to reshape the SBC succeeded.

Throughout the Controversy, the rhetoric used by each side was intense. For conservatives, the Controversy was a battle for the Bible and preserving the Baptist

⁴⁴Walter B. Shurden, *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), xii.

⁴⁵This is a point that Shurden believes is likely to be lost to history: “the greatest error history will make in interpreting the controversy: Thinking it was a lopsided victory. It was a much closer fight than history will reflect. But history will mark it up as a ‘win’ for the fundamentalists and a ‘loss’ for the moderates without paying attention to the very close percentages by which the fundamentalists won the presidency year after year.” From “Twenty Reflections after Twenty Years” in *Not an Easy Journey*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 298.

heritage of a deep loyalty to the Scriptures above all else. They passionately advocated “biblical inerrancy,” decrying moderate reluctance to use the term; a hesitance that was portrayed as evidence of infidelity to the Word of God. Moderates, on the other hand, affirmed the authority of the Bible but claimed that the conservative notion of “inerrancy” amounted to little more than an imposition of a narrow interpretation of Scripture. As a result, at stake in the battle for moderates was the Baptist heritage of decentralized denominational power and a mistrust of hierarchy and doctrinal imposition.⁴⁶

Moderates, finding themselves denominationally homeless, formed alternate institutions, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and various seminaries attached to moderate leaning Baptist colleges. Upending the old maxim about the victors writing history, moderates prolifically wrote works of protest. Some works described the Controversy in great historical and sociological detail,⁴⁷ some were intensely personal

⁴⁶In addition to the interpretational imposition involved in the Eliot Controversy and the Broadman Commentary Controversy, another example of heavy handed hermeneutical imposition can be found in the case of Dale Moody and his teaching on apostasy. In the introduction to *Apostasy: A Study in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in Baptist History* (Greenville, SC: Smyth & Helwys, 1991), Moody notes that his views on the possibility of apostasy, drawn primarily from his interpretation of the book of Hebrews, stretch back to 1941. Despite moments of controversy and heated debate, he was given broad latitude to teach unpopular views until the publication of *The Word of Truth*, his summary of Christian Doctrine in 1981. At that point, in the changed political climate less tolerant of diverse views, Moody was terminated from his post at Southern Baptist Seminary after thirty-nine years. Given Moody’s conservative views of scripture, in his case it was clear that the issue at stake was not inerrancy, but the control of theological interpretation by the denomination.

⁴⁷The most important sociological analysis of the Controversy is: Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990). Other important historical accounts include the aforementioned books by Bill Leonard (*God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention*), and Walter Shurden (*Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War*), and a collection

jeremiads lamenting the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Baptist Church,⁴⁸ and others were descriptions of the Baptist identity that were written to make clear that the post-Controversy direction of the SBC was inconsistent with the Baptist heritage.⁴⁹ Although they have been slower to do so, conservative authors have begun to respond with their own accounts of the Baptist identity, generating an interesting contrast concerning Baptist convictions.⁵⁰

Post-Controversy Baptist Identity Literature: Representative Projects

Although there is a long heritage of writings that explore the Baptist identity, over the last three decades there has been renewed attention to the topic. Obviously, the timing of this surge of interest is not coincidental. Baptist theologian, Robert P. Jones, observes that “there is no doubt that the motivating factor in most of this new-found interest in ‘the

of historical essays by an array of moderate leaders: *The Struggle for the soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement*, edited by Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993).

⁴⁸Examples include: Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 2002); Emerson Cleveland Watson, *Call Me Jeremiah!: A Memoir Response to the Takeover, Dismantling, and Restructuring of a Christian Denomination* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2003); Bruce T. Gourley, *The Godmakers: A Legacy of the Southern Baptist Convention?* (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1996).

⁴⁹Notable examples include: William Powell Tuck, *Our Baptist Tradition* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 1993), and especially Shurden’s aforementioned *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*.

⁵⁰Shurden notes that the “‘official’ fundamentalist interpretation of the conflict” (*Not a Silent People*, 111 n.6) is: James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Dallas: Criterion Publications, 1986). Another conservative who deals extensively with the question of the Controversy and the Baptist identity is Stanton Norman, especially: *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001); and, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005).

Baptist tradition' is the quest for historical legitimation of both sides of the recent convention controversy."⁵¹ Jones makes an important point. Although studies of Baptist identity are intended to be descriptive accounts of what Baptists have been, and generally have been written by historians who consider their work to be, as Shurden describes it, "a moral enterprise...moral in the sense that one must report honestly and fairly what is there,"⁵² these studies are not "unmotivated."⁵³ More often than not, works of self-definition are written in times of crisis and controversy, precisely the times when a movement most needs clarification about their identity as it relates to approaching the future. Consequently, older works bear witness to the Baptist battles of their day; more recent works say a great deal about the present time.

The Baptist identity literature varies greatly in tone, ranging from the very subtle⁵⁴ to the clearly polemic,⁵⁵ but the underlying attempt is to demonstrate that some

⁵¹Robert P. Jones, "Revision-ing Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26.01, (Spring 1999), 35.

⁵²Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, 31.

⁵³ See above, p. 17, n19.

⁵⁴Given the even-handed tone of the book, one might not guess that the Controversy was a primary motivation for Bill Leonard's *Baptist Ways*. However, he states in the Preface: "Perhaps this volume really began in June of 1979 when the Southern Baptist Convention took a turn to the right and precipitated events that required many of us to reclaim, rethink, and rely on our Baptist heritage," xiv.

⁵⁵Ralph Elliott, mentioned above as the focal point of the controversies over biblical interpretation in the 1960s, has offered a candid reflection on his experience of that controversy and the larger Controversy in the SBC since that time in his book, *The "Genesis Controversy" and Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition*. The beginning of the book's conclusion is telling:

All the way through the thoughts expressed in this manuscript, my mind keeps bumping into a phrase that expresses a conclusion I have reached, yet one I do not like. The phrase is "Eulogy for a Great Tradition." There is still talk of freedom and religious liberty, but it has been a long time since these were allowed to be

party has neglected cherished Baptist principles. What follows is a brief description of important projects that promote conservative and moderate versions of the Baptist identity, which will serve to set the context for the Bapto-Catholic proposal of a “third way” beyond the conservative/moderate impasse.⁵⁶

Conservative Proposals

Tom Nettles. One conservative theologian who has addressed the question of the Baptist identity is Tom Nettles, professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His first foray into the question was *Baptists and the Bible: the Baptist Doctrines of Biblical Inspiration and Religious Authority in Historical Perspective*.⁵⁷ Co-written with L. Russ Bush, *Baptists and the Bible* attempts “to investigate the Baptist doctrine of Scripture in a systematic, historical fashion,”⁵⁸ surveying the theological reflections on Scripture produced by a wide array of significant Baptist figures. The historical nature of the survey is important to the authors who state that a

actualized in practice in Southern Baptist life. Compromisers seeking for some personal-security life raft contributed to the death of religious liberty. Such compromise is sin, and it contributes to the harlotry of a huge religious body in this country that can no longer proclaim itself as the “people of God” (177).

⁵⁶In addition to the present study, a helpful account of the Controversy by a young scholar that resists the typical conservative / moderate categories is Andrew D. Black’s, “Kingdom of Priests or Democracy of Competent Souls?: The ‘Baptist Manifesto,’ John Howard Yoder, and the Question of Baptist Identity,” (master’s thesis, Baylor University, 2006).

⁵⁷L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible: The Baptist Doctrines of Biblical Inspiration and Religious Authority in Historical Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 16.

lack of historical awareness will lead a denomination to walk down some of the same roads they have walked before. A strong historical identity, on the other hand, should give them the ability to correct their direction when necessary and to move forward with strength and unity. The Baptist contribution to the Protestant community in the area of biblical authority can only benefit the people of God if it is clearly identified and expressed.⁵⁹

Aside from their conviction that Baptists offer an important, yet overlooked, contribution to the Protestant theology of Scripture, Nettles and Bush are concerned to describe and define “the historic Baptist position.”⁶⁰ Their message is clear: historically Baptists have affirmed the infallibility, inerrancy, perspicuity, and sole authority of Scripture, and they have affirmed the “analogy of faith,” which suggests that Scripture interprets Scripture.⁶¹ The implication is that anything short of these affirmations is sub-Baptist.⁶²

It is this turn from a descriptive account of Baptist theologies of Scripture to a prescriptive definition for Baptists to follow that makes *Baptists and the Bible* an interesting addition to the Baptist identity literature. Not only does it treat a divisive theological issue in Baptist life, but also it uses this single issue as the organizing motif for the whole of Baptist identity, and the only principle upon which Baptist unity may be pursued.⁶³ Perhaps the most interesting feature of this book is its bibliographic data.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., 400-403.

⁶²As with the moderate histories already surveyed, this volume is hardly dispassionate. This is clearest in the section headed by the ominous biblical epigram, “Do Men Gather Grapes of Thorns” in which the views of Walter Rauschenbusch, Shailer Matthews, William Newton Clarke, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and James Josiah Reeve are surveyed. Ibid., 323-354.

⁶³“We are fellow servants with our Baptist brethren. However, Baptist unity is threatened by controversy over God’s Word itself, the one standard by which all religious opinions ought to be tried. How can two walk together unless they be agreed (Amos

Baptists and the Bible was published in 1980, a year after the Controversy began.⁶⁴ As a result, it served as a forerunner of other accounts, establishing the theology of scripture as the essential point of division between conservatives and moderates.

The second major work in which Nettles explored the Baptist identity was *Why I Am a Baptist*, a collection that he edited with Russell D. Moore.⁶⁵ These twenty-six essays answer the question suggested by the title from various angles. Some are culled from historically significant Baptist figures, but most were written by contemporary Baptists including: SBC leaders, Baptists outside the American context, SBC pastors, wives of Baptist leaders, professors, and Baptists who are better known for their leadership in the evangelical movement. Nettles and Moore offer an anecdote in the preface that says a great deal about the purpose of their project. The two were walking to a chapel service at Southern Seminary while flipping through a copy of a different *Why I Am A Baptist*—one published by the moderate Baptist publishing house, Smyth and Helwys. Much dismayed them about its contents:

Written by a virtual “Who’s Who” of the Baptist left, this volume made a concerted effort to attempt Baptist identity without Baptist theology...Rejecting confessional boundaries as creedal straightjackets, these moderate writers presented the alternative: a Baptist identity built upon sociological commonality, shared memories, and not much else. The eclipse of theology in Baptist life was celebrated by some of the contributors because it brings with it a freedom to pursue a “faith journey” without arguing so much about what the faith is.⁶⁶

3:3)? Even more, how can we pray ‘Even so, Lord Jesus’ (Revelation 22:20) if we doubt the truth of his Word?’ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁴Also interesting is the fact that the book was published by Moody Press, an evangelical, rather than a Baptist, publishing house.

⁶⁵Tom J. Nettles and Russell Moore, *Why I Am a Baptist* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001).

⁶⁶Ibid., xv.

Their subsequent observation cuts to the heart of their concerns:

the writers failed to demonstrate why someone who lacks their memories of Training Union socials should become a Baptist. Could a person who rejects the resurrection of Christ (but who is amenable to being dunked in the water) be considered an authentic Baptist? Sadly, the contributors to the Smyth and Helwys book offered no reason why such should not be the case.⁶⁷

Their own version of *Why I Am A Baptist*, therefore, is intended to be a direct challenge to the moderate version of the Baptist identity, one that sets forth clear doctrinal positions essential to the Baptist faith.

Nettles provides the opening essay for the collection. Entitled, “Being Baptist: We Must Not Sell It Cheap”⁶⁸ his essay advances the basic argument proposed in the preface: Baptist identity cannot be crafted apart from theological convictions. After a brief word about various ways of defining the Baptist identity, including historians’ tendency to focus on historical and cultural aspects of “Baptistness,” Nettles makes his central claim clear:

All of these efforts at definition have validity in helping gain overall perspective. Greater accuracy, however, begs for the doctrinal/biblical component. Through the last four centuries, Baptists generally identified themselves through a discussion of doctrinal commitments, built upon exposition and synthesis of Scripture, espoused by the churches.⁶⁹

Having established this, Nettles introduces a topic on which his judgment is mixed, namely, the authority of confessions of faith. Nettles tips his hat to the principle by way

⁶⁷Ibid., xvi.

⁶⁸Ibid., 3-18. Nettles takes his title from Roger Williams’ statement: “Having bought truth dear, we must not sell it cheap, not the least graine of it for the whole world, no, not for the saving of soules though our owne most precious.” Quoted *ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁹Ibid., 5.

of O. C. S. Wallace's exposition of the New Hampshire Confession.⁷⁰ Wallace claims that the creed was important because of its widespread use, but he reassures the reader that it will not be quoted in an authoritarian way. Here we see the Baptist hesitance to compel the conscience, a principle Nettles seems to agree with—albeit uncomfortably. His hesitance is explained by his narration of the downward slide of Baptists into doctrinal incoherence specifically by way of the encroachment of liberalism in the early 1900s and the too-frequent invocation of the principle of “religious liberty” as a means of dodging doctrinal truth claims.⁷¹ In stark contrast, he sets forth J.B. Gambrell, B.H. Carroll, Hercules Collins, Oliver Hart, and Abraham Booth as men who exemplified the “wideness of Baptist exclusivity.”⁷² Each of these were stalwart defenders of distinctive Baptist doctrines like Baptism by immersion and believer's church ecclesiology, yet they were able to lovingly affirm fellow Christians with whom they disagreed profoundly. Some of these were even willing to admit paedobaptist ministers into Baptist pulpits—while not admitting them to the “Lord's table” because of their convictions concerning closed communion.

⁷⁰Ibid., 5.

⁷¹Ibid., 5-9. His critique of the “downward slide” is most pointedly phrased in his observations concerning Joe Odle's 1972 collection *Why I Am A Baptist*: “Even then the don't-force-me-to-believe-anything ethos had so permeated Southern Baptist consciousness that Odle would issue a caveat after quoting the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement on Scripture. ‘It is not a creedal statement,’ he demurred, ‘and therefore is not binding upon any Baptist.’ An affirmation of the truthfulness of Scripture not binding upon any Baptist! How quaint. How debilitating the slide into latitudinarianism had become, that even Joe Odle would despair of thinking that it was necessary for a Baptist to believe the Bible. Though he would not give such an affirmation the status of a creed, he must at least grasp this much: ‘Yet it is an enunciation of what Baptists believe about the Bible.’” Ibid., 9.

⁷²Ibid., 10.

Nettles closes his chapter with a refutation of the claim that a strong proclamation of doctrinal convictions would amount to the death knell of Baptist life in a “post-denominational” age.⁷³ To bolster his claim, Nettles points to the example of Spurgeon’s refusal to affirm doctrinal minimalism in favor of robust confessions of faith,⁷⁴ and to the experience of decline among Northern Baptists following their rejection of the New Hampshire Confession of Faith as a statement of faith in 1922 in favor of a vague affirmation of the adequacy of the New Testament to serve as a guide for faith and practice.⁷⁵ In both cases, according to Nettles, a vague affirmation of toleration and religious liberty resulted in a vague affirmation of doctrine, and ultimately, in an attenuated form of Baptist life. The opening sentence of the final paragraph reads like a prayer: “May we never suffer from such destructive lack of definition.”⁷⁶

The third and most recent contribution Nettles has made to the discussion of Baptist identity is the first volume of the series *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity*,⁷⁷ which deals with Baptist beginnings in Britain. Although the goals of this volume are similar to Leonard’s *Baptist Ways*—namely, an inductive study of the Baptist identity by way of history—the methods Nettles employs are quite different. Rather than a straightforward historical narrative, Nettles recounts individual biographical profiles of important British Baptist figures with the intent to discover an

⁷³Ibid., 15-18.

⁷⁴Ibid., 16.

⁷⁵Ibid., 17.

⁷⁶Ibid., 18.

⁷⁷Tom J. Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity* vol. 1: Beginnings in Britain, (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005).

authentic theological profile of Baptist identity. The attempt is to put into action the conviction he expressed in *Why I Am A Baptist*: the Baptist identity must include doctrinal content, therefore one must look to Baptist exemplars and discern their essential theological convictions.

Before he launches into the main biographical portion of his project, Nettles spends two chapters reflecting on the nature of the Baptist identity question and setting forth his vision for a “coherent-truth model” of the Baptist identity. At the outset he recognizes the shift of Baptist historian’s focus from the question of Baptists’ historical origins to that of Baptist identity.⁷⁸ This renewed attention to Baptist identity is identified as a good result of the Controversy because it “reveals not only a fissure among Baptists in their understanding of the nature of biblical authority, but more broadly reveals two fundamentally disparate views of Baptist identity.”⁷⁹ He characterizes the dispute as between two parties, the “soul-liberty” party and the “coherent-truth” party. He describes the first party as minimizing “the importance of positive doctrinal affirmations,” believing that

doctrinal definition intruded into Baptist life from fundamentalism and eventually neo-evangelicalism but was alien to the original Baptist ethos...They view a serious confessionalism as contrary to Baptist witness because objectivity in doctrinal formulation tends to overpower subjective experience and individual perceptions of truth. Liberty of conscience, the key to Baptist life, cannot co-exist with the broad and objective doctrinal emphasis of confessions.⁸⁰

According to Nettles, the “coherent-truth” party, on the other hand, believes that the “distinctive tenets of freedom and voluntarism would never produce a Baptist church

⁷⁸Ibid., 11-12.

⁷⁹Ibid., 12.

⁸⁰Ibid., 12-13.

apart from a broader foundation of theological, Christological, and soteriological truths...Baptists must be Christian and Protestant evangelical before they can be Baptist.”⁸¹

Nettles goes on to survey major works in the history of Baptist identity writings, noting the important role of the doctrinal considerations played in these accounts. One interesting example is that Joseph Ivimey’s *A History of the English Baptists*, which gives very particular reasons for the demise of some Baptist churches. Nettles notes that “the decline and extinction of some Baptist churches, which Ivimey had the sad duty of narrating, came when they ‘departed from the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity, the proper divinity of the Son of God, and of the Holy Spirit, &c’.”⁸² Consequently, Ivimey’s account is among those that take a “coherent-truth” approach to Baptist identity. A mixed review is offered, on the other hand, of H.C. Vedder’s historical work. The attention Vedder gives to doctrine combined with his unsympathetic treatment of heresy in Baptist life draws praise from Nettles, despite Vedder’s disapproval of the infringement on personal rights posed by strict church discipline. Nevertheless, in the end, Nettles expresses disapproval with Vedder’s later work as a capitulation to the “soul-liberty” party: “Vedder eventually adopted the ‘Progressive’ view of theology. He took a stance in line with the ‘soul liberty’ persuasion, but quite contrary to his own historical evaluation of Baptist identity.”⁸³

⁸¹Ibid., 13.

⁸²Ibid., 16, quoting Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: 1811-30), 3.

⁸³Ibid. In the first chapter Nettles does very little to define the “coherent-truth” model, which creates problems for his critique. These will be assessed below, p 45.

In chapter two, Nettles sets out to clarify the content of his coherent-truth model, which he claims to be justified by two convictions. The first is that that “Baptists cannot be defined apart from connection to historic Christianity.”⁸⁴ The second conviction is a worldview “committed to the objectivity and investigatibility of truth.”⁸⁵ He concludes that this commitment naturally implies inerrancy because “truth exists and can be communicated clearly from one mind to another, from one generation to another, and from one culture to another,”⁸⁶ and because “the Bible is the deposit of this truth that tells clearly how God saves fallen, sinful creatures and what constitutes the nature, function, and future of his church.”⁸⁷ Drawing upon the work of Stanton Norman,⁸⁸ Nettles draws a connection between the Enlightenment and the soul-liberty party, with its emphasis on human experience as a source for theological truth.⁸⁹ As an alternative to the moderate “soul-liberty” view, Nettles offers four categories through which one can interpret the Baptist identity: “orthodoxy, evangelicalism, separate-ness (that is, a theologically integrated ecclesiology), and conscientious confessionality,”⁹⁰ convictions that he then

⁸⁴Ibid., 35.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001).

⁸⁹Unfortunately, both Norman and Nettles overlook the argument made by the *Baptist Manifesto*, namely, that the conservative preoccupation with objectivity and their hermeneutical approach is every bit as indebted to the Enlightenment as the moderate affinity for religious experience.

⁹⁰Nettles, *The Baptists*, 36.

illustrates by way of the Second London Confession and the writings of John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes, and Isaac Backus.

Orthodoxy, for Nettles, is essential: “Baptists are orthodox. This is to say that one must first be a Christian before he can be a Baptist.”⁹¹ Here Nettles argues that certain doctrines, like the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ as developed in the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, comprise the non-negotiable content of the faith and those who give exclusive attention to freedom of interpretation neglect these doctrines.⁹² While he admits that many moderates also acknowledge the Trinity in their writings, he claims that several moderate heroes—including Walter Rauschenbusch, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Kirby Godsey—were antagonistic to classic orthodox doctrinal formulations.⁹³

According to Nettles, aside from being orthodox, Baptists are also evangelical. Nettles clarifies that his intended use of “evangelical” is not the “post-1950 quasi denominational sense”⁹⁴ of the term, which is as notoriously difficult to define as the Baptist identity; rather his claim is that the doctrines of justification by faith, the necessity of the work of Christ, and the necessity of the work of the Spirit are central to the Baptist identity. He notes two ways of approaching the evangelical doctrines, namely, Arminianism (exemplified by the General Baptist strain) and Calvinism (as embodied by the Particular Baptists).⁹⁵ Although both are acknowledged to be

⁹¹Ibid., 37.

⁹²Ibid., 37-38.

⁹³Ibid., 39-40.

⁹⁴Ibid., 43.

⁹⁵Ibid., 40-41.

evangelical, and presumably, Baptist, the discussion that follows develops an exclusively Calvinist understanding of the evangelical convictions that define Baptist life.⁹⁶

The third defining characteristic of Nettles's coherent-truth model is separatism, or a theologically integrated ecclesiology "that is developed in full awareness of its necessary connection with a network of other biblical truths."⁹⁷ In Nettles's view, a commitment to coherent truth involves a corresponding set of ecclesiological convictions, including "believer's baptism by immersion, regenerate church membership, liberty of conscience, separation of church and state, and the necessity of gospel proclamation to all persons in all nations" which "constitute the distinctive aspect of Baptist heritage."⁹⁸ An underlying implication of this view is that a commitment to inerrancy and a reliance upon scripture inevitably leads to Baptist ecclesiology and convictions.

The fourth aspect of Nettles's coherent truth model is its "consciously confessional" approach. Here he suggests that just as a believer ought to make a profession of belief, so also, a church must be clear in its teaching and expectations, as a way of proclaiming truth to the church and to the world. For this reason, he claims that there is an appropriate "disciplinary" use of confessions of faith, that is, expecting Baptists to adhere to confessions of faith is just as much a part of the Baptist story as the value of "liberty of conscience."⁹⁹

⁹⁶Ibid., 41-44.

⁹⁷Ibid., 44.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid., 48.

He ends his theoretical treatment of the coherent truth model with a preview of the three volumes that will make up his eventual trilogy in his *The Baptists* series. Here he again picks up the anti-moderate theme that runs throughout his account of the Baptist identity. Describing volume one, Nettles says that it recounts the “lives of Christians who sought the truth outside of themselves. They did not trust their own hearts. The standard of the Word of God challenged them and molded them. The Bible called for them to lay aside lifestyles and predispositions and bring their experiences under judgment for the sake of conforming to the truth.”¹⁰⁰ The third volume recounts some Baptists’ renunciation of this commitment to the conformity to truth, due to “an immersion in the intellectual shifts of the nineteenth century,” which resulted in “many Baptist thinkers [losing] their place to stand and thus their ability to act upon their culture.”¹⁰¹ Nettles’s grim assessment of this most recent phase is that

some systems sought to maintain a façade of orthodoxy while granting sovereignty to science, historicism, and literary criticism. The sphere of theology and religion gradually had to recede in favor of rationalistic skepticism veiled as piety. In many cases not only Baptist identity, but historic Christianity vanished. An inherited vocabulary woven with theological sophistry made a deceitful covering over the bottomless pit dug by liberalism. Nothing was left but to define Christianity in general, and Baptist life in particular, in terms of personal autonomy and preference.¹⁰²

Nettles’s goal, then, is clear. He seeks to provide a biographically driven account of Baptist life that illustrates the theological clarity and coherence of the Baptist heritage and the infidelity to this heritage by those who, beginning in the nineteenth century, exalt personal autonomy as the defining characteristic of Baptist life.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 48-49.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 49-50.

¹⁰²Ibid., 50.

Observations about Nettles's Position

The conservative vision of the Baptist identity, represented well by Tom Nettles, has much to commend it. It is not simply doctrinaire; the conservative vision suggests a form of pietism that emphasizes a deeply felt commitment to truth, as seen in Nettles's recommendation for a coherent-truth approach to the Baptist identity. Nevertheless, his model is problematic. This is especially evident in the first chapter of *The Baptists*. At times it seems that one is part of the "coherent-truth party" simply by virtue of believing that orthodox doctrinal content is necessary in defining the Baptist identity. At other times it seems that any fondness for "progressive" theology, including biblical criticism, automatically disqualifies one from believing in "coherent-truth." The looseness of his criticism of rival thinkers is unsettling. It would seem that Nettles is less concerned that one affirm the importance of coherence and truth, than that one subscribe to a particular set of doctrines, which he generally leaves undefined. Furthermore, he seems to suggest that the doctrine of inerrancy is the lynchpin for all these issues, *as if his view of orthodoxy is the automatic outcome of affirming inerrancy*; however, one is forced to confront the underlying issue: exactly where are the boundaries of "orthodoxy" and who gets to draw them?

Nettles's historically justified concern about the dangers of doctrinal laxity and the resulting erosion of the core convictions of the faith is admirable. The Baptist story bears witness to many moments of heterodoxy in which Baptists have slackened their attention to the central doctrines attested in the ancient creeds and the classic Baptist confessions of faith. However, it is significant to note that these doctrinal problems are not simply the result of the nineteenth century liberalism as some conservatives suggest.

Various doctrinal deviations—especially denial of the full humanity and divinity of Christ, and ultimately, the Trinity—are well attested from the earliest days of the Baptist story, long before the rise of modern biblical critical scholarship or Schleiermacher’s experiential innovations in theology.¹⁰³ This historical fact presents a challenge to the conservative position, primarily because of the basis on which they guard these core doctrines: the inerrancy of Scripture.¹⁰⁴

Throughout Nettles’ account, it is argued that the doctrine of inerrancy is the safeguard of orthodoxy, while the moderate reluctance to embrace the term is the catalyst for, and evidence of, heterodoxy. The conservative approach suggests that heresy is reducible to doubt in the veracity of scripture, and therefore, the mere assertion of the sole authority of Scripture is capable of preventing false teaching. What this approach ignores, however, is the real theological diversity among those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. One wonders how Nettles might respond to very conservative—even fundamentalist—Christians who reject the doctrine of the Trinity on scriptural grounds.¹⁰⁵ In such cases both sides would appeal to the “clear teaching” of Scripture to

¹⁰³See Curtis Freeman’s discussion of the unitarian tendency in early Baptist thought in: “God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33.3, (Fall 2006), 323-344.

¹⁰⁴This historical example is not intended to dismiss the conservative concern about the importance of doctrine. It is intended to suggest, however, that the problem goes far beyond “liberalism,” and appealing to inerrancy or the authority of scripture cannot solve the problem. The issue, ultimately, is hermeneutical. How ought one interpret scripture, and how ought one weigh rival interpretations? The latter question raises the difficult issue of authority.

¹⁰⁵For one example of anti-trinitarianism based on a “common sense” reading of Scripture, see Freeman, “God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity,” 335, n.53.

make their case. How would one adjudicate such a contest? What does one do when the other appeals to “Scripture alone,” but does so to support a heretical doctrine?

The case of dueling inerrantists is not merely hypothetical. In addition to the examples from early Baptist history, one can look to the early history of the church and its original controversy over the divinity of Christ in its conflict with Arius. As Rowan Williams suggests, Arius was not a progressive thinker attempting to innovate; he was deeply conservative and his proposals were an attempt to preserve monotheism.¹⁰⁶ His ammunition was not Greek philosophy but Scripture, and he was well armed.

What these cases suggest is that whatever else one might say for or against the doctrine of inerrancy, it would be a grave mistake to assume that it provides a ready hermeneutic or any solution to thorny problems of interpretation. Nettles’ own account demonstrates this in an interesting way. He exhibits a “subtle” disdain for Arminian theology, although he is unwilling to say that they stand outside the bounds of orthodoxy. His uncomfortable concession that Baptists are undeniably diverse on these crucial theological questions, while strongly implying that the Arminians are clearly wrong, and less theologically consistent than truly reformed Baptists, demonstrates the principle well. Inerrancy, shared by many Calvinist and Arminian believers, does not solve the interpretive dilemma that divides them. The temptation, however, is to create a powerful—and dangerous—hermeneutical syllogism: “Scripture is inerrant: Scripture *obviously* teaches X: therefore, if you do not believe X, you doubt scripture.” This is the power play that frightens moderate Baptists, and for good reason. Not only did this seem to be an important element of the Controversy, but in some cases that predated the

¹⁰⁶Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

Controversy, the same shallow hermeneutic combined with a flexing of political muscle, resulted in the harsh treatment of quite conservative figures.¹⁰⁷

All of this raises a difficult question for conservatives: can one ever resolve the problem of rival interpretations of Scripture by appealing to Scripture? In taking this approach, is a use of heavy-handed authority inevitable? If so, is it fair to call such an approach “sola scriptura” if the real authority is in the hands of those who enforce and mandate certain interpretations?

Moderate Proposals

Walter B. Shurden. A very different version of the Baptist identity, one that well represents the moderate account of the Baptist identity, has been articulated by Walter B. Shurden, Professor and Executive Director of Baptist Studies at Mercer University. His work has been definitional for moderates for a host of reasons. First, he has taken upon himself the task that many other Baptist historians have undertaken, going beyond the role of academic historian to act also as an “official” interpreter of the Baptist identity,¹⁰⁸ distilling from the vagaries of the narrative the essence of the Baptist spirit.¹⁰⁹ Beyond this, Shurden has been a denominational statesman, especially as moderates began to

¹⁰⁷See the discussion of Dale Moody and the censorship of his views on apostasy above, p. 30 n 46.

¹⁰⁸“Official” is placed in scare quotes to draw attention to an interesting fact: the act of interpreting a tradition is a magisterial act, which puts Shurden—who could not be more anti-magisterial, philosophically speaking—in a difficult position.

¹⁰⁹Issues of Baptist identity have been central to Shurden’s life work. For a chronologically arranged bibliography of Shurden’s prolific writings through 2005, see: *Distinctively Baptist: Essays on Baptist History*, A Festschrift in Honor of Walter B. Shurden, edited by Mark A. Jolley and John D. Pierce (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005).

form alternative denominational structures, culminating in the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Throughout the process of the CBF's formation, Shurden served as a historical resource, a philosophical guide, a commentator, and a "cheerleader," advising those forming the new structures how they might do so in ways that would be faithful to the Baptist heritage.¹¹⁰ Related to his role as a Baptist statesman and commentator, Shurden took up a cause on behalf of moderates that has great historical significance; he meticulously documented the conservative takeover of the SBC and the subsequent creation of the CBF, producing a valuable record for those who wish to understand the turbulence in Baptist life in the late twentieth century.¹¹¹

Of Shurden's various writings on the topic of Baptist identity, the most influential is his short book aimed at a popular audience, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*.¹¹² Commonly referenced by its subtitle, *Four Fragile Freedoms* has become the classic articulation of the moderate vision. In fact, it has become such a

¹¹⁰See the third chapter of *Not an Easy Journey*, "Baptists and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship History." One fascinating inclusion in this chapter, which reveals the importance of Shurden's contribution to the historical understanding of the CBF's recent history, is the full text of the "Address to the Public," (the first public identity statement of the CBF), followed by a brief history of its drafting. Here one sees how Shurden's professional role as Baptist historian specializing in Baptist identity informs his work within the denomination: advising, helping write key statements, and delivering important addresses.

¹¹¹See especially: Walter B. Shurden, *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War*. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996); *The Struggle for the soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993); and, *Not an Easy Journey: Some Transitions in Baptist Life*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005.

¹¹²Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993).

commonplace for moderate Baptists that they are cited—without attribution—as the core values of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship on the CBF website.¹¹³

As mentioned previously, Shurden is well aware of the challenges inherent in defining the Baptist identity, particularly due to the tremendous diversity in Baptist life and the deep disagreements about what is essential to the Baptist vision. In the introduction to *Four Fragile Freedoms*, he establishes the question well:

What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The ultimate and final answer, of course, is simple: membership in a local Baptist church. If the sisters and brothers vote you in, you are a Baptist. When a Baptist church accepts you, you are a Baptist. But there are all kinds of Baptist groups and churches! So what are the theological marks of a Baptist? What are the generic “distinctives,” the peculiar “convictions,” the specific “ideals” that Baptists rally around and that make a Baptist a Baptist? What is the shape and feel of Baptist Christianity?¹¹⁴

The “center” around which Shurden structures his answer is *freedom*. By his account, the “baptistification” of American religion noted by church historian Martin Marty is the spread of a mood of voluntarism, democratization, and freedom across denominational lines.¹¹⁵ Shurden claims that it is this freedom—and the resulting right to disagree—that accounts for both the diversity and the conflict evident in the Baptist heritage. After illustrating his point by providing a litany of notable Baptist names with radically different political and theological ideologies, Shurden turns to the Controversy, noting,

The controversy which has shaken the Southern Baptist Convention for the last twelve years is one of the most recent examples of Baptist diversity. While

¹¹³See the discussion of “core values”: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, “About Us: Who We Are,” <http://www.thefellowship.info/About-Us/Who-We-Are> (accessed June 11, 2008).

¹¹⁴Shurden, *Four Fragile Freedoms*, 1.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 2.

diversity is threatening to some and downright devastating to others, it flows naturally from the Baptist preoccupation with the right of choice.¹¹⁶

Here Shurden gestures subtly toward an understated element of his proposal: the “fragility” of the Baptist freedoms. If the chief distinction of the Baptist identity is freedom, then the one great threat to Baptists is authoritarianism. The Baptist ideal, then, is an open embrace of plurality, and even conflict, in Baptist life. One might surmise that “agreeing to disagree” is a profoundly Baptist act.

The four freedoms that Shurden proposes as the essence of the Baptist identity emerged from his analysis of the sermons and addresses given at the meetings of the Baptist World Alliance from 1905 to 1980.¹¹⁷ He summarizes these four principles as follows:

Bible Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that the Bible, under the Lordship of Christ, must be central in the life of the individual and church and that Christians, with the best and most scholarly tools of inquiry, are both free and obligated to study and obey the Scripture.

Soul Freedom is the historic affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy, or the intervention of civil government.

Church Freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that local churches are free, under the Lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order their worship and work, to ordain whom they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female, and to participate in the larger Body of Christ, of whose unity and mission Baptists are a part.

