ABSTRACT

Kingdom of Priests or Democracy of Competent Souls?
The 'Baptist Manifesto,' John Howard Yoder, and the Question of Baptist Identity

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This thesis examines "Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist

Christians in North America," a statement published by a group of Baptist theologians in

1997. The "Baptifesto," as it has come to be known, claimed that modern Baptists have

uncritically adopted individualistic and rationalistic theories of freedom that work against

the biblical vision of liberty experienced through participation in the church's corporate

vocation to discipleship. The purpose of this study is to place the "Baptifesto" within the

context of contemporary debates over Baptist identity and to show its connections to

similar critiques of the dominant forms of American Christianity within ecumenical

theological and ethical conversations. The various writings of Mennonite theologian

John Howard Yoder (1927-1997) serve as a primary resource for explicating the matrix

of ecclesiological, historical, social, and theological issues raised by the "Baptifesto's"

challenge to standard accounts of Baptist identity in the late twentieth century.
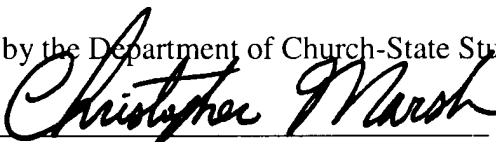
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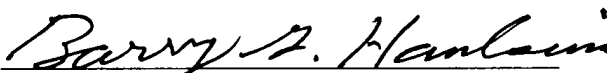Andrew D. Black, M.Div.

A Thesis

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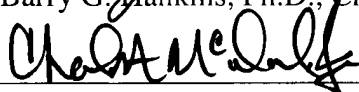
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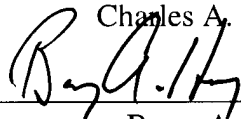
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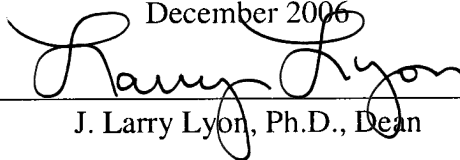Barry G. Hankins, Ph.D., Chairperson

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CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 1997, a group of Baptist church leaders and academics published a statement entitled *Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Christians in North America*.[1] The statement, which has come to be referred to as the "Baptifesto," offered itself to Baptists as a call to "freedom, faithfulness, and community" and attempted to define these abstract terms in thoroughly Christian ways. Basic to the *Baptifesto*'s message was a claim that Baptists across the spectrum of modern political and theological debates have uncritically identified the liberty of Christian discipleship within the community of faith with unbiblical theories of freedom, individualism, and rationalism. By doing so, it claimed, Baptists have lost the ability to maintain a corporate and countercultural witness to genuine freedom, peace, and reconciliation.

At the heart of the statement was a "re-envisioning" of key Baptist convictions set forth in terms of five affirmations and rejections. The focus of these constructive proposals and direct criticisms ranged from topics such as the practice of Bible reading and interpretation to the nature of the church and its relationship with the powers of the non-believing world. The authors framed these polemical statements with a theological account of the late-twentieth-century North American social and religious context—a

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[1]Curtis Freeman, et al., "Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1997): 303-310. (Printed as an appendix to Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Re-Envisioned?" in ibid, 273-309.) Hereafter abbreviated (in italics) as the *Baptifesto*.

description deepened and developed by the statement's alternative narration of Baptist history.

The *Baptifesto* affirmed a traditional Baptist rejection of "constantinian strategies" that "attempt to establish a vision of the church, whether Baptist or any other, by means of civil or political power."[2] At the same time, the statement urged Baptists to reclaim a social, spiritual, and political identity steeped in their biblical heritage:

> Although we attempt to live at peace with all people (Rom 2:10; 14:19; 2 Tim 2:22; Heb 12:14) and to seek the peace of the earthly city (Jer 29:7), we do so with our eyes on the peace of the other city (1 Cor 7:15; Heb 11:10; Rev 21:1-2), whose citizenship we share (Eph 2:19-22), whose politics we practice (Phil 1:27; 3:20; 1 Pet 2:11-12), and whose Lord alone is our peace (Eph 2:14-15; Col 1:21-22; Heb 7:2, 15-17; Rev 1:4). Thus we heed the call to be salt and light, engaging the world and challenging the powers with the peace and freedom of the gospel (Mt 5:13-14).[3]

For the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors, these affirmations mean that Baptists must also "reject any and all efforts to allow secular political versions of church-state separation to define the boundaries or the nature of our witness as the free and faithful people of God." With this vision as basis, the statement called Baptists and other Christians to "the freedom of faithful and communal witness in society."[4]

A thorough assessment of the *Baptifesto's* impact among North American Baptists[5] awaits evaluation from a greater historical distance. The statement's present

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[2]Ibid., 309.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]One is tempted to read the reference to "Baptist Christians in North America" as an attempt to find a locution that avoids the confusion over whether "American Baptists" refers to Baptists who live in America or to members of the American Baptist Churches, USA, one of the largest and most historic Baptist denominations in the United States. The *Baptifesto* does refer to a Canadian Baptist theologian (Douglas Clyde Macintosh), and two Canadians (Gordon Carter of Woodstock, Ontario and Stanley Grenz of Vancouver) were included in the list of 55 endorsers published along with the statement in *Baptists Today* (June 26, 1997, pgs. 8-10). Nevertheless, the statement's co-authors and endorsers were

significance stems in part from the fact that it advanced a radical theological critique of the status of Christianity within contemporary Western societies while speaking from within a mainstream denomination whose history and present self-understanding is intertwined with the American traditions of religious liberty and church-state separation. In addition, the *Baptifesto* is a relatively recent example of the ways in which historic religious antagonisms are disappearing and new alignments are forming in light of the erosion of Christianity's privileged status within Western societies. Its authors urged Baptists not to let their comfortable establishment within the cultural and social patterns of late twentieth-century America cause them to be among the last Christians to realize these momentous facts.

This thesis seeks to demonstrate how and why the *Baptifesto* attempted to renew, among Baptists, the biblical vision of the church as a distinct "priestly kingdom" whose gospel message cannot be separated from its social embodiment. Baptists have long cherished their heritage as dissenters and lovers of liberty, but several questions about this legacy remain open for debate: is this liberty most essentially understood (negatively) as an inalienable right of autonomous dissent or (positively) as the freedom to obey the imperatives of properly-formed conscience? Is the primary locus of such freedom (and, if necessary, dissent) the individual will or a particular kind of community? Basic to the *Baptifesto*'s challenge was a conviction that Baptist churches, together with all Christians, have a divinely bestowed vocation to *corporate* non-conformity—even in the

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predominantly Americans with roots in the Southern Baptist Convention. Thus, this thesis will focus on the United States and Southern Baptist contexts while acknowledging that the *Baptifesto* made some attempt to engage all North American Baptists.

enlightened United States, where most Baptists have historically experienced peace and (relative) prosperity.

One of this project's tasks will be to give a thorough analysis and evaluation of how the statement attempted to incorporate these elements while remaining distinctly Baptist. This will require a study of the institutional traditions, narrative structures, and theological-philosophical assumptions contained within the interpretations of Baptist identity the *Baptifesto* sought to counter. My goal is to show that in its emphasis on the church community—local, historic, and universal—the *Baptifesto* displayed a deeply "catholic" sensibility incongruous with many contemporary and historic accounts of Baptist identity. It also made common cause with a widespread sense of dissatisfaction with the theological, ethical, political, and social paradigms of "modernity," although Baptists are arguably among the most thoroughly modern Christian traditions.

The *Baptifesto* attempted to challenge any notion that there is a near-seamless fit between the institutions and mores of contemporary American democracy, liberal social and political theory, and the vocation of Christian churches in the world. In so doing, it echoed critiques from prominent non-Baptist theologians and cultural critics including, most notably, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, who spent the final decades of his career on the faculty of the University of Notre Dame, and Stanley Hauerwas, a Methodist and professor of theological ethics at Duke Divinity School. These two figures and their theological fellow-travelers represent a significant mood ("movement" would imply too much homogeneity) in contemporary theological and social ethics variously labeled ecclesiocentric or (mainly by critics) "sectarian." Because of their importance in

understanding the *Baptifesto* and its milieu, a few introductory words about Hauerwas and Yoder are in order.

While his career is still ongoing, making an assessment of his contribution at this point incomplete, Hauerwas towers over much of the current theological conversation, to the delight of some and the chagrin of others. In a 2001 *Time* magazine article naming Hauerwas "America's Best Theologian," his profiler (political ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain) gave him the title of "contemporary theology's foremost intellectual provocateur."[6] Hauerwas has established himself as an irascible critic of mainstream American Christianity and what he sees as its capitulation to the idols of American nationalism, consumerism, and individualism. The audacity of his critique is readily apparent in the subtitle of one of his numerous collections of occasional essays: *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas.*[7]

In *Democracy and Tradition* (2004), philosopher Jeffrey Stout listed Hauerwas among what he called the "new traditionalists," a group that also included philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and British theologian John Milbank (leading figure in the emerging theological school known as "radical orthodoxy"). According to Stout, these dissenters reject classic liberal political theory for what they consider to be its ahistorical and superficial account of the human person and human rationality. While he expressed a degree of sympathy with their concern that merely procedural and individualistic conceptions of liberty ensure that only "thin" accounts of the public good prevail, Stout

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[6]Jean Bethke Elshtain, "(America's Best) Christian Contrarian," *Time* (September 17, 2001).

[7]Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.

argued that the new traditionalists' views threaten to undermine the very possibility of participatory democracy—not least by their anti-liberal rhetoric.

In his view, "no theologian has done more [than Hauerwas] to inflame Christian resentment of secular political culture."[8] Hauerwas has insisted in reply that Stout's estimation of his influence is greatly exaggerated and, moreover, that he personally has no problem with Christians' engagement in the political and social challenges of a pluralistic society so long as they do so *as Christians* who know where their primary allegiances lie.[9] The *Baptifesto* reflects a strongly "Hauerwasian" concern in its call for Baptists to take up a distinctly communal witness in society. Whether and how such corporate ethical solidarity, and the theological commitments and church practices needed to sustain it, can exist in early twenty-first century America are important questions given vital urgency by Hauerwas' unrelenting polemics.

The product of a mainline Protestant denomination (United Methodist) and the recipient of an elite theological training (Ph.D., Yale), Hauerwas has repeatedly credited Yoder, who represented a minority voice from the radical Anabaptist fringe, with bringing about a crucial revolution in his thought. Hauerwas was instrumental in bringing Yoder to the Notre Dame faculty in the 1970s, where Yoder taught Christian ethics (moral theology) until his death in 1997. In a panegyric lauding the significance of Yoder's work, Hauerwas claimed, "when Christians look back on this century of

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[8]Jeffrey L. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 140.

[9]Hauerwas, "Postscript: A Reply to Jeff Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*," in *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Non-violence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 211-241.

theology in America, *The Politics of Jesus* [Yoder's 1972 "classic"] will be seen as a new beginning."[10]

It appears that Hauerwas dared to make so bold a prediction based largely upon his sense of the significance of Yoder's thoroughgoing critique of "Constantinianism." In Yoder's elucidation of this complex, theologically rich concept, Constantinianism involves much more than the legal establishment of the Christian faith, and its reference to the fourth-century emperor who first legalized Christianity is therefore more rhetorical than rigorously historical. Constantinianism is, in Yoder's account, a mindset and an understanding of history that evaluates contemporary Christian effectiveness and faithfulness according to the norms of established social powers. For Yoder, the Constantinian assumption that the church can and should be "in charge" (either *de jure* or *de facto*) draws Christians away from socially embodied faithfulness to the ethics embedded within their tradition's most basic and scandalously particular claims. In short, Yoder believed that Constantinianism represents the perennial temptation for the church to take responsibility for a society and its destiny, thus blurring ethically meaningful distinctions between the church that lives by faith in Christ and commitment to his way and the "world" that does not.

Yoder's Mennonite denomination descended from the sixteenth-century radicals of the continental Reformation who aroused the animosity of established Protestant and Catholic authorities by rejecting Western Christendom's deeply entrenched unitary view of church and society and forming separate communities of discipleship. An important

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[10]Hauerwas, "When the Politics of Jesus Makes a Difference," *Christian Century* (October 13, 1993), 982.

question for Baptist historiography is the nature of the relationship between the

Continental Anabaptists and the tradition that emerged from the separatist English

Baptists. As will be seen, an understanding of this debate is also a key to understanding

the *Baptifesto*'s proposal for a renewal of Baptist identity.

The academic backgrounds of the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors demonstrate its link to

this broader school of thought. The published versions of the statement list six co-

authors, all Baptist professors of theology: Mikael Broadway, Curtis Freeman, Barry

Harvey, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip Thompson. Of this

group, three (Broadway, Harvey, Newman) received their doctoral theological training at

Duke; two of them (Broadway and Newman) after Hauerwas joined the faculty.[11] At the

time of the *Baptifesto's* publication, Freeman taught at Houston Baptist University. In

2006, he is director of the Baptist House of Studies at Duke Divinity School.

McClendon served as the group's elder statesman, joining his voice with a set of

younger theologians at the twilight of his career. McClendon was also its most

recognizable name in the theological academy. He was a peer of Yoder and Hauerwas,

spending a year with both scholars on the Notre Dame campus in the mid-1970s.

McClendon claimed that his reading of Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* changed his life and

prompted a "second conversion."[12] Through Yoder, he confessed, "I rediscovered my

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[11]Hauerwas directed Broadway's dissertation ("The Ways of Zion Mourned: A Historicist Critique of the Discourses of Church-State Relations" (Duke Univ., 1993)), and served on Newman's committee. He was an external member of Thompson's committee. Each *Baptifesto* co-author has published additional articles or complete monographs that address the issues raised by the statement. These will be noted, when appropriate, throughout the thesis. A listing of the relevant literature by these authors can be found in the bibliography.

[12]James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology* Volume I (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986; 2nd ed., rev. and enl., 2002), 8.

own profound roots in the baptist [sic] vision."[13] One of the few Baptist theologians read

widely in non-Baptist circles, McClendon completed the final volume of his three-part

Systematic Theology, written from a "baptist" standpoint, just before his death in 2000.[14]

The *Baptifesto* provides a helpful, concrete entry point into a "thick" description

of the "sectarian" approach associated most frequently with such figures as Yoder and

Hauerwas.[15] A study of the statement, and its engagement with a quintessentially

American religious tradition, should give insight into what a Baptist approach to religion,

society and politics shaped by this stance portends. The historical, ethical, social, and

theological dimensions of the *Baptifesto*'s challenge to North American Baptist identity

will be the focus of the discussion to follow, while this broader debate (and the

Baptifesto's role as contributor to and example for it) provides its background and

rationale.

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[13]Ibid. McClendon's technical use of (small b) "baptist" as a descriptive term will be discussed in Chapter Five

[14]In addition to *Ethics*, the trilogy included *Doctrine: Systematic Theology* Volume II (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); *Witness: Systematic Theology* Volume III (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000). Subsequent citations of *Ethics* refer to the second edition.

[15]By no means do I intend to conflate the respective positions of Hauerwas and Yoder in this investigation. Nor, however, do I propose to elucidate fully or finally the nature and extent of their disagreements. I do believe that sorting out those differences is a critical task for Baptists or anyone else attracted to the concerns and commitments they shared. However, a definitive statement along these lines is beyond the scope of this project or my expertise at this point.

In his important attempt to present the overall structure of Yoder's thought (*The Politics of the Cross: The Theological Vision of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002)), Craig Carter noted that many readers know and read Yoder through their engagement with Hauerwas. Carter believed this pattern has led to misunderstandings about Yoder's true commitments, and he provided a partial list of the methodological differences between Yoder and Hauerwas (24).

In his forward to Carter's work, Hauerwas responded by saying, "If it is true my work is better known than Yoder's, I certainly regret that state of affairs. Even more I regret that some may come to have misunderstand [sic] Yoder because of my work."

 "So let me say as clearly as I can that if there is in fact a difference—which may even amount to a disagreement—between Yoder and me, no one should be tempted to side with me" (ibid, 10).

Whether sufficient numbers of Baptists will discover their own convictions in the *Baptifesto*'s vision remains to be seen. If valid, its criticisms require radical reassessment and "re-envisioning" of Baptist Christianity and the relationship of Baptist churches and individual believers to the social contexts in which they find themselves. If false or incomplete, a response to the critique represented by the *Baptifesto* requires careful attention to the specific features of this critique of religious self-understandings closely aligned with the social and intellectual patterns of secular modernity. The *Baptifesto* thus warrants scholarly attention as Baptists and others seek to ascertain whether or not the statement (and the school of thought it represents) is an important and legitimate attempt to save modern Christianity from itself or a wholesale subversion of the genuinely positive contributions of the liberal tradition.

Chapter Two describes the formal and material features of the *Baptifesto*, acknowledges its relationship to a broader conversation about religion in contemporary Western social and political arrangements, and provides an overview of the denominational context out of which the statement arose. A discussion of the most prominent critical responses to the *Baptifesto* will illuminate the key areas of contention in the internal Baptist debates it addressed.

Because his critique sheds important light on the *Baptifesto* and its claims, and because Yoder's name has been curiously absent from most critical discussion of the statement, a close reading of Yoder's 1970 analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention will be the focus of Chapter Three. Extended analysis of Yoder's critiques and recommendations will help elucidate what has been described as the "radically catholic"

thrust of Yoder's theological and ethical vision. The *Baptifesto*, it will be argued, was an effort, nearly three decades later, to articulate a very similar vision for Baptists.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the question of Baptist identity vis-à-vis North American culture and society. This section will place Yoder's vision for the church in the world alongside the *Baptifesto* and its co-authors' engagement with these issues. Chapter Four will be framed by Yoder's essay, "A People in the World," in which he urged members of the "free church" traditions to see their historic commitment to religious liberty and church-state separation as a merely secondary emphasis derived from their communities' primary concern with the character of corporate Christian existence. Yoder's essay provides an important way to understand the *Baptifesto*'s critique of modern Baptist self-conceptions as well as its constructive proposal for a renewed Baptist theological and ecclesiological direction.

Chapter Five summarizes the alternative renditions of the Baptist story provided by the *Baptifesto* and its co-authors. It argues that the varying emphases found in these accounts can still be understood within the framework of Yoder's notion of "radical catholicity" which stresses the intrinsic and specific socio-ethical character of the church. The final section will note statements by prominent twentieth-century Southern Baptists that imply that the kind of ecclesiocentric vision the *Baptifesto* and Yoder advocated requires a kind of un-Baptistic and sectarian withdrawal from public life. Without resolving all the issues such criticisms raise, this final substantive chapter will conclude by claiming that Yoder's critical engagement with H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work, *Christ and Culture,* clarifies the most basic issues at stake in the intramural Baptist debate over the *Baptifesto* and the question of Baptist identity in the twenty-first century.

By engaging with the *Baptifesto* authors and their most direct theological influences, as well as some prominent critical responses to their work, this study will assess the state of the American "experiment" in religious liberty in the early twenty-first century through an analysis of an important internal debate within a quintessential American religious tradition.

Re-reading the Baptifesto *a Decade Later:*
A Personal Word

I believe it is important to make clear the perspective I bring to this subject. My Baptist roots run deep. I am the descendant of several lines of (mostly Southern) Baptists. My great-great-grandfather, J.B. Rounds, was a missionary to then-Indian Territory in the 1890s; he became an early director of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma and founded the famous "Falls Creek" Baptist encampment. Two distant relatives by marriage (E.F. and Gene Bartlett) wrote an assortment of gospel songs that became fixtures within twentieth-century Southern Baptist hymnody.

My life has been shaped by consistent involvement in congregational life. A number of inconspicuous yet unforgettable saints I have known and watched in various churches serve as my models of Christian discipleship, integrity, service, and practical wisdom. I made a profession of Christian faith and was baptized into a Southern Baptist church at the age of seven, while living in a suburb of Oklahoma City. In 1984, my family moved to Wyoming, away from the Bible Belt and away from engagement in Southern Baptist life at a time in which, I would learn later, the denominational conflict described in the next chapter was reaching its most intense stage.

When I returned south in 1993 to attend Baylor University, I spent little time concerning myself with either Baptist politics or formal theology. However, soon after completing my undergraduate studies, the SBC conflict, and the theological and ecclesiological issues it raised, impacted my life significantly. My first post-undergraduate employment was with the SBC's International Mission Board (IMB), for an assignment as foreign correspondent in the agency's communications office. In a formative and personally difficult decision, I resigned the post after two weeks. I realized, with deep regret, that I could not in good conscience write what would be requested of me. I would later learn to describe my concerns in terms of a profound discomfort and disagreement with the soteriological assumptions adopted by the then-solidly conservative IMB. In short, I was profoundly disturbed by what I perceived to be an exclusivist and triumphalistic approach to Christian evangelism and global missions that bifurcated the world and its diversity into abstract "saved" and "unsaved" categories and relegated the drama of human history in all its political, social, and cultural complexity to merely derivative concern. (The official theology I encountered at the IMB was by no means unfamiliar, I had simply been unwilling or uninterested to examine my genuine convictions so critically up to that point.)

After leaving the IMB, I was both counseled and welcomed graciously by numerous "moderate" Baptists, who explained to me more of the recent developments in Baptist life from their perspective. I spent a six-month internship at the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., the historic advocate of religious liberty and church-state separation for a number of Baptist denominations in the United States. The agency's director at the time, James Dunn, became a good friend and mentor.

Two years ago, he officiated my marriage ceremony. His courage, compassion, and generosity have left lasting impressions in my memory.

Dunn, who now teaches at the Wake Forest University Divinity School, has been a prominent and forceful advocate of the moderate cause and of what he calls Baptist "soul freedom." He also represents, in bold strokes, the conception of Baptist identity the *Baptifesto* sought to counter most pointedly. Since I presently find myself in substantial agreement with the *Baptifesto'*s concerns as well as its positive vision for Baptist theological identity, I believe some words of explanation are in order.

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After observing that fellow Baptists have perceived and criticized the *Baptifesto* as "postmodern and premodern, liberal and fundamentalist, Catholic and Calvinist, Anabaptist and Anti-Baptist," co-author Curtis Freeman suggested, drawing upon the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that these varied responses to the statement show that "how we read depends on the kind of assumptions we make and the sort of questions we ask."[16]

I approach these existential issues in Baptist life from the perspective of one whose primary concerns in recent years have focused on the issue of authentic Christian existence in a world that is not only fascinatingly diverse, but also wracked with daunting and compelling challenges. My first-hand experience with the aftermath of the SBC

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[16]Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Re-Envisioned?" 59-60.

battles turned me toward investigation of not only recent Baptist history, but also to the

reading of theology.

I had concluded I could not share the theological and philosophical

presuppositions underlying the fairly standard-plate conservative evangelical theology of

the new SBC and its presentation of the Christian gospel.[17] However, I was unable to

articulate an alternative I believed was not only faithful to what was most deeply true

about the simple gospel messages I had heard all my life, but also sufficiently

intellectually, aesthetically, and ethically satisfying to embrace with the degree of

conviction displayed by those same Baptist conservatives with whom I was in significant

disagreement (by then I would have called them "fundamentalists").

I had studied enough history and had sufficient ecumenical encounters to have a

sense that historic Christianity and Christian theology was more than American

conservative evangelicalism, but I found little help within Baptist theological circles with

these questions, as most were (understandably) preoccupied with defending themselves

against attack or coming to terms with exile from their ecclesial homes in the SBC. The

primary answer I did receive was that, as a "free and faithful" Baptist, I did *not* have to

believe what any denominational hierarchy (or anyone else, for that matter) expected me

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[17]I realize that some would want to draw a sharp distinction between the "fundamentalism" of the new SBC and conservative evangelical theology. I do not. Although this kind of conservatism may have taken on a more strident and politically charged flavor alongside the "resurgence" or "takeover," my focus has primarily been theological rather than political. While I have no great love of controversy, I do believe that the "discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is" (McClendon's definition of theology, *Ethics*, 23) is a crucial task. My description of the cultural, sociological, and historical reasons for the dissolution of the "Grand Compromise" among Southern Baptists (see chap. 2) gives further explanation for how I understand the conflict.

to confess. While this "freedom" provided some relief, I was deeply impressed with the need for reliable guides and critical accountability in discerning what it would mean, as a Christian, to be "faithful" in thought, speech, and action in the emerging twenty-first century.

Significantly, the most important work of theology I encountered during that time was written by British missionary, theologian, and ecumenical statesman Lesslie Newbigin, who died the same week I first read his small book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* in 1998.[18] Newbigin, with the eyes of one who had just returned home from decades of missionary service in India, claimed that the seemingly irreconcilable divisions in Western Christendom between theological conservatives and liberals, liberation theologians and evangelical pietists, and advocates of evangelistic missions and mainstream ecumenism had their roots in Western Christendom's adoption of presuppositions and modes of thought alien to biblical and historical Christianity. (For Newbigin, this included sharp divisions between thought and action and "objective truths" and "subjective values.")

Such was my introduction to an enormous and vitally important conversation that from one perspective can be subsumed under the heading of the emergence of the "postmodern condition," though I question the helpfulness of such a description. I eventually began academic study of theology; first at Emory University and then completing my seminary studies at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. I have been fortunate to receive a theological education that focused on the reading of primary texts from the most influential and profound Christian teachers and thinkers.

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[18]Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

Thus, as I have returned to the question of Baptist identity in recent years, I have been dissatisfied with accounts of Baptist "distinctives" that in my view do not do justice to the breadth and depth of historic Christianity and its "Great Tradition" in making their case for uniquely Baptist positions. Perhaps most notably, in terms that will be described shortly, I cannot accept E.Y. Mullins's dismissal of Catholicism as "religion by proxy." Although I recognize that today's post-Vatican II Catholicism is not the Roman Catholic Church Mullins and George Truett opposed in the 1920s, in my view there has been insufficient recognition of this fact by Baptists and its relevance for contemporary Baptist theology and ecclesiology.[19]

I did not begin to read Hauerwas, McClendon, or Yoder until well into seminary. Only Yoder was assigned (in a seminar on Christian social ethics), and at that time I had no idea how exceedingly insightful I would find him in trying to come to terms with what it would mean to be Baptist in an era of waning denominational loyalty and at a time when evangelical scholars write books asking, in complete seriousness, *Is the Reformation Over?*[20]

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Philosopher Charles Taylor has described a "post-revolutionary" climate as one that is "extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of the *ancien regime* and sees backsliding even in relatively innocent concessions to generalized human preferences."[21]

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[19] Which is not to say that Mullins and Truett were thereby justified in their early-twentieth-century claims.

[20] Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

[21] Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*. With Responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain.

For examples, he cited Puritans who equated any form of ritual with "popery" and Bolsheviks who considered all use of traditional courtesy titles ("Mr." and "Mrs.") to be an affront to the new world order being established.

The *Baptifesto* addressed two distinct, yet overlapping, post-revolutionary climates. The first, and most encompassing, was the atmosphere with which Taylor was specifically concerned: the continual vigilance exercised by many in the modern West toward any sign of a resurgence of pre-Enlightenment religion and its comprehensiveness. The other, more specific, post-revolutionary climate out of which the statement emerged was the aftermath of the Southern Baptist battles of the late twentieth century, in which "moderate" and "liberal" Baptists saw a kind of return to the authoritarian dark ages taking place in the purging of "heterodox" faculty and staff from denominational institutions by the victorious conservatives.

While I believe the *Baptifesto* offered a compelling and hopeful alternative to what had primarily been, unfortunately but also understandably, defensive and reductionistic accounts of Baptist identity, there is plenty of work still to be done in contemporary Baptist theology and ecclesiology. This thesis certainly makes only a slight gesture in that direction. My goal is simply to provide a re-reading of the *Baptifesto,* almost a decade later, with a different set of questions and concerns in view than most former Southern Baptists did in the 1990s. There are no doubt factors rooted in my personal history and generational ethos that give me a much more catholic sensibility vastly different than most Baptists of a few generations earlier. Yet my conviction is that the *Baptifesto* is also worth studying for the thoroughly evangelical and "radical" reason

Edited and with an introduction by James L. Heft, S.M. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

offered by Newbigin in his attempt to discern the shape of *The Gospel in a Pluralist*

Society:

> How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. [22]

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[22]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

CHAPTER TWO

Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: Challenge or Betrayal?

In 1997, when the drafters of "Reenvisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for

Baptist Christians in North America" sent the statement to fellow Baptists for their

consideration and possible endorsement, a "cover letter" explained its purpose. The letter

read in part:

> Baptists in North America have long been fragmented, and far too often the
> fragmentation has been for most unworthy reasons. In the contemporary
> theological milieu, many Baptist theologians have remained timid about stepping
> forward to make constructive theological proposals. Even criticism of the status
> quo popular theology is either excessively muted, or so heavily ideological that it
> seldom gets to the heart of what the Baptist theological heritage has stood for.
>
> For too long Baptist theology has railed against Catholics, Anglicans,
> Campbellites, and Methodists, not to mention liberals, fundamentalists,
> pedobaptists, holy rollers, or whoever are identified as the current "bad guys" in
> other churches or theological camps. But Baptist theology ought not to be against
> the church. Baptist theology needs to be for the church and the gospel in a hostile
> world.[23]

These introductory words imply that North American Baptists' minimalist understanding

of the church—defined primarily over against other Christian (and Baptist)

traditions—has severely limited their own theological coherence and socio-ethical

integrity. The *Baptifesto* placed the church at the center of its reflection and began,

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[23]This "cover letter" apparently sent to potential endorsers of the *Baptifesto* can be accessed online (as of May 22, 2006) at http://home.sprintmail.com/~masthewitt/baptists/Baptifesto.html. It was not printed alongside the *Baptifesto* when the statement was published in *Baptists Today* magazine or *Perspectives in Religious Studies* during 1997. Subsequent references to the statement will refer to the edition cited in Chapter One.

significantly, on a countercultural note by establishing a distinction between the church and the "hostile" world.

To anyone with even passing familiarity with traditional Baptist preaching (or the New Testament, for that matter) such antagonistic language about the "world" is standard fare. As will be seen, the significance of the *Baptifesto*'s use of such traditional terminology is that the "world" does not signify merely some vague power or realm of evil and godlessness. The *Baptifesto* urged Baptists to understand the church as an alternative community called out from the "world," even if that "world" represents the dominant assumptions and traditions of a society in which Baptists have come to feel very much at home.

In other words, the statement's authors challenged Baptists with the claim that faithful Christianity implies membership in a community with a sense of distinct, shared "peoplehood," united by common allegiance to Christ, formed by particular stories and teachings, and marked by mutual service, accountability, and outward mission. The *Baptifesto* recognized that this conviction runs against the grain of certain kinds of American egalitarian and pluralistic sensibilities (depending on how deeply one interprets *E Pluribus Unum*, or the metaphor of the American "melting pot") as well as the mythic national figure of the "rugged individual." For these reasons, its authors argued, a stronger, theologically-informed sense of communal identity would enable Baptists and others to discern when Christian faithfulness conflicts with common sense "American values" and would provide the resources for meaningful and communal resistance against the pressures of assimilation.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to portray in more detail how and why the co-authors of the *Baptifesto* urged Baptists to "re-envision" their (theological, social, ethical, and political) identity. One way to describe its aim is to say that the statement's authors urged Baptists in America to make "Christian" (or "Baptist") a substantive noun with identifiable public meaning of its own, rather than a weak adjective to be paired with weightier terms when used outside of explicitly "religious" conversations (as in "Christian conservatives," "Christian environmentalists," etc.). Because Baptists are not the only religious community to face these issues, it is important to see the ways in which the *Baptifesto* reflects concerns expressed within other traditions before turning to an analysis of its specific proposals. However, as a survey of Baptist history and an analysis of the recent events that provide the statement's immediate denominational context will show, Baptists face unique challenges in establishing a strong sense of "church" that can be contrasted with, and witness distinctively in, a "world" that has been, at least on the surface, more hospitable than hostile.

<div style="text-align:center">

Baptists, Catholics, Jews, and "America"

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During the 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy reassured a group of Houston ministers that a Roman Catholic could be trusted with the leadership of a nation committed to church-state separation. Quelling fears that a Catholic presidency would shift ultimate authority from the Oval Office to the Vatican, Kennedy declared his belief that the President's religious views "are his own private affair." These views are not to be imposed on the body politic, nor can the nation require that the chief executive hold certain religious convictions. With regard to his role as a candidate for elective office, Kennedy insisted that his political philosophy and policy platform had priority over his

religious affiliation: "Contrary to common newspaper usage, I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic."[24]

Kennedy's subsequent election symbolically confirmed that Catholics had now "made it" and joined the American mainstream. Yet this watershed moment presented Catholics with a new set of challenges in the decades to come. If Kennedy's election seemed to signal the end of anti-Catholic bigotry in the centers of cultural and political opinion, developments in the ensuing years threatened to dilute and diffuse Catholic identity to the degree that such religious prejudice was not transcended (as had been hoped), but had become simply a non-issue. By the late twentieth century, American Catholics had arguably ceased to be the kind of distinctive community that tends to arouse curiosity, suspicion, and sometimes animosity in public life.

A few months after the 2004 presidential election, in which another Catholic received a major party's presidential nomination, Catholic journalist Peter Nixon warned that American Catholicism was in danger of compromising its integrity by mirroring the cultural and political polarization of American society. To illustrate this trend, Nixon pointed to examples of Catholics embracing elements of each major political party at odds with central Catholic teachings. As a "pro-choice" abortion stance became mandatory for Democratic politicians, numerous Catholic Democrats abandoned "pro-life" views, dissented from the Church, or declared that their personal convictions on the matter would remain *merely* personal. At the same time, while many traditionalist

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[24]John F. Kennedy, "Address to Greater Houston Ministerial Association." Printed in Deane Alwyn Kemper, "John F. Kennedy Before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960: The Religious Issue" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Michigan).

Catholics were forsaking their traditional Democratic allegiances in large part because of the abortion issue, Nixon warned that Catholic social teaching could not easily be reconciled with recent Republican policies and actions either, particularly with regard to the ongoing military action in Iraq.[25]

While admitting that Catholics need not hold uniform opinions on the details of public policy, Nixon lamented that the American Catholic faithful increasingly leave their Catholic identity behind when entering the political realm. In Nixon's view the Church's own social teaching provides a coherent alternative to the "easy orthodoxies of Right and Left," though its members rarely accord these teachings any greater authority than the numerous other voices clamoring for their attention. For Nixon, the problem "reflects the challenge of maintaining a distinct Catholic identity, one powerful enough to compel Catholics to act against the interests of self, party, clan, or nation when the service of truth requires it."[26] Because this possibility appears less and less likely, he claimed, "It is easy to foresee a day when the cultural and political assimilation of Catholics in the

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[25]J. Peter Nixon, "Catholic Politicians: For God or Country?" *Commonweal* Feb. 25, 2005, 9-10. On one side, Nixon listed numerous Catholic Democrats who retracted earlier public pro-life stances. On the other, he pointed specifically to the Bush administration's recent nomination of Catholic Alberto Gonzales for U.S. Attorney General. Gonzales had played a prominent role in earlier administration discussions over interrogation tactics for prisoners of war and advocated, in Nixon's view, practices that amounted to the kind of torture condemned by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

[26]Ibid. While much has been made of the Second Vatican Council's role in creating the kinds of internal polarization of American Catholicism to which Nixon refers, Catholic theologian William Portier contends that the dissolution of the Catholic subculture (a process largely completed by the Vatican II years, 1962-65) explains one key facet of the traditionalist-liberal divide. In his view, younger Catholics who have never known an intact Catholic subculture may express enthusiasm for the church's authority and traditions in ways their "liberal" elders, who experienced the crumbling of the subculture as a liberation, interpret as reactionary. However, in his view, such interpretations misapply categories from the debate over Vatican II and miss the significance of the church's vastly changed social circumstance. (William B. Portier, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," *Communio* 31 (Spring 2004): 35-66.

United States will be complete and perhaps irreversible. The United States will be the poorer for it, to say nothing of the gospel."[27]

In essence, Nixon claimed that American Catholics had become more recognizably Democrat or Republican (or simply American) than Catholic. Such a pithy summary of the situation does little to illuminate the complexities of these issues, but it highlights the problematic nature (from this perspective) of religious believers who claim that they, like Kennedy, simply "happen also to be Catholic [or Baptist, or Jewish, etc.]," as if one's religious convictions have no determinative public significance.[28]

It is both ironic and significant that the *Baptifesto*'s challenge to North American Baptists shared Nixon's concerns about the diminishing of corporate Catholic identity. The irony becomes apparent when it is remembered that it was Baptists who raised some of the loudest alarms about Kennedy's 1960 candidacy. For centuries, Baptists have defined themselves as prophetic advocates for religious liberty and the rights of conscience in religion, and rejected what was perceived as authoritarian, collectivist Catholicism and its predilection for aligning the church with government's coercive power.[29]

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[27]Ibid.

[28]To be sure, in his 1960 statement, Kennedy acknowledged the possibility of an irreconcilable conflict between the President's conscience (and religious convictions) and the responsibilities of the presidency. He pledged to resign if such an occasion arose. The concerns raised by the perspective articulated in the *Baptifesto* are: do contemporary churches form believers and give them guidance in such a way that a countercultural stance seems both necessary (at times) and possible? Or, does the socially and ethically assimilated nature of so much American Christianity ensure that such a crisis of conscience remains a merely theoretical possibility?

[29] For example, during the 20th century, Baptists united in lobbying efforts that opposed attempts to direct public funds to private and parochial schools and vehemently protested the U.S. government's establishment of diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

In a famous 1920 speech from the steps of the U.S. Capitol, George W. Truett, influential pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, told his audience that the Baptist interpretation of Christianity was "the exact opposite of Catholicism." For Truett, who merely reflected traditional Baptist sentiment on the matter, Catholicism and its corporate emphasis, clerical hierarchy, and sacramentalism "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 terrible the coming of the Kingdom of God."[30] By contrast, he continued, the Baptist message rejects all these emphases in favor of the simple teaching that "the humblest soul in all the world, if only he be penitent, may enter with all boldness and cast himself upon God."[31]

In his speech Truett asserted that the American provision of religious liberty was "pre-eminently a Baptist achievement" and cited eminent authorities, including seventeenth-century political philosopher John Locke, in support of his boast.[32] Truett articulated a widespread Baptist conviction that, whereas Baptists had been closely linked with the advancement of democracy and freedom since their emergence in the seventeenth century, Catholics and their oppressive pre-modern practices and superstitions were on the wrong side of history.

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[30]George W. Truett, "Baptists and Religious Liberty," reprinted in Walter B. Shurden, ed. *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), 65.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid., 62. According to Truett, "The impartial historian, whether in the past, present or future, will ever agree with our American historian, Mr. Bancroft, when he says: 'Freedom of conscience, unlimited freedom of mind, was from the first the trophy of the Baptists.' And such historians will concur with the noble John Locke who said: 'The Baptists were the first propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.'" (The authenticity of the Locke quotation has been called into question.)

However, by the late twentieth century some Baptists were arguing that governmentally-protected religious liberty and social legitimacy are of little ultimate significance if the Christian church does not use its divinely-granted freedom to be a faithful and visible witness as a distinct community shaped by the gospel. Significantly, they claimed to do so *as Baptists*. The *Baptifesto* concluded its proposal with language remarkably similar to Nixon's:

> Among Baptists today this [Baptist] witness is in danger of falling to ideologies of the right and of the left that are foreign to the content and direction of the gospel. To many observers the crisis may appear to be merely a manifestation of the culture wars that pit conservatives against liberals, people of color against 'white America', women against men, interest group against interest group. What these agendas call freedom is what the gospel calls bondage to the false gods of nationalism, classism, or narcissism. The tragedy for Christians is that the culture wars have overwhelmed and co-opted the agenda of the church. The struggle for the soul of Baptists in North America is a struggle against all these false gods. It is, therefore, not a struggle between one such god and another. Yet some Baptists believe that it is. We disagree.
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> . . . [T]he real struggle facing Baptist Christians today is for the embodiment of free, faithful, and communal discipleship that adheres to the gospel rather than submitting to intellectual and social agendas that have no stake in the gospel (Rom 1:16; Gal 1:6).[33]

By seeking to call Baptists away from merely privatized Christianity in which secular discourses set the terms of discussion in all but the intimate realm of the explicitly "spiritual," the *Baptifesto* echoed the concerns of critics who insist that the most basic problem posed by the religious arrangements of liberal societies is not the external threat to the particular claims of religious communities and traditions. Rather, according to this view, it is the tendency to narrow holistic and universal religious visions of human life-in-community to an exclusive focus on the individual human soul and its contentment.

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[33]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 309-310.

Seen from this perspective, religious communities have made a Faustian bargain with secular modern states by agreeing to be defined as a mere society of adherents to the opinions of a particular species of the *genus* "religion."

In the mid-twentieth century, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel articulated this complaint when he claimed that "the trouble is that religion has become 'religion'— institution, dogma, securities . . . . Its acceptance involves neither risk nor strain. Religion has achieved respectability by the grace of society, and its representatives publish as a frontispiece the *nihil obstat* signed by social scientists."[34] In short, modern liberal societies tend to reduce an individual's religious convictions and membership in a religious community to the equivalent of a harmless hobby or a publicly insignificant personal trait such as left-handedness. For example, while individual Jews might adhere to any contemporary variety of Judaism (or not), cultural assimilation and social fragmentation threaten to make Jews *qua* Jews an ethically, socially, and theologically irrelevant category. In 1974, Manfred Vogel provided a classic statement of this concern: "While America has been good for Jews," he declared. "It has been bad for Judaism."[35]

That such sentiments can and have been articulated by Jews is significant. It provides evidence that dissatisfaction with secular modernity's largely privatized religion need not necessarily be motivated by a reactionary desire to return to Christendom-era religious establishments and pre-modern habits of faith and life (seeing as Jews have little

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[34]Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Religion and Modern Society," in *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 25.

[35]Manfred Vogel, in unpublished lectures given at Wake Forest University in 1974. I owe this reference to "American Constantinianism and Its Critics: Dickinson, Faulkner, O'Connor," an unpublished paper by Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph C. Wood presented to the Pew Project on American Literature and Religion, Cambridge, Mass., May 20, 2005.

incentive to wax nostalgic about Christendom). In this regard, a parallel exists between

Jews and Baptists. A strain of Baptist life has always remembered the first Baptists'

persecution at the hands of church and civil authorities in the early seventeenth-century,

and has allowed this experience to shape key Baptist convictions. After leading the

movement for religious freedom in the colonial era, Baptists continue to advocate for

liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state. Thus, like Jews, Baptists

keen to maintain Baptist advocacy of religious liberty can only engage in such

reassessments of secular modernity with ambivalence and a desire that the genuine

achievements of recent centuries, particularly with regard to freedom of religion and the

demise of overt Christian imperialism not be minimized or qualified into insignificance.

Baptist critiques of the dominant patterns in contemporary American Christianity

will necessarily be exercises in self-criticism, and will no doubt be open to charges from

fellow Baptists that such efforts are simply betrayals of the Baptist heritage from within.

In the decade since the *Baptifesto*'s publication, its reception within Baptist life has

proven this to be the case. The most prominent criticism of the *Baptifesto* offered by

other Baptists is that the ecclesiocentric vision it describes would undermine the

venerable Baptist commitment to liberty of individual conscience.[36] From the

perspective of such critics, the *Baptifesto*'s drafters and supporters have abandoned key

Baptist insights and adopted the authoritarian and elitist tendencies of Baptists' historic

antagonists.

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[36]See Walter B. Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25:4 (Winter 1998): 321-340; Robert P. Jones, "Revisioning Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26:1 (Spring 1999): 41; and William D. Underwood, "The Freedom of a Christian," (George W. Truett Theological Seminary Convocation Address, August 30, 2005). (Unpublished MS in author's possession.)

Before turning to a more detailed account of the *Baptifesto*'s specific proposals, it will be helpful to take a historical detour for the purpose of sketching Baptist history, particularly the social and denominational history of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). While the *Baptifesto* addressed "Baptist Communities in North America," its drafters and primary audience shared the traditions and recent experiences of Southern Baptists, the United States' largest non-Roman Catholic religious group in the late twentieth century.

A great deal rests on how one tells the story of Baptists' origins and historical development. The *Baptifesto* emerged out of a Southern Baptist tradition fractured by decades of bitter internal strife. While this narrative uses broad strokes to depict the story of Baptists in America, it provides the context necessary for introducing the themes that will receive further treatment in the pages to follow.

The Baptifesto in Historical and Cultural Perspective

The (Southern) Baptist Experience in America

In popular discussions about the history of Christianity, one frequently hears references to "The Reformation." However, in accounts of the dramatic changes in Western European religion and society during the sixteenth century, historians prefer to speak in terms of several related but distinguishable "reformations," such as the evangelical (Lutheran) movement in Germany, the creation of the Church of England by King Henry VIII, and the official establishment of new non-Catholic forms of Christianity in the Swiss city-states of Geneva (led by John Calvin) and Zurich (led by

Huldrych Zwingli).[37] Alongside these "magisterial" traditions (so called because of their

sponsorship by various "magistrates") emerged various "radical" groups who dissented

from both the Catholic and the various new Protestant religious establishments. These

internally diverse groups either never succeeded (for any significant time) in making their

particular vision for the Christian community normative for a particular principality, or

refused to do so in principle.

In *The Radical Reformation*, generally considered the comprehensive scholarly

volume of record on the subject, George H. Williams described this diverse movement in

terms of three subgroups: the Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Evangelical Rationalists.[38]

Some radicals, the "spiritualists," stressed individual spiritual experience over outward

forms, doctrines, and the "letter" of scripture. Others, "Evangelical Rationalists,"

appropriated the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* in such a way that it eventually

led them to reject doctrines of classical Christian orthodoxy, particularly with regard to

the trinity and the nature(s) of Christ. Following Williams, historian Franklin Littell

contrasted the Anabaptists with these types of radical reform and defined the Anabaptists

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[37]For example, Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

[38]George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation,* 3rd ed., revised and edited (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1992), xxix. Williams is generally credited with establishing "Radical Reformation" as a standard scholarly tool for analysis of these dissenters. Radical can be taken both in the familiar sense of breaking with established norms as well as in its etymological sense of emphasis on the "root" (*radix*). Walter Rauschenbusch, Baptist church historian and social gospel theologian, called the Anabaptists the "root and branch" party of the Reformation (Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism,* 2nd ed., revised and enlarged (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), 2. Littell was citing Rauschenbusch, "The Zurich Anabaptists and Thomas Muntzer," *American Journal of Theology* IX (1905), 92.)

as "those in the Radical Reformation who gathered and disciplined a 'true church' (*rechte kirche*) upon the apostolic pattern as they understood it."[39]

Thus, following these accounts, the Anabaptists were, broadly speaking, those men and women who dissented from various religious establishments based primarily upon their understanding of, and desire to belong to, a genuinely apostolic (or "New Testament") Christian church that existed apart from official sanction. In perhaps their most controversial action, the continental Anabaptists[40] rejected the ancient tradition of infant baptism, thus severing any link between civic membership and covenant membership in a church of believers. Their direct descendants in contemporary Christianity include the historic "peace churches" and countercultural and communitarian groups existing primarily in isolated ethnic enclaves (Mennonites, Old Order Amish, Hutterite Brethren, et al.).

The first properly "Baptist" congregations were formed by English religious dissenters who separated from the established Anglican Church in the early seventeenth century. After declaring their independence from the Church of England, they formed separate congregations whose members made voluntary, adult Christian commitments sealed with the practice of believers[41] baptism. John Smyth, a key early English Baptist

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[39]Littell, xvii.

[40]This was a label they received from their opponents (literally, "re-baptizers"). The Anabaptists themselves preferred simple terms like "believers" or "brethren."

[41]Following common practice, the apostrophe is omitted to avoid choosing between the singular "believer's" and the plural "believers'."

figure, adopted the practice of believers baptism after his contact with an Anabaptist community while in exile in The Netherlands.[42]

Because they have historically shared the original Anabaptists' emphasis on the centrality of local gatherings of "New Testament" churches, the necessity of voluntary membership, and the separation of the church from the political order, Baptists are usually grouped together with the Anabaptists and other traditions in what are often referred to as the "free churches" or "believers' churches." Yet the nature and extent of Baptists' ties to sixteenth-century Anabaptism is a contested matter among contemporary Baptists. Among those who agree that the Baptist movement launched in early seventeenth-century England,[43] the question for Baptist historiography is whether the paradigm of separatist English Puritanism or continental Anabaptism was most basic for the theology and ecclesiology of early Baptists. The significance of these debates will emerge as the details of the *Baptifesto'*s challenge to Baptists in 1997 become clearer.

In the early seventeenth-century, the first Baptists faced their persecutors (in a few instances, while awaiting martyrdom) and claimed that these authorities were not only theologically mistaken, but that they, and all political rulers, lacked any legitimate

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[42]Smyth actually requested membership in the Waterlander Mennonite community before his death. His fellow Baptist pioneer Thomas Helwys broke with him at this point, and eventually returned to England, where he was eventually martyred after charging King James I with abrogating authority in religion that, according to Helwys, belonged to God alone.

[43]The most famous non-mainstream attempt at Baptist historiography traces an unbroken line of descent from the first century through a variety of small, persecuted yet faithful churches to contemporary Baptist congregations (all of which practiced "believers baptism"). On the basis of this Baptist theory of apostolic succession, the influential "Landmark" movement in nineteenth and twentieth-century Baptist life insisted that only individual Baptist congregations reflecting this pure doctrinal and ecclesiological lineage could be genuine "New Testament Churches." See J.M. Carroll, "The Trail of Blood," excerpted in Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and C. Rosallee Velloso da Silva, *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 233-240.

power of enforcement in matters of religion.[44] The Baptists thus constituted a minority

movement whose outsider status was both confirmed and reinforced by persecution from

state and established-church authorities. Baptists watched this pattern of persecution

repeat as they crossed the Atlantic and settled in the new American colonies.

Roger Williams was expelled from Puritan Massachusetts Bay for his public

advocacy of non-conformist beliefs. A Baptist during part of his spiritual pilgrimage,

Williams helped found Rhode Island with a charter that guaranteed complete religious

liberty, making the colony a haven for religious minorities and other dissenters.

Elsewhere in America, Baptists remained on the religious fringe, eyed with suspicion by

the leaders of other colonial establishments.