Religious Freedom is the historic affirmation of freedom OF religion, freedom FOR religion, and freedom FROM religion, insisting that Caesar is not Christ and Christ is not Caesar.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶Ibid., 3.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 4-5. Emphasis original.

After summarizing his project thus, Shurden devotes a chapter to exploring each of these freedoms in greater depth.

Interestingly, five years after the publication of *Four Fragile Freedoms*, Shurden expresses a slight hesitation concerning the attempt to interpret the Baptist identity by way of a “center.” He says,

Is there a singular Baptist idea, ethos, or impulse out of which we live our lives of faith? The Late Robert G. Torbet, revered American Baptist historian, suggested that, rather than pointing to one integrating factor, one must identify a group of principles that constitutes the Baptist identity. In the end, he may have been correct.¹¹⁹

Although he never repudiates his methodology, he is aware of the limited ability of a center to fully capture the diversity of the phenomena in Baptist practice. However, for Shurden, the “centers” approach remains helpful because, “while many of these interpreters utilized a single hermeneutical theme, they often began or concluded by listing a set of principles very similar to Torbet’s,”¹²⁰ and these accounts are, in greater and lesser degrees, generally helpful interpretive “doors of entrance”¹²¹ into the Baptist identity.

What is most interesting about his assessment of the method is his claim about the way one might evaluate the various center-based projects: “one can, in my judgment, take any number of these several approaches *as long as* one draws near to the cluster of remarkable similar ‘principles’ Torbet and so many others have identified.”¹²² This is

¹¹⁹Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 322.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 323.

¹²¹*Ibid.*

¹²²*Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

significant because despite his recognition that “Baptists do not agree on where they came from, who they are, or how they got that way,”¹²³ he asserts that there is a clearly identifiable set of principles that constitute the Baptist identity, and these principles have a regulative function. In other words, one can use these principles to judge whether one is *really* Baptist. With respect to the effects of the Controversy on Baptist life, Shurden’s judgment is clear: the SBC has become sub-Baptist.

Despite the enormous value of Shurden’s body of work and his importance as an interpreter of the Baptist identity, there is a perplexing dimension of his proposals. The challenge does not lie with his self-conscious lack of objectivity—if anything, one of Shurden’s strengths is his recognition that an historian’s “neutrality” is illusory at best.¹²⁴ Rather, Shurden’s project is puzzling in its affirmation of the plurality of Baptist expressions (i.e., the natural result of freedom is disagreement), while emphatically drawing a boundary that excludes certain forms of Baptist life (i.e., those who violate freedom). Another way of describing this feature of his project is that it is quite creedal in its anti-creedalism.

Rather than assessing “creedal” moments of the Baptist story as part of the data—even if in his estimation they are unfortunate or wrongheaded episodes—he assesses them as “un-Baptist,” or deviations from an idealized conception of the Baptist identity. However, as Shurden’s narration of Baptist history indicates, there has long been a struggle over the appropriate shape of authority in Baptist life and Baptists of various stripes have come to different conclusions about these issues. Despite the value of

¹²³Ibid., 321.

¹²⁴See above, p. 19 n 17.

Shurden's work, the deficiencies of his account lead to an important conclusion: because the Baptist heritage is not univocal in its conception of authority or the status of creeds, the issue cannot be assessed historically. The question is a theological one. What ought Baptists be, and why?

Bill Leonard. A work written from a similar theological vantage point, nevertheless, that offers a more nuanced approach to the question of the relationship between history and the Baptist identity, is the previously mentioned book by Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways*. Leonard is the Dean and Professor of Church History at Wake Forest University Divinity School, and his writings have addressed various issues in American Christianity and Baptist History. *Baptist Ways* was commissioned by the Board of Managers of the American Baptist Historical society to replace Robert G. Torbet's *A History of the Baptists*—a volume that was issued in three editions and served as an authoritative source for over half a century.¹²⁵ It explores Baptist history while paying special attention to the question of identity. Its broad scope and irenic tone enables *Baptist Ways* to serve as a helpful summary of the Baptist identity conversation in all its complexity.

From its opening pages, the book makes clear Leonard's intent to address identity issues while telling the Baptist story:

The thesis of this book is relatively simple. It suggests that amid certain distinctives, Baptist identity is configured in a variety of ways by groups, subgroups, and individuals who claim the Baptist name...What does it mean to be Baptist? What is the nature of the Baptist role in church and society? At a time when much Baptist identity worldwide is in a state of permanent transition, it is

¹²⁵Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, xi.

important that we understand something of the diversity and continuity of Baptist life in the initial years of the movement(s).¹²⁶

Leonard's thesis indicates a great deal about why the Baptist identity conversation is as difficult as it is, what the historian's role might be, and why the issue of Baptist identity is worth the trouble. The conversation is difficult because, despite a "family resemblance" between various Baptist groups, there is a bewildering array of groups that claim the Baptist name.¹²⁷ The role of the historian, then, is to attest to the diversity of the data found in the Baptist story, attempting to discover patterns that make sense of the whole. This enterprise is worth the trouble because, in times of constant change, it is helpful for Baptists to know about their varied heritage as they encounter new situations, enabling them to remain faithful to the "Baptist ways."

Leonard's first chapter explores the state of the Baptist identity question. Each subsequent chapter works its way chronologically and thematically through Baptist history,¹²⁸ concluding with thoughts that one might read as a "Baptist identity snapshot" of the era or group under consideration. Leonard finishes his treatment with an epilogue

¹²⁶Ibid., xiii.

¹²⁷"*Claim the Baptist name*" is an important choice of words because, given Baptist confessional flexibility and church polity, it would seem that there is no creedal or authoritative basis by which "illegitimate" claims to the Baptist identity might be quashed. Leonard suggests that, "the emphasis on conscience did not mean that each person was free to believe anything at all and still remain a Baptist. Rather, individual interpretation was pursued under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, within the congregation of believers," (ibid., 6). Although the individual interpretation is checked in some way by the congregation, it is less clear whether a congregation might believe anything at all and remain Baptist.

¹²⁸Leonard works his way from the historical backgrounds of Baptist beginnings, and works his way through Baptist history primarily alternating between the English and American context. Also notable is his attention to Baptist groups in various ethnic and geographic settings: Baptists in the Americas and the Caribbean, African American Baptists, Baptists in Africa and Asia.

that considers, once again, the underlying question of Baptist identity, taking into account the preceding history. His first chapter and epilogue are especially worth considering in detail.

In his opening chapter “Baptist Ways: Defining a People,” Leonard demonstrates the polarities one finds in Baptist life, showing the ways that the conflicts touch even the beliefs and practices that make Baptists distinct. He notes that while all Baptists assert that the Old and New Testament are the authoritative foundation for the Christian faith, there is great disagreement about “the nature of biblical authority, and [they] readily divide over theories of inspiration, doctrines of inerrancy, and methods of interpretation (hermeneutics).”¹²⁹ Even baptism, the most distinctive element of Baptist practice, is the subject of controversy. Although there is general agreement that “the immersion of Christian believers should be the normative mode, they divide over the identity of proper candidates and the meaning of the act itself.”¹³⁰ Some require baptism by immersion of all who desire to join their congregation, even if baptized in another tradition; some immerse new believers but accept the previous baptism of those desiring membership, whatever mode in which the baptism was performed. These questions concerning the relation of baptism to church membership and communion have been debated since Baptists’ beginnings in the seventeenth century. Theology has also been a matter of debate from the earliest days of the Baptist experience. General Baptists espoused an Arminian theology emphasizing the role of free will and the possibility of apostasy, while Particular Baptists held to Reformed doctrines like predestination and perseverance of the

¹²⁹Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 1.

¹³⁰Ibid.

saints.¹³¹ Ever since, Baptists have occupied places across the spectrum between those two poles. Furthermore, the role of women has been hotly debated. Some Baptists have affirmed the theological education and ordination of women, while others have fought it strenuously. Despite these differences, all of these permutations have a valid claim to the Baptist name.¹³²

Having surveyed these conflicts Leonard summarizes the situation well: “In short, describing particular distinctives that typify Baptist identity requires extensive qualification. Numerous scholars have sought to delineate the essence of the Baptists, with the conclusions often being as diverse as the distinctives they sought to define.”¹³³ To illustrate this claim Leonard surveys the history of the Baptist identity conversation. He begins by surveying the list of “Baptist principles” observed by Anglican cleric, and Baptist critic, Daniel Featly in 1640,¹³⁴ he moves to the principles delineated by Alvah

¹³¹Ibid., 2.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Leonard notes that other than “dipping” Featley described principles that were similar to those of other radical sects of the day. These principles included:

First, that none are rightly baptized but those who are dipt.

Secondly, that no children ought to be baptized.

Thirdly, that there ought to be no set form of Liturgy or prayer by the Book, but onely by the Spirit.

Fourthly, that there ought to be no distinction by the Word of God between the Clergy and the Laity but that all who are gifted may preach the Word, and administer the Sacraments.

Fifthly, that it is not lawful to take an oath at all, no, not though it be demanded by the magistrate.

Sixthly, that no Christian may with good conscience execute the office of civil magistrate.

Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dipt, or, The Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over Head and Eares, at a Disputation at Southwark* (London: Nicholas Bourne and Richard Royston, 1646), 36. Quoted in Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 2.

Hovey in the nineteenth century,¹³⁵ and then to Robert Torbet in the twentieth.¹³⁶ Leonard then surveys various views that either call into question these standard lists of principles on the basis of the actual diversity of Baptist practice, or offers a single theme that attempts to find unity amid the multiplicity.¹³⁷ He cites William Brackney, who claims that no list of principles can adequately reflect the diversity of Baptist life, which finds its functional common denominator in believer's baptism by immersion;¹³⁸ Eric Ohlmann, who claims that Baptists are united by a distinctive soteriology;¹³⁹ Karen Smith, who claims that Baptists stand together on the conviction that the individual faith experience

¹³⁵Hovey's principles include the Baptist commitment to: the ultimate authority of Scripture, while maintaining the conditional nature of human knowledge and understanding related to what God has revealed; individual accountability to God for one's beliefs, resulting in religious liberty and free inquiry even if it means changing established creeds; the necessity of conversion, regeneration, and personal response to Christ; a new way of life that demonstrates growth in grace; obedience to Christ manifested in ethical behavior and observation of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Ibid., 3. Drawn from Alvah Hovey, *Restatement of Denominational Principles* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892).

¹³⁶Torbet's principles, include: "(1) the authority of Holy Scripture; (2) a regenerate church membership; (3) baptism by immersion as the sign of new life in Christ and membership in the church; (4) the autonomy of the local congregation; (5) the priesthood of all believers; and (6) religious liberty." Ibid., 3. Drawn from Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950), 15-34. Leonard notes that Torbet omitted this list of principles from subsequent editions (*Baptist Ways*, 15, n. 14).

¹³⁷Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 3-5.

¹³⁸William Brackney, "'Commonly (Though Falsely) Called': Reflections on the Search for Baptist Identity," in *Perspectives in Churchmanship: Essays in Honor of Robert G. Torbet*, ed. David Scholer (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

¹³⁹Eric Ohlmann, "The Essence of Baptists," in *Perspectives in Churchmanship: essays in Honor of Robert G. Torbet*, ed. David Scholer (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

happens within, and is nurtured by, life in the covenantal community;¹⁴⁰ Edwin Gaustad, who asserts that a characteristic belief of early Baptists was “responsible Baptism” that is only performed on a believing subject;¹⁴¹ L. Russ Bush and Tom Nettles, who identify biblical inerrancy as the essential unifying factor;¹⁴² and Paul Harrison who despairs of finding common ground because of the ill-effects of an over-emphasis on individualism, free will, and soul competency.¹⁴³

Although Leonard goes to great lengths to demonstrate the problem of establishing the Baptist identity, he does not despair of the task. Instead, he identifies eight tensions in Baptist life that serve as the defining preoccupations for Baptists. While individual expressions may vary, it is the conflict over these tensions that remains constant.

The first tension he identifies is between the authority of scripture and the liberty of conscience. Although theories about inspiration and methods of interpretation are divisive, Scripture is recognized as authoritative and normative. At the same time, “biblical authority is mediated through individual and communal interpretation based on

¹⁴⁰Karen Smith, “The Covenant Life of Some Eighteenth-Century Calvinistic Baptists in Hampshire and Wiltshire,” in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White*, ed. William H. Brackney and Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Whitley, 1999).

¹⁴¹Edwin Gaustad, ed. *Baptists, the Bible, Church Order and the Churches: Essays from Foundations, a Baptist Journal of History and Theology* (New York: Arno press, 1980).

¹⁴²Bush and Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*.

¹⁴³Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University press, 1959).

liberty of conscience,”¹⁴⁴ meaning that “God alone was judge of conscience and all persons were accountable only to God for their religious beliefs and practices.”¹⁴⁵ The result is a tension between one’s submission to the authority of Scripture and the demands of the interpreter’s conscience. All of this is guided by the underlying conviction that “people could be trusted to interpret Scripture aright through the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith.”¹⁴⁶

Leonard’s second characteristic tension in Baptist life relates to the structure of the church.¹⁴⁷ Although Baptists began as radical congregationalists, associations between the churches sprang up almost immediately. Since that time there has been a struggle between these competing values, balancing the essentially congregational nature of the church with the value of cooperation. These struggles intensify when associations grow authoritarian, threatening the centrality of the local congregation.

The third tension in Baptist life concerns the nature of ministry in the church, specifically, how one ought to understand the roles of the clergy and laity. Set alongside a strong emphasis on the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers—whereby all believers are capable of encountering God without priestly mediation and all are called to serve God in the church and in the world—is the equally Baptist practice of ordaining some for particular ministries in the church.¹⁴⁸ Without recourse to a

¹⁴⁴Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 6.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 7. Leonard’s brief account of the priesthood of all believers (viz., its emphasis on a Christian’s capacity to encounter God without mediation), is problematic,

hierarchical structure to mediate conflict, conflicts between the clergy and laity have generated a tradition of schism and turbulence in Baptist churches. As a result, “debates and divisions seem inescapable, perhaps integral, to Baptist life.”¹⁴⁹

A fourth defining tension in Baptist life relates to regeneration. Because of the Baptist emphasis on regenerate church membership and believer’s baptism, their language tends to be conversionist, speaking of salvation in terms of sinners repenting and accepting Christ. Yet, Baptists also are concerned to nurture and guide children into the faith, and “while these two approaches may complement each other, they may also

especially in its alleged connection to Reformation thought. An unmediated, individualistic conception of the priesthood of believers is a misinterpretation of Luther, the Reformer most associated with the doctrine. As noted by Curtis Freeman (“Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned?” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24.3 (Fall 1997), 283 n.35), Paul Althaus makes the case strongly:

The priesthood of Christians flows from the priesthood of Christ. As Christ’s brothers, Christians receive a share in his priestly office, namely, through baptism, regeneration, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The priesthood means: we stand before God, pray for others, intercede with and sacrifice ourselves to God and proclaim the word to one another. Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the “protestant” sense of the Christian’s freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather he constantly emphasizes the Christian’s evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expressed not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as community. The individual stands directly before God, he has received the authority of substitution. The priesthood means “the congregation” and the priesthood is the inner form of the community of saints. This characteristic distinguishes Christians from the rest of humanity. They are a priestly generation, a royal priesthood. *The Theology of Martin Luther*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 314-15.

Similar themes are taken up by Baptist theologian, Carlyle Marney, in: *Priests to Each Other*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974). For a Bapto-Catholic engagement with these notions, similar to the one below, see: Elizabeth Newman, “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Necessity of the Church,” in *Recycling the Past or Researching History?: Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths*, Philip E. Thompson and Anthony R. Cross, eds., *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* 11 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 50-66.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 7.

create differences concerning the nature of conversion, its proper process, and its authentic recipients.”¹⁵⁰

Leonard’s fifth defining controversy is the tension between various understandings of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.¹⁵¹ Although most take the ordinances as symbolic in nature, some Baptists have also used the term “sacrament.” Those who speak of sacraments repudiate the Catholic and Lutheran positions of transubstantiation and consubstantiation in favor of a Calvinist notion of Christ’s spiritual presence. Although the practice of baptism and the Lord’s Supper is universal in Baptist life, the understanding of them is not.

The sixth defining disagreement concerns the role of confessions of faith. From the beginning of Baptist history, some have embraced confessions of faith as a means of self-definition, while others have rejected them entirely. Often these statements of faith were crafted to assert their own limitations, recognizing that Scripture alone can compel the conscience; however, in practice, “Baptists have often used confessions of faith as a basis for organizing congregations, excluding members, dealing with questions of orthodoxy, and ordaining ministers.”¹⁵² Baptist statements of faith have been used in various ways and with varying degrees of authority, despite a strong ethos of animosity toward “creedalism.”

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 8.

¹⁵²Ibid., 8.

The seventh tension that shapes the Baptist story is the conflict between the competing values of religious liberty and Christian citizenship.¹⁵³ On the one hand Baptists were, in their early days, radicals who were the first to advocate for universal religious liberty. This position set them at odds with the state. Yet, Baptists affirmed the value of the state and the civil order, as long as the state did not interfere with their religious convictions. Baptists, therefore have expressed varying degrees of loyalty to the state, especially in response to the state's positions regarding religious freedoms.

Leonard's eighth, and final, defining tension results from Baptists' theological and ecclesial diversity. From the earliest days of their history, Baptists have held various positions on theological issues across the Calvinist/Arminian spectrum, dividing them on issues as central as the atonement. The same differences exist with respect to "connectionalism;" some pursue a high degree of connectedness with national regional and local associations, while others reject them outright. "Theological diversity, congregational autonomy, and freedom of conscience create environments in which debate, controversy, and schism are not merely possible but inevitable. In a sense, Baptists created an ecclesiastical and theological framework that ensured controversy, dispute and division....Dissent is one of the Baptist ways."¹⁵⁴

Leonard ends his opening chapter with several important admonitions concerning the Baptist identity task. He suggests that "any attempt to delineate Baptist distinctives must begin with a confession that any effort to hold certain dynamic, sometimes

¹⁵³Ibid., 9.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 10.

contradictory, ideals in balance is a noble, but nearly impossible, task.”¹⁵⁵ For this reason, and because of Baptist ecclesial structure, one must realize that schism is unavoidable. The result of the theological diversity in Baptist life is that theologians have a wide array of ideas upon which they can draw while remaining authentically Baptist. For these reasons, Baptists are part of an evolving history that is guided by overarching concerns and cultural contexts; as a result, the question of origins and identity is not static and must take into account the role of cultural influences.

The final words of Leonard’s first chapter merit special emphasis. They imply a great deal about how one might approach the question of Baptist identity as a normative endeavor, which is to say, how one might legitimately or illegitimately use Baptist history for the sake of justifying or criticizing a particular theological position:

Those who write and read the elusive history of the Baptists would do well to avoid the *fallacy of origins*—the belief that one might find authority for contemporary procedures by determining the beliefs and practices of the earliest communities and duplicating them in the present. Even if such replications were possible, *Baptist diversity itself requires decisions as to which kind of Baptist tradition might be considered normative*. Present and future Baptists are compelled to ask: What kind of Baptists do we wish to be? What historical, theological, spiritual, and communal realities inform the nature of Baptist life in a particular context? Those who wish to discover what it means to be Baptist will be obliged to determine what principles and practices are worth retaining and how best to apply them in the unending transitions of the church and world.¹⁵⁶

Because Baptist life itself is so diverse, no simple appeal to Baptist origins can provide an answer to the question of what Baptists ought to be. While historical data can provide insights about how Baptists might address their present and future situations, Baptist history cannot be used to establish a static conception of Baptist identity in a way that

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 14.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 15. Emphasis mine.

settles disputes. Furthermore, Leonard describes the tendency of Baptists to remain open to revision as the “principle of mutability.”¹⁵⁷ Given Shurden’s apparent similarity in this regard,¹⁵⁸ it would seem that a monolithic approach would be undesirable, even subverting the very Baptist identity it attempts to save. Instead, it seems that the most consistent way for Baptists to engage the future is to ask “What ought we do, and why?” listening to the past, to the community, and especially to Scripture, to discern the way forward.

After his historical narrative, in which he returns at the end of each chapter to some consideration of the Baptist identity, Leonard revisits the overarching question of Baptist identity in an Epilogue. He reflects on the current challenge of globalism and religious pluralism and the effects these factors are having in Baptist life. He notes that Baptists are beginning to respond—as expected—in a variety of ways: through renewed emphases on connectionalism, localism, and even ideologically based “non-geographic associations.” These new associations have gathered together like-minded Baptists who

¹⁵⁷“Such openness to new insights is known as the ‘principle of mutability,’ the idea that individuals or churches were ready to alter their dogmas if convinced that a clearer reading of scripture had been discovered.” Ibid., 5. A very similar principle is affirmed by James McClendon. He calls it the “principle of fallibility”: “*even one’s most cherished and tenaciously held convictions might be false and are in principle always subject to rejection, reformulation, improvement, or reformation.*” *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 45. Emphasis his.

¹⁵⁸In one respect it seems that Shurden affirms something similar to Leonard’s “principle of mutability.” He says, “Baptist life is dynamic, not static. Every generation of Baptists must seek to make the essence of Baptist life understandable to its day” (Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 338). It is notable, however, that even in his affirmation of Baptist dynamism, Shurden appeals to the “essence of Baptist life,” which suggests a Baptist “deposit of faith” that can be translated but must remain essentially unchanged.

rally around Reformed theology, or Baptist evangelicalism, or even “post-modern” critiques of “Enlightenment rationality.”¹⁵⁹

His account closes, appropriately enough, with a list of ideals and emphases that one can discern amid the great diversity of the Baptist story. He wryly observes that, “Other Baptist readers, being Baptists, will surely find [the list] wanting.”¹⁶⁰ Wanting or not, his list is instructive:

- God is the Creator of life and the object of faith.
- Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, is the Savior of the world.
- The Bible is the written Word of God.
- Faith in Jesus Christ is both personal and communal.
- Baptism in “deep water” dramatically portrays the union of believers with Christ and the Church.
- The Lord’s Supper is a powerful symbol of Christ’s continuing presence with the individual and the community of faith.
- God alone is judge of conscience.
- The people can be trusted to interpret Scripture aright
...in the context of Christian community
...under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Doctrines can and should be articulated by communities of faith.
- Dissent is a worthy and dangerous pursuit.
- Ideas are worth debating, even when they divide communities.
- There are many ways to be Baptist and many Baptist stories to be claimed.
- Being Baptist is messy, controversial, and divisive.¹⁶¹

For all the diversity of the Baptist story, or stories, Leonard suggests that there are things that allow Baptist identity to cohere. As suggested by his “eight tension” structure, it is the argument itself that helps to constitute the Baptist identity, and it is the “principle of

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 424. The mention of “post-modern” approaches is likely an allusion to Bapto-Catholic theology; as will be seen in greater detail in chapter four, the connection between Bapto-Catholicism and post-modernism is well founded.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 425, n. 2.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 424-425.

mutability” that keeps Baptists light on their feet, capable of reassessing their direction and changing as needed.

Comment on the moderate proposals. Just as there are admirable aspects of the conservative approach, much in the moderate account of the Baptist identity is worth celebrating as well. One notable element, due to the fact that the most prominent interpreters of the moderate vision are historians, is the great attention paid to the diversity of the Baptist experience. These historians admit the difficulty of their task given the deep differences between the various strands of Baptists. Even though some approaches—despite the authors’ best efforts—are somewhat reductive in their effort to identify common themes (e.g. the aforementioned problems with the attempt to identify a “center” in projects like Shurden’s *Four Fragile Freedoms*) they are wary of implying that Baptists have ever been monolithic. For this reason Bill Leonard offers an account of the plural *Baptist Ways*, while the staunchly conservative Stanton Norman speaks of *The Baptist Way*.¹⁶² Moderates, quite rightly, recoil from this willfully selective reading of the history.

Furthermore, moderates rightly identify the problem of authoritarianism that besets conservatives and they are justifiably skeptical of the hermeneutical claims that conservatives attach to their notion of “inerrancy.” Even moderates who are theologically conservative recognize that two people, equally committed to the authority of Scripture, can arrive at radically different interpretations of the same text; and, because the moderate identity was shaped by the experience of exclusion on the basis of interpretational conflict, moderates look askance at any attempt to enforce one

¹⁶²Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005).

interpretation over others. To the moderates, efforts to mandate particular interpretations constitute transparent exertions of power and exercises in coercion—the same type of coercion Baptists rejected when attempted by the state or authoritarian ecclesial structures like the Catholic Church.

As is often the case, these strengths are also the source of the moderates' weaknesses. In their affirmation of diversity in Baptist experience, it is not clear what value is placed on unity. Above we saw Leonard's claim that "ideas are worth debating, even when they divide communities," and "being Baptist is messy, controversial, and divisive."¹⁶³ Shurden makes similar claims in his brief popular history *Not a Silent People*. In his opening chapter, "Here Come the Battling Baptists," Shurden reminds the reader that "Baptists were born in the bosom of radicalism! They are born fighters because they were born fighting."¹⁶⁴ He goes on to nuance the celebration of Baptist contentiousness by saying, "One thing needs to be made clear about Smyth, Helwys, and others of their stripe. They did not buck the establishment—culture, society, church, and state—just for the sake of raw, red-blooded rebellion. Theirs was no adolescent kicking of the traces just to hear the clanging and clonging."¹⁶⁵ The clarification is helpful; Baptists are not bellicose, but driven to pursue fidelity to the New Testament church. Nevertheless, deeply ingrained in the Baptist story is the willingness to break away from other believers in the pursuit of truth, a value that is reflected in the multiplicity of Baptist congregations and associations organized to champion various ideas. While the willingness to follow

¹⁶³Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 424-425.

¹⁶⁴Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, 1.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

the truth wherever it leads is a laudable principle, one must wonder how to square it with the ancient abhorrence of schism as a rending of Christ's body,¹⁶⁶ much less the Nicene Creed's confession concerning the church. If the church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" can one celebrate growth by division as much as by multiplication? It seems equally difficult to celebrate divisive tendencies in a tradition while saying "amen" to Christ's prayer that his followers "may be one as [the Father and the Son] are one."¹⁶⁷

Another point at which moderate strengths go awry is seen in their otherwise admirable opposition to heavy-handed authoritarianism. It is not altogether clear that moderate affirmations of diversity and the freedom of interpretation are consistent or sustainable. The litmus test "How to Recognize a 'Real' Baptist If You See One" by James Dunn—formerly the Executive Director of Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, and currently Adjunct Professor of Christianity and Public Policy at Wake Forest Divinity School—illustrates the danger well. According to Dunn, one has encountered a genuine Baptist,

1. If soul liberty is important.
2. If the priesthood of believers is more than a slogan.
3. If one insists on interpreting the Scriptures for themselves.

¹⁶⁶Henri de Lubac demonstrates the patristic abhorrence of schism, rooted in the ancient connection between salvation and unity in the church, by way of Augustine: "Adam himself is therefore now spread out over the whole face of the earth. Originally one, he has fallen, and breaking up as it were, he has filled the whole earth with the pieces." Later he adds his analysis punctuated by another potent quote from the Bishop of Hippo: "Let us abide by the outlook of the Fathers: the redemption being a work of restoration will appear to us by that very fact as the recovery of lost unity—the recovery of supernatural unity of man with God, but equally of the unity of men among themselves. 'Divine Mercy gathered up the fragments from every side, forged them in the fire of love, and welded into one what had been broken.'" *Catholicism*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 34-36.

¹⁶⁷John 17:11

4. If one defends the right of each person to come to the Bible and, led by the Spirit, seek its truth.
5. If one believes that one must accept Jesus Christ personally.
6. If the church functions as a democracy.
7. If in the fellowship of churches each one is autonomous.
8. If there is no pope or presbyter, president or pastor who rules over you.
9. If religious liberty is the password to public witness and the separation of church and state is its essential corollary.
10. If no mortal has the power to suppress, curtail, rule out, or reign over the will of the local congregation.¹⁶⁸

On the one hand, Dunn suggests that a Baptist is one who celebrates soul liberty and the independent study of Scripture, yet on the other hand he insists that the only “true” or legitimate Baptist interpretation of Scripture is that “the church functions as a democracy,” and “in the fellowship of the churches each one is autonomous.” While these very well may be the best conclusions to draw from the Scriptures, it is ironic that Dunn’s efforts to champion liberty of conscience lead him to authoritatively assert a restricted interpretation of Scripture, as the only “real Baptist” reading of the text. The difference between Dunn’s approach and the conservatives’ is one of degree, not kind. While Dunn does not issue the same range of authoritative rulings about what is true or what Scripture “obviously” says, his position does rest on an assertion of authority. As demonstrated above, there is a similar tendency in Shurden’s work to interpret creedal instances in the Baptist story as “un-Baptistic,” rather than simply unsavory episodes; he exerts a creedal judgment against those who are excessively creedal. One must wonder whether the use of “liberty” as a principle of exclusion is ultimately self-defeating.

There is a related challenge embedded in the moderate position with respect to the claims concerning an individual’s interpretation of Scripture. Leonard notes that Baptists

¹⁶⁸James Dunn, “How to Recognize a ‘Real’ Baptist If You See One,” Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, http://www.bjcpa.org/news/docs/rftc_0606.pdf (accessed June 11, 2008).

affirm that the “people could be trusted to interpret Scripture aright through the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith.”¹⁶⁹ Dunn also emphasizes the importance of defending “the right of each person to come to the Bible and, led by the Spirit, seek its truth.”¹⁷⁰ Although the sentiment is admirable, expressing trust in believers and in the Holy Spirit’s ability to illumine hearts, the implications are not altogether clear. What is the desired outcome, and what does it mean to “interpret Scripture aright?” Does this conviction imply an interpretive infallibility, as if to say that the people, led by the Spirit and interpreting in the community, will assuredly arrive at the “correct” answer to a theological dilemma? Surely not. The sheer diversity of interpretive opinions among Baptists—individually and corporately—would render that claim nonsensical.

Perhaps the Baptist affirmation of the role of the people in interpretation is best conceived of as a statement regarding the opportunity and responsibility—that is, the universal permission and duty—to be involved in the hermeneutical process. The interpretive work is then empowered by Christ’s promise that the Spirit would guide them “into all truth,”¹⁷¹ a promise that applies to all Christians, because they have been made a “royal priesthood...[called to] declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”¹⁷² If this interpretation of the Baptist ethos of interpretation is correct, then there are some challenges that emerge. First, in this

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

¹⁷⁰Ibid.

¹⁷¹John 16:13.

¹⁷²2 Peter 2:9.

account, do the categories of orthodoxy or heresy hold? In a community of equally weighted interpretations, it is not clear how one might discern a better or worse interpretation of the text, or more to the point, whether there are any doctrinal affirmations that are necessarily part of the faith. Second, what is the nature of the work of the Spirit to illumine, and what is the function of the community as it serves as the context for the interpretive work? Although Dunn's strong advocacy of democratic ecclesial processes conjures up disturbing images of congregations voting on the doctrine of the Trinity according to the processes established by Robert's Rules of Order, there do seem to be constructive ways in which theological issues may be engaged on the congregational level through robust theological discernment. Despite the promising prospect for congregational theological conversation, there seems to be nothing preventing a Baptist church from denying the Trinity as "unbiblical," or to overemphasize one or the other side of the paradox of Christ's human and divine natures. It is not even clear, given the structure of interpretation suggested here, that one could say that such developments are "bad." In other words, given the individualistic and procedural focuses of these statements about biblical interpretation, there is no way to affirm any particular theological position as true or preferable. Whether one perceives this openness to be a good thing, or a guaranteed recipe for heresy, one conclusion is certain: to make doctrines like the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ either optional, or up for interpretation, constitutes a radical departure from the historical norm of Christian practice.

Concluding Observations About the Baptist Identity Conversation

Defining the essence of the Baptist identity has never been an easy task. The polarizing nature of the Controversy complicates matters further by introducing deeply partisan interpretations into the conversation, each with passionate motives for their telling of the story. Yet, for all their differences, moderates and conservatives have much in common. Some of these commonalities are the excellent products of their shared Baptist heritage—their love for Scripture, their commitment to the personal appropriation of the truths of Scripture, their focus on God’s self revelation in Christ, and their work in proclaiming the gospel—to name a few. Some of their commonalities are less felicitous.

As demonstrated above, both conservatives and moderates engage in the unfortunate practice of using their versions of Baptist history normatively. Tom Nettles and Walter Shurden both offer their particular reading of the Baptist story as a means of excluding deficient versions of the Baptist identity, which to their minds would include each other’s projects. Bill Leonard, on the other hand, recognizes that Baptist history is elusive,¹⁷³ and the very structure of Baptist thought,¹⁷⁴ makes impossible the normative use of history. He rightly recognizes this as the “fallacy of origins.”¹⁷⁵ Even if Baptist history were simpler to appropriate, his alternative to the fallacy of origins would seem

¹⁷³Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 15.

¹⁷⁴The notion of the “principle of mutability,” which suggests that Baptists have characteristically affirmed their willingness to change in response to additional light from Scripture, is especially relevant here. Leonard quotes the First London Confession of Particular Baptists (1644) to this effect: “We confesse that we know but in part, and that we are ignorant of many things which we desire and seek to know; and if any shall doe us that friendly part to shew us from the Word of God that we see not, we shall have cause to be thankful to God and them.” *Baptist Ways*, 5.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*

better in keeping with the Baptist ethos. He rightly claims that “present and future Baptists are compelled to ask: What kind of Baptists do we wish to be?”¹⁷⁶ This suggests that the truly Baptist question is not simply “who have we been?” but “who ought we be?” What is the *best* form of Baptist life? No abstract principles or historical precedent can easily answer these questions.

Although Leonard is clearly a moderate in his theological sensibilities and in his loyalties with respect to the Controversy, his approach provides a helpful foundation for those who would seek a “third way” beyond the conservative/moderate impasse. In his approach, history is valuable and continues to play a role in reading the present and finding a way forward into the future, but history cannot be used as “proof-text.” Theology, and the Baptist identity, is ever a constructive project.

In the next chapter, we will explore the “Bapto-Catholic” project, an effort to re-read Baptist history and to offer a different sort of answer to the question “what kind of Baptist do we wish to be?” As with the Baptist story itself, this approach is far from monolithic, yet it is unified in its loyalty to the Baptist identity, its critique of perceived flaws in current approaches to Baptist life, and in its commitment to discovering solutions to these challenges through a constructive theological engagement with Baptist history and theology, and the intellectual heritage of the broader Christian tradition.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 15. Emphasis mine.

CHAPTER THREE

Bapto-Catholicism: A Survey

Introduction

In the previous chapter I addressed the conversation among Baptists about the nature of the Baptist identity, giving special attention to the models of Baptist identity that emerged out of the turmoil in the Southern Baptist convention during the final two decades of the twentieth century. After surveying the spectrum of opinions represented by the projects of Tom Nettles and Walter Shurden, I suggested that a helpful alternative was to be found in Bill Leonard's approach in *Baptist Ways*. His project is valuable not only because his "eight tensions" account provides a rich description of the diversity to be found in Baptist history, but also because it rightly acknowledges that history alone cannot provide a clear way forward for Baptist life. Rather, the Baptist future must be determined by an interplay of historical investigation and constructive theologizing that asks "who have we been, who should we become, and why?"