Baptists' outsider status began to change with the widespread eighteenth-century

religious revivals known as the Great Awakening. Led in part by British evangelist

George Whitefield's powerful oratory and Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards's

theological passion and precision, this groundswell of spiritual fervor emphasized the

need for heartfelt religious experience and personal repentance. While mostly intended

for the spiritual reinvigoration of the members of established denominations, most of

whom had been baptized as infants, the revivals' direct personal appeals fit nicely with

the Baptist emphasis on vital faith and personal religious commitment.

The revivalist spirit remained particularly influential as Baptists moved southward

and westward in the nineteenth century. Relatively isolated from established traditions

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[44] The precise nature of the first Baptists' theological convictions that led to their protest and costly witness is an important part of the historical debate between the *Baptifesto* authors and their critics. No narrative of this sort can be neutral, but I have here tried to use somewhat equivocal terms, leaving the controversial nuances for later.

and authoritative institutions, the individualistic *ethos* and relatively unmediated

spirituality of revivalism flourished in the frontier context. Denominations such as the

Methodists and Baptists who could survive and even thrive in such an environment

spread widely and grew rapidly.[45] By the mid-nineteenth century, Baptists represented an

important social strand of the American South and were a culturally dominant,

mainstream religion. After the Southern Baptist Convention formed as a result of the split

with northern Baptists over the issue of slavery in the 1840s, Southern Baptists

represented a fairly homogenous and influential regional religious tradition.

In his study of the social attitudes of nineteenth-century Southern Baptists,

historian Rufus Spain concluded that Baptists were completely at home in southern

culture by the late 1800s.[46] These descendants of radical religious dissenters were now,

according to the title of his study, "At Ease in Zion," and largely identified their destiny

with the fate of Southern civilization. Baptists' congregational form of church

government, internal diversity, and general fractiousness meant that SBC structures

would never have formal coercive authority over the doctrine and morals of its

participant churches and individuals. Yet by the twentieth century the convention

achieved a remarkable cooperative structure, able to hold the vast majority of Southern

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[45]For an important description of the substantial ties between Baptists and American democratic and populist traditions, see Nathan B. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1989). For a close examination of how evangelicals (including Baptists) transformed the American South into the "Bible Belt" and simultaneously adapted to most of its existing social values and traditions, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997). For a sociological study of how "free church" traditions, like the Baptists, were particularly suited for success in the free-market religious "economy" created by the separation of church and state, see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America*, 1776-1990: *Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[46]Rufus B. Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865-1900* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967).

Baptists together in what Baptist historian Bill Leonard has called the "Grand Compromise."[47]

The compromise consisted in Southern Baptists joining together for missionary endeavors and providing parachurch functions such as theological education and the printing of denominational literature. Leonard attributes the SBC's organizational success to its ability to establish an identity rooted in southern culture and shared traditions that provided a unifying center and made space for disgruntled conservatives and liberals within the Southern Baptist orbit, so long as neither dominated the bureaucratic structure.[48] Southern Baptists retained and increased their regional dominance during the twentieth century to the point that eminent church historian Martin Marty could ironically refer to the SBC as the "Catholic Church of the South."[49]

In 1970, during what could be considered the SBC's organizational golden age, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder gave a theological assessment of the denomination in the pages of Southern Baptists' leading theological journal. His article anticipated many of the *Baptifesto*'s themes, and powerfully illustrated the kind of radical shift in categories and self-understanding the statement urged Baptists to make. Yoder's "Non-Baptist View of Southern Baptists" addressed the SBC from the perspective of one claiming shared roots with Baptists in the broader "free church" tradition.

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[47]Bill J. Leonard, God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 31.

[48]Leonard, "When the Denominational Center Doesn't Hold: The Southern Baptist Experience," *Christian Century* 110 (September 22-29, 1993), 905, 910.

[49]Marty, "The Protestant Experience and Perspective," in *American Religious Values and the Future of America* ed., Rodger Van Allen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 40. Cited in Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope*, 3.

Yoder urged Southern Baptists to recognize that their comfortable social prominence betrayed their countercultural heritage. He argued that Southern Baptists' increasing tendency to baptize children at a young age virtually eliminates the original social and ethical significance of believers baptism. While they retained external traditions of their earlier radicalism, such as an emphasis on evangelism and "hell-fire and brimstone" revivalist preaching, Yoder claimed that these practices alone did not make Southern Baptists a missionary community because their evangelism was directed to a largely "churched" population and their moralistic preaching merely served the social establishment.[50]

Because such practices tended to make the identity of the church indistinguishable from the total population ("which was the sociological meaning of establishment in the first place"), Yoder claimed the SBC was essentially a "quasi-Constantinian" establishment, despite Baptists' formal commitment to church-state separation.[51] This Baptist "Constantinianism" becomes possible, according to Yoder, when theological approval of the separation of church and state leads to the assumption that the government is structured according to the will of God and any meaningful ethical distinctions between the community of faith and the body politic are blurred. In this situation, he claimed, piety easily shades into uncritical patriotism.[52]

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[50]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View of Southern Baptists," *Review and Expositor* 67 (1970): 220-221.

[51]Ibid., 220.

[52]Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984), 142.

Yoder's critiques might have resonated with some Southern Baptists. In *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century*,[53] historian David Stricklin described the small countermovement of Southern Baptists alienated from the SBC mainstream for their radical positions on such issues as war and peace, economic and racial reconciliation, and the affirmation of women in leadership roles. In the early 1970s, this "progressive" wing of SBC life probably found Yoder's words about the church and racial segregation especially poignant and convicting in light of recent events. Yet, as Leonard noted, such substantive dissent was relegated to the fringes of SBC life, particularly as the denomination enjoyed increasing numerical growth in the post-World War II era.

The organizational dynamics of Southern Baptist life changed dramatically and became much more diffuse in the years following Yoder's 1970 article, and the *Baptifesto* emerged out of this instability and ferment. In the final decades of the twentieth century, the SBC's robust self-confidence, based on a sense of internal cohesion, was shaken to its core. Beginning in the late 1970s, an organized movement of conservatives (or "fundamentalists," in their opponents' terminology) gained control of the convention bureaucracy through a series of heated political battles. In the process, the unifying center disappeared and denominationally-engaged Southern Baptists formed opposing "moderate" and "conservative" camps.

Basing much of their campaign's urgency on a perceived need to restore the SBC's commitment to "biblical inerrancy," the conservatives eventually gained the upper

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[53] David Strickin, A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth-Century (Lexington, Ken.: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1999).

hand and turned all denominational institutions (seminaries, mission boards, etc.) in a sharply rightward direction. Many of the bewildered, embittered, and in some cases unemployed moderates left the SBC, along with their congregations, to form separate structures for church cooperation and theological education in the 1990s.

The Southern Baptist Civil War in the Context of American and Southern Society

None of these events occurred in a vacuum. Placing the SBC conflict in its historical context requires attention to at least three major developments in the larger culture: the modernization and secularization of American society that gained momentum in the late nineteenth century; the increasing assimilation of the South to the rest of American culture during the twentieth century; and the powerful conservative groundswell in American society that made its presence known in the 1980s with the election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the "Religious Right" to a prominent role in national and Republican party politics.

During the nineteenth century, and for much of the twentieth, most Southern Baptists tended to view being Baptist as a way of being a particularly exceptional southerner; these were highly compatible ideals whose meanings could be taken for granted and were rooted in traditional understandings of community, religion, and morality. Meanwhile, the rest of the nation was being transformed by rapid industrialization, technological innovation, and the growing dominance of secular modes of thought and morality that appeared to undermine traditional religious verities.

Despite the United States' formal separation of church and state, nineteenth-century American public culture and its primary modes of thought were rooted in a broadly Protestant consensus. This consensus allowed for the close identification of

American ideals with evangelical Protestant convictions and provided a defining center

much like the one Leonard described within the SBC. By the turn of the century, the

center collapsed in the face of substantially increased religious diversity, religious

skepticism, and the new ideas of modern science and critical historical scholarship.[54]

American religion was transformed by the vast cultural shift into "modernity."[55]

After years of bitter controversy, northern denominations (e.g., Presbyterians) splintered

into rival communions. A fault line appeared in Christian theology dividing liberals or

modernists,[56] who believed that Christianity must make its peace with and learn from the

new, rapidly secularizing world, from conservatives who perceived authentic Christianity

to be in mortal danger. These "fundamentalists"[57] reacted to modernity and what they

perceived as an increasingly hostile American culture with a defensive regrouping behind

carefully constructed doctrinal walls, while trying to maintain an antagonistic stance

toward the institutions and discourse of the societal mainstream.

Southerners[58] and Southern Baptists were not completely sheltered from the

winds of change sweeping through the nation, but the South managed to retain an intact

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[54]See George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 95-128.

[55]Modernity is a slippery term. I do not wish to press any precise claims about when the modern era formally arrived or to assume more than is necessary at this point about the metaphysical assumptions of modernity and/or liberal social theory. Clearly, these ideas and developments can be traced back several centuries.

[56]For a good historical description of this development, see William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

[57]The term originates from a series of theological pamphlets published in the 1920s in defense of the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith considered to be under attack from modernism. For a standard treatment of the movement, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[58]When speaking of Southern Baptists and "southerners," it is important to clarify that these are white southerners being described. As Yoder noted, most Southern Baptists either passively accepted,

regional culture well into the twentieth century—a fact that can be attributed in part to the

formative nature of southerners' shared experience of military defeat and the humiliation

of Reconstruction. This strong regional identity took political shape in the form of the

"solid South," a continuous Democratic voting bloc that lasted for approximately a

century after the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s.

By the late twentieth century, however, it seemed unlikely to many observers that

the American south would remain "The South" much longer.[59] The dilution of Southern

identity in the late twentieth century can be seen as the successful penetration of secular

modernity—with its individualism, religious diversity, and rapid change—into the heart

of southern culture. This is not to say that all southerners or Southern Baptists

recognized or accepted these changes. Rather, one's reaction to these changes or the

threat of change, and not one's ties to a shared southern or Southern Baptist cultural

inheritance, became a primary source of identity. In her sociological research on the SBC

conflict, sociologist Nancy Ammerman found that an individual Southern Baptist's

"response to modernity" (defined in terms of religious pluralism and openness to change)

largely determined how he or she sided in the controversy.[60]

While "modernity" is an abstract concept that generally fails to incite passionate

responses outside academic circles, the radical social upheavals of the 1960s and beyond

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endorsed, or defended racial segregation in the Jim Crow South.

[59]For example, C. Vann Woodward in 1960: "[T]he time is coming, if it is not already arrived, when the Southerner will begin to ask himself whether there is really any longer much point in calling himself a Southerner." (Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1960), 3.) Cited in Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope*, 16.

[60]Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1995), 150-155.

impacted all Americans and Baptists. Historian David Morgan believes that the

conservatives' campaign to capture the SBC must be seen as part of the broader

conservative response to these changes. Because the SBC controversy did not erupt until

the late 1970s, Morgan has argued that "it took time for society [and Southern Baptist

conservatives] to react in an organized fashion to the disturbing, revolutionary decisions

of the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren and to the excesses of student

protesters and others during the Vietnam War."[61] For SBC fundamentalists, the authority

of an inerrant scripture was the only hope for inoculating the denomination against the

disease of relativist American culture and the only basis for any successful Southern

Baptist attempt to heal the nation.

Taking Morgan's analysis a step further, historian Barry Hankins has argued that

Southern Baptist conservatives came to believe that the Southern Baptist heartland was

rapidly becoming hostile territory. Unlike their predecessors, these Baptists were now, in

an allusion to Spain's earlier work, "Uneasy in Babylon."[62] Hankins claimed the SBC

conservative revolution was spearheaded by individuals who temporarily moved outside

the South (often for educational reasons) where they learned and adopted an evangelical

critique of American culture. ("Evangelical" refers here to a mid-twentieth century

transdenominational movement, more precisely described as "Neo-Evangelicalism,"

emerging out of protestant fundamentalism that mostly retained fundamentalism's

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[61]David Morgan, *The New Crusades, The New Holy Land* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1996), 46.

[62]Barry A. Hankins, Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2002), 2.

conservative theology while seeking greater cultural and intellectual engagement with mainstream American culture.[63])

Like the early critics of the social gospel, neo-evangelicals tended to resist strongly any identification of the gospel with progressive social idealism. Unlike classic fundamentalists, however, neo-evangelicals retained greater hope for the renewal of American culture and politics through the restoration of "Christian values." Here as well, though, there was little perceived conflict between being a good evangelical (or Baptist) and a good American—so long as the nation could regain its perceived biblical heritage and the nation's "moral majority" could wrest political sovereignty and cultural supremacy from the regnant liberal elites.[64]

As Southern Baptists were drawn into the nation's culture wars, political and theological labels gained a new seriousness. Each camp readily located their opponents beyond the pale of authentic Baptist faith and practice. Conservatives saw an obvious resemblance between the attitudes and beliefs of moderate Baptist bureaucrats, pastors, and professors and the cultural and theological accommodation of spineless Protestant liberals. For their part, the embattled moderates tapped into early Baptist themes and identified their opponents with the authoritarian preachers, priests, and prelates who persecuted the first Baptists in the name of orthodoxy.

Both sides pressed alternative and irreconcilable claims to the title of "Baptist" in their attempts to establish the authoritative interpretation of the SBC's recent

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[63]See Marsden, Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

[64]Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

transformation. Meanwhile, Leonard urged Baptist partisans to read the signs of the

times. In his view, the Southern Baptist culture that had given identity to generations was

vanishing and it could not be reinvigorated by doctrinaire conservatives or reincarnated

by nostalgic moderates.[65] In the late 1990s, denominational identities tied to historic

traditions were rapidly disintegrating throughout American religion as the culture

continued its paradoxical trend toward simultaneous homogenization (in terms of mass

media and the global corporate culture) and diversification (in terms of the myriad

spiritual options available to the religious individual). Individual believers might claim

to be any variety of "Baptist," but cultural and social fragmentation threatened to make

Baptists *qua* Baptists a socially and theologically irrelevant category.

The *Baptifesto* was, then, a plea for Baptists—specifically, the Baptists coming

out of this recent SBC history—to consider a way of being Baptist that is faithful to the

heart of their heritage, but that requires a thorough revisioning of familiar Southern

Baptist slogans and habits of thought. In its polemical engagement with the moderate

and conservative visions of Baptist identity, the statement claimed that both alternatives,

despite their differences, shared in the kind of "Constantinian" cultural accommodation

Yoder warned against. From the perspective of the *Baptifesto*, most existing Baptist

traditions are embedded within the synthesis of Baptist identity with Southern

regionalism and have been translated into the ideological vocabulary of America's

political and theological culture wars. This was essentially the same fear Peter Nixon

expressed with regard to American Catholics.

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[65]Leonard, "When the Denominational Center Doesn't Hold," 910.

The *Baptifesto* presented a polemical reading of recent Baptist theology in terms

of intellectual history:

> 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.[66]

For the statement's co-authors, "[i]t 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."[67]

According to the *Baptifesto*, (Southern) Baptists have been led astray by

"accommodation to the individualism and rationalism of modernity" that "weakens the

church by transforming the living and embodied Christian faith into an abstract and

mythic gnosis (1 Tim 1:3-7)."[68] A closer look at the statement's text and immediate

context shows more concretely the diagnosis and prescription the *Baptifesto* offered

Baptists in 1997.

Re-envisioning" Baptist Freedom

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[66]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 309-310.

[67]Ibid., 310.

[68]Ibid.

It would seem that no neutral description of the Southern Baptist conflict is possible. For conservatives the struggle was theological: the internal threat of liberalism required a righteous crusade to purge the denomination of biblical unfaithfulness. Their victory was thus a "resurgence" of the orthodox faith "once for all entrusted to the saints."[69] Moderates typically refused to describe the conflict as a theological dispute. In their view, virtually all Southern Baptists were genuine Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christians. The kind of exacting doctrinal unity the conservatives insisted upon was neither possible nor desirable if Baptists were going to collaborate in the great tasks of missions and evangelism. Thus, in their eyes, the conservatives were simply power-hungry zealots, not the "true believers" they claimed to be.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler described the rival groups offering these competing visions of Baptist identity as the "Truth Party" and the "Liberty Party."[70] According to Mohler, the Truth Party anchors the Baptist identity in a commitment to specific theological propositions. It "insists that Baptist doctrine and polity are inescapably attached to a prior affirmation of biblical truth, to a clear understanding of biblical authority, and an affirmation of revealed truth as demanding our belief in certain doctrinal essentials."[71] By contrast, Mohler claimed that the Liberty Party identifies the heart of being Baptist with an empty notion of individual autonomy. In his words, "the platform for this party is established upon an aggressive assertion of individual rights to interpretation, theological formulation, and experience. . . . [T]he

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[69]Citing Jude 3 (NRSV).

[70]R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "A Conflict of Visions: The Theological Roots of the Southern Baptist Controversy," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7:1 (Spring 2003), 4.

[71]Ibid., 4-5.

central thrust of this group insists that personal experience is more important than propositional truth."[72]

Mohler played a leading role in the conservative coup and directed the rightward redirection of the SBC's oldest seminary. Despite his overt partisanship, Mohler's description of the competing Baptist visions sketches in broad terms the theological alternatives the *Baptifesto* sought to reject in its proposal for the renewal of Baptist identity. In other words, while moderates would certainly dispute aspects of Mohler's characterization of their convictions, they would not necessarily eschew the "Liberty Party" label.

At the outset, the *Baptifesto* sought to establish common Baptist ground with the claim that "from our beginnings, we Baptists have celebrated the freedom graciously given by God in Jesus Christ."[73] The statement then moves to evaluate all versions of Baptist identity in terms of their understanding of freedom:

> 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 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 both of them 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).[74]

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[72]Ibid.

[73]"Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity," 303. The original printed this phrase in italics.

[74]Ibid., 304.

The *Baptifesto*'s authors clearly intended to be equal-opportunity critics as they declared the theological accounts of freedom offered by Mohler's "truth" and "liberty" parties to be flawed and inadequate.

Yet it would be misleading to see the *Baptifesto's* drafters and endorsers as wholly neutral with regard to the Southern Baptist fray. None of the authors of the 1997 proposal were members of an institution still aligned with the new SBC. The statement firmly rejected the notion (implied in Mohler's apologetic defense of the "Truth Party") that any individual has unmediated access to timeless, inerrant, divine truth so long as he or she uses the proper method of biblical interpretation, based in the correct presuppositions. While some Southern Baptist conservatives noted the *Baptifesto* with curiosity and perhaps amusement,[75] it seemed clear to most observers that the *Baptifesto* was throwing down a theological gauntlet to moderate Baptists. Since the most heated disagreements often take place between parties who already share much in common, it is not surprising that the *Baptifesto* is primarily a response to Southern Baptist moderates by their erstwhile allies in the Baptist battles.

In fact, there is good evidence that the *Baptifesto* was originally a direct reply to an influential interpretation of Baptist identity written in a fairly popular style by historian Walter Shurden, a prominent Southern Baptist moderate. In his 1993 book, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms,*[76] Shurden described authentic Baptist faith and practice in terms of four essential convictions: "Bible Freedom," "Soul freedom," "Church

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[75]Russell D. Moore and Gregory A. Thornbury, "The Mystery of Mullins in Contemporary Southern Baptist Historiography," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:4 (Winter 1999): 44-57.

[76]Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 1993).

freedom," and "Religious freedom." Robert P. Jones has made a convincing claim that an early draft of the *Baptifesto* consisted of four articles that correspond to and critique Shurden's "four freedoms." According to Jones, the final version of the *Baptifesto* added an article on church practices (baptism, preaching, and the Lord's Supper) and eliminated direct references to Shurden's work.[77]

However, while the *Baptifesto* does seem to have taken its basic structure from Shurden's "four freedoms," its polemical thrust is directed to a much broader set of targets. By seeking to provide an alternative to the competing Baptist paradigms Mohler outlined, the statement attempted to change the basic terms of debate. In other words, the co-authors of the *Baptifesto* viewed a decision between "truth" and "liberty" as a false choice. To the extent the *Baptifesto*'s criticisms have Shurden directly in view, it is just as likely to be what he did *not* say (i.e., the implicit assumptions underlying his presentation) that was subject to critique, as it was his constructive paradigm for Baptist identity.

For example, Shurden's "Bible Freedom" maintains 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."[78] There are no brash declarations of individual self-determination along the lines of William Ernest Henley's *Invictus* ("I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul") here. Shurden's work has the cautious, measured tone one might expect from a historian seeking a properly nuanced definition.

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[77]Robert P. Jones, "Revision-ing Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26:1 (Spring 1999), 41.

[78]Shurden, Four Fragile Freedoms, 9.

The language throughout *Four Fragile Freedoms* is similarly circumscribed, as Shurden sought to keep freedom in a "polarity" with responsibility, although placing stress on the former. In his "talk back" to the *Baptifesto*, Shurden emphasized this approach, adding that that the polarities of "faith and freedom, liberty and loyalty, the sovereignty of God and human freedom, independence and interdependence, and the individual and community" are all necessary. With these in place, he claimed, one can speak unhesitatingly and enthusiastically about "individualism" as intrinsic to the Baptist identity.[79]

There seems to be little doubt that Shurden would have accepted the "Liberty Party" label for his stance toward Baptist identity, provided that "truth" remained in the picture. One might say that for the co-authors and supporters of the *Baptifesto*, the fact that the options could be framed in this way (even if in terms of a "polarity" or "creative tension" between the two) showed that something basic had gone wrong in Baptist life. Despite the brief mention of "church" as a place where the Bible must remain central, the bearers of the freedom Shurden delineates are individual believers. The church does not appear as an agent capable of exercising "Bible freedom."

By contrast, the *Baptifesto*'s first article advocated "Bible Study in reading communities, rather than relying on private interpretation or supposed 'scientific objectivity.'" It proposed a spirit-guided process of corporate conversation leading to community consensus and took care to distinguish this process from "all forms of authoritarian interpretation, whether they come from the ranks of the academy or clergy."

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[79]Shurden, "The Baptist Baptifesto and the Baptist Identity," 322.

The pointed denials of this section represent one of the statement's most controversial passages:

> We deny that the Bible can be read as Scripture by any so-called scientific or objective interpretive method (e.g., literal-grammatical, historical-critical, etc.) apart from the gospel and the community in which the gospel is proclaimed. Scripture wisely forbids and we reject every form of private interpretation that makes Bible reading a practice which can be carried out according to the dictates of individual conscience (2 Pet 1:20-21). We therefore cannot commend Bible study that is insulated from the community of believers or that guarantees individual readers an unchecked privilege of interpretation.[80]

In its hermeneutical convictions, the *Baptifesto* attempted to avoid both a rationalistic individualism that assumes one can achieve a pure interpretive objectivity untainted by the accidents of one's particular cultural, intellectual, and religious identity. It also rejected a relativistic individualism that sees nothing beyond one's subjective particularity except oppression and violence. Its solution, if it can be called that, was to ground "Bible freedom" in a community that lives by a set of practices that enable both the community and its members to realize "true" freedom.

The *Baptifesto* applied this basic approach to the rest of Shurden's list of essential Baptist freedoms. In nearly every case, the key move is the statement's sustained emphasis on the church community. "Soul Freedom" becomes not an "inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, . . . clergy, or . . . government"[81] (Shurden) but a "call to shared discipleship" within the

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[80]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 305.

[81]Shurden, *Four Fragile Freedoms*, 23. The most historically significant and philosophically substantial account of "Soul Freedom" the *Baptifesto* sought to counter was articulated by early twentieth-century Baptist theologian E.Y. Mullins's notion of "Soul Competency." Mullins's influential treatment of Baptist identity will receive focused treatment in Chapter Four. (See the *Baptifesto*'s reference to Mullins in the quotation on page 45.

context and discipline of the church.[82] "Church freedom" in the *Baptifesto* means that while the church must be free from governmental control (as in Shurden's account), the church is also, by definition, "free" (or called) to be much more than a mere voluntary society that does not exist apart from the individual choices of its members. In the statement's words, "We affirm a free common life in Christ in gathered, reforming communities rather than withdrawn, self-chosen, or authoritarian ones."[83]

In its treatment of "Religious Freedom" (Shurden's fourth category), the *Baptifesto* provided its most ringing rejection of privatized religion. While renouncing the use of coercion by the church to further its ends, the statement denies that the institutional separation of church and state is a sufficient safeguard against the church's captivity to foreign ways of life, thought, and community. For the *Baptifesto*, freedom from governmental intrusion must be matched on the church's side by a corporate commitment to live free from Christian accommodation to individualism, materialism, racism, sexism and other dehumanizing ideologies.

Objections to the *Baptifesto*'s vision for Baptist churches as a countercultural minority could be historical ("times have changed") or theological ("it was as wrong then as now") in nature. They might also flow from pragmatic or "realist" concerns about the implementation of otherwise laudable goals. *Baptifesto* co-author Elizabeth Newman responded to criticisms that the statement simply advocates "community" as the magic solution to privatized Christianity and its shortcomings:

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[82]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 305-306.

[83]Ibid., 306.

> We assert not the "idea" of community over against the "idea" of the individual. Rather, we call for reflection upon how both ideas have been shaped by habits of thought alien to the gospel. For example, modernity defines freedom primarily as the right of the individual to choose. In Baptist thinking, this notion has often shaped our understanding of the "priesthood of the believer" to mean the individual's right to interpret the Bible for him/her self or to express their own conscience.
>
> However, we seek to describe a fuller theological understanding of freedom, one rooted not simply in individual choice, but in the kind of life we live in relation to God and others. This "priesthood of believers" is more rightly understood as our calling by God to serve as "priests" to each other.[84]

Newman used a list of traditional Christian practices such as forgiveness, hospitality, and intercessory prayer to describe the substance of the kind of life-in-relation to which she referred. Her response seems to provide the reasoning behind the statement's inclusion of an article dealing with what Baptists have traditionally called "ordinances" in the statement's final version.

Among its most contrarian assertions in the context of contemporary Baptist life (and the broader evangelical movement that dominates the American landscape) was the rejection of individualistic spirituality and any hint of a merely personal relationship with Christ. The *Baptifesto*'s authors claimed to "reject all attempts to make the church and its practices incidental to our relationship with Christ and one another."[85] They devoted a paragraph each to the "powerful signs" of baptism, Eucharist, and (in an interesting innovation) preaching, seeking to give depth to the statement's vision and support for its claim that such frequently-observed, communal practices, rooted in the Christian story, constitute the church's existence and shape its members in fundamental ways.

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[84]Elizabeth Newman, "A Misunderstood Point," *Baptists Today*, Oct. 16, 1997, 23 (letter to the editor).

[85]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 308.

Following the *Baptifesto*'s publication, a lively debate took place in the pages of the newsweekly *Baptists Today* (which printed the statement and a list of 55 endorsers in June 1997) and *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, the journal of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion. The latter publication included several follow-up articles by individual co-authors[86] and a full-length response to the *Baptifesto* from Shurden (cited above). The *Baptifesto* raised a number of critical historical and theological issues for Baptists, all of which can be given greater scrutiny. However, an important section of Shurden's rejoinder seems to have exposed the most fundamental way in which the *Baptifesto* made its break with existing Baptist traditions and made good on its claim to consider both the dominant visions for Baptist life false while preferring neither.

Freeing the Baptists (and Their Bibles) from Captivity to America

Although claiming to share the *Baptifesto*'s disdain for privatized, "Jesus-and-me" religiosity, Shurden was most disturbed by the statement's "studied, strained, and unfortunate deemphasis on the role of the individual" which, in his view, failed to present a "balanced" picture of the Baptist identity.[87] He saw this tendency at its most prominent in the articles on scripture and "shared discipleship." In the *Baptifesto*'s refusal to commend private interpretation of the Bible, Shurden detected what he believed to be a thoroughly un-Baptist sentiment, as well as theologian Stanley Hauerwas's "enormous"

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[86]Curtis W. Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?" *PRS* 24:3 (Fall 1997): 273-302, and "A New Perspective on Baptist Identity," *PRS* 26:1 (Spring 1999): 59-65; Barry Harvey, "Where, Then, Do We Stand? Baptists, History and Authority," *PRS* 29:4 (Winter 2002): 359-380; and Philip Thompson, "Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical, Theological, and Liturgical Analysis," *PRS* 27:3 (Fall 2000): 287-302.

[87]Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," 323.

influence on the statement. To press his point, Shurden drew upon a passage from one of

Hauerwas's books in which the notoriously provocative scholar claimed,

> No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. . . . I certainly believe that God uses the Scripture to help keep the Church faithful, but I do not believe, in the Church's current circumstance, that each person in the Church thereby is given the right to interpret the Scripture. Such a presumption derives from the corrupt egalitarian politics of democratic regimes, not from the politics of the Church.[88]

According to Hauerwas, within the "politics of the church" it is understood that "the

'right' reading of Scripture depends on having spiritual masters who can help the whole

Church stand under the authority of God's Word."[89]

To Shurden, such sentiments will sound "horrific" in a true Baptist's ears. Even if

the *Baptifesto*'s language and prescriptions are not nearly as incendiary, Shurden criticized

its authors for following Hauerwas's lead and for forgetting that Baptists were "born

reacting to and rejecting the idea of 'spiritual masters.'"[90] He portrayed both Hauerwas

and the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors as reactionaries seeking to turn back the clock on the

positive advances of the Baptist tradition, the Enlightenment and Modernity, and the

Reformation itself.

If, as Truett claimed in 1927, the kind of freedom provided for the church in the

United States was "preeminently a Baptist achievement," then it becomes clear why a

group of Baptists purporting to believe that Baptist convictions about "freedom" must be

disentangled from the traditions of "the land of the free" would be seen as dangerous

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[88]Hauerwas, Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15-16.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Shurden, ibid.

subversives, if not traitors.[91] In Shurden's linking of the *Baptifesto* to Hauerwas and the

attempt to "take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America,"

the core of the dispute seems to have been laid bare. Shurden's most passionately

worded criticisms of the statement were embedded in a narrative so vital to many

Baptists' self-understanding that challenges to it evoke an almost visceral response. This

becomes clearer when one looks at responses other Baptists have made to Hauerwas.

Significantly, Hauerwas's argument in *Unleashing the Scripture* was received

with equal disdain by the new conservative establishment of the SBC. In 2001,

Southeastern Seminary President Paige Patterson, arch-nemesis of politically-engaged

moderate Baptists, engaged in a public debate with Hauerwas. In his critique of

Hauerwas's call to end the promotion of "private" Bible reading and interpretation,

Patterson stood shoulder to shoulder with Shurden. Whatever its potential liabilities,

Patterson claimed, the "priesthood of the believer"[92] which Baptists have historically

celebrated and brought to the fore, is eminently preferable to the arbitrary, coercive, and

stifling "priestcraft" of traditional authorities to which he believed Hauerwas would have

American Christians submit their consciences.[93]

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[91]Christopher L. Canipe has provided a detailed analysis of the ways in which key Baptist leaders in the first quarter of the twentieth century developed theoretical accounts of the deep ties between foundational Baptist convictions and American democracy. His dissertation, *A Captive Church in the Land of the Free: E.Y. Mullins, Walter Rauschenbusch, George Truett, and the Rise of 'Baptist Democracy', 1900-1925* (Baylor University, 2004) was an attempt to test the *Baptifesto*'s claims about the assimilation of Baptist notions of freedom to the philosophical framework of modern liberal democracy. I am claiming here that by the late twentieth century, the primary rhetorical tropes and intellectual habits of what Canipe called 'Baptist democracy' operated on the level of an identity-narrative.

[92]A traditional Baptist twist on Martin Luther's "priesthood of all believers" that is often used as a synonym for "soul competency," though some Baptists would distinguish between the soul competency of all human beings and the priesthood of explicitly Christian believers. The first slogan is thus more generically religious and philosophical, and the second has clearer implications for church polity.

[93]Tony W. Cartledge, "Access to Scripture debated at SEBTS," *Associated Baptist Press* (October

Based on these almost identical reactions by otherwise diametrically opposed

Baptists, one can see the basis for the *Baptifesto*'s claim that the two most prominent

visions of contemporary Baptist life share more in common than they realize. Both

Patterson and Shurden (representing Mohler's "Truth" and "Liberty" parties,

respectively) framed their response to Hauerwas in terms of a narrative that moves from a

dark age of repressive popes and church *magisteria* into an era of freedom and

enlightenment—a story in which Baptists serve as key protagonists. The prominence

given to Hauerwas's intentionally provocative statements in critiques of the *Baptifesto*

says a great deal about the perceived threat the statement posed to certain understandings

of Baptist identity.[94]

5, 2001).

[94]Nearly a decade after its publication, the *Baptifesto* once again became the focus of heated discussion in Baptist circles. In January 2006, William Underwood, newly-elected President of (Baptist) Mercer University, claimed that the Baptist principles of respect for the freedom of individual conscience and individual responsibility were under threat from both the current SBC and groups like the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors and supporters. Following Shurden, he linked the *Baptifesto* to Hauerwas's (in)famous statements, claiming that the statement strays from basic Baptist beliefs about truth and salvation: "Indeed, when we stand before God on judgment day, how many of us believe that it would be a defense to God's judgment to say that we just did what we were told by our spiritual masters?" he asked. "The truth is that we are responsible for our souls. We will be judged as individuals, not as communities." (Quoted by Greg Warner, "Mercer President-elect Decries 'Spiritual Masters' Who Limit Freedom," *Associated Baptist Press*, January 24, 2006).

Underwood's comments largely repeated his December 2005 commencement address at Baylor University, and a sermon given during chapel services at Baylor's Truett Seminary earlier that fall (William D. Underwood, "The Freedom of a Christian" (George W. Truett Theological Seminary Convocation Address, August 30, 2005). Unpublished MS in author's possession.)

The co-authors of the 1997 *Baptifesto* (absent McClendon, who passed away in 2000) along with two additional Baptist professors of theology (Mark Medley and Steven Harmon) drafted a response, in which they denied that their vision for Baptist life was "dangerous and un-Baptistic," as Underwood had claimed. They charged Underwood with ignoring the *Baptifesto*'s explicit rejection of authoritarianism and its advocacy of communal practices that seek to include all members of the community in the shared search for and commitment to gospel truth. Perhaps the heart of their rejoinder (which could just as easily have been addressed to Shurden) was this statement: "While we reject the authoritarian subjugation of individual conscience, there is a sense in which we do believe in being subject to 'spiritual masters'—but not self-appointed ones. We look instead to those whose wisdom and charity have proved themselves over the centuries."

However, lost in the emphasis on Hauerwas's rhetorically volatile proposal to "take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians" (this would presumably include himself) was the larger context of his argument. The book from which the (in)famous quotation is taken was subtitled, *Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*. For Hauerwas, the problem with individual appropriation of the Bible is that when "individual" Americans read the Bible, they do so as self-determining citizens of a liberal democracy, not as members of a historical, trans-national community committed to a way of life that may at times be antithetical to common sense or patriotic values. Thus, he claimed in his reply to Patterson, most American Christians "think they can read [the Bible] just straight up without the kind of life that would ask the question, 'I would rather be wronged than take a fellow Christian to court.'"[95]

A charitable reading of Hauerwas would emphasize that the thrust of his critique was not directed at "individual Christians" understood sociologically, as if the primary evil to be avoided was interpretive plurality *per se*. Rather, it would seem, the fundamental problem in his view is a theologically justified individualism in which it is perfectly legitimate to speak of merely private (in a strong sense) Bible reading by Christians apart from their membership in the church. For Hauerwas, the Bible's rightful place is "in the hands of the church, in the hands of Christians coming to look with one

While that remark points in the direction of a "catholic" emphasis on the role of tradition in moral and theological reflection, their list of potential "spiritual masters" reflects an interesting mix of Biblical heroes and heroines (Abraham and Sarah, Miriam and Moses, Paul and Priscilla), the kinds of patristic figures one would expect to see on such a list (Athanasius and Augustine) and a host of more- and lesser-known figures from Christian history, several of whose names would only be familiar to die-hard Baptists (Martin Luther and Menno Simons; John Smyth and Thomas Helwys; Katherine Sutton and Ann Judson; William Carey and Lottie Moon; Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day; and Muriel Lester and Martin Luther King, Jr.). See Mikael Broadway, et al., "Dangerous and Un-baptistic"? A Response from Supporters of the "Baptist Manifesto" *Associated Baptist Press* (February 1, 2006).

[95]Ibid.

another about how to read the Bible . . . . For Christians our first loyalty is to the triune

God and God's church across time and space. Only in that context can we confidently

and prayerfully read scripture as God's word. Otherwise it is just our opinion."[96]

Conclusion

The *Baptifesto*'s advocacy of "Bible study in reading communities" sounds much

more like Hauerwas than either Patterson's "priesthood of the believer" or Shurden's

"Bible freedom." The *Baptifesto* clearly joined Hauerwas in his lament over the

dissolution of a strong ecclesial identity among American Christians. It also shared his

conviction that the basic issues boil down to how "freedom" is understood. For

Hauerwas, "the question is not whether we have religious freedom . . . but whether we are

a church that scares the society so deeply the society is frightened to give us that

freedom, but we will take it anyway because we are the people of God who stand against

the powers of this world by God's grace and Holy Spirit that makes it possible for us to

say no when Caesar calls."[97]

Thus, for a variety of reasons (including the professional backgrounds of the

statement's co-authors), Shurden justifiably detected a strong "Hauerwasian" flavor in

the *Baptifesto*. However, although the statement clearly made common cause with the

controversial theological polemicist, this does not establish the statement as a Baptist

satellite orbiting within the Hauerwas theological constellation. For one thing,

McClendon (though presumably more a figurehead than an active contributor to the

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[96]Ibid.

[97]Ibid. As a well-known pacifist, Hauerwas has repeatedly urged Christians to realize that "Caesar" never fails to call in wartime.

statement) was an established theologian in his own right who reached many of

Hauerwas's conclusions through different paths.[98]

In addition, little attention has been paid to the ties between the *Baptifesto*'s

vision for Baptist churches in North America and the thought of John Howard Yoder,

who both Hauerwas and McClendon have claimed as an enormous influence. If it can be

shown that Yoder's importance for understanding and locating the *Baptifesto* in

contemporary theology and Christian ethics is at least as substantial as Hauerwas's, this

would have significant implications for the intramural Baptist debate over the proposal.

On a less substantive, polemical level, a demonstration of significant

commonalities between the *Baptifesto* and Yoder's theological ethics would mitigate the

rhetorical effectiveness of using provocative quotations to paint the statement as simply

"Hauerwasian" and thus either too outrageous to be taken seriously, or too crypto-

Catholic for Baptists to recognize themselves in it.[99] More importantly, Yoder was

acutely sensitive to the historic failures of establishment apologetics for official churches

and their prerogatives. His "radical reformation" convictions gave him deep sympathy

with critics of authoritarian "priestcraft." In other words, Yoder shared key features of

the Baptist identity-narrative that causes many Baptists to raise their defenses when "the

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[98]See Terrence W. Tilley, "Why American Catholic Theologians Should Read 'Baptist' Theology," *Horizons* 14:1 (Spring 1987): 129-137. In this article Tilley, a Catholic theologian, reviewed and commended a volume of McClendon's *Systematic Theology*. In a review of the same work, Hauerwas celebrated what he considered to be McClendon's pioneering attempt to reshape traditional systematics. In his words, McClendon had "become such a master of his craft that we can miss the peculiarity of what he has done." See Hauerwas, "Reading McClendon Takes Practice: Lessons in the Craft of Theology" *Conrad Grebel Review* 15 (Fall 1997): 248.

[99]Hauerwas taught at Notre Dame for over a decade and has written appreciatively about aspects of Roman Catholic Marian devotion. Though still a Methodist, in his debate with Patterson Hauerwas told the audience, "Indeed, I say the only interesting ecclesial question left is why we are not all Roman Catholics. Only Roman Catholics have been a church, capable of being a church of the poor in this culture," ibid.

Church" is described in theologically robust terms. Thus, if the *Baptifesto* genuinely shared many of Yoder's basic convictions, its attempt to "re-envision" Baptist identity may have been an audacious departure from recent traditions, but it was not necessarily an attempt to subvert the Baptist heritage by adopting the arguments of its historic antithesis.

The members of the SBC "Truth Party" considered their moderate opponents to be theologically compromised and unwilling to do what was necessary to combat the forces of unbelief and decadence in the church and nation. For their part, the "Liberty Party" believed what they saw as the theocratic militancy of Southern Baptist conservatives was posing a dire threat to principles that had served Baptists and the United States extremely well for centuries. Both of the Baptist alternatives the *Baptifesto* sought to reject seemingly believed that the destinies of (Southern) Baptists and the United States were intertwined, though one side emphasized the need to return the nation to its proper trajectory, while the other side viewed this desire to renew a genuinely "Christian" America as a threat to America's (and Baptists') unique genius. To a large degree, and for both sides, the internal Baptist theological controversy and the nation's culture wars were linked.

For these reasons, although much of the text of the *Baptifesto* and a large part of the debate surrounding it focused on issues of biblical hermeneutics and the locus of theological authority, it becomes clear that the heart of the challenge the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors extended to their fellow Baptists can be expressed in the form of two questions requiring further investigation. First, can the story of Baptists be told in a way that does not overlap in fundamental ways with the story of modern or American progress?

Second, is it socially responsible and theologically justifiable to emphasize the kind of distinctive ecclesial identity to which Nixon called American Catholics and the *Baptifesto* urged former Southern Baptists to adopt?

An important set of answers to these questions can be found in Yoder's writings, particularly in his highly-nuanced, densely-argued critique of "Constantinianism." To begin answering the two issues just outlined, it will be helpful to view Yoder's stance in the context of his 1970 "Non-Baptist View of Southern Baptists." In this important article, Yoder anticipated many important themes of the *Baptifesto*, all while claiming that his critique was motivated by a desire to "let the Baptists be [genuinely] Baptist."

CHAPTER THREE

John Howard Yoder and Baptist Constantinianism

My hope for the Southern Baptists is that there should be no diminution of the commitment to the genuinely theological distinctive positions of their tradition, but that these distinctives might become no longer simply the accreditation for an independent existence. Rather that they should be the substance of a witness to Christians of other convictions and the instruments of internal self-criticism and renewal. If the mood in which distinctives are dealt with is one of ecumenical sharing rather than the shoring up of one's separateness, then ways will be found to express them not in naïve oversimplification but in the kind of reformulation whose relevance to the contemporary scene would be evident

–John H. Yoder.[100]

Jewish philosopher Peter Ochs has argued that John Howard Yoder's theological

project should be of interest to Jews as well as Christians because the Christianity Yoder

articulated is, like Judaism throughout so much of its history, a "biblical religion after."[101]

That is, just as Jews have repeatedly faced the task of faithfully reshaping the ancient

faith in response to dramatically new historical circumstances, Yoder spent his scholarly

career advancing an account of Christianity he hoped would enable Christians to leave

the opposing ruts into which religion settled in recent centuries and to find renewed

opportunities for faithfulness *after* the demise of their social dominance in the West.

This chapter seeks to show the significant ways in which "Re-envisioning Baptist

Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Christians in North America" can be understood in

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[100]John Howard Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View of Southern Baptists," *Review and Expositor* 67 (1970): 225.

[101]Peter Ochs, "Yoder's Witness to the People Israel," in John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 2.

terms of Yoder's vision for the church in the world. A key part of this will be an examination of Yoder's analysis of Southern Baptist churches in 1970. In both his critical admonitions and his constructive alternatives, Yoder's aspirations for Southern Baptists anticipated the *Baptifesto*'s proposal for a new vision of "freedom, faithfulness, and community." The *Baptifesto* hoped to convince fellow Baptists that many of their longstanding traditions and mental habits needed radical reshaping in the sense Ochs has described. Because of these similarities, a look at Ochs's depiction of the times and their challenges provides a helpful introduction to Yoder and his work.

"A Biblical Religion After": Radical Reform and Radical Catholicity

Throughout its history, Judaism has repeatedly reinvented itself in response to cataclysmic events. After exile and dispersion, the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem by the Romans, and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and other principalities, the ancient Israelite religion with its temple and sacrifices gave way to Diaspora Judaism, became codified and formally structured as rabbinic Judaism in the first centuries of the common era, and adapted itself to fit an often nomadic and precarious existence in medieval and early modern Europe.

According to Ochs, in light of the epochal twentieth-century events of *Shoah* (Holocaust), the establishment of the state of Israel, and the threat of Jewish assimilation into Western secularity, contemporary Judaism finds itself in the midst of another metamorphosis. Ochs, a self-described "postliberal" Jew, believes the Judaism presently emerging from these events will continue this pattern of apparent death and creative rebirth by coming to a renewed trust in the "body of its Covenant, which is nothing other

than the written Word of Torah."[102] This "body," according to Ochs, will be filled with the "spirit of a new reception of Torah, a new *Midrash* or way of reliving the tradition of being Jewish in a new historical setting." In the meantime, which is where he believes early twenty-first century Jews find themselves, Jewish life is defined by inner tensions: "Israel's body and spirit no longer fit together, we might say."

For Ochs, a postliberal Jewish perspective sees the present sense of disjunction not as a permanent feature of Jewish life, but as symptomatic of an exhausted paradigm that has yet to be replaced. A key aspect of this current tension, in his view, is that currently dominant modes of reasoning force Judaism into untenable dichotomies: either permanent exile from the ancestral and divinely-promised homeland *or* the establishment and defense of a modern nation-state (including, if necessary, the military subjugation of another people); either cultural and ethical assimilation within secularized late-modern Western societies *or* an anachronistic and submissive existence within sectarian ghettos. According to Ochs, post-liberal Jews discern a need for a new pattern of existence that breaks from both the bland conformity of so much "enlightened" religion and the orthodox options that are at present defined by their defensive reactions to modernity.

The *Baptifesto* shared important features of Ochs's postliberal Jewish outlook, particularly its desire to set aside established dualisms (including, most notably, impatience with modes of thought that pit the "individual" versus the "community" in a zero-sum game). As will be seen, Yoder's ethical and theological vision spoke to such concerns as he advanced a "radical" position in the sense of both a substantive break with

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[102]Ochs, "Commentary on [John Howard Yoder's] 'See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun,'" in ibid, 203.

the status quo and an attempted renewal of what is at the root (*radix*) of a community's

ostensible vocation.

Michael Cartwright has characterized Yoder's stance as one of "radical reform

and radical catholicity."[103] In an important passage introducing his first collection of

essays on basic issues in theological ethics, Yoder sought to head-off attempts to

characterize his views in terms of what the mainstream would consider an eccentric

minority's idiosyncratic convictions:

> Without disavowing my ethnic and denominational origins, I deny that this view is
> limited to people of that same culture or derived in its detail from that experience. It
> is a vision of unlimited catholicity because in contrast to both sectarian and
> "established" views, it prescribes no particular institutional requisites for entering
> the movement whose shape it calls "restoration."[104]

Yoder then enumerated several historic features of his Mennonite tradition he believed

were irrelevant, and even contradictory, to his understanding of the church and its

calling.[105]

Nevertheless, Yoder saw in the historical origins of his denomination, the classic

sixteenth century Anabaptist communities, an important historical precedent for the

theological, ethical, and ecclesiological vision he challenged all Christian communities to

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[103]Michael Cartwright, "Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity: John Howard Yoder's Vision of the Faithful Church." Introduction to Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1994), 1-49.

[104]Yoder, introduction to *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 4.

[105]These included "ethnic isolation, Germanic folkways, the simplicity of immigrant village culture, particular patterns of defensive discipline in garb, and the vocational selectivity that have marked Mennonite migration into North America." More troubling to Yoder were "[t]he defensiveness and authoritarianism with which Constantinian establishments sometimes govern a rural colony or a church agency, the way in which immigrant farmers can without intending it be allied with authoritarian rulers against the interests of the previous, less technically advanced subjects of those same rulers, and the readiness to buy into some elements of the dominant culture while claiming to be clearly nonconformed on others." Ibid.

make their own. Although the Anabaptists were briefly introduced in the last chapter, Yoder's specific remarks about Southern Baptists can be read with greater depth of insight when preceded by a more thorough historical account of these movements in their social context. This overview will also describe Yoder's understanding of the relationship between classic sixteenth-century Anabaptism and twentieth-century Southern Baptists. With this in mind, we turn to the sixteenth century to examine the "radical" features of the Anabaptist movements.

Radical Dissent: The Believers' Churches and Believers Baptism

The two images of "The Reformation" cemented in many people's minds are likely to be the solitary figure of Martin Luther nailing his "Ninety-Five Theses" to the Wittenburg church door in 1517 and his courageous "Here I stand" before the imperial Diet at Worms in 1521. These scenes, both more mythically stylized than strictly historical, often serve as paradigms of the modern challenge to, or emancipation from, centuries of established authority in religious matters. When viewed together as an historical pivot point, with those symbolic actions Luther either (depending on one's perspective or metaphorical preference): (re)discovered a treasure buried in a field for centuries; wrecked a magnificent yet delicate structure in need of repair; or pointed out that the emperor had no clothes, ushering in a crisis of spiritual and moral authority that would eventually lead to an era of freedom and enlightenment.

Such interpretations of Luther's actions and their significance hint at the complex matrix of political, social, and theological dynamics in play during the epoch-shaping events of the sixteenth century. Feudal estates and traditional elites faced challenges from emerging nation-states and a nascent middle class; increased literacy and the advent

of the printing press provided fuel for new ideas and the means for their broad

dissemination; advances in transportation and the "discovery" of new lands opened up

enticing possibilities for gaining vast amounts of power and wealth. In short, Luther

made his stand for the gospel of justification by faith in an increasingly unsettled

atmosphere in which many feared or anticipated the imminent end of the world as they

knew it. Yet despite his defiance of the reigning church authorities with regard to matters

of theological doctrine, in the end Luther sided with social and political conservatism.

The immediate heirs of his legacy generally reinforced Luther's tendency to emphasize

stability and affirm long-standing political and social traditions, most notably the

insistence upon a unitary view of the church and body politic.

With this in mind, perhaps another image needs to be placed alongside the others

in order to represent the extent of the changes the events of the early sixteenth century

unleashed in religion and society. Historian George H. Williams draws our attention to an

event that took place in Zürich, Switzerland, on January 21, 1525:

> The first gathered church of sectarian "Protestantism" came into being precisely at
> that moment when a former priest in the home of a university-educated prophet of
> the new order received baptism on confession of sin from the hand of a layman,
> and when all present defended their action on the ground that the Christian
> conscience was no more beholden to the reforming magistrates and their divines
> than to priests and prelates.[106]

The former priest was George Blaurock, the "prophet of the new order" was Felix Mantz,

and the layman performing the baptism was Conrad Grebel, descendant of a prominent

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[106]Protestantism is placed in quotes because there was, strictly speaking, no such entity as
Protestantism in 1525. In addition, some heirs of these dissenters from state-sanctioned religion continue to
debate the appropriateness of their claiming the "protestant" label for themselves. See, for example, Walter
Klaassen, "Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism : A Vision Valid for the Twentieth Century?" *Conrad Grebel
Review* 7 (Fall 1989): 241-251; and Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision,* (Scottdale, Pa: Mennonite
Pub. House, 1960), 23.