Although Leonard is not a supporter of the Bapto-Catholic approach, his insights about the constructive nature of Baptist identity provide a helpful foundation for the project. His project suggests a way beyond static conceptions of the Baptist identity and it opens up the possibility for rigorous self-criticism and the search for creative theological solutions as Baptists face the future. All of this suggests that Baptists are obliged to assess their heritage, celebrating the fruitful aspects of the tradition and challenging other elements that fall short of fidelity to Christ and Scripture. This notion

of *semper reformanda*—the claim that the faithful church is always reforming—lies at the root of the Bapto-Catholic project.

The reforming impulse of the Bapto-Catholic “movement”¹ had its first programmatic expression in the *Baptist Manifesto*, which, in turn, generated both critical and sympathetic responses. What follows is a close reading of the *Manifesto*, a summary of the most important criticisms it has received, an exploration of subsequent writings that have advanced the Bapto-Catholic themes, and an exploration of the essential marks of Bapto-Catholicism.

The Baptist Manifesto

Although not an original framer or signatory to the statement, Steven R. Harmon provides helpful historical background for the drafting of the *Baptist Manifesto*:

In 1996 a small group of Baptist theologians in the United States, the “Region-at-Large” of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, began gathering as a program unit of the annual meeting of the College Theology Society, an organization of predominantly Roman Catholic college and university professors of theological and religious studies.²

At this meeting Curtis Freeman, Barry Harvey, and Philip Thompson began drafting what would become the *Baptist Manifesto*. Later, Mikael Broadway, James Wm. McClendon Jr., and Elizabeth Newman joined them as the statement’s co-authors. In the initial phase the *Manifesto* was sent out to Baptist pastors and academics, requesting that they consider

¹On the question about whether Bapto-Catholicism is indeed a “movement,” see the discussion below concerning its affinity to Radical Orthodoxy, p. 121 n 154.

²Harmon, Steven R. *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*. Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 1-2.

its theological proposals as a “framework for dialogue among Baptists of all sorts.”³

After some revisions to the original draft, the statement was published in the newspaper *Baptists Today*. The editor’s rationale for printing the *Manifesto* suggests something about the reaction to the statement: “A group of about 50 Baptist scholars has drafted a new statement of what they believe Baptists ought to claim as their theological stance in the modern world. The statement has caused considerable reaction in Texas and other places. Because of the historic nature of the document, we are printing it in BAPTISTS TODAY in its entirety.”⁴ The version printed in *Baptists Today* omitted the cover letter that accompanied the circulated draft,⁵ but included the list of fifty-five signatories,⁶ and

³“Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” reproduced in Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 215.

⁴ “Editor’s Note: Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in America,” *Baptists Today* (June 26, 1997), 8. Emphasis original.

⁵Ibid. The *Manifesto* has an interesting textual “history of reception.” The version printed in *Baptists Today* included the list of signatories but omits the cover letter. The version appended to Curtis Freeman’s article “Can Baptist Theology Be Re-Envisioned?” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1997), contains neither the cover letter nor the list of signatories. The version appended to Harmon’s *Towards Baptist Catholicity* also omits the signatories, but contains the cover letter that is missing from the other two sources.

⁶Because the record of who signed the statement is limited to one source, the list is worth reproducing here in full. The signatories, as printed in *Baptists Today* were: Nancy Ammerman, Mark Ashworth, Raymond Bailey, Robert C. Balance, Michael Beaty, Joe Blair, James Breckenridge, Mikael Broadway, Mark S. Caldwell, Jonathan S. Campbell, Gordon Carder, William D. M. Carrell, Kyle Childress, Steven C. Dominy, Curtis Freeman, Stanley Grenz, Barry Harvey, Charles Johnson, A. Jase Jones, James F. Kirkley, Terry A. Larm, Ben Leslie, Paul Lewis, James W. McClendon Jr., Ken Massey, George A. Mason, Thomas W. Mitchiner, Dale Moody, Scott H. Moore, David L. Mueller, William A. Mueller, Stanley A. Nelson, Carey C. Newman, Elizabeth Newman, Roger E. Olson, Bob E. Patterson, Joseph Phelps, Robert A. Ratcliff, Wallace Roark, Bradley R. Russell, Dennis Sansom, Steven Spivey, Glen H. Stassen, Dan Stiver, Rodney Stewart-Wilcox, Ronda Stewart-Wilcox, Marvin E. Tate, C. Stephen Teague, Philip Thompson Michelle Tooley, C. Rosalee da Silva, Mark W. Whitten, Jonathan Wilson, Kate Westmoreland-White, Michael Westmoreland-White.

was followed by an epilogue⁷ and a critical response by Bruce Prescott, a Baptist pastor from Houston. A few months later, in the Fall issue of *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (henceforth *PRS*), the *Manifesto* was included as an appendix to Curtis Freeman's article, "Can Baptist Theology be Re-Envisioned?"⁸ In the decade that followed there was a significant response to the *Manifesto* by both supporters and detractors. But before exploring how the conversation developed, the content of the *Manifesto* must first be considered.⁹

⁷The postscript is similar in content and tone to the cover letter: "Dear Baptist Sisters and Brothers: Those of use who originally drafted this statement are but a few among a growing number of Baptists in North America who would like to see our churches take a new theological direction, one that is not 'conservative' nor 'liberal' nor something in between. We ask you therefore to consider prayerfully the *Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity* statement. Please read it carefully and give it your consideration. We do not claim it is a perfect statement, but only a beginning. We offer it as a framework for free and faithful dialogue among Baptists of all sorts." Ibid., 10.

⁸Curtis Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Re-Envisioned?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1997), 273-302; Mikael N. Broadway, Curtis W. Freeman, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip E. Thompson, "Re-Envisioning the Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24.3 (Fall, 1997): 303-10. All subsequent references to the *Manifesto* will be to this version.

⁹Few have described or responded to the *Manifesto* in print aside from Harmon's discussion, and the responses by Walter Shurden and Robert Jones that are surveyed below. One notable exception is offered by William H. Brackney. See: *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 59-61. He describes four emphases: 1) a desire to go beyond the liberal/conservative paradigm and into a non-foundationalist mode, 2) a reaction against modernity and the Enlightenment project, 3) post liberal thought, typified by Karl Barth, George Lindbeck, Stan Hauerwas, George Hunsinger, and William Placer, 4) and the Anabaptist, countercultural sensibilities of James McClendon, John Howard Yoder, and Stanley Hauerwas. Brackney's assessment of the *Manifesto*'s significance is rather subdued:

The *Baptist Manifesto* received attention among the Southern Baptist dominated National association of Baptist Professors of Religion (NABPR) and among the Alliance of Baptists, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and readers of *Baptists Today*. It has not yet generated significant response elsewhere in the Baptist family and is thought to be essentially a regionally shaped (Southern), Caucasian

In what might be called the “preamble” of the *Manifesto*, the introductory section that precedes its five key assertions, the co-authors set forth their view of the nature of freedom. Anticipating the concerns and objections of those for whom freedom is the essential mark of the Baptist identity, this section affirms the centrality of freedom while defining it in a very particular way. The opening paragraph says,

From our beginnings, we Baptists have celebrated the freedoms graciously given by God in Jesus Christ...Freedom in Christ is a gift, not a given. This freedom does not subsist merely in self-determination. It is not rooted in what the world calls natural rights or social entitlements. It cannot be claimed, possessed, or granted by any human institution, community or individual. It belongs to God’s gift of the new creation in which we share through our faithfulness to Christ.¹⁰

As a theological category, freedom is rooted in the gratuity of God’s relationship to creation. True freedom, then, is rooted in the work of, and experienced by participation in the loving life of, the Trinity.¹¹ Furthermore, the qualification that freedom “cannot be claimed, possessed, or granted by any human institution, community or individual”¹² suggests that even the church, as a gathered human community, cannot bestow freedom of its own accord. In other words, although freedom is experienced by the church and in the church, it is not the church’s to give; freedom is the gift of God alone.¹³ Furthermore, freedom cannot be reduced to the abstract concept of autonomy. Rather, the *Manifesto*

statement of theological concern. It is confessional (or as some would characterize it, creedal) in that its authors hold to the value of confessions, they have voluntarily signed the document, and it reflects a variation on theological emphases that have a long currency among Baptists. (61).

¹⁰Broadway, et al., *Manifesto*, 303.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*, 304.

¹³This is an important qualification given the criticism that the *Manifesto* gives an excessive role to the community.

suggests that, theologically speaking, freedom is liberty from the domination of sin, freedom for service to others, freedom to exist as brother and sisters of Jesus, and freedom to participate in the new shape of humanity inaugurated by Jesus Christ. To define freedom according to libertarian political philosophy is to miss the message of Scripture about the type of freedom promised by Christ.

Following this theological exposition of the nature of freedom, the *Manifesto* makes a claim about the nature of early Baptist convictions. “For...early Baptists, liberty of conscience was not a libertarian notion. It was a conviction that faith must not, indeed cannot, be coerced by any power or authority. This understanding of freedom is very different from the modern account in which the expression of the will is the greatest good.”¹⁴ They lament that by the mid-eighteenth century the libertarian account had replaced earlier notions through its experience of North American democracy, making theological accounts that either predate or avoid this influence especially important. They claim, “we thus seek an understanding of freedom that is true to the biblical witness and the earliest insights of the Baptist heritage.”¹⁵

Because of its extended critique of freedom one could easily, and mistakenly, conclude that the document is simply a polemical tract against moderates. The final paragraph of the “preamble” clarifies the goal:

Two mistaken paths imperil this precious freedom in contemporary Baptist life. Down one path go those who would shackle God's freedom to a narrow biblical interpretation and a coercive hierarchy of authority. Down the other path walk those who would sever freedom from our membership in the body of Christ and the community's legitimate authority, confusing the gift of God with notions of autonomy or libertarian theories. We contend that these two conceptions of

¹⁴Broadway, et al., *Manifesto*, 304.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

freedom, while seemingly different, both define freedom as a property of human nature apart from the freedom of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We reject them both as false and prefer neither, for false freedom will only lead Baptists to exchange the glory of God for the shame of idols (Rom 1:21-23). Only the freedom of the gospel liberates us from the worship of idols, including the idolatry of the self, so that we might serve the living and true God and await the Son from heaven whom God raised from the dead (1 Thess 1:9-10; Tit 2:11-14; Acts 1:11). We invite Baptists in the fellowship of kindred minds to join us in resisting all destructive ideologies that subvert the gospel. To that end we offer the following affirmations as a description of freedom, faithfulness, and community.¹⁶

According to the *Manifesto*, conservatives and moderates make similarly fatal assumptions about freedom, considering it a property of human nature apart from the theological confession that freedom is a divine gift. Its critique of freedom, then, is intended to call into question assumptions fundamental to both, and in the process, chart a more constructive way forward.

This way forward is developed by way of five theological affirmations. First, the *Manifesto* affirms “*Bible study in reading communities* rather than relying on private interpretation or supposed ‘scientific’ objectivity.”¹⁷ Furthermore, it asserts that God has gifted the whole community of faith, and therefore, everyone may contribute fruitfully to the conversation, especially those with gifts for “equipping the body.” As a result, the *Manifesto* affirms

an open and orderly process whereby faithful communities deliberate together over the Scriptures with sisters and brothers of the faith, excluding no light from any source. When all exercise their gifts and callings, when every voice is heard and weighed, when no one is silenced or privileged, the Spirit leads communities to read wisely and to practice faithfully the direction of the gospel (1 Cor 14:26-29).¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 305.

Thus, it rejects authoritarian interpretations of scripture, whether they issue from narrow coercive hierarchies, or from the tyranny of the autonomous individualist who interprets “according to the dictates of individual conscience”¹⁹ without regard to the community. It also rejects the principle of “scientific objectivity” that inordinately privileges the authority of scholarly methodologies (literal-grammatical or historical-critical).²⁰ The implication is that the Scriptures were written by and for the church, and therefore, are best interpreted within the church, making use of the wise insights of the entire community of faith—a community which includes its scholars and “authorities.”

Second, the *Manifesto* affirms “*following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship* rather than invoking a theory of soul competency.”²¹ Here the *Manifesto* asserts that the path of Christian discipleship takes a certain shape, namely, life together in the church, and it is this path of shared discipleship that results in mutual service to one another as priests. The language in this section is quite strong, suggesting the contentious nature of this issue:

We reject all accounts of following Jesus that construe faith as a private matter between God and the individual or as an activity of competent souls who inherently enjoy unmediated, unassailable, and disembodied experience with God. We further reject all identifications of the priesthood of believers with autonomous individualism that says we may do and believe what we want regardless of the counsel and confession of the church. We finally reject the false teaching that redefines gospel freedom as the pursuit of self-realization apart from the model of Jesus Christ. We call others to the freedom of faithful and communal discipleship.²²

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 305-306.

According to the *Manifesto*, salvation has an inescapably corporate dimension, rooted in the triune nature of God and the new humanity made possible by the incarnation.²³ The logic is straightforward: if the church is the Body of Christ and an essential element of salvation is incorporation into this body, and if God is triune and the “ground of being” is itself relational, then individualistic conceptions of the spiritual life as “unmediated, unassailable, and disembodied experience with God” are woefully lacking.

Third, the *Manifesto* affirms “a free common life in Christ in gathered, reforming communities rather than withdrawn, self-chosen, or authoritarian ones.”²⁴ Here the authors bring to the fore distinctly Baptist convictions, stating that “Baptists have an important contribution to make in God’s mission of freedom. The practices of believers baptism and called-out church membership display a distinctive vision of the church as a community of shared response to God’s message, mission, and renewal.”²⁵ Despite this strong ecclesiological claim, the authors confess the failures of the believers church to live up to its own standards, lamenting the lightness with which some communities take the act of being baptized into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. They further suggest that there is much to learn from believers with different ecclesiological convictions.

Fourth, the *Manifesto* affirms a more sacramental view²⁶ of the practices of the church, saying, “We affirm baptism, preaching, and the Lord’s table as powerful signs

²³Ibid., 303.

²⁴Ibid., 306.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶A Roman Catholic might object to this wording, suggesting that the category of sacrament does not admit of degrees. The intent here, however, is simply to suggest that

that seal God's faithfulness in Christ and express our response of awed gratitude rather than as mechanical rituals or mere symbols.”²⁷ This section is, by far, the longest of the five main affirmations of the *Manifesto*. It begins with a paragraph that acknowledges that God can providentially bless in any number of ways, but has given to the church baptism, preaching and the Lord’s Supper, as a permanent means of sustenance—signifying the essential truths of the faith through powerful acts made effectual by the work of the Spirit. This reasoning is then traced out with each of the practices: baptism is a covenantal act through which “our rebirth through the Holy Spirit is sealed;”²⁸ preaching is the Word of God when it is made efficacious by the Spirit and “God graciously declares the liberating Word which seals salvation through our proclamation of the gospel;”²⁹ and the Lord’s Supper is a memorial in which the Lord is present to declare that the church is one body, signifying and sealing the covenant, and drawing the community toward repentance and reconciliation. The reflection on these sacramental practices ends with a challenge to move beyond medieval and modernist categories in order to recognize that “The Lord is present and active both in the performance of these remembering signs and with the community that performs them.”³⁰ However, as the authors point out, false understandings of these practices are a far smaller risk among

Baptists who have previously been averse to speaking in terms of the sacraments are now increasingly open to traditional sacramental ways of describing the central practices of the church. See p 142-145 below.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 307.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

Baptists than is outright neglect of them, an oversight which the authors call Baptists to address.

Fifth, the *Manifesto* affirms “*freedom and renounce[s] coercion as a distinct people under God* rather than relying on political theories, powers or authorities.”³¹

Echoing the classic free church call for disestablishment from state control, the authors call for the church to reject collusion with the state or coercion on behalf of the faith.

Going a step further, the *Manifesto* calls for independence from “the idols of nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, economic systems, gender domination, or any other power that resists the Lordship of Jesus Christ,”³² and it calls the church to resist the modern temptation to see itself as belonging to “a private, internal, individual, and narrow sphere...[because] the gospel we proclaim is a public message for all people.”³³ These convictions are described as the natural outgrowth of the “free church” ideal wherein a gathered church lives as an exemplary community apart from cultural cooption, but exists as “salt and light, engaging the world and challenging the powers with the peace and freedom of the gospel.”³⁴

In its conclusion the *Manifesto* states boldly that the project ought not be interpreted as yet another salvo in the cultural conflict in American religion, but as a rejection of the false gods and ideologies of both the Baptist right and the left who are fighting the wrong war. One key passage to this effect deserves to be reproduced in full:

³¹ Ibid., 308.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 309.

Ideologies and theologies of the right and the left, as different as they may appear, are really siblings under the skin by virtue of their accommodation to modernity and its Enlightenment assumptions. Some Baptists (in the tradition of E.Y. Mullins' Axioms of Religion or D. C. Macintosh's Personal religion?) embraced modernity by defining freedom in terms of the Enlightenment notions of autonomous moral agency and objective rationality. Others (in the tradition of the Princeton Theology and *The Fundamentals*?) have reacted against modernity, but ironically they perpetuated the same modern assumptions through the individualism of revivalistic religious experience and through the self-evidence of truth available by means of common sense reason. It is not a question of whether these adversaries have adopted modernity. Both drank deeply from the same waters even if they have done so at different wells. We believe that this accommodation to the individualism and rationalism of modernity weakens the church by transforming the living and embodied Christian faith into an abstract and mythic gnosis.³⁵

Because the foundational assumptions of the Enlightenment are passing away, they argue, the Baptist identity is imperiled if it does not divest itself of these ideas.

Their message is clear: if Baptists are to thrive in the future they must get beyond the Enlightenment's construal of freedom as autonomous individualism, and certainty as a product of a-traditional universal rationality.

The final paragraph of the *Manifesto* calls for a conversation concerning these topics, inviting responses from those who agree and disagree with its aims. This is indeed what happened. A conversation ensued in *PRS* that constitutes the bulk of the public engagement with Bapto-Catholic ideas.³⁶

Critical Responses

The *Manifesto* was an intellectually fruitful publication. In the decade since its publication, at least twenty-seven articles in *PRS* are related—directly or indirectly—to

³⁵Ibid., 309-310.

³⁶For another commentary on the *Manifesto*, see: Andrew D. Black, "Kingdom of Priests or Democracy of Competent Souls?: The 'Baptist Manifesto,' John Howard Yoder, and the Question of Baptist Identity," (master's thesis, Baylor University, 2006).

the themes of the *Manifesto*;³⁷ two of these articles are critical in nature and offer the strongest opposition to the *Manifesto* in print. The first of these is Robert P. Jones's essay, "Revision-ing Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective."³⁸ The second is Walter Shurden's "The Baptist Identity and The Baptist *Manifesto*."³⁹ Both articles offer pointed critiques of the *Manifesto*, and each takes a different approach that merits close consideration.

³⁷These articles are written either by *Manifesto* co-authors or by figures identified by Harmon as exemplars of the Bapto-Catholic sensibility (see *Toward Baptist Catholicity*, 17). Two articles are direct critical engagements with the *Manifesto*.

³⁸Robert P. Jones, "Revision-ing Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26.01 (Spring 1999), 35-57.

³⁹Walter B. Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the *Baptist Manifesto*," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25.04 (Winter 1998), 321-340. Although Shurden's article appeared in print before Jones's, Shurden notes that Jones's article was first delivered as a speech June 29, 1998 on the occasion of James Gustafson's gift to the library at McAfee School of Theology, and served as a source for Shurden's article (321, n.1). For this reason, Jones's article will be treated first.

Robert P. Jones's Critique

Jones's critical engagement with the *Manifesto* is based on James M. Gustafson's "theocentric" methodology. Gustafson's approach, critical of "communitarian" approaches that some associate with the *Manifesto*,⁴⁰ is focused on the historically conditioned nature of faith commitments and the consequent need to rearticulate theological statements from age to age to enable theological statements to cohere with the changing experiences of each generation.⁴¹ Jones notes that, "for this task to be possible, experience—and the experiencing individual—must be taken seriously as a source for theology. Gustafson's method, which can be fairly described as 'theology within the limits of experience alone,' is justified not on prior theological assumptions but on common human experience."⁴² His specifically theocentric concern is that theology often "erodes into an unreflective anthropocentricity that is more concerned with the happiness of human beings than with honoring God. Anthropocentric assumptions have degraded religion into a utilitarian tool—we worship God not because God is God but to secure benefits for ourselves, whether in this life or the next."⁴³ These principles are the basis of Jones's critique of the *Manifesto* and Shurden's *Four Fragile Freedoms*,⁴⁴ ultimately developing his own list of principles that he believes would provide a better, theocentric approach to the Baptist identity.

⁴⁰Jones, 38.

⁴¹Jones, 39.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Although Jones also assesses Shurden's work, his critique is quite mild. Jones reserves his strongest criticism for the *Manifesto*.

The implications of these convictions for Jones's reading of the *Manifesto* are quite interesting. In his critique of appeals to "the Baptist tradition" he replies, "tradition has no authority *qua* tradition."⁴⁵ Much like Bill Leonard's caveat concerning the "fallacy of origins,"⁴⁶ Jones reminds the reader that Baptist witness is quite diverse, and founded on a "principle of revision"⁴⁷ that renders an authoritarian understanding of tradition unintelligible. He appeals to this principle of revision to suggest that

Baptists use this central principle, which has its roots in the spirit of freedom discussed by Dr. Walter Shurden, within the current ferment to re-envision Baptist theology not in terms of which strands of the Baptist tradition will undergird narrow denominational interests but in terms of which strands of the varied Christian traditions communicate more fully our present experience of God, the world, and ourselves.⁴⁸

Thus far, aside from the dismissal of "tradition *qua* tradition," there are some points of continuity between Jones and the *Manifesto*. He proposes a constructive, theological "revision-ing" of the Baptist identity that draws upon major strands of the Baptist experience along with the breadth of the various Christian traditions. However, the fault line between Jones's approach and the *Manifesto*'s becomes apparent when Jones returns to tradition. He says,

by noting that "experience is prior to reflection," Gustafson reminds theologians that doctrines and dogmas "arose out of experiences of persons and communities of the past" and are thus conditioned by context. The crucial implication is that dogmas (including scripture as the consensus of communities of the past), cannot in any simple way serve as the data for theology.

⁴⁵Ibid., 37.

⁴⁶See above, p. 63, n 4.

⁴⁷Ibid., 37.

⁴⁸Ibid., 37-38.

This statement clarifies the precise nature of his dismissal of the *Manifesto*. His claim is that experience is both the source of theological data and the authoritative arbiter of theological claims. Corresponding to this emphasis on experience is the centrality of the individual; both are values which are strongly criticized in the *Manifesto*.

Jones structures his study of the *Manifesto* according to the four freedoms proposed by Shurden. He chooses this structure based on his accurate observation that the earliest version of the *Manifesto* was written as a response to Shurden, even though he is not specifically named. This connection between the two documents serves as the basis for his parallel engagement with both.⁴⁹

Before his comparative study Jones makes several key observations. First, he notes that Shurden names his sources (i.e. the sermons and addresses of the Baptist world alliance from 1905 to 1980) while the *Manifesto* does not, despite an obvious reliance on Shurden as an opponent and on unnamed “communitarian and Anabaptist sources”⁵⁰ for

⁴⁹Jones seems to suggest that the *Manifesto* is little more than an attempt to provide a communitarian critique of Shurden. Although he notes that in the revision “the language is softened, exact references to Shurden’s language are removed, and a new fourth affirmation concerning ‘baptism, preaching, and the Lord’s table’ is inserted between the third and fourth freedom” (41), he says that “the content has not changed significantly” (ibid.). However, it seems that the addition of a proposal concerning a Baptist sacramental theology, and a thorough revision and expansion of the other four claims should not be dismissed as inconsequential.

⁵⁰Ibid., 42. When discussing these sources Jones reproduces the *Manifesto*’s uncapitalized use of “baptist.” He follows “baptist” with “[sic]” as if it were mistyped, rather than being McClendon’s frequently noted preferred spelling of the term that indicates baptists in the broadest possible sense (i.e., including Anabaptists and other free church groups). One wonders if this indicates Jones’s rejection of McClendon’s approach or his lack of familiarity with the usage. If it is the latter, the oversight would be more easily explained had Freeman not explicitly described the intentional use of the lowercase “b” in two different places in “Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?”, 275, 301. This fact is significant not only because Freeman’s article predates Jones’s, but also because the *Manifesto*’s first appearance in an academic publication was as that article’s appendix.

support. Second, Jones mentions the unusual nature of the *Manifesto*'s genre, which he describes as a hybrid of a manifesto and a confession of faith. He considers this mixture to be problematic because it argues for the primacy of the community—and given the Baptist provenance, this community is presumably the local congregation—yet the project itself is the product of a group of professional theologians.⁵¹ Third, he observes that *Four Fragile Freedoms* and the *Manifesto* offer a different perspective on the relationship between the church and the world, evident in the *Manifesto*'s frequent “statements about the presence of the church in a hostile world and the sins inherent in the individualism and the rationalism of modernity, which is rooted in ‘the Enlightenment.’”⁵² Jones takes exception to what he takes to be a monolithic rejection of the Enlightenment, and its “nostalgic tone.”⁵³ Fourth, he notes the distinctly different visions of freedom offered by the two works: in Shurden, a freedom that is a property primarily of the individual, and in the *Manifesto*, a freedom that “inheres not in the individual but only in God mediated through the community.”⁵⁴

Several things may be said in response to Jones's introductory comments. First, it is indeed the case that the *Manifesto* does not name its sources, but as a manifesto its

⁵¹Jones, 42. Although I take issue with the alleged inconsistency of the genre with the *Manifesto*'s content (see below), he does observe something about the nature of the document that, as it will be seen, is missed by Shurden. He says that the *Manifesto* “does not primarily seek to establish different historical claim [sic] or dispute the accuracy of the historical claims made in [*Four Fragile Freedoms*], but rather makes the claim that these principles, as formulated, not only fail to meet current needs but actually form the context of the problem” (ibid.).

⁵²Jones, 42.

⁵³Jones, 43.

⁵⁴Jones 44. Emphasis original.

style does not lend itself well to an academic apparatus; parenthetical references to scripture are the extent of its citations, and justifiably so. To uncover the “unnamed sources,” one needs only to look to the other footnote-rich, academic writings of the co-authors—especially the article by Curtis Freeman to which the *Manifesto* was attached as an appendix.⁵⁵ There is no mystery about the sources of the conversation; in these other works one sees a robust conversation with patristic theology, post-liberal and post-conservative theology, post-modern philosophy and theology in the MacIntyrian and Hauerwasian key, and a broad range of Baptist and Anabaptist thought.

Second, there is no necessary tension between the *Manifesto*’s call for the centrality of community and the fact that it emerges out of a conversation among theologians rather than a local congregation. The authors do not define community so narrowly that a group of academics cannot legitimately be considered a “believing, practicing community.”⁵⁶ Rather, true to their proposal, these theologians are practicing their vocation in community with one another, for the sake of the local Baptist congregations in which they participate and for the sake of the broader Baptist fellowship.

Third, although the *Manifesto* does inveigh against “the Enlightenment” in an undifferentiated way, it does so (as does MacIntyre) to suggest that the various strands of the Enlightenment shared certain presuppositions, and therefore, the epoch as a whole has common themes worthy of critique. Ironically, these foundational sentiments are best

⁵⁵Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned.” As a *Manifesto* co-author, this article and the follow-up article—“A New Perspective on Baptist Identity” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 26.1 (Spring 1999), 59-65—can justifiably be read as a commentary on the *Manifesto*.

⁵⁶Jones, 42.

illustrated by the very document Jones names as an example of an Enlightenment work that “contains ideals that have been central to Baptist theology,”⁵⁷ namely, Immanuel Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?”⁵⁸ As Jones notes, “for Kant, Enlightenment is ‘man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity,’ where immaturity is ‘the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.’” Kant goes on to state that the motto of the Enlightenment is ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding.’⁵⁹ It is this autonomous individualism, so well exemplified by Kant’s essay, that the *Manifesto* rejects, whether it is found in current cultural and philosophical sensibilities, or in Baptist theology.

Fourth, Jones is quite right that Shurden and the *Manifesto* disagree about the individual versus the communal nature of freedom, however he seems to overstate the *Manifesto*’s emphasis on the community’s mediatorial work. As seen above, the emphasis of the *Manifesto*’s account of freedom is on its origin in the freedom of God, and its nature as the gift of God. This freedom is then manifested in, and experienced through, relation to others participating in God’s freedom, especially in the church. Jones’s statement would be more accurate if slightly altered: “freedom inheres not in the individual but only in God, *and is experienced in community*.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷Jones, 43, n. 36.

⁵⁸See: “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, general introduction by Allen Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17-22.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰Cf., Jones, 44.

Fifth, although it is not a point of great emphasis, it is worth mentioning that Jones claims that there are five co-authors rather than six. In one instance he specifically refers to the authors as “five men,”⁶¹ indicating that he has overlooked Elizabeth Newman’s participation. Although this oversight may be mitigated by the fact that Newman and McClendon were the last to be brought on as co-authors, the oversight is odd considering that McClendon is given special attention in Jones’s article.⁶² It is also odd given that Newman was listed as a co-author in the *Manifesto*’s first official publication in *Baptists Today*.

Despite these flaws, in the section that follows, Jones performs a valuable service. He compares the language of Shurden’s *Four Fragile Freedoms* to the *Baptist Manifesto*’s alternate proposals. An especially helpful feature of his analysis is that he includes the wording of the deletions from the original draft as well as the insertions in the final version.⁶³ The result is a helpful comparison between Shurden’s source material and the *Manifesto* as it evolved. After each comparison, Jones offers his analysis of both the *Manifesto* and Shurden’s four freedoms; for the sake of brevity, only his analysis of the *Manifesto* will be addressed below.

Concerning “Bible freedom,” Jones expresses concern about the *Manifesto*’s conception of the role of human freedom in interpretation,⁶⁴ its use of scriptural “proof

⁶¹Jones, 38.

⁶² Ibid., 38-39, n. 16.

⁶³ Jones ~~strikes through~~ deleted phrases and underlines the insertions.

⁶⁴Viz., Jones asserts that, despite the *Manifesto*’s claims, “some antecedent freedom is necessary in order for the reader of scripture to choose between various interpretations of the text at hand; and, further, consequent freedom is necessary to relate even “correct” interpretations to the present situation” (44-45).

texts,” and its rejection of “a cornerstone of Protestant belief,”⁶⁵ namely, “‘private interpretation’ according to ‘the dictates of individual conscience.’”⁶⁶ In his treatment of “soul freedom,” Jones notes the *Manifesto*’s critique of the “theory of soul competency” which he suggests might be intended to play to Baptist suspicions regarding formal education, while relying heavily on “communitarian” theory which “tends to isolate Christian theology from critical external points of view and turns theology into a descriptive rather than a normative discipline,”⁶⁷ while undercutting “any understanding of the doctrine of creation that affirms God orders life through nature,”⁶⁸ and overemphasizing God’s revelation in the particular histories of the biblical peoples in such a way that God is reduced to a tribal deity.⁶⁹ He asserts that the resulting “sectarianism” has the “unfortunate and hazardous effect of turning the waning social influence of mainline denominations into a virtue,”⁷⁰ and further claims that the *Manifesto*’s rejection of “unmediated, unassailable, and disembodied experience with God”⁷¹ is problematic because a recommendation like this may have stifled a reformer like Martin Luther who challenged the prevailing wisdom of his day. Concerning “church freedom” Jones finds less to quarrel with, but notes a tension between the

⁶⁵Jones, 45.

⁶⁶Jones, 45, quoting the *Manifesto*.

⁶⁷Jones, 47.

⁶⁸Ibid., 47.

⁶⁹Ibid., 47.

⁷⁰Ibid., 48.

⁷¹Broadway, et al., *Manifesto*, 305.

Manifesto's preference for consensus and their rejection of authoritarianism, given that attempts to achieve consensus and "to close off nominal Christianity in our own ranks"⁷² can quash dissent and establish an "oppressive orthodoxy."⁷³ To counter this, Jones approvingly cites James Gustafson's theocentric assertion: "I do not believe that a theologian ought to be limited by commitments to historic creedal formulations."⁷⁴ With regard to "religious freedom" Jones finds much to commend. He commends the strength of its commitment to the religious liberty, yet he notes discomfort with further expressions of communitarian and sectarian ideology and the potential for the disingenuous doubletalk of assuming "simultaneously the role of persecuted religious communities and powerful political force, taking up the mantle of each as it suits our political advantage."⁷⁵

After his engagement with the *Manifesto* and *Four Fragile Freedoms*, Jones offers theocentric alternatives, including a theocentric version of "human freedom" that was originally a fifth freedom that Shurden later folded into religious freedom. Given the nature of his theocentric analysis to this point, it is no surprise that Jones precedes his list of alternatives with the statement: "Soul Freedom—the key to the Baptist principle of revision—must be seen as the foundation and presupposition of each of the other freedoms...[coming] logically and chronologically prior to the other freedoms and should thus be listed first." His list is as follows:

⁷²Ibid., 306.

⁷³Jones, 50.

⁷⁴James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, cited in Jones, 50.

⁷⁵Jones, 53.

1. Soul Freedom is the Recognition of the right and responsibility of every person to relate directly to God and to all things as appropriate to their relations to God.
2. Bible Freedom is the recognition both of the centrality of the Bible in the life of the individual and the church and of the freedom to use experience, along with the best and most scholarly tools of inquiry, as a hermeneutical guide in order to navigate the dialectical relationship that exists between past and present reflections on the meanings of common human experience in light of an experience of God's presence.
3. Church Freedom is a recognition of the freedom of local churches to shape their activities toward the good of the divine ordering of all creation, as determined by the experiences of their members and in conversation with the larger body of Christ.
4. Religious Freedom is a recognition, flowing from the acknowledgement that religion is only one of many ways of construing the world, of the freedom of all persons to interpret the meaning of life for themselves.
5. Human Freedom is the obligation, stemming from the gospel, to liberate human beings from all the forces that would restrict potentiality.⁷⁶

A full-scale refutation of Jones's account of the *Manifesto* would require more space than can be given here. For this reason, only the most essential points will be mentioned. First, the analysis of the *Manifesto* according to Gustafson's categories of "communitarianism" seems off target. Drawing on Gustafson's article "The Sectarian Temptation,"⁷⁷ Jones suggests that the *Manifesto* is problematic sociologically (in that it exhibits a "curious disconnection between the Christian community and the larger society,"⁷⁸) philosophically (in its assumption that "theological ways of knowing are radically distinct from other ways of knowing" that undercuts the affirmation that God orders life through nature), and theologically (in its conviction that "God is only known

⁷⁶Jones, 55.

⁷⁷James M. Gustafson, "The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church and the University," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 40 (1985). Essay republished in James M. Gustafson, Theodoor Adriaan Boer, and Paul E. Capetz, *Moral Discernment in the Christian Life: Essays in Theological Ethics*, Library of Theological Ethics, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

⁷⁸Jones, 47.

in and through history,” especially the sacred history of the biblical narrative⁷⁹). But in each of these areas, the assessment is either ill-fitting or theologically problematic.

While Jones’s sociological observation is correct in that the *Manifesto* expresses some disconnection between the Christian community and the broader culture, the analysis falls woefully short when it suggests that “this disconnection tends to isolate Christian theology from critical viewpoints and turns theology into a descriptive rather than a normative discipline.”⁸⁰ The *Manifesto* itself, and the theological projects of its co-authors, is normative to the highest degree, interpreting theology as the primary language of the faith, seeing a close connection between theology and ethics, and seeing their projects as directly related to the lived experience of the faith. Bapto-Catholic theology could not be further from detached, descriptive, academic theology. Furthermore, while it is true that the *Manifesto*, and other Bapto-Catholic projects, speak of the Church as a *polis* with its own politics, and an *alteras civitas* with its unique form of citizenship,⁸¹ these emphases are hardly sectarian innovations—they are fresh articulations of the biblical distinction between the church and the world,⁸² Christians’ identity as “resident

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹ See especially, the work of Barry Harvey: *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1999); and *Politics of the Theological: Beyond the Piety and Power of a World Come of Age*, American University Studies, v. 133. (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

⁸² 1 Peter 2:9-12

aliens,”⁸³ or the even Augustine’s classic differentiation in *City of God* between the City of Man, built on pride, and the City of God, whose foundation is love.

Jones is partially correct in the philosophical concerns he expresses; the *Manifesto* does indeed consider theological knowledge as a distinct kind of knowing. However, conceiving of theological knowledge as somehow distinct is hardly strange given that any theological system that acknowledges “special revelation” must posit a type of knowing that is distinct from other types of knowledge. What is especially inaccurate about Jones’s assertion, however, is that he suggests that treating theological knowledge as distinct somehow undercuts the pursuit of theological knowledge by considering God’s ordering of nature. The field of “theological hermeneutics” picks up this theme in accordance with the Augustinian desire to consult the book of Scripture and the book of the world.⁸⁴ Furthermore, as pointed out by Henri de Lubac, a twentieth century French Jesuit theologian regularly cited by Bapto-Catholics, the great mistake of neo-Thomism was positing a radical distinction between nature and grace, splitting the two realms apart in a way that unduly reinforces the distinction between what can be known through “nature” versus “revelation.”⁸⁵ In other words, he persuasively argued for an understanding of “graced nature” that suggests that nature is revelatory precisely because

⁸³ Hebrews 11:13-16

⁸⁴ Theological hermeneutics is the emphasis of Barry Harvey’s, “Where, Then, Do We Stand?: Baptists, History, and Authority,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29.4, (Winter 2002), 359-380.

⁸⁵ de Lubac’s most important work that engaged the issue of the dangers of splitting apart grace and nature is: Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: études historiques*. Théologie, 8. Paris: Aubier, 1946. For a Bapto-Catholic engagement with de Lubac, see: Bryan C. Hollon, “Ontology, Exegesis, and Culture in the Thought of Henri De Lubac” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2006).

it is a grace-filled creation of the God who self-reveals. It is, therefore, a mistake to assume, as Jones does, that attention to the revelatory works of God in the Incarnation and in Scripture necessarily subverts attention to what may be known in the “book of nature.”

The theological concerns noted by Jones raise a second, larger issue. He suggests in passing that “theologically, communitarians assume that ‘God is known *only* in and through history,’ particularly through the history of the biblical peoples. This assumption often leads to the conclusion that God is ‘the tribal God of a minority of the earth’s population.’”⁸⁶ While the first part of his claim is quite correct, the *Manifesto* does embrace an understanding of historically embedded rationality in the sense proposed by MacIntyre, it is quite curious that a Christian theologian would take umbrage at privileging the biblical history as especially revealing. It is difficult to know exactly how in this “theocentric mode” one might make sense of Christ’s words to the woman at the well, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.”⁸⁷ Christ himself maintained particularity while transcending it. Stated differently, one can only move toward the general through the particular. This seems to be a fatal flaw in the “theocentric” perspective: Christians do not worship an undefined *theos*; rather, we worship *theos* incarnate, the Word made flesh by way of being born to a particular woman, who was part of a particular people, in a particular era of history. This particularity may seem scandalously “sectarian,” but it is

⁸⁶Jones, 47, citing Gustafson.

⁸⁷John 4:22-23, NRSV.

difficult to see how one can appreciate the incarnation, or God's redeeming acts in history, without reference to it.

One final comment must be made concerning Jones's proposals. One of the stated goals of Gustafson's theocentric project—a goal shared by Jones—is to reverse the theological trend of “unreflective anthropcentricity that is more concerned with the happiness of human beings than with honoring God.”⁸⁸ However, the experiential methodology that Jones suggests seems to lead inevitably toward anthropcentricity to the highest degree. Especially telling statements include: “Soul Freedom is the recognition of the *right* and responsibility of every person to relate directly to God,” “Religious Freedom is a recognition, flowing from the acknowledgement that *religion is only one of many ways of construing the world*, of the freedom of all persons *to interpret the meaning of life for themselves*,” and “Human Freedom is the obligation, stemming from the gospel, to *liberate human beings from all the forces that would restrict potentiality*.”⁸⁹ These emphases on human fulfillment, individual rights, and religion as a personal interpretive option, all seem to place human will, desires, and personal fulfillment ahead of a concern to “honor God.” This is an unfortunate anthropocentric irony of Jones's theocentric approach.

Walter B. Shurden's Critique

Arguably, the weightiest critique of the *Baptist Manifesto* is offered by Walter Shurden. His response is important for several reasons: as a leading statesman in moderate Baptist life, his reading of the *Manifesto* can be considered representative of the

⁸⁸Jones, 39.

⁸⁹Jones, 55. Emphasis mine.

mainstream of moderate thought. Also, as Jones noted, Shurden's *Four Fragile Freedoms* served as a starting point for the alternative offered by the *Manifesto*, making him a key figure in the conversation. Given that the *Manifesto* may be read as a critique of Shurden, his response is notably evenhanded and gracious. Adding to the article's value, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*" also offers a brilliant, concise overview of the Baptist identity conversation and its major contours. In short, Shurden accomplishes his stated goal, of offering a "friendly talk-back to the *Manifesto* about the Baptist identity."⁹⁰ He considers this response to be of critical importance, and calls others to participate in the conversation as well:

Baptists, especially Baptist historians, should study the *Manifesto* and talk back to it, not only because they have been invited to do so, but because profiling the Baptist identity in a so-called post-denominational era and at the beginning of a new millennium is no minor matter. In my talk-back that follows I have sincere affirmations to share, serious reservations to voice, and honest questions to ask.⁹¹

Shurden, therefore, addresses "two of the major emphases of the *Manifesto*: the individual-communal nature of Baptist life and the notion of freedom in Baptist history."⁹²

Shurden begins his engagement with the *Manifesto*'s treatment of the individual-communal nature of the Baptist identity with an affirmation he repeats several times in

⁹⁰Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 321.

⁹¹Ibid. This preliminary statement is of great importance for understanding Shurden's argument. It identifies his particular methodological biases (viz., those of a historian), his specific concerns (viz., the potential influence of a denominational identity statement that appears at a critical moment in American religious history—a moment noted for its ambivalence toward denominations), and his rhetorical goals (i.e., to commend, to critique, and to inquire). This statement sheds light on both Shurden's intent and my critique.

⁹²Ibid., 321.

the article: “I second the motion—some!”⁹³ He grants that the church is, and must be, central to the Baptist identity,⁹⁴ as long as that commitment makes room for the role of the individual. He further grants that, in assailing individualism, the *Manifesto* identifies a weakness of Baptist (and Protestant) thought that Catholics have criticized since the Reformation. He admits that the privatistic, narcissistic failings of Baptist practice are well known.

Following these admissions, Shurden launches his critique. He begins by asserting that the *Manifesto*’s “deemphasis on the individual...fails to paint a balanced picture of the Baptist identity,”⁹⁵ an issue he illustrates primarily by way of the *Manifesto*’s rejection of the private interpretation of Scripture. Like Jones he questions the use of a “highly questionable verse of scripture”⁹⁶ to justify the claim. Going beyond

⁹³Ibid., 325.

⁹⁴Ibid. Shurden states, “one may accurately say that what Baptists have given to the Christian world is an ecclesiology, not a theology.”

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid., 327. Although Jones emphasizes this point to a far greater degree, Shurden joins in this unfortunate critique. A response to both is in order. Jones cites the *Manifesto*’s claim: “Scripture wisely forbids and we reject every form of private interpretation that makes Bible reading a practice that can be carried out according to the dictates of individual conscience,” (*Manifesto*, 305) and its corresponding citation of 2 Pet 1:20-21: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,” (NRSV). Protesting this connection, Jones observes, “the text cited does not forbid the private interpretation or reading of scripture, but rather points out that the origin of all prophecy that was recorded in Scripture lies with God” (45). While it is true that the primary thrust of this passage is the divine origin of Scripture, it is no stretch to make the connection to private interpretation. The immediate context of the passage emphasizes that believers did not follow “cleverly devised myths when we made known...the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:16), rather, the message was of divine origin, unlike that of the “false teachers...who will secretly bring in destructive *opinions*” (2 Pet 2:1, emphasis mine). It would seem, then, that the epistle’s author intended to contrast the Word of

Jones, he traces the sentiment to Stanley Hauerwas' suggestion that the most urgent task for the church is to "take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America,"⁹⁷ and that discovering the "'right' reading of Scripture depends on having spiritual masters who can help the whole Church stand under the authority of God's word."⁹⁸ Though he notes that the *Manifesto* is not nearly as extreme as Hauerwas in this regard, he states plainly that a rejection of private interpretation is far removed from the historical Baptist and Protestant points of view: "I am not sure I have ever seen a statement on the Baptist identity proposing the denial of private interpretation of Scripture prior to the *Manifesto*."⁹⁹ To support his claim he cites John Clarke and

God and the destructive opinions of human origin. Although it does not suggest how one might resolve the resolve the hermeneutical dilemma of separating human opinions from the Word of God, it seems plausible to cite this verse in support of a rejection of "private interpretation." The implication is simply that the interpretation of the divine Word cannot be an issue of personal prerogative any more than its reception can.

⁹⁷Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15. Quoted in Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 326.

⁹⁸Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 16. Quoted in Shurden "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 326. Shurden prefaces these remarks with the statement, "Hauerwas continued, horrendously to my Baptist ears..." This is a telling statement. Shurden is correct to note that the image of Bibles taken out of Christians hands, and praise for Spiritual masters, is an appalling thought to Baptists, and because of the semantic noise it generates, the point is difficult to hear. But, then, this seems to be Hauerwas' point. Hauerwas, known for his polemical style, seems to have gone out of his way to provoke a passionate response, perhaps to call attention to the misdirection of the passion. I would suggest that he offers two valuable observations: First, Scripture is not private property, nor should it be treated as such; liturgically, it is confessed to be "The Word of the Lord for God's people." Second, there are better and worse readings of scripture, in large measure based on the wisdom, maturity, and experience of the reader. These "spiritual masters," in the sense of the wise master craftsperson, are a gift to the church in their role as hermeneutical exemplars. See the discussion of this issue in chapter four, 169-172.

⁹⁹Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 326.

Obadiah Holmes as examples of seventeenth century figures who claimed the right of private interpretation, concluding that this theme has been an essential part of Baptist theology from its earliest days, rather than a “post-Enlightenment appropriation of democratic individualism and egalitarianism.”¹⁰⁰ In Shurden’s estimation, the *Manifesto*, in its zeal to validate the role of the community, eliminates a meaningful role for the individual, a move that has significant consequences for ecclesial practice. While granting that “no Baptist individual has papal-like freedom to interpret Scripture in any final sense,” Shurden asks, “what ‘community of believers’ the *Manifesto* would authorize to ‘check’ the individual’s interpretation?”¹⁰¹ He continues by saying, “If the fear driving the *Manifesto*’s statement is the idea that any Baptist can believe anything she or he wishes and remain in a local congregation of Baptist believers, one has some sympathy. Baptists have never endorsed or embraced that kind of theological anarchy.”¹⁰²

Shurden then moves to the *Manifesto*’s second affirmation, that affirms a commitment to “shared discipleship” rather than “soul competency.” Shurden again “second[s] the motion—some.”¹⁰³ He recognizes the privatization of faith in American culture and Baptist’s complicity. Yet, he expresses strong reservations concerning the

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 327.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 328. Ironically, any Baptist’s private interpretation is, in fact, more unbounded than any pope’s, which is restricted by tradition, precedent, and Canon Law. While a pope claims “universal jurisdiction” the potential scope of his pronouncements is quite limited. In certain libertarian readings of the Baptist identity, however, the Baptist is utterly unbounded in his or her interpretive possibilities, but only enjoys a “personal jurisdiction.”

¹⁰²Ibid., 328.

¹⁰³Ibid., 329.

Manifesto's apparent minimization of "the direct, personal nature of faith, the singular idea standing behind the concept of soul competency."¹⁰⁴ He cites Carlyle Marney, the First London Confession of 1644, Thomas Helwys, Obadiah Holmes, and others to demonstrate the centrality of the individual soul in the Baptist conception of salvation and religious knowing.¹⁰⁵ Shurden asserts: "To insist that saving faith is personal not impersonal, relational not ritualistic, direct not indirect, private not corporate has never meant for Baptists that the Christian life is a privatized disengagement from either the church or society."¹⁰⁶ He adds, "discipleship begins with an awareness of God that is intensely personal, private and uncoerced, allowing no proxies, and where each individual is accountable to God."¹⁰⁷

In his second major section of engagement with the *Manifesto*, Shurden addresses "The Baptist Notion of Freedom and the Baptist Identity." Shurden again claims that he can "second the motion—some" with respect to the *Manifesto*'s account of freedom. He concurs with its emphasis on human freedom as being rooted in the freedom of God, constituting a theologically, rather than a humanistically, grounded notion of freedom.¹⁰⁸ Shurden qualifies his affirmation by suggesting that this is true not only of early Baptists, as the *Manifesto* states, but of later Baptists as well, including Backus, Leland, Mullins,

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 329.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 329-330.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 330.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 331.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 332.

and the 1980 Baptist World Alliance statement on human rights.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Shurden agrees with the *Manifesto*'s claims that freedom is not license—in the sense of a personal possession to use as one chooses—but, rather, is to be discovered in one's response to the call of faithful discipleship.¹¹⁰ He also praises the strength of its commitment to the disestablishment of the church and the rejection of “constantinian strategies,” though he is less optimistic for the possibility of cultural independence.

There are three areas of concern that Shurden voices with respect to the *Manifesto*'s account of freedom: “First, the *Manifesto* stresses the freedom that comes in redemption and neglects the freedom that comes with creation. Second, and closely related, the *Manifesto* stresses the freedom that comes to the church and neglects the freedom that comes to individuals. Three, the *Manifesto* stresses the disestablishment of the church while minimizing freedom of conscience for all.”¹¹¹ On the first point Shurden suggests that the *Manifesto* “seems to restrict freedom to the people of God who have been redeemed rather than to all who have been created,”¹¹² because it speaks of freedom primarily as a gift of Jesus Christ, and experienced in relation to the triune God—a christocentrism that he claims is not seen in early Baptists.¹¹³ On the second

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 333.

¹¹⁰Ibid. On the latter point, Shurden makes the curious observation that “While these statements appear to be *characteristic of the broader Christian identity*, they certainly constitute significant notes for Baptists to strike at the beginning of a new millennium.” This seems to reflect the unusual expectation that a manifesto/confession of faith for Baptists ought to speak only to issues unique to Baptists.

¹¹¹Ibid., 334.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid.

point, regarding the emphasis on the church's experience of freedom to the exclusion of the individual's, Shurden again invokes a litany of key Baptist figures to make the claim that Baptists have always believed in the importance of the community, while maintaining the centrality of the individual and the conscience.¹¹⁴ The *Manifesto*, on the other hand, voices the same concerns that the seventeenth century religious establishment expressed about Baptists.¹¹⁵ On the third point, he suggests that the *Manifesto* argues for a disestablished church while minimizing freedom of conscience for all, which is to miss the point of the seventeenth century's struggle to fight for the right to live according to conscience. Shurden clarifies, "I am not even close to suggesting that the authors of the *Manifesto* do not believe in religious freedom for all people. I know better." But he expresses alarm that the *Manifesto* would not place "universal freedom of conscience and religious liberty at the very center of the Baptist identity"¹¹⁶—a hesitancy that stems from their analysis of these themes' connection with the Enlightenment's notions of autonomy and objective rationality. To this Shurden replies,

Should we, therefore, minimize an historic characteristic of the Baptist people simply because we think that some of their successors got it from the wrong source? ... Maybe the most serious oversight in the *Manifesto*'s effort to reinterpret the Baptist identity is its neglect of one of the major tiles in the mosaic of the Baptist identity. I am not suggesting that there is only one way to talk about freedom of conscience as a part of the Baptist identity. I am suggesting, however, that one cannot talk about the Baptist identity without talking about freedom of conscience for all.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴Ibid., 335-336.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 336.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 337.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 338.

Shurden concludes his article by asking whether it is possible to re-envision the Baptist identity as the *Manifesto* wishes to do. His answer: “Not only is it possible it is necessary. Baptist life is dynamic, not static.”¹¹⁸ He claims that, “Baptists do not have an unchanging ‘Deposit of Truth’ as the Catholics once claimed for themselves,” and therefore are obligated “to make the essence of Baptist life understandable to its day.”¹¹⁹ The “convictional genes” that define the Baptist essence include the centrality of the individual, the centrality of the church, freedom, and faithfulness; Shurden summarizes his assessment of the *Manifesto* according to these categories.

With respect to the individual, Shurden affirms Edwin Gaustad’s statement that Baptists “stand for individualism above institutionalism, for the reforming prophet more than the conforming priest, for a pietism that is private and personal before it can properly become public and social.”¹²⁰ While he maintains that this gene does not necessarily result in Roger Williams styled believers, disconnected from the church, it does result in a great value placed on individual experience—an emphasis lost in the *Manifesto*’s failure to “distinguish sufficiently the modern perversions from the historic Baptist affirmations.”¹²¹

Concerning the centrality of the church, Shurden suggests that although the *Manifesto* draws attention to the fact that the Baptist vision is not atomistic, it should

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Edwin Gaustad, “Toward a Baptist Identity in the Twenty-First Century” in *Discovering our Baptist Heritage*, ed. William H. Brackney (Valley Forge, PA: The American Baptist Historical Society, 1985), 88. Quoted in Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 339.

¹²¹Ibid.

have been clearer about the connection between the idea of “community” and the church, and especially, about its assertion of “the community’s legitimate authority.” He asks, “what ‘community’ and what ‘authority’ does it reference for Baptist life?”¹²²

With regard to freedom, he restates his wish that the *Manifesto* had been stronger in its assertion of freedom of conscience and religious liberty. He laments, “I get an uneasy feeling about its commitment to Baptist freedom in general. ... After studying the *Manifesto*, I quite honestly wonder if Baptist freedom is not more fragile than I first thought.”¹²³

With respect to the “faithfulness gene,” Shurden claims that the call to faithfully respond to the call to follow Christ is the *Manifesto*’s greatest strength. Given the qualification that follows, this affirmation is an interesting example of “damning with faint praise.” “Whatever it means to be a Baptist Christian, or a Christian of any kind for that matter, it means surely to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, to be committed to what Jesus was committed to. When we take seriously what Jesus took seriously, we often transcend the preoccupation with denominational distinctives. I am of the opinion that this is what the *Manifesto* does.”¹²⁴ Shurden suggests that fidelity to Christ is the one part of the Baptist identity that the *Manifesto* gets right—yet, of the convictional genes it is the least important, because it is the one bit of denominational DNA shared with all other Christians.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Ibid., 340.

Shurden closes on a quintessentially moderate Baptist note. He says that his voluntaristic conscience would not allow him to sign the *Manifesto*, but he revels “in the Baptist freedom that no ecclesiastical community can tell a group of Baptists, including the authors of the *Manifesto*, what they can say and cannot say, what they can sign or not sign.”¹²⁵

Shurden’s critique is important; it reflects the perspective of a significant scholar and statesman in moderate Baptist life, and it attempts to respond to the challenges that the *Manifesto* posed to moderate Baptists. Nevertheless, while it is far less problematic than Jones’s response, Shurden’s article also merits a critical response of its own. The chief causes of concern are the ways it appeals to history, and ultimately, the authority of the historian.

Arguably, the most problematic aspect of Shurden’s “friendly talk-back” to the *Manifesto*—one that colors the entire response—is its genre expectations. Throughout the article Shurden faults the *Manifesto* on historical grounds. This is hardly a startling revelation as Shurden suggests at the outset that those are his intentions,¹²⁶ and he calls upon fellow Baptist historians to take up the same task.¹²⁷ The problem, however, is that the *Manifesto* is not a historical treatise. As its name suggests, it is a *manifesto* that makes proposals for the future of Baptist identity by drawing upon and critiquing

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶“Focusing my talk-back primarily on Baptist history, I want first to visit briefly the issue of Baptist identity,” *ibid.*, 321.

¹²⁷“But Baptists, especially Baptist historians, should study the *Manifesto* and talk back to it...” *ibid.*

elements of Baptist history. Although it does make claims about the Baptist story, its primary goal is not descriptive, but constructive.

The problem with Shurden's historical expectations can be observed at several points. He claims, "with all the dangers Baptists face in privatizing and overly individualizing discipleship, the *Manifesto*, because of its studied, strained and unfortunate deemphasis on the role of the individual, nonetheless fails to paint a balanced picture of the Baptist identity."¹²⁸ This evaluation mistakenly assumes that the *Manifesto*'s goal was to "paint a balanced picture." The *Manifesto* is not intended to be an exhaustive account of Baptist identity like those of Shurden or Leonard; rather, it was a call for Baptists to assess the current state of Baptist practice and chart a healthier way forward, drawing attention to both the best elements of the tradition on which it can build and the most problematic elements which it must avoid.

Similarly, when critiquing the Christocentric account of freedom offered by the *Manifesto*, Shurden says, "granted, one must insist that 'freedom in Christ' is a gift, but is this the distinctive idea that shaped the Baptist identity among the early Baptists? I think not."¹²⁹ Elsewhere he says, "the *Manifesto* overlooks the vast Baptist heritage which identifies freedom with individuals, especially freedom of conscience."¹³⁰ In both cases the bias toward historical methodology causes Shurden's critique to miss the mark. While the *Manifesto* does look to the earliest Baptists for inspiration, it does not suggest that every element of the account is a straightforward exegesis of seventeenth century

¹²⁸Ibid., 325.

¹²⁹Ibid., 334.

¹³⁰Ibid., 335.

Baptist thought. The Christocentrism that Shurden “grants” is precisely the *Manifesto*’s point. Furthermore, the *Manifesto* does not “overlook” the identification of freedom with the individual, it observes this identification and calls it into question. Since it is not a descriptive historical work, but a call to reimagine key ideas in Baptist life, one should not expect it to affirm every element of Baptist practice as it is.¹³¹

The problem of Shurden’s genre expectations can be seen most clearly in his response to the *Manifesto*’s apparent affinity to Hauerwas’s critique of “private interpretation” of Scripture: “One may argue that Baptists, along with many other Protestants, are theologically wrong in calling for the personal interpretation of Scripture, but one cannot argue that Baptists historically have not embraced the idea.”¹³² This is quite clearly what Hauerwas—and the *Manifesto*, in its own way—were doing. Neither makes a historical claim that Baptists haven’t embraced the idea; rather, both assert that there are negative theological consequences for Baptists having done so. This example cuts to the heart of what seems to be Shurden’s underlying concern, namely, that the *Manifesto* is “bad history.” However, it is not an account of what Baptists *are*, but of what Baptists *ought to be*.

One can see this tension between historical and theological expectations of the *Manifesto* in Shurden’s observation about the individual and interpretive authority: “The *Manifesto*, in its zeal for advocating a legitimate role for the community of believers,

¹³¹An ironic aspect of these expectations noted above is that despite his own attention to history and the diversity of the Baptist story, Shurden’s own account is hardly a disinterested description; it flatly rejects the authoritarianism of the SBC since the 1980s. By his own logic here, one might fault his account for “overlooking” the historic examples of authoritarian Baptists.

¹³²Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 326.

negates a powerful part of the Baptist heritage concerning the individual.”¹³³ Thus far, Shurden is critiquing the *Manifesto* on its own terms, questioning whether it is neglecting a good and healthy aspect of the Baptist heritage. But, he supports this in an unusual fashion. First he suggests that the *Manifesto* is reacting to a non-issue:

No part of the Baptist tradition that I am familiar with proposes that final, ultimate, and absolute authority is invested in individual interpretation. The individual is always an “individual-in-community” in Baptist life. So while agreeing that no Baptist individual has papal-like freedom to interpret Scripture in any final sense, one seriously wonders what “community of believers” the *Manifesto* would authorize to “check” the individual’s interpretation.¹³⁴

Later he says, “If the fear driving the *Manifesto*’s statement is the idea that any Baptists can believe anything she or he wishes and remain in a local congregation of Baptist believers, one has some sympathy. Baptists have never endorsed that kind of theological anarchy.”¹³⁵ Yet, he goes on to cite two statements from Baptist denominational study groups that endorse such loose “checks” that anarchy is not an unfair description. One says that the “Christian is free to read the Bible and be guided to its meaning by the Holy Spirit. In becoming part of the witness of a local church, however, one’s freedom in doctrinal interpretation and personal behavior is tempered by the convictions and needs of the community of believers.”¹³⁶ The other says: “While individual believers must always allow their interpretation of Scripture to be illuminated by the understanding of the wider Christian community, they have the *final right to discern for themselves* what

¹³³Ibid., 327.

¹³⁴Ibid, 327-328.

¹³⁵Ibid., 328.

¹³⁶“Baptist Distinctives and Diversities,” quoted in Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 328.

God is saying *to them* through the word and by the Spirit.”¹³⁷ Shurden observes that “these two statements taken together suggest an accurate Baptist limitation on individual freedom. Given Baptist polity, however, only one of the limitations, the first, could be enforced.”¹³⁸ These examples demonstrate the very concerns that the *Manifesto* raises. They also demonstrate the broader problem of Shurden’s response. He seeks to counter the *Manifesto*’s arguments by citing Baptist confessional statements—yet, it is the sentiments of those statements that the *Manifesto* seeks to critique.

A similar problem is found in Shurden’s defense of the “private” nature of faith. Despite admitting that “the privatization of faith appears on every hand in American culture today,” and that Baptists “are not now nor have they ever been exempt from such privatization,”¹³⁹ and despite expressing alarm at an event he observed at one church—accurately advertised as a “J.A.M. Session” (i.e. Jesus and Me)—he resists the *Manifesto*’s every attempt to call individualism into question. He writes: “A personal faith born in the *privacy* of the human heart is the essence of both Baptist and Protestant life.”¹⁴⁰ Later he adds, “discipleship begins with an awareness of God that is intensely personal, *private* and uncoerced, allowing no proxies, and where each individual is accountable to God,”¹⁴¹ claiming that:

¹³⁷From a study paper issued by the Division for Theology and Education of the European Baptist Federation, quoted *ibid.*, 328.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 328.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 331.

surely “faith as a private matter between God and in the individual” is not the whole of discipleship. But neither is what Baptists have meant by private faith a mindless sashay into some type of deviant New-Age individualism, void of any sense of church. It is, according to the Baptist tradition, where discipleship begins and where it returns again and again for much of its staying power. It is also where the church, according to Baptists, is born.¹⁴²

All of this is problematic for a few reasons. First, it is unclear how his expression of disapproval with privatization in American culture and Baptist life squares with his adamant defense of “private faith;” rather, his affirmations sound like an excellent description of a “J.A.M. Session.” Second, besides creating a straw man of “deviant New-Age individualism,”¹⁴³ Shurden side-steps the *Manifesto*’s real critique. It does not claim that Baptists currently have “no sense of church,” rather, it claims that individualism can warp—and in many cases has warped—the understanding of church that they do have. This deficient view describes faith as “a private matter between God

¹⁴²Ibid. Notice Shurden’s willingness to speak authoritatively for Baptists, as if to say that Baptists share this view. But, the very fact that the *Manifesto* is written by Baptists suggests that Baptists do not speak univocally on this point.

¹⁴³The *Manifesto* says that accommodating to modernity’s individualism and rationalism “weakens the church by transforming the living and embodied Christian faith into an abstract and mythic *gnosis*” (*Manifesto*, 310). The implication is that due to certain currents in modernity, salvation easily can be misconstrued as essentially consisting of an individual’s intellectual assent to certain propositions. If the Christian faith is simply about “saving knowledge” rather than incorporation in the church, a community of transformation, then there is a type of Gnosticism at work. Therefore, *gnosis* need not be heard as a charge of “deviant New Age” spirituality—though there may be resonances. Aside from the *Manifesto*, several Bapto-Catholic articles have cited Harold Bloom’s description of hyper-individualistic instantiations of Baptist piety as a type of Gnosticism in his book *The American Religion*. Most are quite careful to distance themselves from Bloom’s judgment that E.Y. Mullins was the sort of Gnostic that Bloom claimed; however, they do cite Bloom’s approval of this type of faith as an indication of its dangers. See: Freeman, “Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church,” 261 n.11; Freeman, “E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity,” 36; Harvey, “Where, Then, Do We Stand? Baptists, History, and Authority,” 370-371; Henry, “Can Baptist Theology Sustain the Life of the Mind? The Quest for a Vital Baptist Academy,” 215-16.

and the individual or as an activity of competent souls who inherently enjoy unmediated, unassailable, and disembodied experience with God,”¹⁴⁴ and gospel freedom becomes “the pursuit of self-realization apart from the model of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁵ Instead, the *Manifesto* describes the Christian faith as “a shared life of mutual accountability in the church,” claiming that “disciples may not remain aloof from the church and its life, its proclamation, its fellowship, its ministry, its suffering, its peace.”¹⁴⁶ The church is, therefore, essential to the nature of salvation itself.

The emphasis on the “private” dimension of faith expressed by critics like Shurden and Jones seems to be driven by a concern that the *Manifesto* would erode the “personal” dimension of faith, capitulating either to a dead authoritarianism that consists of intellectual assent to established doctrinal propositions or a mechanistic sacramentality that considers the reception of grace nothing more than participation in authorized rites. They express concern that Luther and Calvin could never have raised their voices in protest if they had such a reverence for the “community,” and that the pietistic, experiential roots of the faith may be threatened. These worries represent worthwhile concerns; yet, there are two aspects of the *Manifesto* that help to answer them. First, the *Manifesto* critiques terms like “private,” “autonomous,” and “individual” and the perilous effects these philosophically loaded terms have for the life of faith; however, it does not suggest an unthinking capitulation to either the “community” or to “authority.” The document itself is a protest against the established authoritative interpretation of the

¹⁴⁴*Manifesto*, 305.

¹⁴⁵*Manifesto*, 306.

¹⁴⁶*Manifesto*, 305.

Baptist identity, so it is hardly at risk of losing its capacity for dissent. Also, while it calls into question the propriety of treating experience as an unquestionable religious authority, its call for “believers baptism and called-out church membership”¹⁴⁷ demonstrates that conversion and the personally appropriated dimension of the faith are still central in the *Manifesto*’s vision for the Baptist identity.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Shurden’s critique, ironically enough, is its subtle appeal to authority to make its case. Authority is wielded in two different, but equally powerful ways in his article. The subtler, indirect critique is evident in the implication that the *Manifesto* is un-Baptist. In one place the *Manifesto* is given the left-handed compliment: “While these statements appear to be more characteristic of the broader Christian identity than the specific Baptist identity, they certainly constitute significant notes for Baptists to strike at the beginning of a new millennium.”¹⁴⁸ Elsewhere it is suggested that Anabaptist sympathies unduly influence the *Manifesto*,¹⁴⁹ whether in its call to resist the domination of both state and culture,¹⁵⁰ or to pursue peace and justice.¹⁵¹ In other places, Shurden indicates that the *Manifesto* is simply picking up

¹⁴⁷*Manifesto*, 306.

¹⁴⁸Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*,” 333.

¹⁴⁹In a pointed rebuke of the *Manifesto*, Shurden says, “While I personally admire but would not list Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier among ‘Baptist’ theologians, my sense is that the *Manifesto* might want to do so. So hear Hubmaier on the issue of interpretation of Scripture...” which he follows with a quote in defense of individual interpretation. Ibid., 327.

¹⁵⁰“The latter point may derive from the *Manifesto*’s fondness for the Anabaptist tradition.” Ibid., 337.

¹⁵¹“The *Manifesto*’s concerns for ‘peace’ and ‘justice’ are doubtless rooted in its fondness for Anabaptism. While Baptists have never been numbered among the historic ‘Peace Churches,’ the call for peace and justice is a noble one. In this connection, one

the arguments of Baptists' old foes. When responding to the *Manifesto*'s critique of individualism, Shurden writes, "The Roman Catholic Church, however, has been making this very point ever since the Protestant Reformation."¹⁵² With regard to the private interpretation of Scripture, he adds that "while admittedly freighted with difficulties, as the Catholic Church has long and rightly claimed," the value of individual interpretation is central for an understanding of Baptist identity. Stronger still, he also makes the case that the *Manifesto*'s critiques are "exactly what the seventeenth-century establishment in England and America said of Baptists of their day." The implication in all of these examples is clear: the critiques made by the *Manifesto* are the sort that could only be made by those outside the community. It seems that much of Shurden's argument is intended to suggest that the *Manifesto* is either too blandly Christian, too Anabaptist, or too Calvinist, Puritan, or Catholic—which is to say, it is anything but Baptist.

A second, more direct, approach can be seen in Shurden's conclusion. There he asserts that "I do not know of a description of the Baptist identity anywhere that would not place universal freedom of conscience and religious liberty at the very center of the Baptist identity."¹⁵³ Later he expands on the theme, saying

Maybe the most serious oversight in the *Manifesto*'s effort to reinterpret the Baptist identity is its neglect of one of the major tiles in the mosaic of Baptist

may not be too far off base saying, as Fisher Humphreys said and in a positive rather than pejorative vein, that the *Manifesto* is 'an Anabaptist tract for the times.' For me, the document reinterprets the Baptist identity too much in terms of the Anabaptist identity, though I acknowledge a strong Calvinistic emphasis in the document as well," Ibid., 340. Although this quote seems both ambivalent and mildly irenic, the inclusion of Calvinism, closely associated with the Controversy with SBC conservatives, suggests a darker reading of the passage.

¹⁵²Ibid., 325.