Zürich family. All played a role in the story of what scholars label the "Radical

Reformation" and one of the primary branches of this collection of dissenting groups, the

Anabaptists.[107] But in 1525, none of this was by any means clear, nor would any these

men become the founders of a religious tradition in any clear-cut way.

Standard histories of the Reformation for centuries essentially repeated classic

Lutheran and Reformed portrayals of Anabaptists, grouping them with other anarchic

spiritual "enthusiasts" and political revolutionaries scattered throughout the

Reformation's turbulent early years.[108] By the twentieth century, however, important

scholars such as the German sociologist Ernst Troeltsch claimed that the Anabaptist

communities were ahead of their time, serving as prototypical models of voluntary,

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[107]Williams, *The Radical Reformation,* 213. Brief definitions of these groups and some qualifying remarks about the standard categories were provided in Chapter Two.

[108]For example, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines the Zwickau prophets, without qualification, as "Anabaptists." Elizabeth A. Livingstone, ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 566. The Zwickau prophets were a group of puritanical and revolutionary reformers who visited Wittenberg during Luther's 1521 exile and incited widespread social disruption. In this usage, "Anabaptist" appears to be a catch-all description applied to all non-Protestants and non-Catholics with passionately held countervailing views.

The greatest source of the Anabaptists' notoriety came from their association with a particularly scandalous episode. In the mid-1530s, a group of radicals gained control of the North German city of Münster, eventually establishing a theocratic kingdom of the self-proclaimed righteous remnant, now being vindicated in the "last days." As Münster's conflict with its neighbors escalated, the radicals' apocalyptic and dualistic tendencies intensified, fulfilling in their minds an anticipated scenario of mortal conflict between the kingdoms of God and Satan taking place in the last days. Radical social innovations were introduced and enforced within the city (a form of coercive communism, instances of polygamy) that confirmed the sense of horror with which outsiders viewed the inhabitants.

This short but intense episode ended in the violence typical of confrontations between revolutionary and apocalyptic religious groups and the established forces of the larger society. The tragic events reinforced civil authorities' inclination to identify anyone voicing ideas reminiscent of these early radicals with violent insurrection and anarchy. (For contemporary Americans, it may be helpful to view the popular perceptions of the kingdom of Münster in terms of our own society's perception of the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas and the events that occurred there in 1993).

The Anabaptists continued to tell their own story, of course, particularly via the *Martyr's Mirror* – an anthology of stories about peaceful witnesses and faithful martyrs that served as a reminder and inspiration to future generations.

sectarian religious groups that would grow in importance with the rise of secular modernity. During this recent era, more historians have turned their attention to careful study of the earliest Anabaptists, discovering previously unknown primary sources that allow these radicals to speak in their own words. Scholars with denominational ties to the early Anabaptist movements, particularly Mennonites, did much of this initial historical work. Many (including Yoder) were inspired by the work Harold Bender, who in a famous 1944 essay held out what he called "The Anabaptist Vision" as a compelling, comprehensive, and orthodox account of Christian faith and life.

Bender described the Anabaptist Vision as an interpretation of Christianity that locates the essence of Christianity in discipleship, defines the church in terms of a "brotherhood," and is committed to an ethic of love and nonresistance.[109] While he is credited with being a conscientious scholar who inspired a generation of capable and productive Reformation-era historians, Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" is generally seen today as an exercise in denominational apologetics, an attempt to explain and defend Mennonite identity both to ecumenical Christian audiences and to contemporary Mennonites who were then at a great cultural and historical distance from their sixteenth-century roots.

Bender hoped to isolate and depict a pure "Anabaptism" that arose out of the Swiss (Zürich) church reform efforts (launched by Grebel and his circle, described above) and maintained a fairly clear commitment to the three ideals sketched above. However, the historical record is much more cloudy. Most contemporary historians take a "polygenesis" approach to Anabaptist history, stressing the diversity among a variety of

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[109]Bender, The Anabaptist Vision, 13.

related grassroots movements with regard to such issues as the use of violence, relationships with governmental authority (and the non-believing world generally), scriptural interpretation, and others.[110]

While Bender's Anabaptist vision may have lacked historical nuance, many have found a compelling model in the radical communities that served as the basis for his account. Historian Franklin Littell, a Methodist sympathetic to the Anabaptists' conception of the "believers church" also played an influential role in the twentieth-century shift in Anabaptist historiography. His definition of the Anabaptist wing of the radical reformation, which focused upon their unique conception of a voluntary yet disciplined community of believers, was quoted in the previous chapter.[111] According to the normative Anabaptism Littell isolated, what sixteenth-century Western Christianity needed was not doctrinal reformation per se. Anabaptists believed reform was inadequate and the church must now be *restored* along the lines of the earliest Christian communities. Anabaptists therefore located the church's fall around the time of the Emperor Constantine's legalization of the Christian religion and its establishment as the imperial religion shortly thereafter, with all the privileges and responsibilities this entailed.

Echoing Littell, Yoder has described the Anabaptists' comprehensive dissent in terms of "a critical stance toward what medieval Christianity had become, which

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[110]In addition to the works by Williams and Lindberg, cited earlier, a good recent history of Anabaptists and their convictions written from a "polygenesis" perspective is, C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995). Southern Baptist church historian William R. Estep helped make available a number of early Anabaptist sources. See *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533): A Source Book,* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1976).

[111]See p. 31, n. 16.

considers the shortcomings to be structural rather than superficial, and which locates

them not only in dogma or moral tone but also in what had happened to the nature of the

believing community."[112] In this light, Anabaptist rejection of the venerable Christian

tradition of infant baptism can be seen as a logical extension of their basic conviction

about the nature of the church and not their defining characteristic. Infant baptism, in

their view, removed a necessary condition for a church of believers: the potential for non-

coerced, voluntary entry into the community.[113] Even though the label given by their

opponents implied that the Anabaptists' peculiarity was rooted in their radical approach

to this practice, Anabaptists preferred to describe themselves with simple terms like

"believers" or "brethren."

Protestant and Catholic governments were united in their antipathy toward these

religious iconoclasts, reformers, and self-proclaimed restorers of the authentic apostolic

faith whose understanding of faithful Christian community lacked endorsement by civil

authorities. The 1529 imperial Diet of Speyer re-activated provisions from ancient

Roman civil law and made rebaptism a criminal offense. This council of the officially

Catholic Holy Roman Empire ended in a stalemate of sorts, with several principalities

and free imperial cities registering their protest against the lack of toleration for

Lutherans in Catholic territories (the origin of the label "Protestant"). Nevertheless, the

parties were able to reach consensus on an edict mandating that "Every Anabaptist and

rebaptized man or woman of the age of reason shall be condemned and brought from

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[112]John Howard Yoder, Michael G. Cartwright, and Peter Ochs, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 108.

[113]For a classic statement of the Anabaptist position, see Balthasar Hubmaier, "On the Christian Baptism of Believers" in Estep, *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533): A Source Book,* 91ff.

mutual life into death by fire, sword and the like . . . without proceeding by the

inquisition of the spiritual judges . . . . [L]et them all by no means be shown mercy."[114]

The authorities perceived Anabaptists to be a threat to the state, not just the

church. As Walter Klaassen has noted, the Theodosian-Justinian laws against rebaptism

were civil codes, not simply church canon laws.[115] Their abandonment of infant

baptism–linked to their stress on voluntary and regenerate church membership--called the

status quo into question. To the extent that civil authorities insisted upon the alliance

between Christianity and the civil community, the Anabaptists did indeed pose a direct

threat to political order.

While some Anabaptists had the inclination and training to debate baptismal

practice with their opponents on the level of abstract disputes over human free will or

Biblical exegesis,[116] most assumed that human beings are capable of making responsible

decisions and believed a straightforward reading of the Bible justified their position. But

they also believed this commitment would likely result in great hardship. Anabaptists

generally described their "choice" to commit to the community of Christian disciples as a

yielding to an authoritative divine summons. Sixteenth-century Anabaptist Pilgram

Marpeck described the costly nature of such a commitment:

> Those who are truly and correctly baptized in Christ are baptized with Christ in
> patience under tribulation. Committed to suffer even unto their physical death,
> every Christian who is baptized with Christ is a participant in his tribulation. He

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[114]Cited in Williams, 358. Unlike this edict, the ancient (anti-Donatist) Theodosian statute did not explicitly prescribe capital punishment for the crime of rebaptism.

[115]Walter Klaassen, Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant, 63.

[116]Former priest and university-trained theologian Balthasar Hubmaier eventually threw his energies behind the Anabaptist position on this issue. For his classic exegetical and theological arguments against infant baptism, see "On the Christian Baptism of Believers" in Estep, 91ff.

commits himself to hate all temptations and to resist all evil, and he opposes it in faith and patience, with the sword of truth. To this tribulation no young child, unable to speak, can commit itself.[117]

It was not simply unscriptural to baptize infants, according to classic Anabaptist reasoning, it was immoral and incoherent in light of the costs and conditions of genuine Christian discipleship. These radicals understood the New Testament church and, by extension, their own congregations, as mutually accountable communities whose nature could not be separated from their ethical shape.[118]

The "Schleitheim Confession," an early Anabaptist statement of corporate convictions composed by a gathering of Swiss radicals, stressed the church's separation from the "world" and its ways and proscribed the use of violence. A baptized believer could not wield the "sword" of civil authority because the office required its holder to act in ways "outside the perfection of Christ."[119] In taking up such a pacifist and separatist stance many Anabaptist communities sealed their fate as subversive outlaws. The leaders of sixteenth-century Central Europe lived in almost constant fear of invasion from the increasingly powerful Ottoman Empire encroaching upon their eastern frontier. From the established authorities' perspective, Anabaptists continued to speak in ways that threatened the stability of the Christian principality and weakened the citizenry's resolve to take up arms in its defense. For their part, Anabaptists began to lose hope that governmental authorities–Christian or otherwisewould ever cease to be motivated by an

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[117]Quoted in Walter Klaassen, "The Anabaptist Critique of Constantinian Christendom" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 55:3 (July 1981): 227.

[118]Ibid., 224.

[119]*The Schleitheim Confession,* ed. and trans., John Howard Yoder, (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1977), 14.

un-Christian spirit of coercion and persecution. From this, many concluded that the

responsibilities of governmental power and the Christian life were incompatible.[120]

Yoder found a touchstone for his "radical reformation" perspective in the kind of

mainstream "believers church" Anabaptism Littell identified, perhaps epitomized by the

radical ethical and social dissent of the *Schleitheim Confession*. Yoder was the translator

for one of the primary English versions of the document to be published and he

collaborated in historical studies of two key Anabaptist theologians, Michael Sattler and

Balthasar Hubmaier.[121] His doctoral dissertation at the University of Basel analyzed the

theological "disputations" held between Anabaptist representatives and Reformed

theologians representing civil authorities.[122]

While at Basel, Yoder studied with twentieth-century theological giant Karl

Barth.[123] Yoder's interaction with this tremendously influential theological critic of

mainstream (particularly European) Protestant theology and church life, combined with

his rootedness in sixteenth-century Anabaptism, gave Yoder a unique perspective and

potent resources for articulating a vision for twentieth-century church renewal. Though

he would eventually gain a much larger audience after joining the Notre Dame faculty in

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[120]This is a key point at which prominent Anabaptist leaders diverged, with some (e.g., Hubmaier) believing Christians can and should wield the "sword" against criminals but never against unbelief per se. Others, like Pilgram Marpeck, were open in principle to Christian participation in civic leadership but wanted to look closely at particular cases.

[121]*The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, ed. John H. Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973) and *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (trans. and ed.) H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989).

[122]Recently published in English as Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers, ed., C. Arnold Snyder ; trans., David Carl Stassen and C. Arnold Snyder ; introduction by Neal Blough (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2004).

[123]According to legend, Yoder wrote a lengthy and detailed critique of Barth's position on war and personally delivered it to the famous theologian, shortly before defending his dissertation.

the 1970s, Yoder spent the early part of his career in denominational institutions, while

participating frequently in ecumenical discussion. Many of these dialogues took place

with representatives from other traditions with roots in the "radical reformation."

A number of scholars consider the Anabaptists to be a key (though indirect)

influence or historical precedent for other Christian traditions that have come to

prominence in recent centuries. This would include groups such as the Baptists,

Methodists, and the American Campbellite "restorationist" movements as well as broader

entities such as the Wesleyan-Holiness traditions and contemporary Pentecostalism.

While there is little consensus on the best way to describe and define its boundaries,

many have identified within this diverse assortment of traditions a distinctive view of the

church. This ecclesial vision stresses its continuity with normative, apostolic Christianity

not primarily in terms of institutional continuity or doctrinal orthodoxy, but in terms of

faithfulness to a vision of a Christian community whose members have been gathered out

of an unbelieving world into a new way of life.[124]

Starting in the 1960s, Yoder played a leading role in a series of conferences

focused on the concept of the "believers' church," to which representatives of the groups

just described were invited. The conferences were partly inspired by a desire to inquire

after and, if possible, clarify the conceptual unity among these traditions, so that their

shared convictions could be more adequately included in the high-level ecumenical

discussions taking place in the World Council of Churches' "Faith and Order" meetings.

As Yoder described the conferences in a twenty-five year retrospective history, the goal

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[124]For example, Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985) and Littell, op. cit.

was also to test the fruitfulness of using "lived eccesiology" rather than doctrinal formulations alone as a key for self-understanding, self-criticism, and renewed witness.[125]

The first of these conferences took place in 1967 and was hosted by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Three years later, Yoder published "A Non-Baptist View of Southern Baptists" in the seminary's journal, *Review and Expositor*. His critical analysis of Southern Baptists addressed the SBC at perhaps the golden age of its organizational vitality. Instead of mutually hostile "truth" and "liberty" parties engaged in a heated battle (to return to the terms adopted in the previous chapter), the SBC in 1970 maintained a relative internal peace presided over by moderate, bureaucratic statesmanship. As this close reading of Yoder's article moves to his specific challenges, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which Yoder's critiques and recommendations would be substantially repeated by the 1997 *Baptifesto*'s proposal for "Re-envisioning Baptist Identity."

Southern Baptists in Dixie: Goliath with a David Complex

In 1966, the SBC surpassed the United Methodist Church in membership to become the largest non-Catholic religious body in the United States.[126] In the post-World War II era, Southern Baptists were absorbing a good share of the Sunbelt's population boom and planting and growing churches in all regions of the country. Yet, as its name continued to make unmistakably clear, the SBC was indelibly linked to its southern

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[125]Yoder, "The Believers' Church Conferences in Historical Perspective" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65:1 (January 1991), 8.

[126]David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman, Introduction to *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*, Roozen and Nieman, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 28-29.

homeland, and the bulk of its numerical strength remained within the states of the former

Confederacy. A vast network of Southern Baptist institutions (colleges, hospitals, etc.)

dotted the southern landscape, and a professionally organized bureaucracy channeled

Southern Baptist energies toward the effective maintenance and expansion of this

structure. As the last chapter recounted, these Baptists had risen from their origins as a

persecuted minority of radical religious dissenters in seventeenth-century England to

become part of their region's *de facto* cultural and religious establishment.[127]

At a time when mainline Protestant denominations were beginning to recognize,

with anxiety, that their status as key shapers of America's cultural consensus was slipping

away, the SBC seemed a model of efficiency and growth.[128] Yet the traditional

Protestant establishment generally viewed Southern Baptists, as leading representatives

of their region, to be theologically provincial and socially backward. The SBC reinforced

this perception by refusing to participate in the global ecumenical conferences of the

twentieth century and, despite a few prominent examples to the contrary, Southern

Baptists were seen to have been on the wrong side of the civil rights movement.[129]

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[127]Since no legal establishment of religion has been possible in the United States since the early nineteenth century, some have called this phenomenon "functional establishment." See Darrell L. Guder et al., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 6. Yoder served as part of a theological resource team that assisted writers of this jointly-written publication of the North American *Gospel and Our Culture Network*. This ecumenical group shares many of the *Baptifesto's* concerns and emphasizes concrete practices that can enable North American churches to escape the habits and assumptions of "functional establishment."

[128]On the waning of mainline Protestantism, see the discussion of historian Sydney Ahlstrom's interpretation of this trend in Roozen and Nieman, 29. (Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), 1079.)

The mainline establishment descended from what Marsden called the "Protestant cultural establishment" of the nineteenth century (cf. *Religion and American Culture*, 96-98). Its influence waned after the fundamentalist-modernist controversies divided many of the historic protestant denominations, and as the discourse of "civil religion" became less and less explicitly Protestant or Christian.

[129]On the scattered network of socially progressive Southern Baptists who challenged the

"Success" can bring on an existential crisis for those accustomed to think of themselves as underdogs. Reflective Southern Baptists of the time might have wondered about several things. How does a movement that began by insisting upon the believing community's independence from established church and state powers (enduring persecution in the process) and whose structures, beliefs, and practices still somewhat reflect this heritage, become the establishment of another day? Is this cause for celebration or concern? Since the United States officially separates church and state, requiring all churches to rely upon their members' voluntary allegiance, had the world simply caught up with the pioneering Baptists, making it long past time for them to shed their prickly particularity and join the mainstream?

These are the kinds of questions Yoder attempted to answer when speaking to Southern Baptists in 1970. While some Southern Baptists saw their institutional success as a sign of divine favor, at least a few were willing to listen to constructive criticism from an outsider, as witnessed by the publication of Yoder's article. Mindful of his audience, Yoder sought to make clear that his remarks were not motivated by liberal condescension, Yankee elitism, or the kind of jealousy one might expect from the member of another "free church" tradition whose community did not enjoy Southern Baptists' numerical success.

What Kind of "Non-Baptist"?

Yoder began by describing the ways in which he believed mainline ecumenical Protestantism currently viewed Southern Baptists. In his account, this group (represented

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segregation system see Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent*, 48-81.

primarily by the leadership of such denominations as the Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians) hoped that Southern Baptists would "mature" by engaging with mainstream theology, toning down their self-assured rhetoric, and abandoning their traditional isolationism.[130] The easiest way to join the mainstream would be to join the National Council of Churches and participate in ecumenical conversations, something the SBC had refused to do, claiming that the Baptist commitment to the autonomy of each local congregation precluded the convention from taking such actions.

In the eyes of the mainstream, Yoder claimed, the SBC and the Roman Catholic Church represented the two largest "sectarian" Christian communions in the United States who retained enough self-confidence in their own traditions that neither felt any real inclination to rely on other groups to do their work.[131] According to Yoder, mainline Protestantism believed it was irresponsible, naïve, and dangerous for a religious community with as much social prominence as the SBC to retain the characteristics of a combative sect confident in its own possession of the truth. Like members of the *nouveau riche* seeking entrance into an established country club, the upwardly mobile SBC would need to refine its social graces in order to join the ranks of the intellectually responsible and culturally influential churches.

As evidence that some Southern Baptists felt the sting of such criticism from the mainstream and shared its conclusions, Yoder noted small trends within Southern Baptist life and thought signaling a move toward the mainline model, such as some Baptists

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[130]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View of Southern Baptists," 220.

[131]In his words, "both institutionally and psychologically, it has always been possible for Southern Baptists to continue to operate as if they were the one true church." Ibid, 219.

questioning the traditional insistence upon believers baptism.[132] In Yoder's view, such

sentiments did not reflect genuine Baptist self-criticism, but were simply signs of

insecurity among Baptists who have come to see the distinctive features of their churchly

heritage as signs of inferiority because they "grew up too close to it and then went to

school elsewhere."[133] For his part, Yoder rejected this mainline stance toward the SBC

for what he saw as its smug condescension. Such an approach, he claimed, "seeks to deal

with a body of Christian brethren and with their tradition as if they were simply a

deficient example of something else." It presupposes that "in order to deal responsibly

with the problem of inter-church relations, every group from the Baptists to the Catholics

must evolve into the kind of mainstream pluralist tolerance which is characteristic of the

American 'religious establishment.'"[134]

However, the deeper problem for Yoder was that the establishment's hopes for

Southern Baptists gave priority to a rather empty version of Christian unity over

substantive considerations of the church's mission such as the "renewal of disciplined

internal nurture, evangelism, and prophetic concern for social morality."[135] He asserted

that he did not want to see Southern Baptists become yet another mainstream

denomination because emulation of that model would create as many problems as it

proposed to solve. Yoder rejected the assumptions underlying a prominent criticism of

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[132]Ibid., 220, 225.

[133]Ibid., 221. In his own denominational context, Yoder would have been very familiar with a desire for "upward mobility" among young Mennonites exposed to the socially, culturally, and theologically "wider world" outside the primarily rural, ethnically homogenous Midwestern enclaves in which they were raised.

[134]Ibid., 220.

[135]Ibid.

Southern Baptists but, as will be seen, he did not thereby intend to validate the SBC's

aloofness from ecumenical conversation and seeming lack of concern for Christian unity.

Another likely direction from which a critique of Southern Baptists could be

launched was the standpoint of the other Bible Belt churches outside the mainline

establishment such as the Churches (and Disciples) of Christ, independent and landmark

Baptists, and various Holiness and Pentecostal congregations. These traditions for the

most part shared the SBC's local congregationalism and were fellow members of the

broader "free church" movement. Yoder's articulation of their viewpoint is worth

quoting in full, as it establishes basic concerns of his own:

> From the perspective of these groups, it is the Southern Baptists who represent in many a town the real establishment. That the Southern Baptists do not baptize infants does not itself free them from being the "quasi-Constantinian" official church as long as practically all children are baptized at a relatively young age, maintaining the identity of the church membership with the total population, which was the sociological meaning of establishment in the first place; and as long as most of the people, especially most of the powerful people, belong to this communion and find their powerful positions in society reinforced by that belonging. That the form and content of Baptist preaching is evangelistic does not in itself constitute Baptist churches as a missionary community, as long as the population to which that preaching is directed is a densely churched population. That the preacher is hard on sin does not itself make them a prophetic minority about moral issues as long as the sins he is hard on are not those with social respectability: as long as xenophobia and war, racial segregation and economic exploitation are not radically challenged.[136]

Despite the fact that these other "free church" communities largely shared Southern

Baptists' historic ecclesiology, the SBC's socio-cultural dominance in the South served to

magnify secondary differences between them, Yoder claimed. Thus, these groups define

themselves over against Southern Baptists (and vice-versa), emphasizing particular forms

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[136]Ibid., 220-221. This passage was cited and paraphrased in the last chapter (p. 36, n. 37).

of worship, modes of baptism, and spiritual traditions as essential facets of their
particular identity.[137]

While Yoder expressed a sense of solidarity with these low-church Protestant
outsiders within the SBC-dominated South, he argued that they, like Southern Baptists,
had missed the essence of the radical vision of church at the heart of their shared
traditions. Yoder insisted that the "radical reformation" or "believers' church" vision "is
a theologically sober and culturally relevant way for *all* Christians to understand their
mission as believing community in the modern world."[138]

Significantly, he did not claim to link this vision directly to any one historical
community or tradition. In his view, to isolate a particular tradition or historical moment
(other than the canonical primitive Christians) as normative would miss the point because
the mindset underlying the believers' church perspective emphasizes discontinuity
("repentance" and "rebirth") over continuity ("maturation" and "development") and
present faithfulness over historic descent. For Yoder, then, Baptists, Mennonites and
others may be genetically connected to radically countercultural Christian communities,
and their current terminology and practices may reflect this, but such *prima facie*
evidence does not make them a church in the Radical Reformation sense. (Conversely,
this would seem to imply that crucial elements of the Radical Reformation stance can

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[137]This seems to precisely what the preface to the *Baptifesto* had in mind when claiming that "for
too long Baptist theology has railed against Catholics, Anglicans, Campbellites, and Methodists, not to
mention liberals, fundamentalists, pedobaptists, holy rollers, or whoever are identified as the current 'bad
guys' in other churches or theological camps. But Baptist theology ought not to be against the church.
Baptist theology needs to be for the church and the gospel in a hostile world" ("Cover Letter" to *Re-
envisioning Baptist Identity*, see Chapter Two p. 20, n. 1).

[138]Ibid., 221 (italics in original).

also take shape within traditions historically antagonistic to the believers' churches.[139])

Thus, for Yoder, the question of whether twentieth-century Southern Baptists had

substantive historical ties to the classic separatist Anabaptist movements is diminished in

importance if the proper criteria for faithful Baptist (or Mennonite) identity have to do

with a certain theological vision for the church.

Having established the place from which he addressed Southern Baptists, Yoder

then began to offer his challenge. In his substantive criticisms, Yoder moved away from

more abstract considerations to critique particular Southern Baptist habits of belief and

practice. He consistently claimed that Southern Baptists have over-identified themselves

with particular cultural values and structures, blurring the distinction between their

Christian allegiances and their status as Americans and Southerners.