¹⁵³Ibid., 337.

identity. I am not suggesting that there is only one way to talk about freedom of conscience as part of the Baptist identity. I am suggesting, however, that one cannot talk about the Baptist identity without talking about freedom of conscience for all.¹⁵⁴

This is a fascinating move for Shurden to make. In so doing, he suggests that there is something essential to the Baptist identity, a principle apart from which one cannot claim the Baptist heritage. Because it sets an essential criteria for denominational identity, this strategy is creedal, and in fact, “magisterial.” This is deeply ironic in that Shurden, more than any other popular interpreter of the moderate Baptist identity, has rejected “creedalism” in all its forms.

Together, Shurden and Jones offer the most prominent criticisms of the *Manifesto*. Despite the problems noted with each, their arguments are important and provoke responses that help to clarify what is, and what is not, being claimed in the *Manifesto*.

What is Baptist Catholicity?

Having surveyed the initial document and its two most significant critiques, one might ask, “What exactly is a Bapto-Catholic, and how does the term relate to the *Manifesto* and the conversation it provoked?” It will be left to others to provide a detailed history of the conversation that ensued; instead, what follows here is a thematic exploration of Baptist Catholicity, surveying general considerations, Harmon’s proposal of seven marks of Baptist Catholicity, and then, an alternate proposal for five marks of Bapto-Catholic theology.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 338.

A range of terms—including “Bapto-Catholic,” “Catholic Baptists” and “Baptist Catholicity”—has been employed by theologians who look to the diverse contours of the Baptist story, and to the breadth of the Christian tradition, for the sake of discovering sources of renewal for Baptist life.¹⁵⁵ One could rightly describe the effort as a “Baptist *Ressourcement*.”¹⁵⁶ It is important to note that this “movement” bears a distinctly different character than others in contemporary Baptist life, for example, those that have used weblogs and other internet-based tools in order to exert political pressure to influence the conversation on the national denominational level.¹⁵⁷ In fact, the term “movement” may be too strong a term to accurately describe Bapto-Catholicism. There is no clearly defined group working toward specific political goals. A helpful analogy is found in the “Radical Orthodoxy” project, which describes itself as a “sensibility” rather

¹⁵⁵As indicated above, Bapto-Catholic was coined by Ralph Wood and is favored here due to its grammatical flexibility. The term “Catholic Baptist” has been used by Curtis Freeman in “A Confession for Catholic Baptists,” from: Gary Furr and Curtis W. Freeman, *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1994). It can also be found in the subtitle to Barry Harvey’s forthcoming book: *Can These Bones Live: A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press). “Baptist Catholicity” is Steven Harmon’s preferred term in *Towards Baptist Catholicity*.

¹⁵⁶See the summary of Harmon’s discussion of “*ressourcement*” below, p. 124.

¹⁵⁷Despite the distinct differences, there are similarities between the *Manifesto* project and the “Baptist bloggers.” The statement was drafted by the co-authors in the earliest days of email. The primary difference is that the bloggers have tended to focus on the political dimensions of Baptist life: the inner workings of committees, the candidates for denominational leadership, and the various policies up for debate in denominational meetings. The *Manifesto*, on the other hand, was intended to generate a theological conversation, influencing Baptist self-conceptions rather than Baptist votes. For one examination of the “Baptist blogger” phenomenon, see: Phillip Jordon, “SBC Leaders Acknowledge Baptist Bloggers Here to Stay,” Associated Baptist Press, article posted February 19, 2007, <http://www.abpnews.com/1739.article> (accessed June 11, 2008).

than a “movement,”¹⁵⁸ and extends its work through publications and the exchange of ideas at academic conferences. Also, while there are self-described advocates of the Radical Orthodox perspective and publishing projects dedicated to advancing the conversation, there are other thinkers whose works resonate with the themes of the project apart from any intentional identification with the group. Similarly, the Bapto-Catholic conversation has been advanced primarily through books, academic journals, and academic conferences. Also, while there are scholars who identify themselves as “Bapto-Catholics,” there are others who are uncomfortable with the label, yet their work resonates with Bapto-Catholic sensibilities.

Towards a Definition of Bapto-Catholic Sensibilities: Steven R. Harmon

Much like defining the Baptist identity, defining the Bapto-Catholic sensibility is a challenge. In both instances the challenge is the same; given the diversity of the thinkers involved, there is no easy way to essentialize the project. Nevertheless, it is possible to paint a portrait with broad strokes. Steven R. Harmon offers a portrait of this type in *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, identifying seven “identifying marks” of Bapto-Catholic theology.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ “Radical Orthodoxy is a theological movement—or better, sensibility—operating across many Christian traditions, in dialogue with other non-Christian traditions, and working alongside other academic disciplines such as politics, economics, the natural sciences, social and cultural theory.” Radical Orthodoxy Online, “Resources and Information,” <http://www.calvin.edu/~jks4/ro/> (accessed June 11, 2008).

¹⁵⁹ Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 6-17.

First, Harmon argues that *Bapto-Catholics see tradition as a source of authority*.¹⁶⁰ He notes that a variety of theologians, including Stanley Grenz, Phillip Thompson, Mark Medley, D. H. Williams, and Stephen Holmes, have suggested ways that the authority of tradition might be understood. Some have also suggested ways that Baptists might actively engage the broader Christian tradition, whether by entering into a constructive dialogue with other Christian groups that have more thickly defined conceptions of tradition,¹⁶¹ or by directly engaging the patristic sources and abandoning the myth of the “Constantinian Fall” of the church.¹⁶²

Second, according to Harmon, *Bapto-Catholics believe that there is a place for creeds in liturgy and catechesis*.¹⁶³ While rejecting the doctrinal rigidity and authoritarian use of statements of faith in the SBC, they have affirmed the role of the ancient ecumenical creeds as tools for Christian education, hermeneutical fidelity, and ecumenical connection. They have advocated the use of creeds in large convocations such as the meeting of the Baptist World Alliance and even in weekly worship services.

Third, *Bapto-Catholics approach liturgy as the context for formation by tradition*.¹⁶⁴ Harmon notes a growing emphasis in Baptist theology on the formative nature of liturgy as well as renewed attention to Prosper of Aquitaine’s maxim “*lex orandi, lex credendi*.” He cites a number of projects that attempt to craft a well-

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 7.

¹⁶²Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁶³Ibid., 8-10.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 10-11.

articulated theology of liturgy and worship. The result is an approach to Baptist liturgy that is more attentive to its capacity for Christian formation.

Fourth, *Bapto-Catholics see community as the locus of authority*.¹⁶⁵ Harmon points to the communal focus of the *Manifesto* which prescribes various communal practices as an alternative to the individualistic tendencies that characterize both ends of the conservative / moderate spectrum. Framed ecclesialogically, this approach to tradition sees the church as a “traditioning” community, actively handing down that which is believed, rather than a static repository of that which is handed down.¹⁶⁶

Fifth, Harmon observes that *Bapto-Catholics have a sacramental emphasis in their theology*. The claim is not simply that Bapto-Catholics have a more robust theology of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper than those that are dependant on Zwinglian approaches, “but more broadly, a theology that understands the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist as paradigmatic of the relation of God to the material order that is disclosed in the Incarnation.”¹⁶⁷ For this reason, Bapto-Catholic scholars have produced essays that relate sacramental theology to a host of topics: a Protestant retrieval of the traditional seven sacraments, the political implications of Baptist sacramentality, Baptist notions of “real presence,” and the sacramentality of ordination.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 11-13.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 12-13. Harmon draws upon Mark Medley’s discussion of the distinction between “traditio” and “traditia,” discussed below.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., 13.

¹⁶⁸Notable collections of essays include: Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, v. 5 (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2003); Anthony R. Cross, ed., *Baptist Sacramentalism 2* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006); Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than*

Sixth, Harmon claims that *Bapto-Catholics approach their task as a constructive retrieval of theology*. He compares the Bapto-Catholic attitude toward tradition to the *ressourcement* approach of the French Catholic theologians of the “*nouvelle théologie*” movement that strongly influenced the Second Vatican Council. The firm conviction of these theologians was that “the task of *ressourcement*, ‘retrieval’, is prerequisite to *aggiornamento*, ‘updating’.”¹⁶⁹ In other words, the best way to engage the future faithfully is to look to the vast resources of the past for constructive ideas. Baptists, therefore, have profitably discovered rich sources for theological development in ancient concepts like the church as *altera civitas* (another city), or sanctification as a growing participation in the divine nature as in the Byzantine concept of “divinization.”¹⁷⁰ In this mode, a theologian’s task is to engage the issues constructively, engaging problems and questions by bringing to the table the rich resources of the whole tradition of theological engagement.

Seventh, according to Harmon, *Bapto-Catholics engage in “thick” ecumenism*. Rather than a thin, “lowest common denominator,” approach, “‘thick’ ecumenism proceeds on the basis of a common commitment both to deep exploration of the ancient ecumenical tradition and to deep exploration of the particularities of the respective denominational traditions.”¹⁷¹ He suggests that these efforts are exemplified by the

a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 2 (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2002).

¹⁶⁹Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 15.

¹⁷⁰Harmon cites the work of Paul Fiddes, Stanley Grenz and Clark Pinnock; *ibid.*

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*, 16.

Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and the Baptist contributions to its journal *Pro Ecclesia*.¹⁷²

Harmon's seven marks capture well the emphases of the Bapto-Catholic writings. The only deficiency of his account is that it does not indicate what sorts of methodological or philosophical concerns inform the project. For this reason, it seems helpful to build on Harmon's proposal by slightly recasting his marks, condensing some marks under broader categories, and adding marks that describe the methodological aspects of the project.

A Proposal: Five Marks of Bapto-Catholic Theology

What follows is a list of five alternate marks of Bapto-Catholicism. The first two marks address the methodological and philosophical commitments not addressed in the previous account; the final three marks are a condensed version of the categories proposed by Harmon. Because it was the focal point of the conversation that ensued, each mark will be illustrated primarily by examples from the Bapto-Catholic articles that appeared in *PRS* in the decade since the publication of the *Manifesto*. Accordingly, I suggest that the Bapto-Catholic sensibility is: 1) theological in its methodological orientation, 2) postmodern in its philosophical assumptions, 3) congregationally centered in its hermeneutics and practices, 4) catholic in its approach to tradition, especially with

¹⁷²Examples include: Nigel G. Wright, "The Petrine Ministry: Baptist Reflections," *Pro Ecclesia* 13.4, (Fall 2004) 451-465; Tarmo Toom, "Baptists on Justification: Can We Join the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*?" *Pro Ecclesia* 13.3 (Sum 2004), 289-306; Timothy George, "The Sacramentality of the Church: An Evangelical Baptist Perspective" *Pro Ecclesia* 12.3 (Sum 2003), 309-323; Stepen J. Duffy, "Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic Soteriologies: A Comparative Study," *Pro Ecclesia* 9.4 (Fall 2000), 434-459; Philip E. Thompson, "A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking A Catholic Spirit Among Early Baptists," *Pro Ecclesia* 8.1 (Wint 1999), 51-72.

respect to sacraments and liturgy, and 5) ecumenical in its aim. Because the first two marks are new proposals and the final three are reformulated versions of Harmon's proposal, the bulk of the attention in what follows will be given to the theological methodology and postmodern outlook of the project.

Bapto-Catholicism is theological in its methodological orientation. On one level, this principle is similar to Leonard's conclusion regarding the "fallacy of origins." No dispute about the nature of Baptist identity can be settled by an easy appeal to historical precedent; not only are the historical precedents diverse, and therefore impossible to use as simple "proof texts," but also, the constant pursuit of fidelity requires openness to revision and change. On another level, however, the Bapto-Catholic position seems to go beyond this, suggesting that theology is the primary language of the faith. This claim is in no way intended to minimize the central importance of history,¹⁷³ rather, as a synthetic discipline—drawing together the insights of history, biblical studies, and philosophy, among others—theology attempts to engage both the dogmatic content of the faith, and the practical questions of who we are to be and why. This basic conviction drives the Bapto-Catholic project and, as we have seen with Shurden's critique, can result in a misunderstanding with other Baptist scholars employing other research methods. This approach to the Baptist identity is evident throughout the Bapto-Catholic writings, but is especially prominent in the work of Philip E. Thompson, Mikael Broadway, and Curtis Freeman.

¹⁷³Because the MacIntyrian approach claims that "narratives" are essential for the perpetuation of a tradition, history is certainly not dispensable. In fact, as will be seen, Bapto-Catholic authors are quite interested in history, though their conclusions are often at odds with the standard interpretations of Baptist historians.

Two articles by Philip Thompson exemplify this approach well. The first is entitled “Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical, Theological, and Liturgical Analysis.”¹⁷⁴ Here Thompson engages Shurden and Jones, arguing that a fundamental difference between the *Manifesto* and its critics is that the critics posit continuity in the Baptist identity,¹⁷⁵ while the *Manifesto* notes significant changes in Baptist thought over time that requires Baptists to reassess their current position. Given that the disputing parties find themselves in a stalemate, Thompson suggests, “turning elsewhere, to the life of Baptist communities, especially their worship,” and asking, “How have the sung, prayed, and enacted faith of Baptists gathered for worship related to the more formal theological writings?”¹⁷⁶ He notes significant—and in some cases, radical—shifts in the theology embedded in these artifacts of Baptist practice. Prayers shifted in focus, hymns were reworded, and hymnals reshaped, moving away from a posture of openness to sacramental understandings of baptism and the Lord’s Supper and communal understandings of the church, toward a desacramentalized and individualistic interpretation. Thompson boldly states that “the theological foundation for Baptist thought and life for their first two centuries was a Trinitarian theocentrism,”¹⁷⁷ grounded

¹⁷⁴Philip E. Thompson, “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical Theological and Liturgical Analysis,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27.3 (Fall 2000), 287-302.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 287-289.

¹⁷⁶Thompson, “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical Theological and Liturgical Analysis,” 290.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 300. Thompson and Jones have quite different conceptions of theocentrism and anthropocentrism. As noted above, Jones’ version of theocentrism seems quite anthropocentric. Unfortunately, Thompson does not engage Jones directly on this issue.

in a theological emphasis on the freedom of God, which over time was eroded by anthropocentrism. He concludes with a provocative claim:

Baptist identity has been re-envisioned on the level of its theological foundation. So profound has been the shift, I would venture that even affirmations shared by early and contemporary Baptists, such as church-state separation, are mere resemblances and no evidence of continuity. There is certainly room for projects such as the *Manifesto*, which seek to recover vital aspects of earlier Baptist theological identity.¹⁷⁸

This quote is quite revealing. In it, Thompson makes clear his goal: to provide an accurate historical account of theological currents in Baptist life that demonstrates a theological claim, namely, that the Baptist story is characterized by a deep theological discontinuity between its earliest days and its most recent expressions—which justifies re-envisioning projects like the *Manifesto*. In other words, Thompson recognizes that he is making a historical argument as part of a larger theological argument.

This method is even more the case with Thompson's article entitled "Seventeenth-Century Baptist Confessions in Context."¹⁷⁹ In it he explores the effects that the historical and cultural contexts of Baptist confessions in the seventeenth century may have had on the confessions themselves. In fact, the article is so meticulously historical in its focus that one may lose sight of the underlying theological conviction he indicates at the outset. He states, "Baptists most often regard the confessions as primarily declarative or descriptive with significance limited to the time in which they were drafted," leading to the typical distinction between prescriptive creeds and descriptive confessions. Instead Thompson indicates that he,

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 302.

¹⁷⁹Philip E. Thompson, "Seventeenth Century Baptist Confessions In Context," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29.4 (Winter 2002), 335-348.

shall here argue that a more careful examination of early Baptists' engagement in their confessions with their context will allow us to see better the contours of their self-definition, from which we may continue to learn. Many studies make passing reference to the contexts in which Baptist confessions were written. Yet analysis of the contexts and Baptists' responses to them with an eye toward an emergent self-definition is generally lacking.¹⁸⁰

In other words, a greater historical understanding of the complexity of Baptists' responses in the past can provide much grist for the contemporary theological mill. Even when employing historiographical methods, Bapto-Catholic writings are raising theological questions for constructive purposes.

One can see the same theological methodology at work in Mikael N. Broadway's article "Preaching What We Practice: Churches Confessing the Whole Gospel."¹⁸¹ Broadway begins by exploring the MacIntyrian notion of practice and McClendon's understanding of the "practice of doctrine" in which the church extends its work of confessing the gospel. He then explores the confessions of John Smyth noting various theological facets that emerged, observing that "the confessions illustrate a second order articulation of the practices which the congregation had come to understand as essential to their claiming to be the church of Jesus Christ."¹⁸² Broadway then turns his attention to the confessions of Thomas Helwys and the decidedly "spiritual" turn of his thought, noting *The Mystery of Iniquity's* attempt to appease the king by granting that the sovereign had rights to his subjects' bodies, but not their souls. Broadway then describes the disastrous implications that this bifurcation of body and soul would have later in the

¹⁸⁰Ibid., 336.

¹⁸¹Mikael N. Broadway, "Preaching What We Practice: Churches Confessing the Whole Gospel," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29.4, (Winter 2002), 381-400.

¹⁸²Ibid., 386.

legitimation of slavery among Southern Baptists. Like Thompson, Broadway is engaging the historical narrative for constructive ethical and theological ends.

This theological methodology is also apparent in the work of the most prolific contributor to the Bapto-Catholic conversation, Curtis Freeman. In many of Freeman's works the argument is built with extensive reference to Baptist history, yet in all of these cases, the methodology is, in fact, theological. In each of his articles, even those that deal exclusively with historical concerns, the goal is never purely descriptive.¹⁸³ One article that exemplifies this method of developing theology-via-history is Freeman's exploration of Trinitarian thought in early Baptist life, "God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity." Freeman begins his historical survey of Baptist Trinitarian reflections with the late seventeenth century controversy among General Baptists involving Matthew

¹⁸³An article that similarly demonstrates this principle is: Curtis W. Freeman, "E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," *Review & Expositor* 96.1, (Winter 1999), 23-42. In it he describes the difficult course charted by Mullins between the Scylla and Charybdis of fundamentalism and liberalism. To accomplish this task he provides an account of the rise of competing fundamentalist and liberal perspectives in nineteenth and twentieth century thought, and the effects each had on Baptist thought. One system was established on the bedrock of reason, while the other sought to find a solid foundation on religious experience; nevertheless, both were functions of philosophical currents of the Enlightenment. He then narrates Mullins' career as a theologian and denominational statesman who successfully navigated the perils of modern theology, connecting his theological writings to the dangerous currents of his day. The result is a nuanced portrait of a controversial figure. Despite the historically oriented account Freeman gives, it is clear that he is doing far more than telling a story. He makes clear that a modern Baptist ought not blithely follow Mullins's example without recognizing the problematic tensions embodied in his project. His conclusion makes this clear:

One way of accounting for how he negotiated a route through the narrow straits between the crushing rock of common sense rationality and the threatening swirl of experiential religion is that he made the journey on a calm day. The seas on which we sail, however, are more turbulent, and the currents more treacherous. The consensus of evangelical doctrine with which Mullins bound himself has long since disappeared, and the value of soul competency as a navigational tool for averting danger is limited. (37)

Caffyn and his heterodox denials of the full humanity and divinity of Christ and the Trinity. From there Freeman traces the story forward through Baptist history and the varied episodes of passionate defense, reasoned argumentation, or ambivalent confession of Trinitarianism. He concludes by citing the current anemic state of Trinitarian convictions, citing McClendon's assessment of the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message in which he mused that "the guide-book tone of the confession, which reads like a quick tour through a theological museum, reflects a growing indifference by Baptists to Trinitarian faith and practice."¹⁸⁴ Freeman's own view is far dimmer:

Closer examination of the history of Baptist reflections on the trinity, however, has displayed not an indifferent Trinitarianism, but instead an implicit (and sometimes explicit) Unitarianism...If most Baptists are Unitarians that simply have not gotten around to denying the Trinity, is there hope for them to recover a rich Trinitarian faith and practice? Other Baptists hope so.¹⁸⁵

Freeman's article exhibits not only close attention to the historical details surrounding the historical developments (or devolutions) in Baptist theology, but it unapologetically makes use of the historical narrative to suggest particular theological ends. This does not mean that Freeman tells a convenient history with details that only support his thesis—in fact, contrary to what some might expect of a *Manifesto* figure, his account of seventeenth century Baptist figures is far from hagiography—it simply means that his interaction with the historical details is driven by a constructive theological question. His analysis of General Baptists is grim: "Having refused the life-giving grace of the Trinity, the cankering error proved terminal for the old General Baptists just as Thomas Monck had predicted, and the New Connection which maintained a Trinitarian basis of

¹⁸⁴Freeman, "God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity," 343.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 344.

fellowship alone survived.”¹⁸⁶ The implication is clear: falling victim to the same error today may well lead to the same fate. For Freeman, the boundary between history and theology is quite permeable.

The same permeability can be witnessed in another historically oriented article that provides a fascinating look at “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,”¹⁸⁷ (i.e., those born between 1919/20 and 1929).¹⁸⁸ While the article is descriptively focused and attends closely to the historical and sociological influences on the theology of the thinkers of this generation, it is clear that the article is far more than a historical exploration. Aside from provoking interesting questions about the relationship between a theologian’s culture and his or her theology, it concludes by providing a guide to the three main Baptist approaches to the theological task.¹⁸⁹ This typological section is not only an interesting theological analysis of the

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 328.

¹⁸⁷Curtis W. Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27.1, (Spring 2000), 21-38.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 25. The notable names include: E. J. Carnell, Langdon Glikey, Morris Ashcraft, C. Norman Kraus, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Gordon Kaufman, James Leo Garrett, Gordon Lewis, Takashi Yamada, John Howard Yoder, James Deotis Roberts, Osadolor Imasogie, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harvey Cox. One will notice, given the presence of Anabaptist figures in the list, that Freeman’s list makes use of the “little b baptist” designation.

¹⁸⁹Drawing upon the examples of the theologians of ‘generation twenty-something,” Freeman’s offers this typology of Baptist theology:

In the first type, theology is a discipline within the history of ideas which, although performed by those who are historically or confessionally baptist, is not necessarily related to the ongoing life of concrete convictional communities. This type of theology done by baptists is part of an intellectual culture that might well be described as Christian philosophy (or religious studies)” (Ibid., 32).

Type two:

In this type, theology is a general field and an analytical method of study, independent of other methods and fields (e.g., philosophy, psychology, cultural

main characters in the story sketched by Freeman in the first half of the article, but it also seems to be an important part of Freeman's broader theological project. Given that his third and final type, "doing baptist theology," describes the post-liberal approach taken by many thinkers with whom Freeman expresses solidarity in other works, one might reasonably conclude that one goal of the article is to locate his own work, and perhaps that of the broader Bapto-Catholic project, alongside this group of theologians who were concerned to build an explicitly baptist theology. Here we see that the attempt is to provide an accurate history of a generation of baptist theologians and an accurate typology of the baptist theological endeavor, while at the same time advancing a clear case for a particular understanding of the Baptist identity.

Bapto-Catholicism is postmodern in its assumptions. Given the varied understandings of "postmodernity," one might wonder in what sense Bapto-Catholics can be considered postmoderns. A detailed answer to this question is given at the outset in the *PRS* conversation in Freeman's "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?" Freeman begins by sketching the state of modern theology, which is the product of a long

anthropology, etc.). It draws heavily upon research from Scripture studies and the history of doctrine. Type 2 theology is practiced by those who are confessionally baptist, and its aim is to serve the well being of the whole church. Unlike type 1, historic baptist theologians are important conversational partners for this theology, but as in type 1 the social and convictional life of baptists is not regarded as paradigmatic (Ibid.,34).

Type three:

In type 3, theology as a second-order appraisal of Christian language and action endeavors to display the grammar of first-order statements, then it seeks to challenge and test Christian language, not only for clarity and coherence, but more importantly for gospel faithfulness. Thus, in its descriptive and critical tasks, type 3 theology attends to the beliefs and practices of convictional communities in which the baptist way is regarded as paradigmatic. In short, this type of theology is guided by the baptist vision (Ibid., 35).

development from its beginnings with the “Constantinian” conjoining of church and state, through the various permutations of the middle ages and the upheavals of the Protestant Reformation, to the modern result of a subtle wedding of church and culture, even among groups that preached separation of church and state. He notes, “ironically, in North America, where Protestantism became the de facto established church, no group exemplified the christianized culture better than the Baptists, especially in the southern United States.”¹⁹⁰ The dominance of the church in culture came under attack with the rise of the philosophical movements of the Enlightenment. Protestants accommodated, responding to the philosophical demands of Enlightenment notions of foundationalism, “which requires all beliefs to be justified by a special class of beliefs that cannot be questioned.”¹⁹¹ Freeman notes that the result was a pair of seemingly opposite, yet twin, responses: fundamentalism (grounded on common sense rationalism) and liberalism (appealing to the foundation of religious experience). Baptists also were directly influenced by currents in Enlightenment philosophy, picking up aspects of Locke’s conceptions of religious liberty and autonomous individualism, especially prevalent in the American context.

Freeman traces these themes in great historical and philosophical detail in order to demonstrate several things: 1) to “thickly” demonstrate Baptist complicity in a type of Constantinianism, 2) to demonstrate the ways in which fundamentalism and liberalism are related, albeit counterintuitively, and 3) to demonstrate “why it is a mistake to write off the twentieth-century theological conflicts among Baptists simply as power plays by

¹⁹⁰Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?” 276.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 277.

mean people.”¹⁹² Freeman’s narration also leads to a crucial assertion: “Because the current crisis in Baptist theology is occasioned by the collapse of the Enlightenment project, theologies that depend on the Enlightenment for their intelligibility cannot successfully negotiate the transition beyond modernity.”¹⁹³ In a concise statement of the problem, Freeman suggests that

There are signs of insurgence against the modern *consensus fidelium* which has held sway since the eighteenth century. No longer can it be assumed that individual rational agents can arrive at absolute, objective, universal, and non-historically conditioned truths that serve as the foundations for knowledge. *All* truths are historically conditioned and tradition dependent. One of the few points of agreement in the late twentieth-century academy is that the Enlightenment project has run its course. This is the postmodern *consensus (in)fidelium*. The upshot is that theological liberals and conservatives can no longer assume a prevailing intellectual and cultural consensus that privileges their affirmations as “grounded” and “justified” in the self evident truths of experience or Scripture. Now that the canons of reason engendered by modernity no longer hold sway, Christian theologians must grasp anew both the terror and freedom of what it means to have no other foundation than Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11) who is known and made known in the gospel story.¹⁹⁴

Freeman suggests that if Baptist theology continues to define itself by appealing to philosophical convictions that are untenable (not simply unfashionable), then the coherence of the Baptist identity itself is imperiled.

Having demonstrated the inevitability of engaging whatever may lie on the other side of modernity, Freeman notes three main strands of postmodern thought with greater and lesser promise for the future of Baptist theology. The first strand consists of the “poststructuralists, deconstructionists, and pragmatists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel

¹⁹²Ibid., 293.

¹⁹³Ibid. The assumption that “the Enlightenment Project” has failed comes directly from the analysis of Alasdair MacIntyre. This will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

¹⁹⁴Ibid.

Foucault, Jean Francois Lyotard, and Richard Rorty,”¹⁹⁵ a school of thought that is typically hostile to religious and metaphysical claims. He notes that few Baptists have seen much promise in this approach, other than some helpfully critical aspects of deconstructionism. A second strand is exemplified by Leslie Newbigin, whose missiological theology resulted in a critique of the domestication of the church to cultural and philosophical demands, which, in turn, contributed to the “post-Christian paganism of the West.”¹⁹⁶ Freeman sees Barry Harvey’s call for the church to “foster a counter-societal outlook”—as opposed to interpreting the church as a function of society or society as a function of the church—as another example of this type. The third strand is occupied by the post-liberal projects figures like Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Brevard Childs, Stanley Hauerwas, George Hunsinger, and William Placher, and anticipated by the work of Karl Barth. Among Baptists, Freeman suggests that this approach is best exemplified in the work of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. Of these strands, Freeman sees the latter two strands of postmodernity as healthy ways forward.

The final words of the article prepare the reader for the article’s appendix, the *Baptist Manifesto*. Freeman suggests that it is not something foreign to Baptist practice; rather it is exploring familiar ground with different assumptions:

The difference between this postmodern course and its modern predecessors has to do not with changed *practices* such as Bible study, following Jesus, common life, baptism, preaching, the Lord’s table, and the disestablishment of the church, but rather with a reassessment of the theological *accounts* and *warrants* that are necessary for these practices to flourish into the next millennium.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 295.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 296.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., 302.

The conclusion clearly indicates his answer to the rhetorical question posed by the article's title: Baptist theology can, and must, be re-imagined.¹⁹⁸

A similar critique of modernity, attempting to disengage Baptist identity from the philosophical freight of the Enlightenment can be found in various other Bapto-Catholic articles in *PRS*. As one might expect, given Freeman's mention of Barry Harvey as an exemplar of a type of postmodern thought, Harvey's articles in *PRS* clearly demonstrate the postmodern dimension of Bapto-Catholic thought. His article "Round and Round About the Town: The Ecclesial Dimensions of Living In the Truth,"¹⁹⁹ expresses the subtle tyranny of the City made all the more powerful by its illusion of freedom, and the possibility of ecclesiology as a means of living in freedom and truth. Yet, he makes clear that his intention is not mere lamentation:

My purpose here is not to add my voice to the growing chorus of modernity bashers nor sound a note of resignation and despair. It is rather to remind us that the common vocation of all Christians is to abide in the truth in the midst of a fallen world that lives within a lie. Indeed, I want to argue as forcefully as I can for the possibility of this kind of life, not outside the City limits in some imaginary cloister, but within its confines.²⁰⁰

Beyond this, Harvey's article "Where, Then, Do We Stand? Baptists, History, and Authority" addresses the central question of the postmodern critique: the challenge of the

¹⁹⁸Freeman explores these themes further in various articles: "E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity;" A New Perspective On Baptist Identity," 65; "Toward a Sensus Fidelium for an Evangelical Church," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 163-5; "The 'Eclipse' of Spiritual Exegesis: Biblical Interpretation from the Reformation to Modernity," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 35, (Summer 1993), 25).

¹⁹⁹Barry Harvey, "Round and Round About the Town: The Ecclesial Dimensions of Living In the Truth," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25.1 (Spring 1998), 105-114.

²⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 110.

narratability of history and hermeneutics—whether the object is the book of Scripture, or the book of the world—in an age after the death of the Enlightenment assumptions of universal, objective, rationality. Harvey suggests that “it seems unwise for believers to spend precious intellectual capital in an effort to shore up its eroding foundations. Neither should Christians follow the lead of postmodern cults who discern nothing but chaos and call it carnival.”²⁰¹ Rather, he calls Baptists to recover their sense of narratability through the pedagogy embedded in the communal practices inherited in the Christian tradition,²⁰² because “embodied in these and other practices are the authorizing patterns for our common life and language, foremost among which are generative memory and poetic imagination, theological self-understanding, and church order. These patterns constitute a series of sign-acts performed *in and for* the world.”²⁰³ Therefore, this community of practice and memory provides a way beyond radical individualism of modernity and its resulting linguistic incoherence; in the church, Christ is the *logos* of the world made flesh.

In addition to Harvey’s works, one can find clear examples of the postmodern aspect of Bapto-Catholicism in several other articles in the *PRS* conversation. Douglas

²⁰¹Barry Harvey, “Where, Then, Do We Stand?: Baptists, History, and Authority,” 369.

²⁰²He specifically mentions: “communal reading of Scripture; the preaching, teaching, and baptism that nurture a called-out church membership; the eucharistically-ordered sharing of burdens within the fellowship of the church and the extension of hospitality to those without; and the work of fraternal admonition and mutual forgiveness within congregations and the task of moral discernment and doctrinal consultation between them.” *Ibid.*, 378.

²⁰³*Ibid.*, 378-79.

V. Henry's reflections on a Baptist theology of higher education,²⁰⁴ Mark Medley's reflections on the normativity of tradition,²⁰⁵ and D. H. Williams's exploration of the patristic tradition as canon,²⁰⁶ all offer significant examples of ways in which Baptists have come to critique the philosophical inheritance of modernity and seek a way beyond it in the traditions and practices of the church.²⁰⁷

Bapto-Catholics are congregationally centered in their approach to hermeneutics and practices. The congregational focus of Bapto-Catholic theology is evident in Barry Harvey's articles mentioned above. Harvey suggests that the local congregation is an essential component of the life of faith; it is in the church that one acquires the distinct language and practices of the church that give coherence to the Scripture and the world, and it is the congregation that enables an alternate "politics,"²⁰⁸ that coheres with faithful discipleship.

²⁰⁴Douglas V. Henry, "Can Baptist Theology Sustain the Life of the Mind? The Quest for a Vital Baptist Academy," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33.2 (Summer 2006), 203-226.

²⁰⁵Mark Medley, "Catholics, Baptists, and the Normativity of Tradition: A Review Essay," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28.2 (Summer 2001), 119-129.

²⁰⁶Daniel H. Williams, "The Patristic Tradition as Canon," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32.4 (Winter 2005), 357-379.

²⁰⁷Although it was not one of Harmon's seven identifying marks, from the opening words of the Preface, he makes clear that the postmodern critique is an important part of his conception of Baptist catholicity: "*Towards Baptist Catholicity* contends that the reconstruction of the Baptist vision in the wake of modernity's dissolution requires a retrieval of the ancient ecumenical tradition that forms Christian identity through liturgical rehearsal, catechetical instruction, and ecclesial practice" (xvii).

²⁰⁸This is to say, life in the church is ordered by a different set of assumptions (e.g. obedience to Christ) that regulate life together as the body of Christ, thus creating an embodied witness to the gospel. This is a point Shurden seems to miss in his critique of Hauerwas: "Hauerwas fails to make clear which "politics of the church" he means, but

Similar themes are developed by Mikael Broadway, who builds upon a common conviction that doctrinal theology is a second-order activity.²⁰⁹ This suggests that theoretical reflections grow out of the practices and the worship of the church. The rich and complex interrelationship between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi* can be witnessed in his example of the doctrine of believer's baptism. Broadway suggests that in John Smyth's church the centrality of a covenantally based ecclesiology gave rise to the practice, and *then* to the theology, of believer's baptism. The confessions that articulated these principles "illustrate a second-order articulation of the practices which the congregation has come to understand as essential to their claiming to be the church of Jesus Christ."²¹⁰ In this, and several other articles,²¹¹ one can discern the deeply Baptist concern for the centrality of the local congregation. For Bapto-Catholics, this centrality is the result of the congregation's role as a hermeneutical community that seeks to discern

the appropriate Baptist response to this kind of theologizing is that Baptists were born reacting to and rejecting the idea of "spiritual masters." The right and responsibility of private interpretation of Scripture is most certainly part of the "politics" of Baptist church polity" (Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist *Manifesto*," 326). Politics—as either Hauerwas or the *Manifesto* authors portray it—is not primarily about church polity typically conceived, but a more fundamental understanding of the church as *polis*.