In an important turn of phrase, Yoder charged Southern Baptists with

provincialism. Unlike the SBC's critics in the Protestant mainline, however, he did not

fault Southern Baptists for stressing the particularity of Christian claims and convictions

in a diverse society. Rather, the real problem for Yoder was that the SBC's member

churches have adopted "provincialisms which put the distinctive identity of a Christian

body at the wrong place."[140] Theologically, one can perhaps reiterate Yoder's concern in

this way: when what is distinctive about one's particular religious identity is

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[139]Possible evidence for this claim can be found in James McClendon's *Systematic Theology*. McClendon presents the life of radical Catholic Dorothy Day as an example of "resurrection ethics" rooted in the "baptist vision"—his formulation of Yoder's "Radical Reformation" perspective (McClendon, *Ethics*, 279-299). Such examples are part of theologian Stanley Hauerwas's response to the criticism that the "church" he describes along with such thinkers as Yoder and McClendon is an abstraction that does not and cannot exist because it fails to correspond with any single existing community viewed as a whole (See "Reading McClendon Takes Practice: Lessons in the Craft of Theology" *Conrad Grebel Review* 15 (Fall 1997), 248-250).

[140]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View," 222.

domesticated within the assumptions of the surrounding culture, emphasis upon these now-largely-trivial matters becomes idolatry.

The Provincialism of the Southern Baptist 'Empire'

As the last chapter noted, Yoder saw "Constantinianism" as an extremely adaptable pattern able to take form in a variety of historical situations; even, ironically, in the context of official church-state separation. In his article, Yoder described the Constantinian mentality in terms of a certain mood and tone:

> [T]he Church is linked with the centers of power and prestige in a given society. She lays her moral claims upon the whole population with the "establishment" mentality reinforcing the call to personal decisions. The individual perceives the call which the Church addresses to him as a call to line up with things as they are; God and the established order are closely linked.[141]

Yoder hoped to convince Southern Baptists that uncritical identification with their surrounding culture led to subtle changes in emphasis that dramatically altered the substance of many original Baptist convictions and practices. Significantly, he claimed that the manner in which many Southern Baptists were currently practicing believers' baptism illustrated the process at work.

Baptism into the "World"

Yoder criticized Southern Baptists for gradually lowering the acceptable age for baptisms to the point at which many "cradle Baptists" are baptized as young (early elementary school-aged) children. In his view, what is important for baptism is not the age at when a child can have a meaningful spiritual experience, or grasp basic existential or theological notions. The crucial factor is discerning when a person is able to

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[141]Ibid.

understand and assume the responsibilities that come with membership in a community of discipleship. In his assessment, the difference between young children and infants is negligible "if what one is to be accountable for is a commitment of one's total future personality to the standards and the discipline of the Christian community and to costly obedience to Christ as Lord."[142] By this reasoning, the church's status as a fellowship committed to a new way of life with social implications is undermined when the baptism of young children weakens the connection between baptism and membership in a distinct community of mutual accountability.

Brian Haymes, a Baptist pastor in London, has raised similar concerns about the baptism of young children. He claimed that British Baptists are often puzzled by what appears to be a widespread tendency among their American cousins to baptize children as young as six years old: "[N]o English Baptist I know would doubt that a child can have a living relationship with God in Christ. As children, they are able to trust Christ for salvation. Hopefully . . . their childlike (not childish) faith may develop . . . ."[143] By contrast, Haymes compared baptism and church membership with marriage, noting that there are certain decisions children have traditionally never been allowed to make. He claimed that, while children who profess Christian faith are assured of salvation, "those who live in that salvation also serve Jesus Christ as Lord. They are disciples, followers, potentially martyrs . . . . the [baptismal] candidate is declaring that he or she is Christ's

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[142]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View," 222.

[143]Brian Haymes, "Baptism: A Question of Belief and Age?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27:1 (Spring 2000), 126.

and that this commitment is . . . for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health."[144]

Haymes' comparisons between British and American baptismal practices suggest the kind of cultural adaptation that would validate Yoder's claim (though, as Haymes acknowledged, this by no means excuses English Baptists from self-critical examination of their own provincial traditions). Elsewhere, Yoder offered this description of the ways in which the external trappings of radical traditions can be retained and celebrated while the substance of the community's distinctive vocation is eroded:

> Socially defensive child raising, cheaply persuasive evangelizing, a focus on guilt or fear and its relief rather than on God's sovereignty and glory, and negligence of moral catechesis before or after baptism have brought many of our churches to the point where the social impact of a person's baptism is that of a rite of passage deepening his or her rootage in the known world rather than launching him or her onto a new life possible only by grace.[145]

Yoder's remarks are taken from another article in which he discussed Baptists and ecumenism. He urged Baptists and other churches in the radical reformation to renew the substantive aspects of their historic protest against paedobaptism in ecumenical dialogue for the sake of the whole church's social and ethical integrity, but only in full recognition of the ways in which their current practice falls far short of the ideal.

In 1997, the *Baptifesto* shared Yoder's concern for the integrity of this signal Baptist practice. Believing that believers baptism is one of the practices that enable Baptist congregations to become a "community of shared response to God's mission, message, and renewal," the statement's co-authors made it known that they

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[144]Ibid., 127.

[145]Yoder, "Another 'Free Church' Perspective on Baptist Ecumenism," in *The Royal Priesthood*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Scottdale, Penn: Herald Press, 1998), 276.

. . . find it alarming that for many Christians the fact of their baptism into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is of little or no consequence to them. Our call for a believers church, however, is not a condescension to other traditions. It is first a summons to close off nominal Christianity in our own ranks. It is only second a gesture toward other traditions and communities to the end that they might make disciples of those whom they baptize. Insofar as we are faithful in our common witness to a believers church, we embody afresh the church to which God's call to mission is given (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:46-48; Jn 20:21; Acts 1:8).[146]

We find here a significant similarity between the *Baptifesto* and Yoder's "radical Catholicity." Like Yoder, the statement expresses a catholic desire for unity and opposition to unnecessary "provincialism" while stressing the distinctiveness of the community of discipleship. Therefore, if believers baptism is simply an empty identity-marker used to ratify a group's separateness, Baptists cannot legitimately challenge the practices of other traditions.

The *Baptifesto* dedicated one of its five articles to the "powerful signs" of baptism, preaching, and the "Lord's supper." Its description of baptism sought to counter interpretations of the practice as merely voluntary by insisting that baptism is a sign of participation in what God has already done and is doing. Thus, it continued, "we are reminded that our lives are not our own but have been bought with a price . . . by baptism we enter into a covenant of mutual accountability and discipleship with the community of the faithful (Mt 18:15-20)."[147] In critiquing many of his fellow Baptists' observance of believers baptism, Haymes conceded that many such Baptists are understandably motivated by an understandable desire to confirm and ensure the salvation of young children. But he also worried that some simply reject the church community's authority

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[146]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 306.

[147]"Re-envisioning Baptist identity," 307.

to make such determinations, a sentiment he attributed to the assumption that baptism is an entirely personal matter between an individual and God.[148] Haymes claimed that the idea of "absolute individual liberty" was foreign to Baptists at their best, yet he admitted that Baptists on both sides of the Atlantic have often been tempted to think, believe, and behave in such terms.[149]

The Provincialism of Rugged (Baptist) Individualism

According to German philosopher Georg Jellinek, "To recognize the true boundaries between the individual and the community is the highest problem that thoughtful consideration of human society has to solve."[150] One possible way to interpret the *Baptifesto* and its challenge to contemporary Baptist identity is to frame the debate in terms of this perennial question. The statement rejected Baptist theologian E.Y. Mullins's notion of "soul competency" and instead offered a call to "shared discipleship." As the last chapter noted, fellow Baptists have charged the *Baptifesto*'s authors with going too far in their "deemphasis on the role of the individual."[151]

In his article, Yoder emphasized the ways in which he believed Southern Baptists had adopted American forms of individualism: the frontier mentality of dogged self-reliance and the revivalist tradition's emphasis on "psychological mechanisms of

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[148]Ibid., 127-128.

[149]Ibid.

[150]Georg Jellinek, "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens." Cited in Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 23.

[151]Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," 323.

conversion."[152] He claimed that the American tradition of religious awakenings associated with such figures as Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley was a movement within "Christendom" that presupposed infant baptism. Because a "churched" society was assumed, he argued, the revivals "naturally led to a concentration of thought and concern upon just what it is that happens in the personality when repentance or regeneration or sanctification takes place, rather than giving attention to the visible expressions of the faith in ethics, community, and history."[153]

Throughout his writings Yoder showed little interest in establishing a system of first principles that would ground his arguments and from which he could enter into dialogue. He preferred instead to let particular contexts, interlocutors, and, above all, readings of the biblical text determine his terms and method of engagement. Therefore, although most of his work was focused on contested questions of social ethics, he did not offer highly theoretical accounts of the ontological or theological status of the "individual" or "community." As Yoder argued in his 1970 article, "conversion in the New Testament is profoundly personal; but seldom is it most centrally perceived as individual, and never is there analysis (or manipulation) of, or argument about the psychological mechanisms of conversion as a sequence of inner awareness."[154]

Yoder blamed the dichotomy in so much contemporary religious discourse between free individuals and constraining communities on the "sociology of establishment" that brings assumptions that tinge all communal aspects of belief with a

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[152]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View," 223.

[153]Ibid.

[154]Ibid.

sense of external imposition. In such an environment, he claimed, "the only social form that comes to mind with which to critique [the establishment] is the lonely rebel."[155] Yet he saw this as an absolutely untenable option. For Yoder, "the alternative to arbitrary individualism is not established authority but an authority in which the individual participates and to which he or she consents. The alternative to authoritarianism is not anarchy but freedom of confession."[156]

For its moderate Baptist critics in the "liberty party," the *Baptifesto*'s most controversial statements came in its advocacy of "bible study in reading communities" and its insistence that no method or position could give a solitary individual a "right" to private interpretation. The *Baptifesto* provided only a sketch of its understanding of how "reading communities" would read scripture and exercise communal discernment and discipline:

> Because all Christians are graciously gifted everyone has something to bring to the conversation, but because some members are specifically called "to equip the saints" everyone has something to learn from those with equipping gifts (Eph 4:7-16). We thus affirm 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).[157]

Critics of the statement have linked the figures it describes as having "equipping gifts" to the "spiritual masters" Stanley Hauerwas argued are necessary to teach the church how to read scripture properly. Even further, the same critics associate these interpretive guides

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[155]Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 24.

[156]Ibid.

[157]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 304-305.

or authorities with the priests, prelates, and princes who persecuted the earliest Baptists and Anabaptists.

Yoder did not speak directly to issues of biblical interpretation and authority in his article. In other writings, however, he made clear that the vision of the church he saw embodied paradigmatically by the Anabaptists has embedded within it processes for moral discernment by the community in which scripture stands at the center.[158] In an extended discussion of how this process he saw outlined in the New Testament itself would work, Yoder claimed that a number of diverse "agents" would guide the community. These various and dispersed authorities are to provide the community with "direction," "memory," "linguistic self-consciousness," "order," and "due process." It seems extremely likely that the *Baptifesto*'s reference to the shared leadership role of those in the community with "equipping gifts" had something very much like Yoder's "hermeneutics of peoplehood" in mind.[159]

In arguing that Southern Baptists have adopted a form of conversionistic spirituality alien to their earliest heritage, Yoder did not seek to criticize directly such figures as Edwards and Wesley for their efforts to help reinvigorate the largely moribund state of eighteenth-century Anglo-American Christianity. He merely sought to show Southern Baptists that revival traditions of modern evangelicalism did not emerge from within the classic Baptist understanding of the disestablished church. It would follow,

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[158]Yoder, "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *The Priestly Kingdom,* 15-45.

[159]Elsewhere, Yoder calls the practice of communal discernment, "The Rule of Paul," citing the discussion in 1 Corinthians 14. See Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Believing Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale, Penn: Herald Press, 2001). Quite possibly, the co-authors of the *Baptifesto* would give Tradition more explicit deference than Yoder. I am convinced careful analysis would show the differences between them to be negligible compared to that between the *Baptifesto* and the hermeneutical strategies it explicitly rejected.

then, that he believed Baptists can leave them behind while remaining authentically

"Baptist."

A prominent view within the sociology of American religion sees the combination

of revivalist piety and Baptist free-church ecclesiology to have been a mixture perfectly

suited for success within the religious marketplace created by America's separation of

church and state.[160] When churches "compete" for members, denominations can be seen

as brand names that merely package the product "religion" in particular ways. Yoder

urged Southern Baptists to realize that to accept this characterization would be the

epitome of provincialism.

Divided and Conquered

Yoder rejected what he saw as the American mainline establishment's tendency to

view Christian denominational differences analogously (as brand names), yet he believed

that "one can hardly hold it against mainstream ecumenists that they understand Southern

Baptist congregationalism as a cloak for self-righteous provincialism."[161] Yoder did not

criticize Baptists' emphasis on the "priority" of the local congregation, but lamented that

this conviction had often become an affirmation of the local fellowship's "exclusive"

right to consider itself "the church."[162]

In practice, this meant that Southern Baptists' response to modern efforts to

reconcile divided Christian traditions had been largely negative. In 1940, the SBC

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[160]Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America*, 1776-1990: *Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

[161]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View," 224.

[162]Ibid., 223.

declared that Baptists' commitment to voluntary cooperation meant that the SBC could

not commit Southern Baptists to any formal ecumenical relationships, such as

membership in the World Council of Churches. Yoder urged his readers to see that while

the pronouncement was a valid application of legitimate Baptist commitments, the

convictions it cited did not preclude SBC churches and their broader units of association

from finding creative ways to engage in ecumenical conversations and joint mission

efforts.[163]

Again, Yoder maintained that the faithful Christian community should always be

distinct within its host society, but this distinctiveness belongs to all Christians who claim

Christ as Lord and must not be located in one's particular denominational label. Without

such a genuinely catholic perspective, he believed, the local emphasis of Baptist

ecclesiology "risks giving the impression that meeting in one place is sufficient for the

local congregation to be accredited as church, even if what goes on there is too

mechanical or too massive or too routine to be genuinely recognizable as a community of

believers."[164] The *Baptifesto* reflected Yoder's concern for disciplined catholicity when

it affirmed "a free common life in Christ in gathered, reforming communities rather than

withdrawn, self-chosen, or authoritarian ones."[165]

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[163]Ibid.

[164]Yoder, 224. Yoder himself modeled this commitment to both ecumenical engagement and radical distinctiveness. In the latter part of his scholarly career as professor of social ethics at Notre Dame, he dialogued with Catholics and others about the just war tradition (on a campus with an ROTC chapter) while steadfastly maintaining his commitment to "Christological" pacifism.

[165]"Re-envisioning Baptist identity," 306.

Turning for a moment to the more general criticisms of religion in modern life,

we hear remarkably similar sentiments from prominent twentieth-century philosopher-

theologian Martin Buber with regard to his own Jewish community. According to Buber,

> Not one of the [modern, Western] nations perceived the great task of liberating and
> accepting the Jewish community as a community *sui generis,* and not a single Jew
> from out of his age-old awareness thought to exert such a claim upon the unaware
> nations. Jewry disintegrated into small particles to comply with the nations'
> demand.[166]

In short, Buber claimed, "Israel lost its reality by becoming a 'confession.'" Both Yoder

and, decades later, the *Baptifesto*, pleaded with Baptists not to confuse their convictions

about the autonomy of the local church with docile acceptance of a dispersed religious

community whose fragmentation serves interests other than the gospel.

Following this line of thought, many cultural critics have argued that

contemporary nation-states are willing to permit and protect a diversity of faiths so long

as the particular expressions of generic "religion" remain domesticated and essentially

private. This is unacceptable to all who, like Buber, believe that "just as God's cry of

creation does not call to the soul, but to the wholeness of things, as revelation does not

empower and require the soul, but all of the human being—so it is not the soul, but the

whole of the world, which is meant to be redeemed in the redemption."[167] In this view,

the most basic problem with modern secularity is the pressure to narrow holistic and

universal religious visions of life to an exclusive focus on the individual human soul and

its spiritual contentment. For Yoder, the only way to retain this robust view of the

Christian gospel and the church's vocation without resorting to "Constantinian" fusing of

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[166]Martin Buber, "The Jew in the World," in *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1997), 171.

[167]Martin Buber, "The Faith of Judaism," in ibid, 27.

church and state is to take up the stance of the alternative community that does not make "separateness" an end in itself, but does accept the contingent social status of the minority as a very likely possibility.

Provincial Spirituality and "Neo-neo-Constantinianism"

What seems radical, countercultural, or sectarian in one context becomes conformist, mainstream, or irrelevant when seen from another cultural, historical, and theological perspective. "Separation from a sinful world" can inspire Anabaptists to form minority communities persecuted for their refusal to bear arms in the local ruler's service, or it can evoke otherworldly detachment from human suffering. Yoder argued that the SBC too often retained a sense of separateness from Southern society only by stressing the church's "spirituality." According to this view, the church's duty is to save (and hopefully reform) individual souls; questions of social ethics do not concern the church as church.

Theologian Charles Marsh illustrated the effects of this attitude in his examination of the life and thought of SBC pastor and denominational statesman Douglas Hudgins during the turbulent years of the Civil Rights movement.[168] Hudgins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Jackson Mississippi, preached to his church and television audience that it was "time to shift the emphasis from the material to the spiritual,"[169] and Marsh recounts an important episode that illuminates what Hudgins intended by this exhortation. When the 1954 Southern Baptist Convention voted to endorse a report supporting the

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[168]Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), chap. 7.

[169]Ibid., 90.

Supreme Court's landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* school desegregation decision, Hudgins explained his dissenting vote by insisting that the court's ruling was "a purely civic matter" and thus "not appropriate nor necessary before a religious body."[170]

Marsh presents Hudgins as a preeminent "theologian of the closed society" who articulated the theological justification for mainstream white churches in the South to remain indifferent to the social dimensions of black disenfranchisement and suffering. Marsh located the heart of Hudgins's logic in a "certain deracinated piety" in which the biblical story and the language of God, Jesus, sin, and salvation seemed to reside on a different existential plane than that of race, class, economics, and politics.[171] Significantly, as he sought to excavate the theological roots of this mindset, Marsh pointed to Hudgins's appropriation of the theology of Baptist theologian E.Y. Mullins, particularly Mullins's notion of "soul competency."[172]

Yoder claimed that the kind of emphasis on the church's "spirituality" displayed by Hudgins was much closer to classic Lutheranism than traditional Baptist convictions. With the horrors of Hitler and Holocaust still in recent memory, to be identified with a "Lutheran" social ethic was a serious charge. In the eyes of many, Southern Baptists had earned this notorious comparison along with the vast majority of white, southern Christianity. As Marsh notes, *The Christian Century*, Mainline Protestantism's flagship

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[170]Ibid., 100.

[171]Ibid., 88.

[172]Ibid., "The Piety of the Pure Soul," 106-112. Marsh presents a powerful argument that the language of "soul competency" is so ethereal and vague that unexamined cultural assumptions and customs inevitably, though unselfconsciously, provide the de-historicized "soul" with its shape and substance. To my knowledge, no Baptist has challenged Marsh's powerful critique of Hudgins's theology and its implicit criticism of the coherence of Mullins's formulation.

magazine, compared radical civil rights pastor-activist Ed King to German pastor Martin Niemoller, one of the few courageous examples of German Christian resistance to Hitler.[173]

It was not too difficult for non-Southerners like Yoder and the writer of the *Christian Century* article to see and denounce the provincialism of southern Christianity and its support of, or at least acquiescence in, the patent injustice of its region. But were Southern churches the only ones guilty of engaging in uncritical culture-religion? What about the less overt racism of "white flight" which accelerated the creation of impoverished urban ghettos? Did the threat of nuclear holocaust require American Christians to accept and obey the dictates of Machiavellian statecraft justified by appeals to national security?

Yoder made clear that nationalism was simply another form of provincialism seen from the perspective of a church whose lord claims universal authority. He warned that Christians, and especially Baptists, easily come to understand separation of church and state "as only an internal division of labor within a Christendom culture."[174] The temptation to view church and state as amiable partners becomes particularly strong when "Christian principles" are identified almost exclusively with a particular form of government and social order (e.g. American democracy, capitalism, and political liberalism).

The centrality of Yoder's concept of "Constantinianism" to his distinctive stance has been noted more than once. In a key essay, "The Constantinian Sources of Western

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[173]Ibid., 131.

[174]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View," 224.

Social Ethics," Yoder focused attention directly upon the ways in which he believed

major assumptions within Western social ethics have been impacted by "the deep shift in

the relation of church and world for which Constantine soon became the symbol."[175] In

his most succinct articulation of this shift, using the fourth-century legalization and

eventual establishment of Christianity as his paradigm, Yoder described the phenomenon

in terms of its impact on the understanding of the church and its character, as well as the

relationship between history and divine providence.

> Before Constantine, one knew as a fact of everyday experience that there was a
> believing Christian community but one had to "take it on faith" that God was
> governing history. After Constantine, one had to believe without seeing that there
> was a community of believers, within the larger nominally Christian mass, but one
> knew for a fact that God was in control of history.[176]

In the same essay, Yoder employed a series of inelegant neologisms to describe the

adaptation of the Constantinian mindset to different historical and social circumstances.

As the ideal of "Christendom" gave way in the sixteenth century to a multitude of

religious establishments in various principalities, Yoder saw the rise of what he called

"neo-Constantinianism"—a state of affairs in which the same dynamics played out, but

on a smaller scale (this time, he claimed, the Constantinian mindset fostered a more

provincial nationalism, making it much more acceptable for Christians to kill each other

out of patriotic duty).

Yoder enumerated various stages of the process, leading all the way to "neo-neo-

neo-neo-Constantinianism." In his analysis of Southern Baptist life, the relevant category

is what Yoder called "neo-neo-Constantinianism" which arose after the Enlightenment

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[175]Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 135.

[176]Ibid., 137.

and the various modern revolutions. Although church and state have become formally

and institutionally separate in most modern nations, he claimed, "moral identification of

church and state remains."[177]

Provincial Theology

In his final challenge, Yoder warned Southern Baptists to avoid the provincialism

of the reactionary "quasi-creedalism" he believed characteristic of American

fundamentalism. Yoder identified himself with the "evangelical" groups who opposed

the forces of modernism in the early twentieth century, but he lamented what he believed

were the wooden and reductionistic ways in which the "fundamentals" of the faith came

to be defined and defended.[178] This last warning would now certainly seem prophetic to

many Baptists. As the previous chapter described, not long after Yoder wrote his article,

the SBC was torn by a Baptist civil war with one side defining the conflict in terms

drawn directly from the earlier fundamentalist-modernist battles in northern mainline

denominations.

Conclusion: An Anabaptist Tract for the Times?

After concluding his litany of Southern Baptist shortcomings, Yoder admitted that

his criticisms might seem to validate the view (held especially by the protestant mainline

and establishment-minded ecumenists) that the SBC's problems stemmed from its

peculiar Baptist commitments. Yet he reassured his readers that he wanted nothing other

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[177]Ibid., 142.

[178]Ibid., 225.

than for Baptists to be "Baptist." The challenge, in his view, was to emphasize one's

particular denominational identity for the sake of self-criticism while avoiding the kind of

"naïve oversimplification" that screens one's own shortcomings out of the picture and

turns the perception of others into caricatures.[179]

In other words, Yoder rejected the view that Southern Baptists must mute the

specificity of their witness to be intellectually mature and socially responsible Christians

in a pluralistic United States. At the same time, he urged Baptists to emulate mainline

Protestantism's desire for the reconciliation of the church. Believing that complacent

denominationalism dulls prophetic religion by slicing potentially subversive religious

convictions and communities into smaller and less threatening segments, Yoder hoped

that Southern Baptists would adopt "a theological commitment to the acceptance of

conversation with other Christians as one of the ways any group's identity must be

affirmed and tested."[180] He believed Baptists and other free-church Christians must not

excuse themselves from contemporary ecumenical conversations because they may be

able to offer crucial insights to the Church in a time when it has become clear to nearly

all that top-down reunification strategies will not succeed.

Yoder's prophetic challenge to Baptists articulated a vision for the church in

America that exists as a distinct community providing an alternative to the status quo. In

a society marked by divisive identity politics and increasingly segmented into "lifestyle

enclaves," such a community refuses to become a "church" inscribed within ethnic,

racial, political, or arbitrary confessional and organizational boundaries. In a cultural and

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[179]Ibid.

[180]Ibid., 226.

religious milieu that emphasizes the centrality of the individual, such a church insists that the economic, political, and social character of the Christian community in its internal and external relations is at the heart of its evangelistic witness to the world. For Yoder, Baptists, and all segments of American Christianity, need conversation with the wider church to discern the difference between costly stands required by Christian discipleship and the kinds of provincial distinctiveness that cause needless division and dangerous pretension. He also believed that American Christianity also needed this kind of ecumenical solidarity in mission to make its existence as a countercultural community seem both viable and socially significant.

In his 1970 critique of Southern Baptists, Yoder urged his fellow free-church Protestants to find inspiration in their heritage for a way of being church in America that placed its distinctive identity in being the kind of reconciling community to which all Christians are called. The 1997 *Baptifesto* shared Yoder's concerns and his positive vision for the church. In an insightful and clever quip, Baptist theologian Fisher Humphries called the *Baptifesto*, an "Anabaptist 'Tract for the Times.'"[181] This description combines a nod to the Anabaptist elements within the statement with a reference to the publications of the Oxford movement within the nineteenth-century Church of England that called for a renewal of a strongly catholic theological identity within the Anglican Communion.

Humphreys' pithy portrayal of the *Baptifesto* could be seen as an attempt to identify the statement with two communities and stances from whom many Southern

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[181]Fisher Humphreys, "How Shall We Re-envision Baptist Identity?" Unpublished paper delivered to the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, St. Louis, Missouri, 1998.

Baptists would have wanted to disassociate themselves: the strange separateness of radical Anabaptist movements (recall Yoder's list of frustrations with his own heritage) and the elitist and authoritarian tendencies of "high church" traditions. From another perspective, however, this same description could be seen as recognition of the *Baptifesto*'s congruence with Yoder's "radical catholicity" that combines elements usually kept separate, if not in opposition.

The *Baptifesto* can fairly be described in terms more or less congruent with the social and ethical stance Yoder saw exemplified by the sixteenth century Anabaptists and which he believed was also at the heart of the historic Baptist impulse. This would seem to provide an important new angle on the issues at stake in the *Baptifesto*'s proposal for a "re-envisioned Baptist identity." Like Ochs, the *Baptifesto* recognized in Yoder's radically catholic vision for the church in the world a promising way for Baptists to be a "biblical religion after." As the next chapter shows, the *Baptifesto* hoped to find a way to be authentically Christian and genuinely Baptist "after" the linking of Baptist identity with a particular stream of social, political, and intellectual history.

CHAPTER FOUR

'Baptistification' and Its Discontents

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

—*Alexis de Tocqueville (1835)*[182]

In 1970, Yoder hoped Southern Baptists would conclude along with him that the

biblical understanding of the church's separation from the world and its ways was not

narrow, narcissistic, or elitist but was, rather, "a commitment to a cosmopolitan view of

humanity, a missionary reconciling concern reaching far beyond race and nation, and a

special readiness to pass judgment upon the shortcomings and sins of one's nation and

culture."[183] This sounds like an impossible ideal to many. As missionary-theologian

Lesslie Newbigin has noted, such attempts to criticize the culture in which one lives are

often dismissed for being as delusional as "pretending to move a bus when you are sitting

in it."[184]

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[182]*Democracy in America* Vol. I, Part II, Chap. 9. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 275.

[183]Yoder, "A Non-Baptist View," 224.

[184]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 191. Newbigin referred to, but did not cite, a review of one of his earlier books published in the journal *Theology*.

The material debating the merits and shortcomings of the kind of position Yoder represented is voluminous and complex, but most criticisms portray this stance as advocating an unrealistic and irresponsible withdrawal from, and rejection of, the political and social challenges of a religiously diverse world. A frequently voiced worry is that churches influenced by such approaches will restrict their moral vision to a particular community, its particular story and language, and its idiosyncratic norms. Instead of cosmopolitan, as Yoder claimed, critics consider his stance to be thoroughly provincial, motivated by sectarian concern for the internal purity of one's group above all else.[185]

In light of the substantial similarities between the *Baptifesto* and Yoder's radically catholic challenge to Southern Baptists, the next two chapters will seek to demonstrate that key issues at the core of the dispute between the statement's supporters and their fellow Baptist critics have to do with what H. Richard Niebuhr called "the enduring problem" of the relationship between "Christ and Culture," the title of his 1951 work that became a standard text in mainstream American theological curricula during the second half of the twentieth century.

One of the basic questions the *Baptifesto* attempted to raise among late twentieth-century Baptists concerned the social and ethical dimensions of the Christian community and its relation to all external institutions, mores, and social configurations. Because of this, Yoder's attempts to clarify and defend his stance against charges of irresponsible or otherworldly "sectarianism" (often originating, in his view, from a particular and

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[185]While not directed at Yoder in this instance, this is the force of Stout's critique of Hauerwas, cited in the introduction. See also Hauerwas, "Will the Real Sectarian Please Stand Up?" *Theology Today* 44:1 (April 1997): 87-94.

pervasive reading of *Christ and Culture*) are particularly instructive for understanding the issues at stake, and they highlight what may be the most basic source of mainstream Baptist opposition to the *Baptifesto*'s proposed "re-envisioning." (To my knowledge, this is also a dimension that has received little attention in the intramural Baptist debate over the statement.)

This chapter will revisit the contested matter of Baptist identity, paying particular attention to the ways in which the *Baptifesto*, and various related writings by its co-authors, engaged prominent accounts of Baptists' origins, development, and relationship to other Christian traditions (and catholic Christianity as a whole). The significance of the *Baptifesto*'s alternative rendering of Baptist history and identity will emerge after being set alongside three prominent interpretations of Baptists' public significance that describe Baptists as those who have come to epitomize a particular type of religiosity most successfully adapted to American culture.

Chapter Five will describe the ways in which the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors have retold the Baptist story, and will show that a major obstacle to acceptance of the *Baptifesto*'s alternative for Baptist self-understanding can be found in the ways many Baptists have defined themselves over against their ecclesiological cousins with origins in the sixteenth-century radical reformation. In the words of Foy Valentine, longtime head of the Christian Life Commission of the SBC (the convention's agency for social and ethical concerns), "We [Baptists] have never been Anabaptists."[186] As will be seen, his claim was historical, but its thrust was ethical and social, stressing Baptists'

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[186]Oral Memoirs of Foy Dan Valentine (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Institute for Oral History), 199.

willingness to get involved in public affairs and influence society for the good by

working with and through official structures (and implying that Anabaptists have been

unwilling to do so).

The present discussion will be framed by a description of Yoder's address to the

inaugural conference on the "Concept of the Believers Church," in which he told his

audience that the Christian community's primary role in the wider society is to be "A

People in the World." I hope to demonstrate the extent to which Baptists came not only

to support, but to *identify with* what Tocqueville called the American accord between

politics and religion in such a way that the statement's call for a visible and communal

Baptist witness in society would inevitably be perceived as a hostile threat to Baptist

identity.

<center>*"A People in the World"*</center>

In his 1967 presentation at the believers' church conference in Louisville, Yoder

cited historian Roland H. Bainton's remark that the earliest Anabaptists represented "an

amazingly clear-cut and heroic anticipation of what with us has come to be axiomatic."[187]

Similar statements have been made on behalf of all the "free churches" which link such

elements as the separation of church and state, the broad extension of religious liberty,

and the rise of a voluntaristic ethos in religion to these traditions with connections to the

radical reformation. In such accounts, the Anabaptists, early Baptists, and others who

denied the legitimacy of all official attempts to establish "Christendom" were simply

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[187]Roland H. Bainton, "The Anabaptist Contribution to History" in Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender* (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1957): 318. Cited in Yoder, "A People in the World" in *The Royal Priesthood*, 67.

ahead of their time. As Chapter Two noted, many Baptists in America have claimed,

with particular pride, to have been in the vanguard as these elements became features of

modern nation-states, with the United States—site of Baptists' greatest public

influence—leading the way.

While acknowledging a degree of indisputable historical accuracy in statements

like Bainton's, Yoder believed it was a crucial theological error for members of the

"radical reformation," "free church," or "believers' church" traditions (each set of terms

has its descriptive weaknesses) to claim victory or vindication based on the modern

West's embrace of church-state separation and other correlative practices. This would be

a grievous mistake, in his view, because he considered it a dangerous temptation to

assume that "the course of history and the structures of society are the most significant

measures of whether people are doing the will of God."[188]

In other words, Yoder rejected congratulatory accounts of the believers' churches

that describe their vocation in the world in terms of a particular pattern of socio-political

development presumed to be the workings of divine providence. He urged the

representatives of these various traditions to see their role in shaping the dominant social

forms of modern religion as merely a secondary effect of their basic concern with the

character and content of socially-embodied Christian existence within the church.[189] For

Yoder, the "otherness" of the church was crucial for theological reasons, because, in his

rearrangement of Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, the church's gospel "message" is

inextricable from the "medium" of its existence as a "new social wholeness" brought

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[188]Ibid., 82.

[189]Ibid., 67.

about by God's initiative.[190] Thus, for Yoder, the church's struggle to avoid becoming

captive to or confused with "the world" and its powers is not ultimately a matter of

specific social arrangements or the widespread acceptance of certain ideas congenial to

Christian convictions.

The *Baptifesto* shared Yoder's concern for placing a renewed and "re-envisioned"

conception of discipleship and community at the center of any conception of (in this case)

Baptist identity. Like Yoder, the statement's co-authors also called North American

Baptists away from over-identification with ideologies and structures that, in their view,

distract[191] the church from its calling to be a social entity with a specific and intrinsic

character. It was earlier noted that an unpublished preface to the *Baptifesto* concluded

with a plea for Baptist theological identity that is "for the gospel and the church in a

hostile world."[192] Leading up to this statement with clear "sectarian" overtones was a

lament over a perceived tendency toward negative definition within Baptist theology.

The *Baptifesto* charged most of contemporary Baptist theology with having an

encyclopedic account of what and who Baptist churches cannot and should not be, but

precious few constructive proposals.

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[190]"The church is then not simply the bearer of the message of reconciliation, in the way a newspaper or a telephone company can bear any message with which it is entrusted. Nor is the church simply the result of a message, as an alumni association is the product of a school or the crowd in the theater is the product of the reputation of the film. That men and women are called together to a new social wholeness is itself the work of God, which gives meaning to history, from which both personal conversion (whereby individuals are called into this meaning) and missionary instrumentalities are derived." Ibid., 73-74.

[191]In both the colloquial sense of "to draw attention away" and the etymological sense of "to pull apart."

[192]"Cover letter" to "Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," (see p. 20, n. 1).

To show how contemporary Baptist identity became detached from such ecclesiological concerns, an analysis of the most influential twentieth-century theological attempt at Baptist self-definition, E.Y. Mullins's *Axioms of Religion*, will be preceded and followed by discussions of important non-Baptist interpretations of Baptists' significance in shaping the dominant character of religion in the United States. While Chapter Two raised some of the same issues in its introduction of the *Baptifesto* and its concerns, they are treated here in more detail. Moreover, the primary critical sources placed in dialogue with these versions of Baptist identity are various articles written by *Baptifesto* co-authors that press the statement's historical and theological claims further in ways that highlight the concerns about Baptists' ecclesial identity in relationship to the wider (in this case, American) society.

"Baptistification Takes Over"

In 1980, church historian Martin Marty coined the term "baptistification" to refer to the steadily increasing dominance of a religious style that emphasizes individual decision, leads to an adult initiation into the faith, and results in a strong sense of personal religious identity rooted in these experiences.[193] Marty, a Lutheran, noted that these elements were making deep inroads into older Christian traditions. He acknowledged that the individualistic and experiential "baptist" style seems to have successfully captured the modern *zeitgeist*, causing traditional and more communally-oriented

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[193]Martin E. Marty, "Baptistification Takes Over," *Christianity Today* 27, Sept. 2, 1983, 33-36. This was only a few years after Americans elected a self-proclaimed "born-again" president in (Southern Baptist) Jimmy Carter and *Newsweek* magazine declared 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical."

Christian traditions to wonder if they must get with the baptistification program or become extinct.

The SBC's impressive numerical growth and the concurrent decline of traditional mainline denominations in the mid-to-late twentieth century provided some evidence for Marty's claim, although his deeper point was that one could be a "baptistifed" member of any denomination or theological tradition, provided one's church membership and religious identity was understood in these voluntaristic and individualistic terms. Marty expressed confidence that the more corporate and tradition-oriented expressions of Christianity would not completely disappear and he warned "baptists" to heed the lesson, now being learned by those mainline and catholic traditions whose fortunes were now waning, that numerical success and Christian integrity do not necessarily correlate.

In *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, which served as a foil of sorts for the *Baptifesto*, Walter Shurden acknowledged Marty's report on "baptistification" with approval. For Shurden, Marty accurately located the heart of the Baptist style, posture, and attitude in matters of faith with penetrating insight. This fundamental Baptist ethos or inner logic, according to Shurden, is marked by the principles or values of *freedom*, *choice*, and *voluntarism* and is animated by the spirit of "FREEDOM."[194]

Chapter Two showed the ways in which the *Baptifesto* challenged this understanding of freedom in the context of Baptist life. The statement argued, in essence, that Baptists in recent centuries had come to understand the divinely-granted freedom of Christians—which, in its most authentic form, it claimed, is inseparable from "faithfulness" and "community"--in terms closer to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of

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[194]Shurden, The Baptist Identity, 2.

happiness." The *Baptifesto* and its co-authors disputed that Marty's notion of "baptistification" captures the heart of what Baptists have always been, can, or should be. Nevertheless, claimed *Baptifesto* co-author Curtis Freeman, Marty "is correct . . . insofar as Baptists came to adopt most visibly the full and complete democratization of Christianity in North America."[195]

Christopher L. Canipe gave Freeman's thesis historical testing in his examination of the life and thought of three leading Baptists of the early twentieth century. His dissertation, *A Captive Church in the Land of the Free: E.Y. Mullins, Walter Rauschenbusch, George Truett and the Rise of 'Baptist Democracy', 1900-1925*[196] chronicled the ways in which these men, in their roles as theologians, civic leaders, and denominational statesmen, linked Baptist ideals and the best aspirations of American democracy in a compelling and hopeful vision of progress. (This was, after all, the age of the emerging "American Century" and the "War to Make the World Safe for Democracy"). While there is no need to retrace the same ground Canipe has already covered with many of the same questions in view, I want to show how a particular component of 'Baptist democracy' articulated Baptist theological identity in such a way that it would be exceedingly difficult to speak of any distinct Baptist (or Christian) "peoplehood."

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[195]Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned," 292.

[196]Baylor University, 2004.

Soul Competency and "Our Progressive Life and Civilization"

Edgar Young Mullins (1860-1928) served as president of The Southern Baptist

Theological Seminary from 1899 until his death. He ascended to the position in an

atmosphere of controversy, and was entrusted with the task of leading both the seminary

and the denomination[197] through a turbulent era in American Protestantism that saw the

fracturing of several northern mainline denominations as a result of the fundamentalist-

modernist controversies. Mullins's predecessor at Southern Seminary, William H.

Whitsitt, had been removed from his post after it was revealed that he had written a series

of anonymous articles arguing that there had been no Baptists practicing believers

baptism by immersion until the seventeenth century. Whitsitt's conclusions angered the

scores of Baptists influenced by the "Landmark" movement, which sought to secure

Baptist uniqueness and superiority by positing its own version of apostolic

succession—an unbroken chain of "Baptist" churches that essentially stretched back to

the biblical John ("the Baptist"), cousin of Jesus.[198]

As *Baptifesto* co-author Phillip Thompson has noted, Mullins attempted the

difficult task of articulating an account of Baptist identity that neither challenged the

Landmarkists head-on nor validated their eccentric theories of Baptist uniqueness and

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[197]Mullins served as president of the SBC (1921-1924) and served an annual term as president of the Baptist World Alliance in 1928. He was instrumental in the development of the first Baptist Faith & Message doctrinal statement for Southern Baptists, which was adopted in 1925.

[198]The classic Landmark Baptist text was James Milton Carroll's "Trail of Blood." It has recently been reprinted in *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*, Curtis Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva, eds. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 233-240. See also Rosalie Beck, *The Whitsitt Controversy: A Denomination in Crisis* (Ph.D. thesis, Baylor Univ., 1984).

amateurish (yet highly popular) historiography.[199] Mullins's way of telling the Baptist

story largely parallels the claims George W. Truett advanced in his 1927 speech from the

nation's capital.[200] In *The Axioms of Religion*, Mullins claimed that "the doctrine of the

soul's competency in religion under God is the distinctive historical significance of the

Baptists."[201]

As Mullins explained it, this signal Baptist idea "excludes at once all human

interference, such as episcopacy and infant baptism, and every form of religion by proxy"

because "religion is a personal matter between the soul and God."[202] To contrast

Baptists' distinctive insight with their ecclesiological rivals, Mullins attempted to show

how the ecclesiastical structure and each element of the Roman Catholic sacramental

system assumed the individual soul's *incompetence*.[203] Mullins believed Catholicism

simply contradicted soul competency, and he claimed that the magisterial Protestant

traditions were only slightly better in this regard since their use of creeds and practice of

infant baptism stifled its potency.

For Mullins, "soul competency" was the key to understanding what makes

Baptists *Baptist*, and it also provided the internal logic underlying the art, science, and

politics that constituted the best of "our progressive life and civilization."[204] At the heart

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[199]Phillip E. Thompson, "A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking a Catholic Spirit Among Early Baptists," *Pro Ecclesia* VIII:I (Winter 1999), 55.

[200]See Chapter Two, 25-26.

[201]Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908), 53.

[202]Ibid., 54.

[203]Ibid., 60.

[204]Ibid., 65.

of all legitimate modern progress, he argued, lies this principle Baptists have seen and

seized more clearly and firmly than all other confessions. According to Mullins, the

social and cultural conditions were providentially ripe for this signal Baptist conviction to

gain a wider hearing, extending outward from the United States because "America is the

arena which God has supplied for the free and full play of the principle [of soul

competency], and from here it is destined to spread until it covers the earth."[205] The dark

days of "religion by proxy" were gradually giving way.

Because Mullins's public roles required a great deal of moderate statesmanship,

his positions were almost always carefully stated and delicately balanced. By "soul

competency," Mullins did not intend to set forth any radical assertion of individual

autonomy (it is a competency "under God") nor an empty libertinism without normative

content.[206] He emphasized that the soul's competency "is not apart from God's

approach," that the Scriptures provide the record of this approach in Christ, and that the

soul would be lost without them, doomed to "repeat the sad failures of the past, seen in

all the superstitious, and ceremonial, and speculative attempts to find God."[207] Mullins

thus enabled Baptists wary of classic liberal Protestant theology (and its reliance upon

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[205]Ibid., 68. That similar sentiments were simply "in the air" among Southern Baptists of the time can be seen in this 1920 statement by Victor I. Masters: "As goes America, so goes the world. Largely as goes the South, so goes America. And in the South is the Baptist center of gravity of the world" (*Review and Expositor*, 1920). Cited in Edward L. Queen, II, *In the South the Baptists are the Center of Gravity: Southern Baptists and Social Change, 1930-1980* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991), 16.

[206]Mullins also qualified Baptist advocacy of individualism: "individualism alone is inadequate because man is more than an individual. He is a social being. He has relations to his fellows in the Church and in the industrial order, and in the State." Ibid., 51.

Yet the locus of these relations is still in the atomistically conceived individual. The fact that "man is a social being" does not impact Mullins' fundamental understanding of religion as the relationship between the solitary soul and its maker.

[207]Ibid., 69.

philosophical theories that posit the believing self's "religious experience" as its proper

subject matter) to see their concerns somewhat addressed by his gestures toward a

theocentric conception of soul competency and his emphasis on the Bible's normative

role in the authentic appropriation of this architectonic Baptist principle.

In 1999, two young Baptist theologians representing the "conservative

resurgence" that gained control of the denomination in the late twentieth century cited the

internal debate over the *Baptifesto* as evidence for their argument that sorting out the

"mystery of Mullins" is a key task for Baptists with ties to the Southern Baptist

Convention whose twentieth-century self-understanding he so decisively shaped.[208]

(Recall that the *Baptifesto* affirmed "following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship

rather than invoking a theory of soul competency."[209]) Historian Bill Leonard has

presented Mullins as the personification of the "Grand Compromise" that made possible

the unity-in-diversity that was the unique organizational and theological genius of the

Southern Baptist Convention for most of the twentieth century.[210] For its part, the

Baptifesto portrayed Mullins as a key figure in North American Baptists' assimilation to

philosophical modernity and its epistemological individualism by defining freedom in

terms of "autonomous moral agency and objective rationality."[211]

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[208]Russell D. Moore and Gregory A. Thornbury, "The Mystery of Mullins in Contemporary Southern Baptist Historiography," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:4 (Winter 1999): 44-57. See especially pp. 500-502. Though not the article's focus, the *Baptifesto* was implicitly dismissed as a flirtation with "trendy postmodernism" by wayward Baptists cut loose from the moorings of confessional Protestant orthodoxy.

[209]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 305.

[210]Leonard, God's Last and Only Hope, 49-51.

[211]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 309-310. The relevant except was quoted above on p. 44, n. 42.

As part of his case for a revisioning of Baptist theology, Freeman provided a historical sketch purporting to show the thoroughgoing modernity of the two dominant streams within modern Baptist thought. According to Freeman, Mullins's mediating political strategy must not be confused with his theological paradigm that, despite his attempts at nuance and use of traditional evangelical motifs, was clearly tied to the "liberal vector" in modern theology in its reliance on experience as an organizing principle. The "fundamentalist vector," per Freeman, founded its project on the Bible, understood as a repository of inerrant propositions available to any individual through the use of common-sense reasoning. As Freeman tells the story of modern theology (and Baptists' accommodation to it), both approaches used external philosophical warrants to secure rational foundations for theology rather than trusting in the gospel message, the biblical story, and the church's own doctrinal language as adequate grounding for faithful Christian living and speaking.[212] Significantly, as Freeman noted, both modern paradigms were tailored to fit any rational or "soul-competent" individual *as an individual*, making the church a mere auxiliary to theology's primary subject-matter: religious "truths" or experiences.

In the same way that Freeman accepted Marty's "baptistification" as a legitimate account of the modern, American, and Baptist ethos in typological terms, Thompson has agreed that Mullins successfully established a conception of Baptists' theological identity and historical significance that surpassed the Landmarkists' "Trail of Blood" mythology in its power to capture Baptist imaginations. By the 1990s, he claimed, "that soul competency is the distinctive mark of Baptist faith has passed into the realm of nearly

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[212]Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?" 289-291.

unquestionable 'fact'; assumed rather than investigated, often invoked without critical thought."[213] This identification of Baptist distinctiveness with soul competency (or its rough equivalent in a phrase like "priesthood of *the* believer"[214]) and a progressive vision of social history—with soul competency as catalyst—was described earlier as a Baptist identity-narrative challenged and threatened by the *Baptifesto.*

Despite the theological equipoise Leonard attributes to Mullins, which enabled him to appease most of the theological camps in the early-twentieth-century SBC, Mullins did not address the concerns about the ethical and social integrity of the church raised by the *Baptifesto*, convictions Yoder wanted to recover or reinforce as the *raison d'être* at the heart of the believers' churches. To fellow Baptists offended or puzzled by self-respecting Baptists making such a decisive break with traditional icons like Mullins, Freeman offered this irenic explanation:

> It may appear from this account that any Baptist who adopted the Constantinian strategy of translating the gospel into contemporary ideas in order to conquer and convince the culture must be a "fool, an ass, or a prating coxcomb." Such is *not* the case. The efforts and, in large measure, the achievements of earlier generations of Baptist theologians are cause for celebration. Indeed, rather than reproaching them for their theological accommodation to modernity, perhaps it is more appropriate to ask why we would expect them to have thought differently. Such an admission, however, does not mean that the proposals of modern Baptist theology should then remain unchallenged.[215]

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[213]Thompson, "Seeking a Catholic Spirit Among Early Baptists," 56.

[214]The original Reformation slogan, originating with Martin Luther, proclaimed the priesthood of *all* believers. Twentieth century Southern Baptist progressive Carlyle Marney spoke out harshly against a "bastard individualism" that "taught us that the believers' priesthood meant that 'every tub must sit on its own bottom.'" Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1974), 12. Cited in Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Reenvisioned?," 273. (Chapter Two noted the way in which some Baptists distinguish between soul competency and "priesthood of the believer." See p. 55, n. 68.)

[215]Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Re-envisioned?" 292.

It is striking to hear the mild-mannered Mullins, advocate of the soul's liberty from church and state control, described as "Constantinian" in the excerpt from Freeman cited above. Yet recall that in Yoder's formulation Constantinianism is only superficially about particular power arrangements and most fundamentally about habits of thought that dilute qualitative (and theologically necessary) distinctions between the social character and calling of the church and the world that does not share its confession. These critics of Baptist "neo-neo-Constantinianism"[216] do not allege that Baptists like Mullins set out to enervate Baptist ecclesiology, but that the atomistic implications of "soul competency" make such a result inevitable. Furthermore, when Baptist identity is expressed in terms of a *principle*, the focus moves away from any particular Baptist (or Christian) "peoplehood" into the more abstract and "universal" realms of ideas and "experiences."

An assessment of Mullins and Southern Baptists from an unlikely quarter completes this sketch of notable "libertarian" interpretations of Baptist identity. While it is almost imperative that Baptists in the South come to terms with Mullins's legacy, literary critic Harold Bloom, a self-described "Gnostic Jew," has argued that Mullins's creativity and originality have not received their due attention outside Southern Baptist circles, making Mullins "the most neglected of major American theologians."[217] For his pragmatic influence on a major American religious tradition, and for his articulation of quintessential features of the American religious culture, Bloom ranked Mullins higher than such notable figures as Jonathan Edwards among shapers of the nation's religious character.

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[216]Cf. Chapter Three, pp. 94-98.

[217]Harold Bloom, The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation (New York: Simon & Schuester, 1992), 199.