²⁰⁹Broadway cites Geoffrey Wainwright and James Wm. McClendon as among the many who have promoted this view, "to the point that it may even have become commonplace." See, "Preaching What We Practice: Churches Confessing the Whole Gospel," 382.

²¹⁰*Ibid.*, 386.

²¹¹Notable among these are Curtis Freeman's exploration of "communion ecclesiology" and the specific relationship between the Eucharist and the church ("Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology and the Free Church," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31.3 (Fall 2004), 259-272) and Douglas Henry's emphasis on the role of community in his conception of a theology of higher education ("Can Baptist Theology Sustain the Life of the Mind?: The Quest for a Vital Baptist Academy," 219).

the sense of Scripture and the world, and as a worshipping community whose faith is embodied in what it confesses and how it practices that confession.

Bapto-Catholicism is “catholic” in its approach to tradition, especially regarding sacraments and liturgy. The “little c” catholicity affirmed by Bapto-Catholics is an extension of the notion of the “communion of saints” affirmed by the Apostles Creed, or as Chesterton described it, the “democracy of the dead.”²¹² This is to say that the constructive work of re-envisioning the Baptist future must involve engagement with the whole body of Christ, including Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants of various persuasions, and the varied strands of the Baptist tradition. In large part, a call for a richer theological conception of tradition underwrites this work.

A strong advocate for a robust engagement with the tradition is D. H. Williams who notes the canonical role of patristic theology. He is quick to clarify that his claim “is not meant to equate patristic authority with that of the Bible. Any of the ancient church Fathers would have been horrified to find their written legacy was being placed on par with Holy Scripture.”²¹³ Yet, he argues that there is “an indissoluble connection between the apostolic and patristic church,”²¹⁴ and that “advocating the normativity of the patristic faith with the apostolic is merely giving voice to the theological and historical

²¹²Chesterton’s classic encomium of democracy and its essential connection to tradition is quite relevant reading for Baptists who are typically quite fond of one and dismissive of the other. See, G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (John Lane Co., 1908; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 52-54.

²¹³Williams, “The Patristic Tradition as Canon,” 364.

²¹⁴*Ibid.*, 362.

ramifications that have been already operating for much of church history.”²¹⁵ Even a radical postmodern stance cannot escape the normative role of patristic tradition, because even if it “refuses to identify with any standards of faith as enduring standards, all theologizing is still done using a terminology and conceptuality that is beholden to established norms of the Christian past and shapes the direction of the future.”²¹⁶

Others have also recognized the weightiness of tradition. Mark Medley’s review of Terrence Tilley’s *Inventing Catholic Tradition* affirms Tilley’s distinction between the two aspects of tradition: *traditio* (that which is handed on) and *traditio* (the process of handing on).²¹⁷ He concludes by suggesting that one problem with Baptists’ rejection of tradition is that it almost exclusively focuses on tradition as *traditio*, whereas the *Manifesto* is concerned to emphasize *traditio* and the “traditioning” practices of the church.²¹⁸

Because of their emphasis on the local community, its practices, and the normative role of tradition, it is no surprise that liturgical and sacramental understandings would be an important facet of Bapto-Catholic reflection. Among the articles of the *PRS* conversation, Freeman’s “Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology

²¹⁵Ibid., 363.

²¹⁶Ibid., 362.

²¹⁷Medley, “Catholics, Baptists, and the Normativity of Tradition: A Review Essay,” 122.

²¹⁸Ibid., 126-7. Medley revisits the books by Tilley and Thiel in his essay, “Stewards, Interrogators and Inventors: Toward a Practice of Tradition,” (Paper presentation, Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy Seminar, Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, July 24-28, 2006). As the title suggests, he suggests that Baptists ought to approach the task of “traditio” in terms of a MacIntyrean practice, further suggesting that the skills and virtues of stewardship, interrogation, and invention, are necessary for the practice’s flourishing.

in the Free Church” is a prime example of these concerns. Through a close engagement with Miraslov Volf’s book *After Our Likeness*, Freeman explores the concept of a free-church “communion ecclesiology” where salvation is understood as communion with God *and* the Body of Christ, effected through the work of the church in word and sacrament—despite the typical reluctance of Baptists to speak in those terms. In a similar vein Thompson critiques the anti-material bias and desacramentalizing tendencies in Baptist thought, especially as it corresponded with the rise of modernity.²¹⁹ To advance his arguments he appeals to changes in hymnody, pointing to greater openness to sacramental ideas among earlier Baptists, while recognizing the tremendous theological formation that takes place in liturgical practices.²²⁰ While both are especially focused on Baptist theology, both are attuned to the way it connects to the broader catholic tradition and is practiced in the sacramental and liturgical life of Baptist churches.

Taking the engagement with traditional conceptions of the sacraments one step further, Elizabeth Newman explores whether Baptists might accept a theory of real presence.²²¹ Her engagement with Catholic, Orthodox, and Baptist thought provides an excellent example of the charitably critical engagement that is possible in a Bapto-Catholic enquiry. She takes seriously the Catholic claims—and Protestant reservations—about transubstantiation, and in turn offers a nuanced, philosophically rich account of the

²¹⁹Thompson, “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical Theological and Liturgical Analysis,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27.3 (Fall 2000): 296.

²²⁰*Ibid.*, 297-300.

²²¹Elizabeth Newman, “The Lord’s Supper: Might Baptists Accept a Theory of Real Presence?” in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* 5, (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), 211-227.

presence of Christ in the church and its act of Eucharistic proclamation. Noting that Rome is alone in its insistence on transubstantiation, she asks whether a more “catholic” position might be found that would recognize the reality of Christ’s presence without appealing to Aristotelian metaphysical abstractions.²²² Newman claims that an understanding of this sort would not only accomplish the goal of a more embodied, creation-affirming stance for Baptist worship, but it would also help promote the work of unity in the Body of Christ.²²³

Bapto-Catholicism is ecumenical in its aim. As demonstrated by Newman’s concern for constructive engagement between the Christian Traditions, one goal of Bapto-Catholic theology is to promote unity in the Body of Christ. Nevertheless, the commitment to ecumenism does not result in a slackened commitment to Baptist distinctives. Rather, several have called Baptists to participate in the broader Christian tradition as a specific tradition of dissent. One such call has been issued by Douglas V. Henry, who notes that Baptists must recognize the essential unity of the church, and the unique Baptist vocation of dissent, in order to remain coherent:

it must be persistently remembered that Baptist identity makes sense only as a reform movement within the life of the one church founded by Jesus Christ. Baptist theology and life must remain a form of Christian theology and life, one

²²²“We may also ask, however, in light of Roman Catholic belief and practice, is transubstantiation...as a theory of real presence fully catholic, since only the Roman Catholic Church has embraced this position? Might there be a ‘reformed’ way to understand the Lord’s Supper as sacrament that is at the same time catholic and consistent with God’s word?” Ibid., 214.

²²³Another example of engagement with the ancient theological tradition is James McClendon’s discussion of the role of the saints. While his conclusions are distinctly baptist—rejecting the idea of post-mortem intercession by the saints—his efforts to establish an exemplary role for saints in Christian devotion and liturgy is a surprising development. See: James Wm. McClendon, Jr., “Christian Worship and the Saints,” in *Biography as Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 172-184.

that bears the distinguishing marks of the peculiar thought, experience, and practices of Baptists. Baptists must be distinctive in order to warrant continued differentiation from the larger body of Christ, but must never suppose themselves to be so distinctive as to become (*per impossible*) self-sufficient from the church universal, torn asunder from the body within which their identity makes sense.²²⁴

Recognition of the connection to the universal church by way of dissent is not the only way Henry suggests that Baptists may discover coherence. He claims that “Baptists too often have failed to remember that their affection for liberty is not *sui generis*, but instead stands within a larger Christian theological tradition,”²²⁵ resulting in a shallow conception of freedom that impoverishes Baptist theological reflection and a degree of hubris that overlooks the valuable contributions of non-Baptist Christians on this essential Christian value. Henry calls on Baptists to engage the deep and wide Christian witness to freedom, saying, “If Baptists are to make worthy use of their abiding love for liberty in underwriting the project of Christian liberal learning, they must therefore read and reflect about freedom in more historically attuned and philosophically sophisticated ways than ever before,”²²⁶ naming a litany of the great lights of the Christian literary canon. Engagement with others is essential, especially in the areas in which Baptists are lacking.²²⁷

²²⁴Henry, “Can Baptist Theology Sustain the Life of the Mind? The Quest for a Vital Baptist Academy,” 208.

²²⁵Ibid., 215.

²²⁶Ibid., 216.

²²⁷Citing the lack of an authoritative starting place for Baptist ethical reflection, Henry joined Baylor professors Michael D. Beaty and Scott H. Moore in calling for a robust engagement with the Roman Catholic social teaching, specifically the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, to serve as a guide for moral inquiry: “Protestant Free Church Christians and *Gaudium et Spes*: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective,” *Logos* 10.1 (Winter 2007), 136-165.

Along similar lines Harvey has commended greater attention to the identity of Baptists as “dissenting catholics.” With Michael J. Hollerich he affirms that tendency of Protestants to privilege a certain period of church history (i.e. the Reformation) sets up another “norming norm” alongside Scripture, or “in other words, the sort of anti-Catholic, anti-creedal positions articulated in these principles ironically instantiated what they were designed to prevent—supplementing the authority of Scripture as the norming norm of Christian existence.”²²⁸ Rather, “when positioned within the historic dialectical relationship with a Catholic past that we share with our fellow Protestants rather than over against it, being Baptist can be both intelligible and faithful.”²²⁹

When addressing the question of how Baptists can attend to the catholicity of spirituality, Curtis Freeman summarizes well the Bapto-Catholic commitment to the normativity of tradition and the identity of baptists as dissenters:

How can baptists attend to the catholicity of spirituality? First, they can listen carefully to voices within the heritage of the whole church because the most interesting and insightful perspectives may nor come from their own community or even the traditions that ultimately prevailed in the centuries that shaped the Catholic and Protestant orthodoxies....Second, baptists can listen cautiously to the voices of the past by always referring new insights to shared baptist convictions so as to enhance both the particularity of the baptist vision and the universality of their spirituality. In the final analysis, by taking seriously their role as a minority consciousness within the whole church, baptists may perform their most faithful spiritual task. As catholic baptists practice the disciplines that nurture and sustain their common convictions, they enact a truthful vision of the new creation.²³⁰

Here we see a quintessentially Bapto-Catholic response. Baptists are those Christians who embody a certain voice of protest in the catholic church—a minority consciousness

²²⁸Harvey, “Where, Then, Do We Stand?: Baptists, History, and Authority,” 374.

²²⁹Ibid., 380.

²³⁰Curtis W. Freeman “A Confession for Catholic Baptists,” 85-86.

that bears witness to convictions about the called out church membership and covenantal ecclesiology—while seeking unity in the Body of Christ, and maintaining a posture of humility and a willingness to learn from the church universal.

Conclusion

The Bapto-Catholic sensibility, especially as it has developed in the United States, can be interpreted best as a response to the fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention and the philosophical collapse of modernity. The conversation has involved a creative, theological re-imagining of how Baptists might live out their unique vocation in the Body of Christ at the dawn of a new century, responding to cultural, theological, and philosophical challenges. For all of these reasons, one area of great concern has been the question of tradition. No single figure has been more influential in Bapto-Catholic thought in this regard than Alasdair MacIntyre. The next chapter will look more closely at the role MacIntyre's project has played in the development of Bapto-Catholic theology thus far, while seeking ways that his conception of tradition may further extend the Bapto-Catholic project.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alasdair MacIntyre: A Philosophical Resource for Bapto-Catholics

Introduction

Chapters two and three explored two facets of Baptist life, namely, the Baptist identity conversation following the dramatic shifts in the Southern Baptist Convention in the early 1980s, and the efforts of the Bapto-Catholics to move beyond the binary “conservative vs. moderate” paradigm by charting a “third way” forward into the post-modern era. It was noted that this decade-old approach to the Baptist identity seeks to abandon Enlightenment notions of autonomous individualism in favor of a rich engagement with the diverse strands of the Christian tradition, rooted in the life and practices of local churches. The influence of Alasdair MacIntyre on this movement is unmistakable and it is this facet of the Bapto-Catholic project that the present chapter will address. The scope of MacIntyre’s project is staggering—re-narrating the history of philosophy in order to diagnose the ills of modern moral philosophy—and its arguments are dense, rendering a comprehensive engagement in this short space impossible. What will be offered, however, is a brief overview of the most salient aspects of MacIntyre’s project, a description of the ways in which his work has contributed to Bapto-Catholic thought, suggestions for additional directions in which his work might be profitably extended, and a recognition of difficult questions that emerge when attempting to translate MacIntyre’s work into theology. First, a few words about the shape of MacIntyre’s project are necessary.

Alasdair MacIntyre: Career and Essential Concepts

Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian and ethicist who has done much to extend MacIntyre's thought into the theological realm, offers this compact summary of MacIntyre's career:

Born in Scotland in 1929, MacIntyre began teaching at Manchester University in 1951. He came to the United States in 1969 to teach at Brandeis University, and he has held in the years since a large number of academic appointments, including stints at Boston University, Wellesley, Vanderbilt, Yale, Duke, and Notre Dame. His books began with *Marxism: An Interpretation* in 1953 and have continued in a steady flow, including *The Unconscious: A Conceptual Analysis* in 1958, *A Short History of Ethics* in 1966, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic* in 1970, *After Virtue* in 1981, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* in 1988, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* in 1990, and *Edith Stein* in 2005.¹

Of these books, the three that have had the most influence in philosophical circles are:

After Virtue, *Whose Justice Which Rationality?*, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.² In these books one encounters MacIntyre's case against modernity and his

¹Stanley Hauerwas, "The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre," *First Things* 176 (October 2007): 35.

²Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition: Being Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in 1988*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). Several other books are philosophically significant. These include: Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999); *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*. Vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and, *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays*. Vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Hauerwas notes that the last two volumes provide access to articles that were previously difficult to obtain, offering important insights into the development of MacIntyre's thought ("The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre," 35). Thomas Hibbs would grant similar importance to MacIntyre's most recent book especially for relating MacIntyre's project, and philosophy itself, to theology: "*Edith Stein* is a splendid philosophical book, whose significance over time may come to rival that of *After Virtue*. That it should constitute a compelling prelude to theology, indeed, to hagiography, goes some measure toward confirming Thomas Aquinas' paradoxical claim that philosophy can have its own integrity and

unique response to the loss of vital concepts of the moral life, rooted in virtues and the communal pursuit of human flourishing. These works offer intricate historical accounts of the fall of modernity into its present fragmented state, instead recommending a recovery of the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions that dominated moral discourse in ancient and medieval western culture. The three most important aspects of his project for Bapto-Catholic thought, and for theological discourse generally, are his critique of modernity, his alternate account of the moral life that consists of virtues, practices, narratives, and traditions, and the attending concept of tradition constituted rationality.

The Critique of Modernity

In the opening chapter of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre offers a brief thought experiment as gripping as any science fiction novel.³ He asks the reader to imagine a scenario in which there is an environmental catastrophe followed by a period of violent backlash against science. Books and laboratories are destroyed, scientists are persecuted and universities shuttered. Later, some wish to revive science but are left to build upon the incoherent fragments of what once was:

function as a handmaiden of theology.” Thomas S. Hibbs, “Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue,” *First Things* 163 (May 2006), 50.

³MacIntyre notes the connection himself: “This imaginary possible world is very like one that some science fiction writers have constructed” (*After Virtue*, 2). As it turns out, it may not be simply a hypothetical connection. Ralph Wood notes, “It is a piece of widespread academic scuttlebutt that MacIntyre’s introduction and conclusion to that seminal book [*After Virtue*] silently borrow from *A Canticle for Liebowitz*” (“Lest the World’s Amnesia Be Complete: A Reading of Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Liebowitz*,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27.1 (Spring 2000), 89). Miller’s brilliant, dystopian, post-nuclear holocaust novel from 1959 offers a plotline similar to MacIntyre’s thought experiment, complete with Know-Nothing governments, the abolition of science, and the devoted preservation of scientific knowledge in fragmentary form by an order of monks. See: Walter M. Miller, *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960).

a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred. Nonetheless all these fragments are reembodyed in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry and biology.⁴

MacIntyre's "disquieting suggestion" is that modern moral philosophy finds itself in an analogous situation. Traditional moral vocabulary persists, but the radical philosophical shifts of the Enlightenment have robbed them of their significance, reducing fundamental concepts like "good" to emotivist expressions of preference.⁵ Compounding the problem is that the methods of modern philosophy (i.e., both analytic and existential philosophy) render it incapable of detecting the problem.⁶ Similarly, the "value neutral" methods of academic history prevent one from asking evaluative questions concerning what is better or worse.⁷ MacIntyre's proposed solution to modern fragmentation is to narrate the history of moral inquiry once again in order to discern what was lost and then to set about the task of re-discovering a coherent account of the moral life.⁸

⁴MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1.

⁵MacIntyre defines emotivism as, "the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character." Ibid., 11-12. He summarizes the position by saying that for some emotivists, "to say 'This is good' [is] to utter a sentence meaning roughly, 'Hurrah for this!'" Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 2.

⁷Ibid., 4.

⁸For an excellent summary of MacIntyre's critique of modernity and the account of narratives, practices, virtues and traditions in *After Virtue*, see: Brad J. Kallenberg, "The Master Argument of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*," in Nancey C. Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Nation *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

MacIntyre argues that moral inquiry has been rendered unintelligible,⁹ and without the means for sustained conversations about the good life in the public sphere, the prospect of human flourishing is quite dim. What, then, was responsible for such a dire state of affairs? According to MacIntyre, the culprit is the “Enlightenment Project,” the period (ca. 1630-1850) during which, “‘morality’ became the name for that particular sphere in which rules of conduct which are neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic are allowed a cultural space of their own.”¹⁰ According to MacIntyre, the project failed; in fact, it had to fail. The reason for the failure was its abandonment of a crucial component of both ancient and medieval moral philosophy: the concept of *telos*, which is to say, the *good*, or the *true end* for humankind.¹¹ As MacIntyre states it,

The moral scheme which forms the historical background to their thought had, as we have seen, a structure which required three elements: untutored human nature, man as he could be if he realized his *telos* and the moral precepts which enable him to pass from one state to the other. But the joint effect of the secular rejection of both Protestant and Catholic theology and the scientific and philosophical rejection of Aristotelianism was to eliminate any notion of man as he could be if he achieved his *telos*. Since the whole point of ethics—both as a theoretical and a practical discipline—is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true

⁹“The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character. I do not mean by this that such debates go on and on—although they do—but also that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.” MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 39. Jack Russell Weinstein describes the Enlightenment project in explicitly religious terms. He describes it as, “the complex eighteenth century project that sought to emancipate morality from religion using the tools of an objective reason.” *On MacIntyre*, Wadsworth Philosophers Series, (Australia: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, 2003), 45.

¹¹MacIntyre provides a detailed engagement with the concept of *telos* in his 1990 Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University: Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, The Aquinas Lecture, 1990, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1990).

end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of a *telos* leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear.¹²

Having abandoned both Aristotelian conceptions and theological accounts of human nature, Enlightenment philosophy set about the project of rationally justifying ethical behavior without recourse to any clear conception of the good toward which a human life ought to tend. The result was a jumbled mixture of rival ethical views, each negating the other and, ultimately, failing to provide rational justification for morality. It was into this void that Nietzsche spoke. “It was Nietzsche’s historic achievement to understand more clearly than any other philosopher...not only that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will, but also the nature of the problems that this posed for moral philosophy.”¹³ MacIntyre’s conclusion is that once the Enlightenment project has been demonstrated to be an irredeemable failure, one is left with a stark choice: Nietzsche or Aristotle, embracing the irrationality and essential willfulness of human action, or attempting a rational account of the good for human beings.¹⁴ MacIntyre chooses the latter and, consequently, he proposes an account of

¹²MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 54-55.

¹³Ibid., 113. MacIntyre offers a helpful summary of Nietzsche’s devastating critique of the Enlightenment project in *The Gay Science*, section 335: *After Virtue*, 113-114.

¹⁴“Hence the defensibility of the Nietzschean position turns *in the end* on the answer to the question: was it right to reject Aristotle? For if Aristotle’s position in ethics and politics—or something very like it—could be sustained, the whole Nietzschean enterprise would be pointless. This is because the power of Nietzsche’s position depends upon the truth of the one central thesis: that all rational vindications of morality manifestly fail and that *therefore* belief in the tenets of morality needs to be explained in terms of a set of rationalizations which conceal the fundamentally non rational phenomena of the will.” Ibid., 117.

human life that is constructed on an Aristotelian framework of virtues, practices, narratives, and traditions.

Virtues, Practices, Narratives, Traditions

MacIntyre's proposal attempts to reinterpret the vital aspects of Aristotelian thought while translating them into categories that are more congenial to the contemporary situation. Therefore, while the Greek *polis* and a certain understanding of metaphysical biology were central for Aristotle's account, contemporary politics and biology require that MacIntyre find new ways of articulating an Aristotelian proposal.¹⁵

His account begins with the concept of *practices*, which he defines as,

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended.¹⁶

Practices are more than skills, though skills are involved (e.g. throwing a football is not a practice, while the sport of football is one). They are complex human activities with standards of excellence and internal goods (as opposed to external goods like wealth or fame) which can be experienced only by participation in them.

Practices, however, are not self-sustaining. The health and perpetuation of the practice is dependent on the excellence of the participation. It is at this point that the role of the virtues becomes evident. MacIntyre states that "a virtue is an acquired human

¹⁵Although he abandons any notion of metaphysical biology in *After Virtue*, *Dependent Rational Animals* is an attempt to retrieve some aspects of biology for an understanding of human flourishing.

¹⁶MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”¹⁷ This is to say that without the virtues the practices founder.

An important notion regarding the virtues, however, is that they are not fleeting moments of right action, but they are characteristics that endure over time and in various circumstances, whether or not they are “effective in the way that we expect a professional skill to be.”¹⁸ For this reason, “the unity of a virtue in someone’s life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole.”¹⁹ This requires MacIntyre to speak to the notion of selfhood and its stability over time. To do this, he appeals to the concept of *narrative*, the storied nature of selfhood “whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.”²⁰

Two aspects of MacIntyre’s notion of narrative are especially noteworthy. The first is that narratives provide the necessary *context* for understanding and assessing any action. His famous illustration of this principle is the story of a person who is approached by a stranger at a bus stop who says, “The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.” MacIntyre notes that the sentence itself is clear enough, but its intelligibility is dependent on the context of the comment. Thus, a narrative context makes actions intelligible, it provides unity to an otherwise fragmented self (rendering the individual intelligible to others and to themselves), and it implies the

¹⁷Ibid., 191.

¹⁸Ibid., 205.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

essential relationship between the individual and others as their narratives overlap. Given all this, the other noteworthy feature of narrative becomes clear. By establishing the narrative unity of the self, and the narrative connections between the various “characters,” one discerns the essential role for history and seeking a narrative unity for the entire human story. MacIntyre states,

In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask “What is the good for me?” is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask “What is the good for man?” is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common.²¹

So, the best way to characterize human moral exploits is as a “narrative quest,” a quest for the good.²² The virtues are crucial in this regard because they

are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will help sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.²³

With all of these elements in place MacIntyre is able to offer a provisional conclusion about the good life for humankind: “the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life of man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.”²⁴

²¹Ibid., 218-219.

²²Jean Porter notes that MacIntyre drops the language of narrative quest as he develops his account further in *Whose Justice* and *Three Rival Versions*. See “Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre,” in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. Mark C. Murphy, ed., Contemporary Philosophy in Focus, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 38-69.

²³MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

²⁴Ibid.

As one might expect, however, given his emphasis on the overlapping nature of narratives and the necessity of historicity to intelligibility, the narrative quest is not a solitary pursuit. The quest takes place in *traditions*, because “I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of tradition.”²⁵ Just as practices have a historical character, and virtues are essential to their maintenance, the virtues are an essential part of tradition: “thus, insofar as the virtues sustain the relationships required for practices, they have to sustain relationships to the past—and to the future—and to the present.”²⁶ The importance of the past does not render a tradition static, however. MacIntyre is insistent on the fact that “all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought,”²⁷—whether modern physics or medieval logic—and because reasoning involves argumentation, “traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean [i.e. static], it is always dying or dead.”²⁸ It is this conviction that establishes the premise for MacIntyre’s now classic definition of tradition in *After Virtue*: “A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument,

²⁵Ibid. Yet, it is important to note that MacIntyre does not suggest that the fact of historical givenness does not imply quiescence toward the “moral limitations of the particularity of those forms of community. Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, or the universal, consists.” Ibid.

²⁶Ibid. In fact, if virtues are those habits which sustain the flourishing of a practice, one could argue that historical attentiveness is one of the most important virtues for the health of the practice of tradition-constituted rational enquiry.

²⁷Ibid., 222.

²⁸Ibid.

and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”²⁹ And it is the virtues that enable the tradition to flourish and to seek the good.

Tradition Constituted Rationality

Despite the far-reaching impact of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre recognized that it did not go far enough in its description of the nature of rationality. Lacking was an adequate description of the nature of rationality, one that sufficiently accounts for the ability to assess and, ultimately, to choose between rival traditions³⁰ and one capable of responding to the challenges presented by relativism and perspectivism.³¹ MacIntyre’s next book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (hereafter, *Whose Justice*), seeks to fill this gap by developing a theory of “tradition constituted rationality.”³² By modifying “rationality” with “tradition constituted,” MacIntyre does not intend to suggest that this is *one type* of

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, ix.

³¹ In one of the most important theoretical chapters of *Whose Justice*, MacIntyre summarizes the task before him: “What I have to do, then, is to provide an account of the rationality presupposed by and implicit in the practice of those enquiry-bearing traditions with whose history I have been concerned which will be adequate to meet the challenges posed by relativism and perspectivism.” Ibid., 354.

³² An interesting facet of both books *Whose Justice* and *After Virtue* is that MacIntyre is reaching for a general audience:

In *After Virtue* I tried to address both academic philosophers and the lay reader. The danger of such attempts is that they leave both audiences dissatisfied; this is a danger which I have judged worthwhile to risk once more, if only because of a conviction that the conception of philosophy as essentially a semitechnical, quasi-scientific, autonomous enquiry to be conducted by professionalized specialists is in the end barren (ibid., x).

rationality among many; rather, he argues that rationality *as such* is constituted by its embeddedness in traditions of enquiry and their narrative contexts.³³

MacIntyre argues that the urgent need for such an account is not only evident in the intractability of the debates between the varied traditions in pluralistic societies, but also in members of those societies themselves as they struggle with the effects of the incoherence of their own rational formation. He notes that,

what many of us are educated into is, not a coherent way of thinking and judging, but one constructed out of an amalgam of social and cultural fragments inherited both from different traditions which our culture was originally derived (Puritan, Catholic, Jewish) and from different stages in and aspects of the development of modernity (the French Enlightenment, the Scottish Enlightenment, nineteenth-century economic liberalism, twentieth-century political liberalism).³⁴

As a result we find ourselves in disagreement with others, and ourselves, and “we are forced to confront the question: How ought we to decide among the claims of rival and incompatible accounts of justice competing for our moral, social and political allegiance?”³⁵

An option that MacIntyre rejects as typical of modern sensibilities, is that rationality requires “that we first divest ourselves of allegiance to any one of the contending theories and also abstract ourselves from all those particularities of social relationship in terms of which we have been accustomed to understand our responsibilities and our interests,”³⁶ ignoring that such an approach is itself the product of the tradition of liberal individualism. Another typical response is to abandon the pursuit of rationally

³³Weinstein, *On MacIntyre*, 61.

³⁴MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 2.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

engaging in rival traditions all together, collapsing instead into a fideist trust in this community or that—a common practice among both religious and secular communities.³⁷

How, then, did these unsatisfactory options arise? Given the critique offered in *After Virtue*, it should be no surprise that the villain excoriated in *Whose Justice* is also Enlightenment philosophy. Yet, his description of the problem in this later account has shifted in significant ways:

It was a central aspiration of the Enlightenment...to provide for the debate in the public realm standards and methods of rational justification by which alternative courses of action in every sphere of life could be adjudged just or unjust, rational or irrational, enlightened or unenlightened. So, it was hoped, reason would displace authority and tradition. Rational justification was to appeal to principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural particularities which the Enlightenment thinkers took to be the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places.³⁸

In this version of the critique one can see the seeds of MacIntyre's proposed alternative.

Whereas the Enlightenment desired to strip authority and tradition from rationality, thereby providing “an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain,”³⁹ MacIntyre suggests that the solution is to recover

a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in a tradition, a conception according to which the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from

³⁷He demonstrates the smug and insular attitude that a secular institution may hold by asserting that:

To the readership of the *New York Times*, or at least that part of it which shares the presuppositions of those who write that parish magazine of affluent and self-congratulatory liberal enlightenment, the congregations of evangelical fundamentalism appear unfashionably unenlightened. But to the members of those congregations that readership appears to be just as much a community of prerational faith as they themselves are but one whose members, unlike themselves, fail to recognize themselves for what they are, and hence are in no position to level charges of irrationality at them or anyone else (ibid., 5).

³⁸Ibid., 6.

³⁹Ibid.

and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition.⁴⁰

Yet, he suggests that a participant in a healthy tradition is unaware of its traditional nature; it is only when a tradition is in distress that it begins to self-consciously theorize about its nature.⁴¹ This is why thinkers like John Henry Newman, who theorized about the nature of the development of the Christian tradition in the midst of turmoil in Anglican life, are unusual in their attention to a theory of tradition.⁴²

At the outset, MacIntyre suggests that there are four considerations that must be borne in mind if his account of tradition-constituted rationality is to be properly understood. The first is that “the concept of rational justification which is at home in the form of enquiry is essentially historical,”⁴³ which is to say that claims are judged by their adequacy to narrate the conversation thus far and to provide a rationally superior account of the tradition as judged from within by the tradition’s own standards. Second, tradition constituted rationality indicates that the precision of statements, as well as their histories, linguistic features, and cultural conditions are all essential to understanding the account given; therefore, the content of a tradition conscious engagement is different than what is

⁴⁰Ibid., 7.

⁴¹Ibid., 8.

⁴²Ibid. MacIntyre notes that Newman wrote as one alienated from the tradition in question. Indeed, Newman’s most extensive treatment of the nature of tradition, *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, was begun at the end of his time as an Anglican and was published shortly after his entrance into the Roman church. MacIntyre suggests that it is this outsider’s perspective that enabled Newman the distance to ponder the nature of the Christian tradition.

⁴³MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 8.

offered in the ahistorical mode of Enlightenment thought.⁴⁴ Third, in response to those who would protest that his account of rival traditions offers no better promise for resolving radical disagreements than liberalism, MacIntyre suggests that describing the problem rightly is essential to addressing it; once it is accurately conceived, progress is possible.⁴⁵ Fourth, he suggests that “tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive rational enquiry cannot be elucidated apart from its exemplifications.”⁴⁶ Although he believes historical exemplification is essential to any conceptual discussion, MacIntyre suggests this is especially the case for describing the nature of tradition constituted rationality. This is reflected in the detailed histories he proceeds to offer.

After his detailed historical engagement with the Aristotelian, Augustinian, Thomistic, and modern liberal traditions, MacIntyre returns to his theoretical account of traditions of enquiry, expanding his notion of tradition:

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.⁴⁷

He goes on to note that internal debates might destroy fundamental agreements, and therefore, create rivals traditions that function as external critics, or the rivals may find new common ground and in the process forge an enlivened and more complex debate, or

⁴⁴Ibid., 8-9.

⁴⁵Ibid., 9-10.

⁴⁶Ibid., 10.

⁴⁷Ibid., 12.

the tradition may lose coherence and die.⁴⁸ However it unfolds, MacIntyre asserts that there is no progress toward any rational end apart from a tradition of enquiry. He claims that “there is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.”⁴⁹ Yet, the implication is not that these traditions are entirely insulated from the internal debates of other traditions; one tradition may “overhear” another and consider the rival claims of the other based on the rational standards of the first. However, there are no neutral or “independent standards of rational justification by appeal to which the issues between contending traditions can be decided;”⁵⁰ each tradition can only engage the other based on its own standards of rationality. Not only is such eavesdropping possible, but it seems both likely and potentially productive because traditions often share points of contact that makes this interaction possible.⁵¹

All traditions experience change over time. According to *Whose Justice*, there are three stages in which the initial development of a tradition happens:

a first in which the relevant beliefs, texts, and authorities have not yet been put in question; a second in which inadequacies of various types have been identified, but not yet remedied; and a third in which response to those inadequacies has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 350.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 351.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 355. He also offers an addendum that is especially relevant for theological traditions:

As an enquiry proceeds it develops standard forms of argument, points of incoherence are discovered and addressed, and established beliefs prevail until a more satisfactory answer is discovered. In each stage,

beliefs and judgments will be justified by reference to the beliefs and judgments of the previous stage, and insofar as a tradition has constituted itself as a successful form of enquiry, the claims to truth made within that tradition will always be in some specifiable way less vulnerable to dialectical questioning and objection than were their predecessors.⁵³

Traditions progress as they answer previously elusive questions or resolve points of incoherence. At times, however, addressing difficult issues within a tradition is profoundly unpleasant. In fact, it is possible that a tradition, by its own standards of progress, has ceased to grow or identify satisfactory answers to problems, a situation in which the tradition's continued viability becomes questionable. MacIntyre describes these events as "epistemological crises" and claims that "it is in the way in which the adherents of a tradition respond to such occurrences, and in the success or failure which attends their response, that traditions attain or fail to attain intellectual maturity."⁵⁴ In such a state traditions face several potential outcomes. In their engagement with rival traditions they may find new resources and innovative solutions that can be coherently appropriated and synthesized into their own tradition, or they may discover new unanswerable questions and collapse into incoherence. Should the tradition successfully

Where a person or a text is assigned an authority which derives from what is taken to be their relationship to the divine, that sacred authority will be thereby in the course of this process exempt from repudiation, although its utterances may certain subject to reinterpretation. It is indeed one of the marks of what is taken to be sacred that it is so exempted (ibid.).

⁵³Ibid., 359.

⁵⁴Ibid., 361.

endure the crisis, it will be stronger and more vital than it was before; however, if it fails, the viability of the tradition is itself imperiled.⁵⁵

The possibility of engaging other traditions of enquiry requires that the one tradition understands the other well enough to recognize it as a rival.⁵⁶ Understanding the other is no small feat. Because all traditions are historically, culturally, and linguistically embedded, mutual understanding requires an act of translation.⁵⁷ This work of translation generally takes two forms: “translation by same-saying and translation by linguistic innovation,”⁵⁸ the latter of which is employed in circumstances when it is discovered that a tradition lacks an equivalent concept into which an alien concept might be converted.

Translation is not only difficult because of the great differences between the languages, but because of the cultural embeddedness of language. Languages are bound up with practices and histories such that there is a dramatic difference between the “phrasebook” equivalency employed by tourists and the layered and inferential expressiveness of a language used by natives. The only way to learn a language in this way is to become like a child and to learn the other language as a “second first language,”⁵⁹ in the way an anthropologist might, living among a people for a time before being able to accurately describe a culture or speak a language. These anthropologists argue that other languages “cannot be acquired as a second language by adding to one’s

⁵⁵The notion of “epistemological crisis” and its relevance for the Bapto-Catholic conversation will be explored further in the conclusion.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 370.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 372.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 374.

first language skill in sentence-matching or even in paraphrase. They have to be learned as second first languages or not at all.”⁶⁰ In fact, “the characteristic mark of someone who has...acquired two first languages is to be able to recognize where and in what respects utterances in one are untranslatable into the other.”⁶¹

The two primary problems that MacIntyre notes concerning translation are the challenge faced by those attempting to translate from one community with well-defined beliefs into another with incompatible convictions, and the difficulty of translating concepts from a culture with well-defined convictions into one of the “internationalized languages of modernity.”⁶² The challenge in the first scenario is to carry over ideas from one language to another in a way that is coherent in the new context without doing violence to the original. The best test of success in this regard is “when someone, a text from whose first first language has been translated into his or her second first language, agrees that were he or she to translate the resultant text back into his or her first language what would then in turn result would be substantially the same as the original text.”⁶³ The challenge embodied in the second occurs when texts from traditions with strongly embedded histories and well-defined truth convictions are translated into the “value-neutral” internationalized languages of modernity, which in turn present them “in a way that neutralizes the conceptions of truth and rationality and the historical context.”⁶⁴ This

⁶⁰Ibid., 375.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid., 379.

⁶³Ibid., 380.

⁶⁴Ibid., 384.

neutralizing tendency constitutes a significant translational hurdle. Nevertheless, the translational effort is essential and its degree of difficulty varies depending on its points of connection with the other “languages” involved:

Rival traditions may of course be very different from each other in some ways while sharing a great deal in others: texts, modes of evaluation, whole practices, such as games, crafts, and sciences. Insofar as this is so, translation will generally be able to proceed almost entirely by same-saying. But the less that is shared, the more difficult and cumbrous the work of translation will be, and the more possibilities of untranslatability will seem to threaten.⁶⁵

MacIntyre quickly qualifies that it is not really a threat because the untranslatable concepts can potentially reveal the ways in which a culture is weak or impoverished in its vocabulary. Therefore, one must engage other traditions with the conviction that the other may in fact be rationally superior, specifically in the ways it is least translatable. One’s conviction that his or her tradition is true indicates a conviction that the tradition is able to withstand comparison to a rival and the corresponding risk of falsification.⁶⁶

These themes are continued in the follow-up book, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (hereafter, *Three Rival Versions*).⁶⁷ In this later work, the published version of his 1988 Gifford Lectures, three modes of moral inquiry are contrasted: encyclopaedia, genealogy, and tradition. Each has its own particular goals and ways of engaging in practical rationality, and each can be represented by a seminal text of the nineteenth

⁶⁵Ibid., 387.

⁶⁶“Only those whose tradition allows for the possibility of its hegemony being put in question can have rational warrant for asserting such a hegemony” (ibid., 388).

⁶⁷Hibbs notes that *Three Rival Versions* “continues his defense of Thomas [Aquinas],” and although it “does clarify and amplify MacIntyre’s position, it does not substantially alter the claims of WJWR.” See: “MacIntyre, Tradition, and the Christian Philosopher,” *Modern Schoolman* 68: (1991): 212, n4. Therefore, while *Three Rival Versions* is a substantial development of MacIntyre’s argument, it is in fundamental continuity with *Whose Justice*.

century. According to MacIntyre's account, the Encyclopaedists, whose vision is embodied in the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*,

assumed the assent of all educated persons to a single substantive conception of rationality...they understood the outcome of allegiance to the standards and methods of such a rationality to be the elaboration of a comprehensive, rationally incontestable scientific understanding of the whole, in which the architectonic of the sciences matched that of the cosmos...and finally, they saw their whole mode of life, including their conceptions of rationality and of science, and part of a history of inevitable progress.⁶⁸

Another rival version of moral enquiry is represented by the archtypical genealogical account offered by Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (*The Genealogy of Morals*).

What it provided "was not only an argument in favor of, but a paradigm for, the construction of a type of subversive narrative designed to undermine the central assumptions of the Encyclopaedia, both in content and in genre."⁶⁹ A very different enquiry was called for by Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris*, summoning

its readers to a renewal of a specific type of tradition, that which achieved definitive expression in the writings of Aquinas, one the appropriation of which could not only provide the resources for radical criticism of the conception of rationality dominant in nineteenth-century modernity and in the Ninth Edition, but also preserve and justify the canonical status of the Bible as distinct from, yet hegemonic over, all secular enquiry.⁷⁰

In these three rivals one clearly discerns the shape of familiar foes and friends mentioned in previous works (e.g., Enlightenment rationality, Nietzsche, Aquinas). While there are similarities between *Three Rival Versions* and his previous works, certain less prominent

⁶⁸Ibid., 24.

⁶⁹Ibid., 25.

⁷⁰Ibid.

themes are brought to the foreground and the account of tradition shifts in subtle but important ways.⁷¹

One way in which MacIntyre expands his account of tradition-constituted in *Three Rival Versions* is by exploring in detail the analogy between rational enquiry and the crafts. He notes that in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, Plato indicates that “the enquirer has to learn how to make him or herself into a particular kind of person if he or she is to move towards a knowledge of the truth about his or her good and about *the* human good.”⁷² In Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics*, he presents philosophical enquiry as a craft and a capacity which requires intellectual and moral virtues, and he points to the master-craftsman as a model for the one with *sophia*. Further, he indicates that craft imagery is carried forward into the middle ages with the concept of the liberal arts: “the word ‘*ars*’ as used in ‘*ars liberalis*’ means precisely what ‘*techne*’ means.”⁷³ This indicates that it is necessary that those who would pursue philosophy must do so as any other craft and become an apprentice.⁷⁴

The value of this craft-centered approach is seen in two key distinctions that all apprentices must learn:

The first is the distinction between what in particular situations it really is good to do and what only seems good to do to this particular apprentice but is not in fact so. That is, the apprentice has to learn, at first from his or her teachers and then in

⁷¹Porter, “Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre,” 56-57.

⁷²MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 61.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Thomas Hibbs characterizes well MacIntyre’s appropriation of the image of craft: “In articulating Aquinas’s alternative to encyclopaedia and genealogy, MacIntyre subordinates epistemology to pedagogy.” In, “MacIntyre’s Postmodern Thomism: Reflections on Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry” 279.

his or her continuing self-education, how to identify mistakes made by him or herself in applying the acknowledged standards, the standards recognized to be the best available so far in the history of that particular craft. A second key distinction is that between what is good and best for me with my particular level of training and learning in my particular circumstances to do and what is good and best unqualifiedly. That is, the apprentice has to learn to distinguish between the kind of excellence which both others and he or she can expect of him or herself here and now and that ultimate excellence which furnishes both apprentices and master craftsmen with their *telos*.⁷⁵

Apprentices gain a practical type of wisdom that enables them to participate in a storied practice with excellence, one that is sensitive to the context and to the subjective skills and limitations of themselves. The knowledge that is gained is not merely theoretical, it is also applied and practiced—an essential quality for moral inquiry: “the *telos* of moral inquiry, which is excellence in the achievement not only of adequate theoretical understanding of the specifically human good, but also of the practical embodiment of that understanding in the life of the particular enquirer, most of all requires therefore not just a craft but a virtue-guided craft.”⁷⁶ Just as any craftsperson must have an intimate familiarity with his or her craft, one must also participate in an intimate way with the subject of the craft of moral and philosophical inquiry; because, “one cannot learn how to move towards such conclusions without first having acquired some at least of those same virtues about which one is enquiring.”⁷⁷

At this point MacIntyre introduces another of the innovations in *Three Rival Versions*’s account of tradition-constituted rationality: the role of authority. Although he does mention authority in *Whose Justice*—specifically, the authority of certain texts or

⁷⁵MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 62.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 63.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

utterances that are central to a tradition⁷⁸—there seem to be two innovations introduced in *Three Rival Versions*.⁷⁹ The first is the essential role of the teacher as a master of a craft. One needs a teacher in order to overcome the paradox noted in Plato's *Meno*, namely that the pursuit of virtue requires some degree of virtue. A wise teacher is capable of instilling in the apprentice virtues appropriate to the craft, equipping the student for further growth into self-motivated action.⁸⁰ A master has a special sort of authority, one which is

more and other than a matter of exemplifying the best standards so far. It is also and most importantly a matter of knowing how to go further and especially how to direct others towards going further, using what can be learned from the tradition afforded by the past to move towards the *telos* of fully perfected work. It is in thus knowing how to link past and future that those with authority are able to draw upon tradition, to interpret and reinterpret it, so that its directedness towards the *telos* of that particular craft becomes apparent in new and characteristically unexpected ways. And it is the ability to teach others how to learn this type of knowing how that the power of the master within the community of a craft is legitimated as rational authority.⁸¹

MacIntyre notes another type of authority to which even established masters of the craft are subject. Although he demonstrates that in the Middle Ages *quaestiones* and *distinctiones*—the provisional insights gained through dialectical and grammatical

⁷⁸MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 354; *Three Rival Versions* 83, and to a lesser degree, 92.

⁷⁹I am indebted to Jean Porter for the observation that *Three Rival Versions* offers a threefold picture of authority. "Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre," 62.

⁸⁰MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 63.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 65-66. This seems to be an expansion of a similar idea expressed in *Whose Justice* concerning the competent speaker of a language and the special capacities of the poet: "Knowing how to go on and to go further in the use of the expressions of a language is that part of the ability of every language user which is poetic. The poet by profession merely has this ability in a pre-eminent degree," 382.

engagement with the disputed questions of the tradition—enable the possibility of radical dissent in the tradition,⁸² he cites the censure of Peter Abelard by Bernard of Clairvaux as an example of another necessary role for authority. “It was then the exercise of authority and the recognition accorded to authority which prevented the development of dialectical argument from fracturing the unity of enquiry into a multitude of disagreements, even though that enquiry drew upon heterogeneous philosophical sources.”⁸³ This final type of authority, therefore, exists to preserve a necessary level of unity in the enquiry so it does not splinter and dissipate its energies in fruitless directions, and it preserves an Augustinian understanding of knowledge and authority, even with respect to the masters of the craft of philosophical and theological enquiry.⁸⁴

Another innovation in *Three Rival Versions*’s account of tradition-constituted rationality is implied in the final conception of authority: a concern to present fundamental dissent. While MacIntyre’s account is notable for the essential role he gives to conflict as the means by which a tradition grows, extends, and refines its arguments, in *Three Rival Versions* he pulls back slightly. In contrasting tradition-constituted

⁸²MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 89.

⁸³Ibid., 91. Because it places limits on the role of conflict and because those limits seem somewhat arbitrary rather than rational (e.g., rooting deference to the authority of a person’s office or role, pg. 92) this is the most challenging aspect of MacIntyre’s account of authority. Also, because he describes this aspect of a tradition with specific reference to the Augustinian trajectory of the Christian tradition, one wonders how universal its implications are. How might one square this account of authority with traditions that have little to no hierarchical structure? This is a question of special importance to Baptists attempting to engage MacIntyre’s program.

⁸⁴“The practice of specifically Augustinian dialectic and the belief of the Augustinian dialectician that this practice is a movement towards a truth never as yet wholly grasped thus presupposes the guidance of authority. Hence when the very same authority places restrictions upon dialectical enquiry, it would be unreasonable not to submit,” *ibid.*, 93.

rationality with the encyclopedic and genealogical options, MacIntyre says that genuine universal insights can only come through membership “in a particular type of moral community, *one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded.*”⁸⁵ Although it is possible to read this quote as a breach with MacIntyre’s other statements about the centrality of conflict to a tradition,⁸⁶ MacIntyre merely seems to suggest here that despite a tradition’s perpetually contested nature, there are also fundamental agreements that give the tradition coherence. Certain shared convictions even allow a tradition as contested and fractious as modern liberalism to be described as a tradition.⁸⁷

Although MacIntyre’s primary concern has been to construct a coherent moral philosophy after the catastrophe of the Enlightenment, the nature of his project has allowed him to contribute significantly to the theory of tradition, with a sensitivity to religious concerns. As a result, his work is a tremendous resource for Baptists who are beginning to question their indebtedness to the Enlightenment and its hostility to tradition. What is more, the details of his proposal resonate well with Baptist sensibilities, especially the centrality of dissent and the provisional and historically conditioned nature of traditions and their authoritative statements. For this reason, it is especially important to explore the influence of MacIntyre’s thought on the Bapto-

⁸⁵Ibid, 60. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁶This may be a concern especially when this concept is read in concert with the previously noted claim that a tradition’s authority must prevent “the development of dialectical argument from fracturing the unity of enquiry into a multitude of disagreements,” *ibid.*, 91.

⁸⁷Further helpful discussions of MacIntyre’s concept of tradition constituted and tradition constitutive rationality can be found in Christopher Stephen Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 33-63; and Bruce W. Ballard, *Understanding MacIntyre* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 22-42.

Catholic project thus far, and to explore ways that MacIntyreian insights might extend the enquiry.

MacIntyre's Importance for Bapto-Catholics

On the one hand, it may seem barely noteworthy that Bapto-Catholics interacted with MacIntyreian thought—ever since the publication of *After Virtue*, his work has been at the heart of discussions in contemporary ethics, philosophy, and theology, making incidental contact nearly inevitable.⁸⁸ Yet, as the preceding chapter describing Bapto-Catholic distinctives and the above summary of MacIntyre's thought suggests, the interaction between the two has been anything but incidental. Arguably, MacIntyre has been the single most influential philosophical resource for Bapto-Catholic thought.

MacIntyre is undeniably the source of much of the Bapto-Catholic critique of modernity. One sees this influence in Harmon's diagnosis of the crisis facing Baptists at the end of modernity.⁸⁹ D.H. Williams creatively appropriates the narrative of MacIntyre's "disquieting suggestion" to assert that although contemporary theology continues to utilize the vocabulary crafted in the Patristic era, the historical context has been lost to such a degree that the whole is no longer coherent. A similar type of critique

⁸⁸Hauerwas notes well the epic scope of MacIntyre's project and the ironically dehumanizing and de-historizing consequences of his influence:

Few dispute that Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most important philosophers of our time. That reputation, however, does him little good. It is as though, quite apart from the man, there exists a figure called *Alasdair MacIntyre* whose position you know whether or not you have read him—and whose name has become a specter that haunts all attempts to provide constructive moral and political responses to the challenge of modernity ("The Virtues of Alasdair MacIntyre, 35).

⁸⁹See the opening words of Harmon's preface: "*Towards Baptist Catholicity* contends that the reconstruction of the Baptist vision in the wake of modernity's dissolution requires a retrieval of the ancient ecumenical tradition that forms Christian identity through liturgical rehearsal, catechetical instruction, and ecclesial practice," xvii.

is found in the co-authored article by Michael Beaty, Douglas Henry, and Scott Moore, who advance MacIntyre's claim that current moral language is emotivist at its core, through it is littered with the incoherent remnants of objective moral language, making an authoritative statement about Christian ethical reflection, like Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, absolutely necessary.⁹⁰ Both in tone and content the Bapto-Catholic assessment of modernity mirrors MacIntyre's.

Bapto-Catholics have also seized upon MacIntyre's critique of autonomous individualism.⁹¹ His understanding of "tradition constituted rationality," provides the conceptual framework to call into question the overly individualistic expressions of doctrines like "the priesthood of the believer," "soul competency" and the private interpretation of scripture. If MacIntyre's analysis is correct, one can understand why the Manifesto and similarly inclined theological statements have been worded so pointedly; if reason is by its very nature tradition-constitutes, then individualistic approaches are a grave threat for a tradition of enquiry. Considered in a theological light, the consequences are even more alarming, given that the tradition of enquiry in question is the church; therefore, what is at stake is the conversation within the Body of Christ, and

⁹⁰Michael D. Beaty, Douglas V. Henry, and Scott H. Moore, "Protestant Free Church Christians and *Gaudium et Spes*: A Historical and Philosophical Perspective," *Logos* 10.1 (Winter 2007), 136-165. The jointly written article is the combined product of three papers delivered by the authors at a conference at the Vatican. An online summary of Henry's paper generated controversy among Baptists. Articles appeared in *The Baptist Standard* newspaper, pointed critiques were exchanged between Russell Dilday (a moderate Baptist statesman) and Henry, and Rev. Dr. Raymond Bailey strongly criticized Henry by name in his church newsletter, though Henry is a member of another church. See: Ken Camp, "Notre Dame Model for Baylor Generates Debate," *The Baptist Standard*, (February 17, 2006); and Raymond Bailey, "Betwixt & Between," *Seventh Notes* 1 (January 2006).

⁹¹MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 220-223.

ultimately, the flourishing of the communion of saints. Seen in this light, Shurden's protest against the *Manifesto*'s reluctance to trumpet certain formulations of "freedom" falls flat.⁹² The Bapto-Catholic complaint is not simply an ideological dismissal of a philosophical movement it finds distasteful, arguing that Baptists got their ideas from the wrong source; the concern is that certain ideas that are the progeny of the Enlightenment run contrary to the nature of the gospel and the virtues that would lead to Christian flourishing. The corresponding missiological concern is that if Baptists participate in the very pathologies that make modern culture incoherent to itself, they will lose their prophetic voice and cease to witness to a culture beset by the same sins and incoherence.⁹³

In a similar vein, MacIntyre's defense of tradition-constituted rationality provides philosophical justification for the Bapto-Catholic turn to tradition. This is important for several reasons. Aside from the aforementioned problems of individualism, without

⁹²In response to the *Manifesto*'s lack of an explicit affirmation of religious freedom for all people, Shurden says:

A major part of this reluctance, it seems to me, is the *Manifesto*'s concern that "some Baptists ... [have] embraced modernity by defining freedom in terms of the Enlightenment notions of autonomous moral agency and objective rationality." While I doubt seriously the historical accuracy of the description, let's say, for the sake of argument, it is correct. Should we, therefore, minimize an historic characteristic of the Baptist people simply because we think that some of their successors got it from the wrong source? (Walter B. Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and The Baptist Manifesto." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25.04 (Winter, 1998): 337-338.)

⁹³Douglas Henry views the prevailing incoherence as a challenge for conceptions of Christian higher education. He admonishes Baptists to distinguish between the Christian understanding of freedom and its more common usage rooted in Enlightenment rationality. Henry's concern is to discover a notion of freedom that would serve as a proper foundation for the "liberal" pursuits of academic study and the life of the mind. Douglas V. Henry, "Can Baptist Theology Sustain the Life of the Mind? The Quest for a Vital Baptist Academy." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33.2 (Summer 2006): 218, n39.

some conception of tradition, it is difficult to discern how a particular group relates to its own history. Further, in a complex tradition like Christianity, consisting of multiple traditions, it is unclear how a group might articulate its self-identity as part of the whole without some conception of tradition that speaks to the larger tradition. Even more difficult is expressing the significance of the larger tradition at all; to return to the problem mentioned at the outset of this study, without a conception of tradition it is unclear how one might confess that he or she believes in the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Therefore, MacIntyre’s account is amenable to Baptist sensibilities because it articulates a way to understand historical situatedness, contextual particularity, and the authoritative—yet fluid—nature of tradition. MacIntyre’s program also illustrates well the Bapto-Catholic assertion that being anti-traditional on principle leads to a collapse into a willful incoherence, undercutting the very possibility for a sustained critique in which certain questions are extended over time. Without the context of a sustained rational debate, a tradition is in danger of developing a heritage of dissent, which in fact, brooks no dissent. This is the situation in which MacIntyre suggests that the modern university finds itself. Because its rival traditions are entrenched in irreconcilable debates, and each assumes the irrationality of all other positions and the unassailability of their own, the university is the victim of a tragic historical irony: “It is ironic that the wholly secular humanistic disciplines of the late twentieth century should thus reproduce that very same condition which led their nineteenth-century secularizing predecessors to dismiss the claim of theology to be worthy of the status of an academic discipline.”⁹⁴ Whether secular or sacred, without a rich conception of tradition-

⁹⁴MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 7.

constituted rationality that values debates internal and external to the tradition, played out over time, and guided by commonly held goods, the only other options are variations on the theme of “fundamentalism.”

A fourth significant theme of the Bapto-Catholic project that can be traced to the influence of Alasdair MacIntyre’s work is the emphasis on narratives, virtues, and practices. This theme has been expressed in various ways. As it was seen above, in *Baptist Roots*, Freeman, McClendon, and Velloso da Silva argue that practices can and should serve as the organizing motif for the baptist identity, contending that the constitutive practices of a community best exemplify its commitments.⁹⁵ MacIntyre’s thought provides the theoretical underpinnings for Mikael Broadway’s article “Preaching What We Practice,”⁹⁶ Barry Harvey’s work investigating communal practices like theological hermeneutics and the role of narrative in the community,⁹⁷ and Mark Medley’s discussion of tradition as a practice with its own necessary virtues.⁹⁸ Two other

⁹⁵Curtis W. Freeman, James W. McClendon, Jr, C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva, *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999. See above, p. 20.

⁹⁶Mikael Broadway, “Preaching What We Practice: Churches Confessing the Whole Gospel.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29.4 (Winter 2002): 338 ff.

⁹⁷See especially: Barry Harvey, “Round and Round About the Town: The Ecclesial Dimensions of Living In the Truth,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25.1 (Spring 1998): 105-114, and “Where, Then, Do We Stand?: Baptists, History, and Authority,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29.4 (Winter 2002): 359-380.

⁹⁸See: Mark Medley, “Stewards, Interrogators and Inventors: Toward a Practice of Tradition.” Paper presentation, Young Scholars in the Baptist Academy Seminar, Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, July 24-28, 2006.

works that represent baptist appropriations of MacIntyrian thought⁹⁹ are *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition*¹⁰⁰ and *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue*.¹⁰¹ *Virtues and Practices* offers a summary of *After Virtue* and a collection of essays by theologians of various traditions, using MacIntyre's concepts to structure their Christian ethical reflection. *Living Faithfully*, on the other hand, is a straightforward commentary on *After Virtue* by Jonathan Wilson, a Baptist theologian. Wilson takes the final words of *After Virtue*—which claim that we await, not Godot, but another St. Benedict—as a “prayer” for a “new monasticism” and communities of ethical enquiry and practice.¹⁰² In all of these cases

⁹⁹It may be overstating the case to claim that these two books are full-fledged Bapto-Catholic works; yet, both bear sufficient resemblances and connections to Baptist catholicity to make inclusion here legitimate. *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition* contains essays written from a variety of denominational perspectives; however, the editors are “little-b” baptists who were connected to James Wm. McClendon (Kallenberg and Nation were his students, Murphy was his wife), and the collection contains several essays that contribute to baptist thought in significant ways. Similarly, although it may presume too much to call Jonathan Wilson, author of *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, a Bapto-Catholic, he signed the *Manifesto* and his work is in keeping with its themes.

¹⁰⁰Nancey C. Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Nation. *Virtues & Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

¹⁰¹Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

¹⁰²Wilson's call has not gone unanswered. “New Monastic” communities have begun to emerge. The phenomenon is ecumenical, but some prominent figures in the movement are Baptist, including Wilson's son-in-law, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. See: Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has To Say To Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008); *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005); Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007).

one can see the fecundity of MacIntyre's categories for dialogue within a tradition. Because his program focuses on the centrality of a tradition's narrative, its practices and the virtues that sustain those practices, a tradition appropriating his thought is left to grapple with fundamental questions: who are we, what do we do, and why? Further, a tradition must ask itself, what kind of virtues must we embody if our practices are to be sustained and if we are to reach the good toward which we are striving. It would seem that this is the impetus for the substantial reflection among Bapto-Catholics regarding the sacraments. Arguably, it is the MacIntyrian notion of the constitutive nature of practices that drives the interest in the role of the sacraments more than other potential considerations.¹⁰³

New MacIntyrian Horizons For Bapto-Catholics

It is clear that MacIntyre has had a profound influence on the Bapto-Catholic conversation thus far. Nevertheless, there are further aspects of his program that also are well suited to the further development of the Bapto-Catholic enquiry. His account of the role of conflict in the development of a tradition and his historicist account of the truths gained by a tradition are especially well suited to Baptist thought and provide a helpful

¹⁰³I.e., one notes a difference between the praxis-oriented approach to the sacraments of Bapto-Catholic thinkers (see Elizabeth Newman, "The Lord's Supper: Might Baptists Accept a Theory of Real Presence?" in *Baptist Sacramentalism*, edited by Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 5 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003): 211-227) and the Catholic and Orthodox understandings of the "sacramental economy," which makes much stronger claims about the link between the sacraments and the dispensation of grace:

The seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body. The Church, then, both contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies. It is in this analogical sense, that the Church is called a "sacrament," (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 774).

way forward. These ideas are particularly helpful for the Bapto-Catholic conversation because they have the potential to alleviate the anxieties some Baptists have surrounding Bapto-Catholic proposals, especially concerning their proposal to grant a prominent role to tradition.

The Role of Conflict

It has been noted already that conflict plays a prominent role in the Baptist vision. Conflict is so central that Walter Shurden was able to effectively tell the Southern Baptist story by way of its controversies in *Not a Silent People*. He provocatively begins the book by claiming:

If you think that Baptists of today are devoted establishmentarians, if you see them as a herd of timid, effete thumb-sucking Christians, fearful of any controversy and all change, I have two suggestions for you. One you may be wrong, but this is not the place to argue that point. Two, even if you are right about the “now” Baptists, do not make the mistake of thinking that Baptists have always been domesticated. Baptists were born in the bosom of radicalism! They are born fighters because they were born fighting.¹⁰⁴

The book concludes with a section of lessons one might draw from the Southern Baptist story, in which he claims, “Write a book entitled *Baptist Controversies*, and you have written a somewhat satisfactory summary of Baptist History.”¹⁰⁵ Bill Leonard’s account is quite similar. He claims that, “theological diversity, congregational autonomy, and freedom of conscience create environments in which debate, controversy and schism are not merely possible but inevitable. In a sense, Baptists created an ecclesiastical and

¹⁰⁴Walter B. Shurden, *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 1995), 1.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 113.

theological framework that ensured controversy, dispute and division.”¹⁰⁶ He concludes his reflection on the Baptist ways with several key points of Baptist identity, which include: “Dissent is a worthy and dangerous pursuit...ideas are worth debating even when they divide communities... Being Baptist is messy, controversial and divisive.”¹⁰⁷ W. Glenn Jonas, Jr. describes the Baptist identity by identifying a conflictual center: “I would contend that over four centuries of Baptist history, the essential quality that identifies Baptists is diversity through dissent. In other words, Baptist conflict spawns new Baptist traditions. This, in turn, creates Baptist diversity. Diversity through dissent therefore becomes the central identifying characteristic of the Baptist tradition.”¹⁰⁸

The challenge of defining the Baptist identity, explored at length in chapter two, has much to do with the scope and intensity of the conflicts among Baptists. There it was mentioned that the preferred method of historically describing the Baptist identity is Bill Leonard’s account of tensions that have shaped the enquiry over time. Choosing to frame the story in terms of tensions reveals the centrality of conflict: one cannot essentialize the Baptist story in meaningfully universal ways due to the number of disagreements and

¹⁰⁶Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 9.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 424-425.

¹⁰⁸William Glenn Jonas, *The Baptist River: Essays on Many Tributaries of a Diverse Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 3. Jonas follows this definition with a humorous story exemplifying Baptist divisiveness:

[There was a] Baptist who was stranded on a desert island. One day a ship came to the Island and the shipwrecked Baptist ran out to greet it. “I’m so glad you’re here,” he said. “I’ve been alone on this island for five years.” The captain replied, “If you’re all alone, why do I see three huts?” The Baptist answered, “Well I live in one and go to church in another.” “What about the third hut?” asked the captain. “That’s where I used to go to church.”

For the reasons explored below, I suggest that the recognition of dissent is necessary for a proper understanding of the Baptist identity, but it is not sufficient.

complexities in the story. In other words, conflict is not a fact to sidestep *en route* to a coherent definition of Baptist convictions—conflict itself is an important plank of Baptist self-description.

All of these convictions are important to note in an expanded way here because they point toward a potential hesitation that some Baptists may have concerning the Bapto-Catholic project, that is, their insistence upon looking to tradition as an authoritative source. Some might assume that the deference to tradition may result in a truncated ability to engage in the sort of robust disagreement that has typically characterized the Baptist engagement with their own tradition, and with others. Given the importance of conflict to MacIntyre's definition of tradition, and MacIntyre's profound impact on Bapto-Catholic thought, it is apparent that this fear is misguided.

It is helpful to return to MacIntyre's definitions of tradition. In *After Virtue* he describes a tradition as: "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."¹⁰⁹ In *Whose Justice* he develops the concept, arguing that a tradition is

an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.¹¹⁰

In both definitions conflict is an essential aspect of a tradition and the progress of a tradition occurs as competing arguments are compared and sifted, allowing "the best

¹⁰⁹MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

¹¹⁰MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 12.

description so far,”¹¹¹ to emerge from the crucible of the tradition’s internal debate.¹¹²

The innovation in *Whose Justice*’s expanded definition is that both rival internal conceptions and the arguments posed by critics external to the tradition are part of the development and advancement of a tradition. “So, the narrative history of each of these traditions involves both a narrative of enquiry of debate within that tradition and also one

¹¹¹On the relationship between the *telos* and “the best so far,” see MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 64.

¹¹²Hibbs notes that there is a special challenge in reconciling MacIntyre’s “best so far” approach with the category of revelation. Because of revelation’s special status, the standard form of engagement changes. “This is not to say that theology cannot develop, or that it has nothing to learn from encounters with rival traditions. It is to say that radical reversal is inconceivable,” (“MacIntyre’s Postmodern Thomism: Reflections on *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*,” 289). Elsewhere Hibbs clarifies the relationship further by appealing to the explicitly theological account offered by MacIntyre’s exemplar, John Henry Newman:

What Newman will allow for is unforeseen development, an enrichment and enlargement of initial formulations of divine truth. Indeed he sees such development as part of the divine economy and as a necessary concession to the human mode of understanding. But the starting point of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, while it may be contingent in time and place, has as its source the infallible authority of *Deus revelans*. Contingency may indeed be present in an individual’s or a community’s comprehension of the content of revelation. But the Christian message itself, as Augustine, Thomas, and Newman understand it, is not susceptible of radical revision in the way MacIntyre suggests traditions are. Furthermore, in what Christianity moves toward—the consummation of all things in Christ—it is at odds with MacIntyre’s view of tradition (Ibid., 219).

Hibbs’s summary of Newman’s view seems quite amenable to Bapto-Catholic thought—recognizing questions and contingency is important, but so is recognizing the revealed, and therefore, unalterable, points of doctrine like the humanity and divinity of Christ, or the Trinity—and it suggests that a Bapto-Catholic engagement with Newman would likely be quite profitable. Questions that immediately arise, however, include: what exactly is included in the non-contingent “Christian message itself,” and how might one make such a judgment? These questions lead to the issue of authority, which will be discussed below.

of debate and disagreement between it and its rivals, debates and disagreements which come to define the detail of these varying types of antagonistic relationship.”¹¹³

From this several conclusions can be offered. First, Baptists—though proud of their role as dissenters, and correct to claim a special status for their unique history of dissent—are not unique in this regard. Conflict and dissent are part of the normal workings of *all* traditions, even those that are hierarchically structured. MacIntyre’s historical engagement illustrates well the internal debates within Catholicism. Therefore, asserting a heritage of dissent does not exempt Baptists from asserting a role for tradition. If MacIntyre is correct, tradition itself is an inevitable component of all traditions of enquiry whatsoever. A more complex question that Baptists must face then, is *how* a tradition is to be regulated and carried forward in the best way possible—and this question is part of the internal enquiry of the tradition.

Second, tradition ought not be a dreaded concept especially because the significance of the tradition is itself a matter of interpretation. Positing a special, unquestioned, canonical status for Scriptures does not solve interpretive debates, it

¹¹³MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 350. John Milbank offers a critique of MacIntyre on theological grounds that are similar to those noted above in n111. Milbank attempts to “radicalize” MacIntyre, suggesting that he is not “sufficiently relativistic or historicist” (328). Further, he suggests that “there is no method, no mode of argument that charts us smoothly past the Scylla of foundationalism and the Charybdis of difference. Nor do I find it possible to defend the notion of ‘traditioned reason’ in general, outside of my attachment to a tradition which grounds this ideas in the belief in the historical guidance of the Holy Spirit” (ibid.). In part, Milbank’s critique is that “MacIntyre tries to demonstrate, from a detached point of view, that tradition-governed inquiry in general is rational, and makes objective progress, whereas the only possible response to nihilism is to affirm one’s allegiance to a particular tradition, and derive an ontology from the implicit assumptions of its narrative forms” (262). *Theology & Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Second Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). This tension between MacIntyre’s general theory and the particulars of a given tradition are evident in his account of authority.

merely points to the documents that are the locus of the debate. Similarly, granting some authoritative status to tradition need not stifle the conversation. Instead, it opens up another arena for debate, namely, the shared stories and convictions of the community. MacIntyre himself recognizes this. Even when he describes the special sacred authority granted certain canonical texts as being “exempt from repudiation,” he notes that those utterances “may certainly be subject to reinterpretation.”¹¹⁴ Even that which is untouchable and irrefutable is still an object of communal interpretation.¹¹⁵

Third, by framing the conversation in terms of traditions of enquiry, one finds that dissent is one important mode of participation in the tradition. If a tradition is an ongoing conversation about the good to be pursued, then there is room to participate by dissenting from prevailing views. It is important to note, however, that dissent is not an end unto itself. If a tradition of rational enquiry is to be healthy, and if dissent is to have any semblance of meaning, there must be a common pursuit of truth and a legitimate contestation over particular goods; in other words, a “tradition of dissent” is unintelligible

¹¹⁴MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 355.

¹¹⁵ Certainly, Baptists will have a much different view than Roman Catholics about what ought to be considered “untouchable.” However, it is important to note that Catholicism, with its high regard for the status of tradition, still recognizes that the tradition must be interpreted. The question for any tradition is *how* the interpretive endeavor ought to proceed. The distinctly Catholic doctrine of the *magisterium* is a hierarchical solution to the interpretive problem. This is well defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

The apostles entrusted the “Sacred deposit” of the faith (the *depositum fidei*), contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to the whole of the Church. ... “The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.” This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome (84-85).

without a clear sense of that from which it dissenting.¹¹⁶ In the same way, a tradition of enquiry must also express a commitment to rational engagement. It is not enough to express preference for one set of goods over another—such a stance falls victim to MacIntyre’s critique of emotivism and its underlying Nietzschean elevation of the will—the inquiry must justify itself rationally. Certain reflections on the Baptist identity seem to suggest that the Baptist way is a question of “style” and preference, even avoiding the appearance of the claim that the Baptist way is the best way.¹¹⁷ A tradition of enquiry cannot be an exercise in nostalgia or an assertion of preference. If it is to avoid the trap of Nietzschean willfulness, the enquiry must be a quest for truth with the boldness to rationally defend a position, entertain difficult objections, or to abandon a position if it has been shown false.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Curtis W. Freeman, “A Confession for Catholic Baptists,” in Gary Furr and Curtis W. Freeman, *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1994), 87ff.

¹¹⁷ This is a curious feature of some of Shurden’s reflections. While he is proud to assert his partisanship within the Baptist identity conflict (see above, p. 19 n 17), he seems to hesitate to assert the superiority of the Baptist identity, lest he be accused of “tribalism”:

While I never believed that we were the only ones, I snuggled up pretty close to the absurdity that we were the best ones, but I have repented of that a thousand times and with good reason. Tribalism, like all other provincialisms, has to die. I do not decry the death of tribalism, but neither do I deny the pull of home. For me, the larger Baptist family has been my home and my little corner of the forty-acre field of Christendom. I hope I am not flirting again with tribalism when I say that at the center of my being there is something about being Baptist as I understand it that is both freeing and fulfilling (*Not an Easy Journey*, 8).

It would be unfair to suggest that Shurden’s justification is purely emotivist—his arguments elsewhere suggest otherwise. But there is a distinctly emotivist tone in certain of his writings. See also the prominence of “style” as a motif in: *The Baptist Style for a New Century: Documents for Faith and Witness* (Brentwood, TN: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2001).

¹¹⁸ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 358.

Fourth, just as dissent is essential to the nature of tradition, so are common agreements. In fact, it is the common goods that serve as the common bond among the interpretive options and give coherence to the tradition. In his critique of the alleged disinterestedness of reason, MacIntyre says that one possibility that must be considered is that

reason can only move towards being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, *one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded* is a condition for genuine rational enquiry and more especially for moral and theological enquiry.¹¹⁹

Fundamental dissent is problematic precisely because the unity of a tradition is unsustainable without certain agreements that unify a tradition and make its debates cohere.¹²⁰ Counter-intuitively, MacIntyre suggests that it was the framework of common convictions that made possible the radical diversity of the Middle Ages:

It would have been unsurprising if what had emerged had been a certain unprincipled eclecticism, a mere *mélange* of viewpoints. What saved the twelfth century from such eclecticism was the existence of an overall framework of belief within which the different uses of different parts of ancient philosophy had to be put to work and in terms of which they had in the end to be justified. But the existence of such a framework did not preclude radical disagreement.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 59-60.

¹²⁰ This implies a difficult question: how might one know that a tradition has reached “fundamental dissent?” Stated differently, how much unity is necessary for the coherence of a tradition? While these questions do not permit a precise answer they have great practical import for a tradition, especially when a practical follow-up question is raised: how might a tradition achieve and sustain a necessary level of unity?

¹²¹ Ibid., 87-88.

Although a Baptist might bristle at MacIntyre's subsequent commendation of Abelard's censure and its apparent justification of an authoritative hierarchy within a tradition,¹²² his exclusion of fundamental dissent is not an altogether alien sentiment. Something similar seems to be the underlying concern for William Brackney's lament about the divided state of Baptist convictions:

If all Baptists share a common denominator in our doctrine of baptism, we must also painfully admit that we are, beyond that affirmation, hopelessly fragmented. Theological, political and social realities are such that Baptists have spread in many directions and categories. While we have pressed our basic principle successfully, we have blunted our concern for scriptural Christianity by disagreeing on virtually every detail mentioned in the Bible.¹²³

The question to which Brackney seems to point is an important one: what binds Baptists together? Around what fundamental agreements can Baptists gather—and dispute?

Certainly, this seems to be the motivation for the Bapto-Catholic call to affirm the ancient Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Those documents have long served the church as points of unity and common ground that enabled coherent dispute. They ought not be read as documents that discourage debate, but as confessions that enable the consensus that debate requires. Similarly, one could read the *Manifesto* as a document calling for a certain understanding of Baptist life, grounded in a conception of tradition-constituted rationality, intended to provoke further conversations about the nature of Baptist life.

Rather than prohibit dialogue, it seeks to give shape to the dialogue. In all of these points

¹²² Ibid., 89-93. See Porter's perceptive engagement with these issues: "Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre," 63-65.

¹²³ William H. Brackney, "Commonly, (Though Falsely) Called...": Reflections on the Search for Baptist Identity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13.4 (Winter 1986), 81. Brackney goes on to explain how Baptists have managed to maintain coherence despite the radical diversity: "The solution to this fragmentation has been the natural clustering of churches into associations or communions which can agree on enough principles to cooperate in fellowship and service." Ibid.

one sees in MacIntyre the resources to affirm a robust role for disagreement over the commonly held goods of the tradition. The MacIntyrian bent of the Bapto-Catholic project ensures that the traditional appreciation for conflict and debate remains healthily enshrined in its approach to the Baptist identity.

Historicism

Another facet of MacIntyre's thought that could be advanced profitably by Bapto-Catholic theologians is his insistence on the historicity of all traditional claims. This is to say that all human enquiries take place in history and are inevitably bound to their historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts. MacIntyre states that, "Doctrines, theses, and arguments all have to be understood in terms of historical context,"¹²⁴ which is not to say that timeless truths cannot be claimed, but that "such claims are being made for doctrines whose formulation is time-bound and that the concept of timelessness is itself a concept with a history, one which in certain types of context is not at all the same concept that it is in others."¹²⁵

The historical shape of tradition gives rise to several consequences for MacIntyre's project. The first, and most obvious, consequence is that because of the cultural embeddedness of all enquiries, no tradition's claims can be assessed apart from its history. This is a rather straightforward and methodological claim about how the tradition is to be engaged. The second, and much further reaching, consequence is that if a tradition of enquiry is historically conditioned, it is impossible to escape the historical contingency of its expression. Despite its timeless claims, the tradition's enquiry is time

¹²⁴MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 9.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*

bound. Awareness of the historically conditioned nature, and thus the provisionality, of a tradition's statements require traditions to ask, "which is the best answer to be proposed so far?"¹²⁶ One must weigh the current formulations on the scales of rational coherence. MacIntyre notes that this sifting is at the root of "the original and most elementary version of the correspondence theory of truth...one in which it is applied retrospectively in the form of a correspondence theory of falsity."¹²⁷ By assessing the current state of the tradition, its members are able to assess the points at which the tradition's answers simply do not square with its current perception of reality. Despite its claims to have encountered the "real," a tradition's commitment to truth requires it to admit that its *description* of the real may require revision, or even rejection. A third, and related, consequence is that a tradition is inherently dynamic. Given that traditions are not simply rational enquiries, but are also communities of practice that are shaped by, and give shape to, the inquiry, "all such communities are always, to greater or lesser degree, in a state of change."¹²⁸ The historically conditioned nature of tradition by definition makes it responsive to the contextual pressures exerted by the tradition's own narrative, its surrounding culture, and rival traditions. For all of these reasons, the historicist account offered by MacIntyre manages to give due consideration to the past, remain flexible in its engagement with the present, and preserve coherence into the future.¹²⁹

¹²⁶Ibid., 358.

¹²⁷Ibid., 356.

¹²⁸Ibid., 354.

¹²⁹Kent Reames compares and contrasts the historicist projects of MacIntyre and John Howard Yoder in: "Histories of Reason and Revelation: With Alasdair MacIntyre and John Howard Yoder into Historicist Theology and Ethics: A Dissertation" Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago (1997). He uses these two figures to articulate a

MacIntyre's view of the historicity of tradition is potentially quite congenial to a Baptist account of tradition. One such view is expressed by Keith W. Clements's essay in *The Truth in Tradition*, a collection written by British Free Church theologians exploring the role and meaning of tradition among the non-episcopal traditions.¹³⁰ Clements—a Baptist minister and a past general secretary of the Conference of European Churches—offers a carefully nuanced Baptist perspective on tradition. He notes the depth of the Baptist commitment to scripture over and against tradition, especially as demonstrated in its rejection of infant baptism despite near universal practice to the contrary. Yet, he observes that Baptists have also been tradition conscious, especially concerning their own distinctives during periods in which those particularities were

fundamental methodological difference between types of historicism: reasonist and confessionalist (with MacIntyre representing the former, and Yoder the latter). “A reasonist historicist theologian is a consistently historicist theologian who accents or stresses or makes more central the claims of rationality (or rationality-preserving historicism) than those of the Christian revelation (authority-preserving historicism); a confessionalist historicist theologian reverses these priorities” (255). This distinction resonates with the critique noted by Hibbs above (p. 184 n 111) concerning the tension between the traditional Christian claim to proclaim revealed truth, and the radical reversibility or falsifiability of a philosophical tradition of enquiry. Reames, however, would likely respond that this tension is not problematic, it simply represents a different way to engage theological questions. I am inclined to agree with the confessionalism of Hibbs, Augustine, Aquinas, Newman, and Yoder.

¹³⁰The editor of the collection, Rupert E. Davies, states that the collection is motivated in part by a desire to provide Free Church reflections on tradition, specifically because their perspectives are generally excluded by the very definition of terms. He says:

Put in the directest terms, the doctrine consists in the assertion that tradition is faithfully preserved only in those communions which possess, as they claim, the historic succession of bishops from the apostles; that is, the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox communions. According to this view, what is officially taught and practiced in these communions is genuine tradition; what is not so taught and practiced there, is not entitled to the name of tradition. (K. W. Clements, Rupert Eric Davies, and David Michael Thompson, *The Truth in Tradition: A Free Church Symposium* (London: Epworth Press, 1992), 2-3).

threatened.¹³¹ Baptists are not only concerned to preserve their own distinctives, however; he cites the inclusion of the Nicene, Athanasian, and Apostle's Creeds in the seventeenth-century General Baptist confession *The Orthodox Creed*, and the recitation of the Apostles' Creed at the inaugural Baptist World Alliance meeting in 1905.¹³² Nevertheless, he notes that the Baptist perspective on tradition is essentially, "a matter for rigorous scrutiny in the light of the normative, apostolic testimony to be found in scripture. It is an overtly critical perspective," which he demonstrates with a quote from the Baptist Union of Great Britain's response to the Faith and Order "Lima" text, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. He notes that each responding church was asked "to indicate 'the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the church through the ages.'" The Baptist response is instructive:

We do not find this form of question particularly meaningful or significant. We can recognize in this text a multitude of emphases in harmony with the witness of the New Testament, and in our response we have thankfully acknowledged key areas where this is judged to be so. *But tradition is a dynamic process with inevitable admixture of truth and error*; and formulations of faith change through the ages, not least because of changing contexts and situations. What we register is a valuable contemporary movement towards common understanding on divisive issues.¹³³

Thus, Baptists view tradition as potentially valuable—in fact, Clements later makes a very MacIntyrian point in claiming that "we cannot completely cut loose from tradition without losing Christian identity"¹³⁴—but it is provisional, fallible, and subject to reformulation. This is a thoroughly historicist view.

¹³¹Ibid., 9.

¹³²Ibid., 11.

¹³³Quoted *ibid.*, 13. Emphasis Clements's.

¹³⁴Ibid., 21.

After surveying the Baptist views of tradition, Clements goes on to survey the key documents of ecumenical significance, noting that the central problem of hermeneutics is all too often overlooked, as is the imprecision of the terms employed:

What exactly is meant by 'Tradition' (capital T) anyway? It is certainly something that one would wish to exist, an objective source of unimpeachable truth, of pure belief unaffected by time and chance, beyond the vagaries and prejudices of our particular confessional and partisan standpoints. But is there, can there be, anything beyond these particular visible traditions? Once traditions in their plurality are acknowledged, any notion of a single great "Tradition" over and above these becomes a Will o' the Wisp. We are tempted to suspect that what may be going on here is that old theological game of let's pretend, of imagining that because a word is used, especially a word with a capital letter, what it refers to has a real existence.¹³⁵

Much could be said in response to Clements's account, but one observation must be made: the emphases of his account square well with the dynamism, historicism, and conflictual account of tradition provided by MacIntyre.

Conclusion

MacIntyre's project not only constitutes one of the most important developments in contemporary philosophy, his work also has deep resonance with, and promise for, Baptist thought. He offers a valuable diagnosis of the modern morass of incommensurable philosophical and moral traditions, and he provides constructive solutions for working around these limitations. If Bapto-Catholics are correct in asserting that Baptist thought was shaped at critical junctures by Enlightenment philosophy, then

¹³⁵ Ibid., 19-20. Clements's historicist concerns are important to note; Tradition cannot be used as a convenient way to escape the church's historical situatedness and the resulting epistemological consequences (i.e., fallibility of interpretation, divisions between rival traditions). This fact ought not lead the church to despair, resigning itself to its divided state; rather, it must bear in mind the eschatological reality of the church's unity. Although, like justice, may not be fully realized outside of the eschaton, it is a *telos* toward which we must strive if we are to pursue fidelity to the gospel. See: Freeman, "A Confession for Catholic Baptists," 87-89.

MacIntyre's project offers both a stern rebuke and suggestions for a way forward.

However, appropriating MacIntyre's project is not without its challenges. Just as he finds it necessary to assert a role for authority in his conception of tradition, one wonders how Bapto-Catholics might also respond, especially given the centrality of authority as a theological category. Although it is not perfectly clear how Bapto-Catholics might appropriate MacIntyre's insights, that he is a valuable interlocutor for Baptist thought is beyond doubt.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Retrospect

This dissertation has attempted to describe the Bapto-Catholic sensibility by surveying its underlying philosophical convictions, the documents of its chief proponents and interlocutors, and its historical context. One might notice that the shape of the study is itself an attempt to engage in the type of “thick description” that MacIntyre envisions as part of tradition constituted rationality. In a study about Bapto-Catholics, one might consider it unusual to devote a large amount of space to “the Controversy” or to a narration of the arguments over the nature of the Baptist identity, but this project was shaped by the conviction that one can never understand intellectual currents like “Baptist Catholicity” without a robust connection to the cultural, conceptual, and linguistic framework out of which they emerge.

One cannot understand this species of Baptists without reference to “the late unpleasantness” between the conservative and moderate combatants in the twentieth-century disintegration of the Southern Baptist Convention. These circumstances, interpreted through a MacIntyrian lens, served as the genesis for the Bapto-Catholic critique embodied in the *Baptist Manifesto* and other polemical works. The result was a critique of the philosophical influence of modernity on Baptist life and a constructive project to reconsider the Baptist story, its practices, and the virtues that would sustain them. Bapto-Catholics hope that an adequate way might be found into the future, beyond the stormy transitions out of modernity and into whatever may lie on the other side.

Revisiting the Question: What is Baptist Catholicity?

Having considered the details of recent Baptist history and rival conceptions of Baptist identity, it is also important to revisit the central question of this study: what is Baptist-Catholicity? Previously the question was raised in an effort to sketch a basic semantic range for the term and to survey the content of the arguments advanced by those who might be considered Bapto-Catholic.¹ Now, however, it is possible to ask the question from a quite different angle: given MacIntyre's description of tradition, how might one characterize the role of the Bapto-Catholic project within the Baptist tradition? For that matter, what is the place of Bapto-Catholicism within the Christian tradition broadly considered?

A potential answer to the first question can be found in MacIntyre's concept of the "epistemological crisis."² A crisis of this sort occurs when a tradition-constituted enquiry encounters a seemingly irresolvable conflict between equally unsatisfying rival options. In this situation, by its own standards of evaluation, the tradition has ceased to make progress. This describes well the story of the latter days of the intact Southern Baptist Convention. Deep conflicts emerged over fundamental issues of hermeneutics, the posture toward secular disciplines like the sciences, and institutional governance—conflicts that are typically part of the normal working of a "historically extended, socially embodied argument."³ However, in the 1960s and 1970s the usual mechanisms for

¹See above, p. 120-147.

²MacIntyre's full account of epistemological crises can be found in: Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 361-365.

³Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.

resolving conflict began to falter. Soon it became clear that the crisis ran far deeper than political processes. The standard solution of “looking to scripture” was found to be inadequate—precisely because the interpretation of Scripture was itself the problem. All the while, both sides claimed to hew closer to the side of Scripture and the Baptist tradition. At issue were rival narratives of the Baptist identity, which resulted in rival hermeneutics—even rival rationalities.

With the publication of the *Baptist Manifesto*, the situation grew more complex. By naming both conservatives and moderates as two sides of the same coin minted by the Enlightenment, Bapto-Catholics offered an alternate narrative of the Baptist identity with its own set of rival goods. Three distinct visions for Baptist life and practice were in competition, yet it is likely that many did not recognize the situation in those terms. Due to the deep mistrust between the parties and the tremendous implications of these conflicts for Baptist institutions, some saw the conflict as “power plays by mean people”⁴ rather than the heightened internal conflict of a tradition in an epistemological crisis. It is not unusual that some were unaware of the nature of the conflict; MacIntyre notes several

⁴Curtis W. Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned?” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24.3 (Fall 1997), 293. After critiquing the shortsightedness of the “power play” interpretation, Freeman rightly observes that:

the antagonistic relationship between liberals and conservatives is an inevitable consequence of the interaction between these two rival visions of theology given their divergent trajectories and incommensurable paradigms. Moreover, the intensity of the Baptist battles in this century is indicative of *an* underlying crisis of modernity and of the attempt by Baptists to articulate their identity as a free people of God. Because the current crisis in Baptist theology is occasioned by the collapse of the Enlightenment project, theologies that depend on the Enlightenment for their intelligibility cannot successfully negotiate the transition beyond modernity. Thus, neither fundamentalist (or evangelical) nor liberal (or moderate) theologies have the resources to develop a Baptist theology for the next millennium (ibid.).

examples in which the crisis was only recognized in retrospect.⁵ Given the stalemate in the Baptist conversation, the inadequacies of previous solutions, and the emergence of a new proposal with unsettling approaches to the old problems, the situation does indeed fit the description of an epistemological crisis.

How does a tradition in crisis find resolution? MacIntyre suggests that an impasse of this sort can only be overcome by inventing or discovering new solutions that meet three stringent requirements. The solution must answer the enquiry's previously irresolvable difficulties in a "systematic and coherent way;" it must be able to explain what had previously rendered the tradition "sterile or incoherent, or both," before the new solution was offered; and it must demonstrate a "fundamental continuity" between the new theoretical suggestions and the shared beliefs of the tradition thus far.⁶ Should these criteria be met, the solution may be considered a genuine solution, or, to borrow John Henry Newman's terminology, an authentic development of doctrine.⁷

There is a predictable anxiety produced within a tradition in crisis. It is predictable not only because conflict naturally produces anxiety, but also because the necessary elements of a successful resolution are frightening. Novel concepts and re-conceived stories are threatening prospects for those who have grown attached to the

⁵MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 363.

⁶Ibid., 362.

⁷John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, (London: J. Toovey, 1845). MacIntyre cites Newman as a preeminent theorist of tradition in the Christian thought; see: *Whose Justice* 8, 353-54, 362. James Gaffney notes that "one surprising thing about the reception given to Newman's *Essay on Development* is that, praised as it usually is among Catholics, it is so little imitated or extended by them" John Henry Newman and James Gaffney, *Conscience, Consensus, and the Development of Doctrine*, (New York: Image Books, 1992), 37. Arguably, MacIntyre's project is an exception to this rule.

established categories and narratives. Yet, there are three other risks for a tradition in crisis that are far greater than the challenge of accepting an altered self-conception. The first risk is conversion.

MacIntyre suggests that conversion becomes a possibility when a tradition in crisis encounters the claims of a rival tradition in a new way. Whether it is an alien tradition encountered for the first time, or whether it is an old rival encountered anew, the tradition in crisis may engage the other as a true dialogue partner, learning its language such that it becomes a “second first language.”⁸ Once the language of the other is learned to this extent, real conceptual engagement is possible, with all its attendant risks. The risk is that in the encounter with the other, it may be discovered that the other offers a more compelling answer to the problems under consideration.⁹ Also, if the newly discovered answer cannot be demonstrated to be in fundamental continuity with the tradition in crisis, it cannot be considered a solution for that tradition; rather, the “solution” has put the tradition’s viability into question.¹⁰ If a tradition is committed to

⁸An interesting example of a study that demonstrates the approach of acquiring the “second-first language” before engaging in dialogue is: Timothy V. Vaverick, “The Office of Pastor in Contemporary Southern Baptist Thought and Practice: Ecumenical Possibilities from a Roman Catholic Perspective,” Ph.D. diss, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, 1996. In it Vaverick spends the first half of the dissertation describing Baptist history and the office of the pastor in Southern Baptist thought and practice, carefully demonstrating “linguistic competence.” Only then does he take up the task of comparing and contrasting Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic practice, suggesting potential areas for future ecumenical dialogue.

⁹MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 364.

¹⁰MacIntyre’s description of this situation is helpful: “Derived as it is from a genuinely alien tradition, the new explanation does not stand in any sort of substantive continuity with the preceding history of the tradition in crisis. In this kind of situation the rationality of tradition requires an acknowledgement by those who have hitherto inhabited and given their allegiance to the tradition in crisis that the alien tradition is superior in rationality and in respect of its claims to truth to their own,” *ibid.*, 365.

the pursuit of truth, there is necessarily an attending risk of being proven wrong; in such cases, conversion is a potential outcome.¹¹

Applying the template of an epistemological crisis to the Baptist identity conversation reveals what is at stake for the participants. The three traditions surveyed in this study may engage in the “tournament of narratives,”¹² attempting to offer solutions to

¹¹Indeed this is the case for both MacIntyre and John Henry Newman. Both were willing to engage in rational discourse about the nature of tradition and both were led to various “conversions.” MacIntyre was raised in a non-denominational Christian setting and though he had exposure to Catholic thought as a teenager, he remained a Protestant, enamored of Karl Barth. In his late teens he also encountered Marxism, joining the Community party at age 18. His philosophical investigations led him to deep skepticism, then abandonment, of both. His engagement of Aristotle and Thomism in *After Virtue* eventually led him back to Christianity. He became a Catholic in 1983 while writing *Whose Justice*. For further details, see MacIntyre’s autobiographical reflections in “An Interview with Giovanna Borradori” and “An Interview for Cogito” in: Alasdair MacIntyre, *The MacIntyre Reader*, Kelvin Knight, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 255-275. See also the biographical sketch in: Thomas D. D’Andrea, *Tradition, Rationality and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), xvi-xviii; and the biographical chapter in: Jack Russell Weinstein, *On MacIntyre*, Wadsworth Philosophers Series, (Australia: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, 2003), 4-14. For an account that highlights the continuity of MacIntyre’s philosophical development, see: Christopher Steven Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 7-32.

Newman evinces a similar willingness to follow where the argument leads. He was born into an evangelical-Calvinist family, became a high-church Anglican during his Oxford days, and then converted to Catholicism while writing his *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*. In each case, despite immense personal cost, it was his engagement in the traditions of enquiry that required that he make each move. For the full account, see the autobiographical defense of his conversion, recognized as a classic of nineteenth century literature: *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: Being a Reply to a Pamphlet Entitled “What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?”* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864).

¹²McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *Ethics*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 143. See his expanded discussion of the role of conflict and rival narratives with special reference to baptist thought: *ibid.*, 36-41. Ralph Wood builds on the tournament image, suggesting that jettisoning the Enlightenment illusion of objectivity necessarily leads one into the tournament of narratives. He says, “Our task is to articulate the Christian story as it confronts and engages other accounts of the true and the good and the beautiful” *Contending for the Faith: The Church’s Engagement with Culture* (Waco,

what they consider the chief problems in Baptist life. The Bapto-Catholic interpretation of the situation is that the other two options are locked in an interminable battle rooted in their shared inheritance from the Enlightenment. Their proposals—embodied in the *Baptist Manifesto* and suggested by the various “marks” of Bapto-Catholic thought surveyed above—attempt to solve those problems, while narrating both the source of the problems found in the other versions and their own consistency with the Baptist identity. The success or failure of the proposals and their corresponding narratives is an open question. One thing is certain: each tradition risks being out-argued or out-narrated, and each—assuming that all parties are genuinely open to the risks of rational argument—opens him- or herself to conversion to the other positions.

Yet the challenge of conversion does not end there. There is not only a risk of conversion to rival positions within the Baptist identity conversation, but also conversion to the traditions to which Baptists look to find new solutions to their problems. At previous stages conservative and moderate Baptists have looked to various sources for inspiration to deal with crises as they arose.¹³ Bapto-Catholics have also looked to a variety of sources. They have not only looked to seventeenth-century Baptist thought as a creative resource; their emphasis on catholicity has led them into conversation with diverse expressions of the Christian traditions, especially Catholic and Orthodox

TX: Baylor University Press), 120. The task then, even among rival Baptist visions, is to compare narratives in pursuit of the ultimate goods.

¹³ Freeman and Thompson both argue that conservatives and moderates drew from theological, philosophical, and cultural resources as they encountered various challenges, and in some cases, these appropriations were detrimental for Baptist health. See: Curtis W. Freeman, “E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity,” *Review & Expositor* 96.1 (Winter 1999), 23-42; and “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical Theological and Liturgical Analysis,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27.3 (Fall 2000), 287-302.

theology. With this broad engagement comes great promise for discovering innovative answers to the intractable problems embedded in current Baptist thought; however, with it also comes the danger that the rival narratives may provide more attractive, coherent solutions, necessitating conversion. As mentioned above, the spate of recent conversions among high-profile theologians suggests that conversion is not merely a theoretical consideration.¹⁴

The second great risk embodied in the Bapto-Catholic response to the epistemological crisis in Baptist life is that certain problems may be discovered to which there is no adequate solution.¹⁵ Because of the tradition-constituted nature of inquiry, the discovery of new solutions invariably creates the potential for discovering new, and worse, problems. This is because any alien concept that shows promise as a solution is embedded in a web of other concepts and presuppositions which may not be assimilated as easily. This is indeed the case thus far in Bapto-Catholic thought, including the ideas explored in this study.

The Proposal Thus Far and Its Potential Problems

It was suggested above that tradition is a concept of fundamental importance for Bapto-Catholics. In chapter three we saw that Steven Harmon's first mark of Baptist

¹⁴Jason Byassee, "Going Catholic: Six Journeys to Rome." *The Christian Century Magazine* 123.17 (August 22, 2006), 18-23. Also remarkable is the recent willingness for evangelical authors to entertain Catholic claims and the contemporary developments in Catholic thought. See: Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?: An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2005).

¹⁵See: MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 364.

catholicity is to regard tradition as a source of authority,¹⁶ and similarly, I suggested that Bapto-Catholics are catholic in their approach to tradition, especially with respect to sacraments and liturgy.¹⁷ Furthermore, in chapter four, MacIntyre's philosophical conception of tradition was explored at length in order to discover an account of tradition that answers the current problematic in Baptist theology, while remaining recognizably consistent with Baptist thought. Given the traditional Baptist antipathy toward tradition being viewed authoritatively, these proposals are challenging points of contention among Baptists. According to MacIntyre's account of "epistemological crises" the proposal offered thus far can only succeed if it manages to provide an account that sufficiently answers the current problematic, narrate the flaws embedded in rival versions as inevitable consequences of their faulty presuppositions, and demonstrate that the proposal is in fact consistent with the Baptist tradition. Therefore, one might describe this study as an attempt to narrate the Bapto-Catholic project with special reference to its account of tradition as a solution to difficult problems besetting Baptist thought; it is my hope that this study does in fact advance that argument.

It must be admitted, however, that there is a significant issue that must be advanced alongside a well-articulated account of tradition; an account must be given of authority. Indeed, this is suggested in Harmon's claim that Bapto-Catholics hold that "tradition is a source of authority,"¹⁸ and by MacIntyre's turn to authority as a necessary

¹⁶See above, p. 122.

¹⁷See above, p. 141.

¹⁸Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 27 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 7-8.

aspect of a tradition.¹⁹ The implications of this claim could lead in several directions. One might wonder what weight one ought to give tradition in current debates. Is the past merely one voice among many that ought to be consulted in theological deliberation, or is something stronger necessary? Furthermore, if tradition is authoritative in any degree, one must ask: what counts as a legitimate part of the tradition? How might Baptists make that decision? In Roman Catholic thought these are all issues that fall under the rubric of the “magisterium.” To hearken back to MacIntyre’s emphasis on the pedagogical function of authority, one might ask: who is the teacher? These are all difficult and interrelated questions. Because the concept of tradition is itself embedded in a web of understandings or conflicts over the nature of authority, speaking to one issue necessitates a word about the other.

The challenge of providing an adequate account on this matter ought not to be underestimated. Putting the issue in practical terms, one might ask: is it coherent for Baptists to assert an authoritative role for tradition when the tradition itself arises from, and mandates, an episcopal polity? Similar questions have been raised by other Protestant theologians. Echoing concerns expressed by George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson writes, “Canon, creed, and episcopate were but parts of a single norm of faith, discovered in response to a single historical crisis; if one of the three is alienable, how are the other two not? It was precisely in their interaction that they were to guard the apostolicity of the church's teaching; what justifies separating one as dispensable?”²⁰ While Jenson

¹⁹See above, 170-173.

²⁰ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 239. Jenson is developing a similar theme expressed by George Lindbeck: “It is to this episcopally unified church, furthermore, that all major Christian traditions owe their creeds, their liturgies, and above all, their scriptural canon. If these latter are

himself remains Lutheran, the question he poses is instructive. If one intends to draw upon the tradition and treat it as authoritative, affirming the canon of Scripture and the ancient creeds, then one must answer Rome's longstanding traditional claim to possess magisterial authority, preserving the Gospel through the apostolic succession of its bishops and its unity under the ministry of the Pope.²¹ For those who wish to grant special authority to tradition, issues of authority and ecclesiology cannot be overlooked.

inexpungible, why not also the episcopate?" (199). In "The Church," in Geoffrey Wainwright, ed., *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 179-208.

²¹The nature of the papacy and its role in ecumenical conversations has been much discussed, especially since Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. For examples of Catholic conversations on these matters, see: Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I and II*, (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 1998); and, John R. Quinn, Phyllis Zagano, and Terrence W. Tilley, *The Exercise of the Primacy: Continuing the Dialogue*, (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 1998). For a fascinating ecumenical collection of reflections, see: Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Church Unity and the Papal Office: An Ecumenical Dialogue on John Paul II's Encyclical Ut Unum Sint (That All May Be One)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001). Especially interesting is the contribution by Richard Mouw. Although he is not a Baptist, his perspective as a reformed evangelical theologian may resonate well with many Baptists:

Anyone who is at all familiar with the so-called "conservative evangelical" movement in North America knows that we are not very fond of the papal office. Nor do we hold to the kinds of ecclesiological views that fit easily within the categories that are taken for granted by the other traditions represented in this consultation.

To put it in personal terms: when I listen to discussions among Christians who are concerned about the papacy and related matters, I feel like someone attending a family gathering after having lived a long time away from home. My relatives are discussing matters of disagreement that I know little about, yet I listen with more than detached interest. I don't know exactly how to enter into the arguments, but neither can I convince myself that the discussions are none of my business (124).

It should also be noted that the Orthodox Churches have long recognized the necessity to articulate a response to the claims of Rome. Given its episcopal structure and equally ancient apostolic claims, however, the shape of its response to Rome is quite different than the response any other group might offer.

It is not novel to suggest that the issue of authority is a special sticking point for the Bapto-Catholic conversation—the Foreword to *Towards Baptist Catholicity* itself notes that an adequate theology of authority is a lacuna in Harmon’s project. Although Paul Avis, an Anglican priest and the General Secretary of the Council for Christian Unity, offers glowing praise for the book, his endorsement comes with a significant caveat. Avis notes that Harmon overlooks the traditional link between catholicity and the teaching authority of the episcopate. While he suggests that he may be “running ahead” of the current project, he muses about how one would square the ancient tradition of the “threefold ministry”—bishop, presbyter, and deacon—with Baptist identity.²² Pressing the issue, Avis cites John Henry Newman’s dictum: “If you have come this far, you can’t stop here; the argument will carry you further.”²³ In reference to Newman’s conversion—which was provoked by his study of the development of doctrine and the role of authority—Avis wonders “whether authority is an underdeveloped and therefore unresolved issue in this admirable volume.”²⁴

Avis’s observation is fair, not only with respect to Harmon’s project, but to the Bapto-Catholic movement as a whole. For all its potential promise, there are many unanswered questions about the relationships between the authority of tradition, the practices of the ancient church, and the Baptist identity. Furthermore, if Bapto-Catholics are honestly to wrestle with the question of the magisterium and the nature of authority, they must take seriously the ecclesiological implications of Newman’s assertion: does the

²² Paul Avis, foreword to: Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, xvi.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

argument necessarily take one Romeward? Newman's narrative and his treatment of the development of doctrine, praised so highly by MacIntyre, suggests that it does.

Newman's scathing critique of Protestantism is notable. He says, "And this one thing at least is certain; whatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth it is this."²⁵ More damning still is his charge that, "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."²⁶

For Protestants who would affirm the ancient traditions while maintaining their own distinct identities—especially those who, like the Baptists, have long prided themselves as the most consistent voices crying "sola scriptura!"—Newman's words are a forceful challenge. How might one answer his charge? Stated differently: how might one reconcile John Henry Newman and George W. Truett?²⁷ The pointed words offered by both are instructive at least in part because they indicate just how incommensurable the two positions seem, and just how dramatic a Bapto-Catholic synthesis might be, should it manage to successfully narrate a solution. Perhaps some hope for success can be found in the previously unimaginable harmonization of Aristotle and Augustine, as achieved by Thomas Aquinas.

²⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: J. Toovey, 1845), 7-8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁷ See above, p. 6.

The Future of Bapto-Catholicism

Responding to the question of authority would far exceed the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, such a response is needed. Beyond further articulations of the varied practices that constitute the Bapto-Catholic vision, the underlying theologies of tradition, authority, and ecclesiology are essential components of whatever narrative will be offered as the enquiry continues.

The project is an important one in Baptist life. If MacIntyre and other critics of modernity are correct, then the Enlightenment project was a failure and its progeny (liberalism, objectivity, and ahistorical accounts of rationality) has little future. To whatever degree that Baptists find themselves beholden to these atraditional traditions, their own future is imperiled. The continued vitality of the Baptist identity is at stake and new solutions must be sought.

This assertion recalls the suggestion above that there are three anxiety-provoking risks that result from the response to the epistemic crisis. The first risk is conversion resulting from the encounter with rival traditions, the second is the discovery of unsolvable problems within the tradition, and the third risk may be the most sobering of all: the risk of the slow death of an atrophied, then abandoned, tradition of enquiry. Consider MacIntyre's warning that a tradition's attempts to answer the challenges in its enquiry "may founder...by doing nothing to remedy the condition of sterility and incoherence into which the enquiry has fallen."²⁸ Although risks abound for a program like the Bapto-Catholic enquiry, far greater risks abound for a tradition in crisis that refuses to look for solutions.

²⁸MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, 364.

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