Baptists and "The American Religion"

In Bloom's estimation, Mullins was "the Calvin or Luther or Wesley of the Southern Baptists, but only in the belated American sense, because Mullins was not the founder of the Southern Baptists, but their re-founder, the definer of their creedless faith."[218] In his provocative and idiosyncratic attempt at "religious criticism," Bloom tried to demonstrate that Baptists are best understood when it is shown that "theirs indeed is what I call the American Religion, and not European Protestantism or historical Christianity."[219] Bloom hoped to convince students and practitioners of religion in the United States that

> We are post-Protestant, and we live a persuasive redefinition of Christianity. It is so pervasive that we refuse to admit that we have transformed the traditional religion into a faith that better fits our national temperament, aspirations, and anxieties. A blend of ancient heresies and nineteenth-century stresses, the American Religion moves toward the twenty-first century with an unrestrained triumphalism, easily convertible into our political vagaries.[220]

The nineteenth-century stresses Bloom cited are, more or less, the rugged individualism of frontier mythology and the "transcendental" mysticism popularized by such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman ("Song of Myself"). The ancient heresies are the various "Gnostic" groups ancient Christianity had to define itself over against in the early centuries of the church's existence. "Gnosticism" was less a system of doctrines than an assortment of common motifs, typically characterized by a dualistic anti-

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[218]Ibid., 199.

[219]Ibid., 192.

[220]Ibid., 45. Bloom considers Southern Baptists and Mormons to be the most significant and successful expressions of the American Religion. Though Baptists "imported" their faith into the United States, Bloom considers the differences between "Southern Baptism" and the more indigenous faith of the Latter-Day Saints to be insignificant for his analysis (28).

materialism and an emphasis on obtaining salvation through obtaining esoteric

knowledge (*gnosis*) of one's true identity as an immaterial and immortal soul.

For Bloom, "*Awareness*, centered on the self, is *faith* for an American."[221] This

awareness may include some reference to God, but "the God of the American Religion is

not a creator-God, because the American never *was* created, and so the American has at

least part of the God within herself."[222] The American Religion is, then, "a knowing, by

and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and that knowledge leads to freedom, a

dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, other

selves."[223] Bloom conceded that the American Religion, thus construed, certainly "tends

to exclude a sense of the communal."[224] Nevertheless, he concluded, it "clearly does suit

the religious genius of our nation and cannot be extirpated."[225]

For Bloom, the biblical, first-century John the Baptist really was the prototypical

Baptist because a Southern Baptist "who has walked with and talked to Jesus and who

reads the Bible in that inspired light, does not need a Southern Baptist church in order to

be justified for salvation."[226] Leaving aside for the moment all question of the weight

Bloom's conjectures should be accorded, it is easy to see why if Bloom is correct, and

"Southern Baptist religion is an experiential mode of negative theology," then Baptist

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[221]Bloom, 25. Bloom cited William James's classic definition in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902): Religion is "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." James's influence upon Mullins has frequently been noted.

[222]Ibid., 114.

[223]Ibid., 49.

[224]Ibid., 66.

[225]Ibid., 26.

[226]Ibid., 211.

identity itself can only be defined in the vaguest of terms, with the emphasis—as the

Baptifesto's co-authors lamented—on who Baptists are *not*.[227] In the words of Bloom's

anonymous guide into Southern Baptist spirituality, "Reverend Doe": "everyone is

competent to understand soul competency as he or she sees fit."[228] Such individualistic

stresses render reaching substantive consensus on shared theological commitments nearly

impossible. This is surely a reason why Leonard acknowledged that the glue holding the

twentieth-century SBC together in its "Grand Compromise" was at least partly cultural,

in the form of a shared institutional and regional ethos.[229]

A complete outsider to Southern Baptists and their traditions, Bloom unabashedly

sided with the moderates who had recently been exiled from positions of power in the

SBC, seeing them as Mullins' legitimate heirs, misunderstood and reviled by

fundamentalist "know-nothings." Whether these same moderates appreciated this strange

new ally is unclear. Bloom certainly gave their critics plenty of material.

While refraining from wholesale endorsement of Bloom's claims about Mullins

and "the American Religion," Freeman agreed that "soul competency" could legitimately

be considered "Gnostic" because Mullins construed the competent soul as part of a

dualistic anthropology in which body and soul are kept distinct.[230] In his critical

examination of the quietist, establishment spirituality of Baptist pastor Douglas Hudgins,

Charles Marsh argued that the high abstractness of "soul competency" (particularly in

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[227]Ibid., 201.

[228]Ibid., 202.

[229]Leonard, "When the Denominational Center Doesn't Hold," 910.

[230]Freeman, "E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," 36. Freeman was also clear in noting, however, that Mullins was by no means alone among Baptist theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in holding such a dualistic anthropology.

Hudgins's appropriation of Mullins's theological legacy) creates a void in which the "accidents of race, class, and custom" inevitably rush in to give the believing self its form and substance.[231] In Marsh's paraphrase of Hudgins, the death and resurrection of Jesus "has nothing to do with social movements or realities beyond the church; it's a matter of individual salvation."[232] The *Baptifesto* made an implicit reference to Bloom's celebration of Southern Baptist Gnosticism and the Mullins tradition by rejecting any suggestion that individual souls possess an inherent capacity for "unmediated, unassailable, and disembodied experience with God."[233]

To be sure, Freeman contended that Mullins would be horrified by the "unrestrained libertarianism" to which he believed some Baptists have attached Mullins's legacy. He hinted that Mullins perhaps remained silent about the kinds of virtues and communities necessary for competent souls to read the Bible wisely and lead full lives as Christians because "the safeguards of character and community were givens, part of the evangelical consensus of his day, constitutive elements of the Baptist understanding of the Christian life that he thought needed no explanation to his readers."[234] If such was once the case, Freeman continued, the substantive consensus within which "soul competency" could simply protect a healthy unity-within-diversity "has long since dissipated" within Baptist life.[235]

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[231]Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, 109.

[232]Ibid, 189-90. Also cited in Freeman, op. cit.

[233]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 305.

[234]Ibid., 34. Again, it is only the immaterial soul, which has no intrinsic relationship to other souls, that is competent.

[235]Ibid. This is precisely the same sympathetic explanation philosopher (and former Southern Baptist) David Solomon offered alongside his critique of outspoken moderate Baptist advocate of "soul

From his unsparing criticisms of Catholicism and all high-church traditions, one can surmise that Mullins considered it axiomatic that all attempts to speak theologically about "church"—that is, as anything more than a voluntary association of individuals-- enter the unfortunate realm of "religion by proxy." It is hard to imagine, for example, how Mullins could countenance the kind of mutual accountability Anabaptist theologian Balthasar Hubmaier outlined in his catechism for new believers:

> Q: What is the baptismal pledge?
> A: It is a commitment which one makes to God publicly and orally before the church, in which he renounces Satan, and his thoughts and works. He pledges as well that he will henceforth set all his faith, hope, and trust alone in God, and direct his life according to the divine Word, in the power of Jesus Christ our Lord and in case he should not do that, he promises hereby to the church that he desires virtuously to receive fraternal admonition from her members and from her, as is said above.
>
> . . . .
>
> Q: What is fraternal admonition?
> A: The one who sees his brother sinning goes to him in love and admonishes him fraternally and quietly that he should abandon such sin. If he does so he has won his soul. If he does not, then he takes two or three witnesses with him and admonishes him before them once again. If he follows him, it is concluded, if not, he says it to the church. The same calls him forward and admonishes him for the third time. If he now abandons his sin, he has saved his soul.
>
> Q: Whence does the church have this authority?

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liberty," James M. Dunn (who Freeman considered an example of the libertarianism Mullins would not have countenanced). See Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 199.

According to Hankins, Solomon responded to some of Dunn's remarks at an academic conference by claiming that "the kind of society Dunn [longtime director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington, D.C.] was articulating, where individual rights trump all other considerations, would be highly unlikely to produce the kind of passionate, public-spirited community advocate that Dunn was himself."

Freeman gave little evidence for his claim that Mullins would have disapproved of Dunn's pithy summary of the (Mullins-inspired) Baptist creed: "Ain't nobody but Jesus going to tell me what to believe!" Or, at any rate, he fails to consider, as Solomon did, that Dunn could have been making the same tacit assumptions about ecclesial and character formation he supposes Mullins must have done.

A: From the command of Christ, who said to his disciples, "all that you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and all that you loose on earth shall also be loosed in heaven."

Q: By what right has one brother to use this authority on another?
A: From the baptismal pledge in which one subjects oneself to the Church and all her members according to the word of Christ.[236]

As Yoder noted, in Hubmaier's context, the practice of believers' baptism was an initiation into the furthest thing from radical individualism.[237] Here we see can see more clearly what Yoder meant when he claimed that "the alternative to arbitrary individualism is not established authority but an authority in which the individual participates and to which he or she consents. The alternative to authoritarianism is not anarchy but freedom of confession."[238]

Could a Baptist soul come to believe that his or her competency under God required this kind of submission to a community of mutual responsibility? Could the holy and loving God, who "has a right to be sovereign" (Mullins's "theological axiom"), choose to allow the church community, like the Bible, a role in determining the parameters of soul competency? Not according to Bloom. As he reads Mullins, "Soul Competency is like erotic competency (if I may be allowed that splendidly outrageous term), since there is no room for a third when the Baptist is alone with Jesus."[239]

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[236]Hubmaier, "A Christian Catechism," in H. Wayne Pipkin and J. Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1989): 350-353. Cited in Yoder, "Binding and Loosing," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 339-340. Yoder's essay provided an extended discussion of the practice of "fraternal admonition" intended as a study guide for contemporary churches. He attempted to address the likely objections today's readers bring to the topic.

[237]Bloom, 340.

[238]Ibid.

[239]Bloom, 202.

The Possibility of a Third Way

Marty reviewed *The American Religion* in the pages of *Christian Century*, which allowed him to assess the merits of Bloom's creative thesis and to compare the "American Religion" with the phenomenon he had earlier described as "baptistification."[240] In general, Marty considered Bloom's work to be more entertaining and provocative than genuinely illuminating—the kind of work scholars should certainly read and take into account, but that is unlikely to initiate a significant revising of established theories. While he believed Bloom had given a creative and compelling account of one dominant form of American religion, Marty insisted that Bloom simply ignored the vast numbers of Americans who happily and faithfully practice a more traditional and communal style of Christianity, or who strive to find a balance between public religion and private spirituality. For Marty, "baptistified" religion and these various forms of committed churchmanship represented, respectively, the "yin" and "yang" of American Christianity and "Bloom has provided an evocative, provocative and memorable account of the yin."[241]

As has been previously noted, the *Baptifesto* reflected a desire for a genuinely new alternative, as opposed to some kind of mediating position or healthy tension between the dominant alternatives in Baptist life and in American religion and society. Marty's "yin" and "yang" of American religion are slightly different than Mohler's Baptist "truth" and "liberty" parties, yet the *Baptifesto* arguably considered both sets of alternatives to be steeped in the kinds of "Constantinianism" that erodes the church's

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[240]Marty, "All Gnostics Here?" *Christian Century* (May 20-27, 1992), 545-548.

[241]Ibid., 548. Marty also used the same yin-yang simile in "Baptistification Takes Over."

integrity in the pursuit of "success" closer at hand. It is likely that both Yoder and the

Baptifesto's co-authors likely would have considered Marty's "public protestant"

counterpart to "baptistification" largely akin to the "mainstream pluralist tolerance"

Yoder urged Southern Baptists in 1970 to avoid because its catholicity was purchased at

the price of ethical rigor and Christian specificity.[242]

In his address to the Believers' Church conference, Yoder attempted to shift the

arena of debate by identifying a "triangular pattern" of three distinct ecclesiological

models instead of a "yin-yang" polarity. To illustrate this pattern at a key point in

Christian history Yoder unsurprisingly turned to the sixteenth-century, where he

distinguished between: 1) mainline Anabaptists motivated by a desire to "finish" the

Reformation by restoring not only the doctrine, but the socio-ethical character of

apostolic Christianity; 2) "spiritualizers" who wanted to carry the Reformation's

dismantling of 'externals' to its fullest extent and return to pure, inward, "spiritual"

Christianity; and 3) the "theocratic" or magisterial traditions who placed the "locus of

theological meaning in the whole society" and thereby linked Christian social reflection

to the pragmatic and more generalized concerns of governing a territory in which not

everyone can be held accountable to any rigorous understanding of Christian

confession.[243]

Yoder claimed to find a consistent repetition in Christian history of this three-fold

pattern of differentiation, which, as he noted, resembles the classic "church," "sect," and

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[242]See Chapter Three, p. 80.

[243]Yoder, "A People in the World," in *The Royal Priesthood*, 72.

"mysticism" types developed by German sociologist of religion Ernst Troeltsch.[244] To

demonstrate the legitimacy of speaking in terms of three distinct options, Yoder

discussed the various ways in which two of these stances would be united in their

opposition to the third, depending on the issues under discussion. Yoder hoped this

typology would clarify what he believed the Anabaptists grasped with critical clarity:

"the church is called to move beyond the oscillation between the theocratic and the

spiritualist patterns, not to a compromise between the two or to a synthesis claiming like

Hegel to 'assume' them both, but to what is generally a third option."[245]

In light of Chapter Two's reading of the *Baptifesto*, it seems clear that the

statement's authors would, perhaps with some qualification, identify late twentieth-

century conservative Southern Baptists with the "theocratic" type and moderates with the

"spiritualizers." Thus, a primary issue between the perspective represented by the

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[244]Here are Troeltsch's definitions:

Church: "The Church is an institution which has been endowed with grace and salvation as the result of the work of Redemption; it is able to receive the masses, and to adjust itself to the world, because, to a certain extent, it can afford to ignore the need for subjective holiness for the sake of the objective treasures of grace and of redemption."

Sect: "The sect is a voluntary society, composed of strict and definite Christian believers bound to each other by the fact that all have experienced 'the new birth.' These 'believers' live apart from the world, are limited to small groups, emphasize the law instead of grace, and in varying degrees within their own circle set up the Christian order, based on love; all this is done in preparation for and expectation of the coming Kingdom of God."

Mysticism: "Mysticism means that the world of ideas which had hardened into formal worship and doctrine is transformed into a purely personal and inward experience; this leads to the formation of groups on a purely personal basis, with no permanent form, which also tend to weaken the significance of forms of worship, doctrine, and the historical element."

The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, Vol. 2, trans. Olive Wyon. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960): 993. Yoder noted that his three-cornered typology also borrowed from Franklin Littell's "Church and Sect (With Special Reference to Germany)," *The Ecumenical Review* VI (April 1954): 262-276.

[245]Yoder, "A People in the World," 72-73.

Baptifesto and contemporary "moderates" loyal to Mullins's legacy is illuminated in historian Franklin Littell's observation that "in every center of the Left Wing [of the Reformation] there was an early tension between those whose uneasiness regarding historic 'forms' led them away from community in a concrete sense, and those who moved forward and gathered a people on a New Testament basis."[246]

Yoder also explained how from the perspective of the "Anabaptist" type a similar (Constantinian) error is present in both the "spiritualizing" and "theocratic" approaches. Because the spiritualizing mystics locate theological meaning in the non-material realm of "spirit," he claimed, they typically remain content with present social forms: dominant structures and systems, though perhaps relativized in significance, are legitimated by default. On the other hand, both "theocrats" and "Anabaptists" would be united in rejecting the spiritualists' Gnostic detachment of salvation from history. (The dispute between these two groups then boils down to the question of who is the primary carrier of history's meaning: the church community, the state, or "secular history" in general?)

Conclusion

A likely explanation for the gulf separating Mullins's thought from the ecclesiocentric concerns of Yoder and the *Baptifesto* can be found in Mullins's articulation of Baptist identity in terms of a *principle* ("individualism in religion"[247]) which, though it might be most purely understood and practiced by Baptist Christians in their congregations, could be communicated in such a way that its adoption and influence

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[246]Littell, The Anabaptist View of the Church, 23.

[247]Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, 93.

would reach far beyond church walls into the marketplace of religious, social, economic, and political thought.[248] In this Baptist theology, "Baptists" are the mere aggregate of Baptist believers, not a distinct "people," and their social significance is in the multitudes of individual lives making their way through the world with the competency of the soul under God as the driving force of their faith and thought. Both the formal and material features of "soul competency," then, work against any strong conception of spiritual community.

Contrast this approach with Yoder's assertion that, according to Biblical Christianity, "the ultimate meaning of history will not be found in the course of earthly empires or the development of proud cultures, but in the calling together of the 'chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation,' which is the church of Christ."[249] For Yoder, this ecclesiocentric reading of history was not the narcissistic viewpoint of a self-proclaimed elect, whose "spiritual" salvation is the goal for which material and social history provides a dramatic backdrop. Rather, he claimed, the church is a movement in the midst of "secular" history and

> is herself a society. Her very existence, the fraternal relations of her members, their ways of dealing with their differences and their needs are, or rather should be, a demonstration of what love means in social relations. This demonstration cannot be transposed directly into non-Christian society, for in the church it functions only on

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[248]According to Mullins, soul competency, and its corollaries, the "axioms of religion," "express the truths and ideals which lie at the heart of all man's higher strivings today"(78). The axioms are: 1) the theological axiom: "the holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign"; 2) the religious axiom: "all souls have an equal right to direct access to God"; 3) the ecclesiological axiom: "all believers have a right to equal privileges in the church"; 4) the moral axiom: "to be responsible man must be free"; 5) the religio-civic axiom: "a free church in a free state"; and 6) the social axiom: "love your neighbor as yourself." Ibid., 73-74.

[249]Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 13.

the basis of repentance and faith; yet by analogy certain of its aspects may be instructive as stimuli to the conscience of society.[250]

The next chapter will discuss these issues in further detail, but it is important to note here that Yoder did not posit an impermeable wall between the church and its surrounding world. However, he did insist that it is essential to the church's vocation that there be a discernible social and ethical character within the community of Christian discipleship when seen from the outside world.

What Yoder said to the Believers' Church conference is largely what the *Baptifesto* claimed three decades later, though the *Baptifesto* described these issues more in terms of intellectual genealogy while Yoder emphasized the social and ethical dimensions of church history. "Freedom," "choice," and the like have their place in the Christian vocabulary, but the modern West has also adopted them as its own watchwords. Therefore, Baptists and other Christians ironically lose the ability to witness to and offer their neighbors the choice of an authentic social alternative in the form of a particular way of life when they assume too easily that such concepts retain the same meaning both inside and outside the church's common life.

Did Yoder's types pose alternatives Baptists would rather not choose between?[251] Or, is the substantive difference between Baptists and Anabaptists analogous to the perennial debate between "spiritualizers" and the advocates of concrete communal

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[250] Ibid., 17.

[251] Southern Baptist theologian James Leo Garrett, editor of the collected papers from the inaugural Believers' Church conference, summarized the response to Yoder's presentation offered by C. Emmanuel Carlson, director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. According to Garrett, Carlson questioned the appropriateness of Yoder's triangular typology. Unfortunately, the summary comments on this point are too brief to gain further insight from what retrospectively looks like a particularly important exchange. James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed. *The Concept of the Believers' Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1969), 250-252.

discipleship? In other words, was the *Baptifesto* simply an *"Anabaptist* 'Tract for the Times'" only tangentially related to the primary course of Baptist history? These are the kinds of questions in view as the next chapter looks at the implications of these attempts to distinguish the Baptist and "free church" story from the story of America and modernity.

CHAPTER FIVE
'We Have Never Been Anabaptist':

Baptists, Anabaptists, and 'The Enduring Problem'

It is in fact striking to observe, concerning the reorientation of priorities since Constantine, that most of the mainstream theologians with whom I converse want me to accept *greater* value homogeneity as a part of the American *civil* covenant but at the same time want *less* value homogeneity in the Christian community."
                                                        --Yoder, "The Christian Case for Democracy"[252]

        As the last chapter noted, the kind of "gospel social ethics" Yoder articulated is

often met with concerns that such a focus on churchly integrity and theological

specificity would have dangerous consequences if it were to gain widespread adherence.

It has been described as: a sophisticated form of apolitical quietism that prefers a clear

conscience over the messy work of seeking justice in a violent world; the emergence of

resentful identity politics in response to chaotic pluralism and shallow secularism; an

intellectual defense mechanism employed to protect Christian ethics from external

criticism; or, likely, some combination of all these. A particularly serious internal

criticism that can be posed to the advocates of a position like Yoder's is, how does a

strongly ecclesiocentric ethical stance avoid the same trap of negative self-definition the

Baptifesto sought to overcome among Baptists, if the church is always defining itself over

against the "world"?

        These are the kinds of objections usually addressed to the more prominent and

controversial Stanley Hauerwas, who claimed that Yoder "forever changed the way I

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[252]Yoder, "The Christian Case for Democracy," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 163.

think."[253] This chapter will not attempt to enter the debate between Hauerwas and his

critics in any significant way, and will take on a task much smaller in scope that returns

to the theme with which the last chapter began.

The *Baptifesto* has been criticized for not including a statement about the religious

liberty of all people in its proposals for re-envisioning Baptist identity.[254] The statement

did not claim to provide a comprehensive account of Baptist convictions, so in one sense

this is simply an argument from silence. However, although the *Baptifesto* explicitly

rejected attempts to establish or maintain a church through coercion, it is true that it did

not include a specific commitment to protect universal religious liberty by seeking the

institutional separation of church and state. Thus, the worry expressed in this objection is

that the *Baptifesto* represents a kind of aloof, perhaps elitist, attitude toward the world

outside the church that is ultimately more self-serving than faithful to legitimate Christian

social concern.

Since Yoder's work has been shown to illuminate key features of the *Baptifesto*'s

challenge to Baptist self-understanding, this raises several important questions: Does a

"radically catholic" approach require some form of stubborn or obscurantist

sectarianism? Was Yoder right in claiming that his vision for the SBC, if embodied,

would only result in Southern Baptists and their churches becoming more truly "Baptist"

and, most basically, how much of a "contrast society"[255] can or should Baptists be?

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[253]Hauerwas, foreward to Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, viii.

[254]Shurden, "The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto," 337-338.

[255]Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). As cited by Philip D. Kenneson in *Beyond Sectarianism: Re-imagining Church and World* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 2.

Yoder told the 1967 Believers' Church conference, "for the Anabaptists and all who have followed in their train . . . the rejection of the church-state tie has not been an issue debated in its own right but a reflection of or a deduction from their concept of the nature of Christian discipleship and community."[256] Yoder did not claim that these two concerns were mutually exclusive, but he left no doubt as to which he believed should take priority. After describing the two ways in which the *Baptifesto* sought to find evidence for a "radically catholic" identity within the Baptist heritage, this chapter will conclude by looking at the issue of Baptists and "sectarianism," using Yoder's critical engagement with H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* to illustrate the basic issues and key assumptions shaping this aspect of the intramural debate the *Baptifesto* initiated.[257]

Retelling the Story

The co-authors of the *Baptifesto* did not dispute that most modern Baptists came to adopt an account of their distinctive ecclesial identity that, because of the detached rationalism and individualism they saw underlying its definition of freedom, could not be substantially distinguished from Marty's "baptistification" and Bloom's gnostic "American Religion." As it made this admission, however, the statement pointed to two sources for its alternative reading of historic Baptist identity:

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[256]Yoder, "A People in the World," in *The Royal Priesthood*, 67.

[257]Philip D. Kenneson provides an extended and helpful analysis of the various contexts in which the language of "sectarianism" is used (often as an epithet), along with an examination of the presuppositions underlying many of these claims, in *Beyond Sectarianism: Re-Imagining Church and World* (see above, n. 4, for full citation). As Kenneson notes, the sociological sense of "sectarianism," with its roots in Troeltsh's well-known categories, has the least built-in pejorative overtones because it simply points to a community's acknowledgment of its distinctiveness from the larger society.

> We concede . . . that the conception of freedom we oppose became deeply entrenched in the North American Baptist tradition by the mid-eighteenth century. Baptist heritage, however, predates the formation of modern democratic societies in North America. We have, therefore, drawn from earlier sources of the Baptist heritage and from other examples in the believers church (or baptist) tradition that have resisted modern notions of freedom and have practiced a more communal discipleship. We thus seek an understanding of freedom that is true to the biblical witness and the earliest insights of the Baptist heritage.[258]

The *Baptifesto* represented, in part, a kind of restorationist attempt to claim that its vision for Baptist identity is more in line with that of the very first Baptist communities. Perhaps more significant, however, is the way in which the statement shifted the question of Baptist identity away from the search for a consistent adherence to core principles by placing Baptists among the communities birthed by the historic impulses of the radical reformation. In making these moves the *Baptifesto* attempted to convince Baptists that the theme of "faithful dissent" so much a part of their historic self-understanding can take both "catholic" and radical "Anabaptist" forms.

Revisiting the First Baptists

Though his significance for twentieth-century Baptist life is immense, the *Baptifesto* did not make E.Y. Mullins the primary villain in its narrative of Baptist declension through assimilation to mainstream modernity. As the excerpt above shows, the statement placed what could be called the "fall" of the Baptist tradition sometime between the early 1600s (the first English separatist communities practicing believers' baptism) and the mid-1700s. Among all the significant social, material, and intellectual

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[258]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 304.

developments during this period, these were the years in which the "Age of Enlightenment" began to take shape.[259]

In *Jonathan Edwards: America's Theologian*, Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson argues that Edwards gave a unique and insightful response to the Enlightenment as a believing and thinking American Christian: "The European and American theological task of the eighteenth century was to be at once believing and Enlightening . . . . Edwards brought it off, as perhaps no other theologian quite did."[260] Jenson concluded that theology in America could have avoided many pitfalls had Edwards's insights been sufficiently developed and understood by subsequent generations. The *Baptifesto* echoed Jenson's lament, arguing that the mainstream of Baptist thought failed to recognize with sufficient clarity the difference between pragmatic alliance with Enlightenment's *philosophes* against authoritative church establishments and adoption of "enlightened" theological presuppositions.

British philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), one of the primary sources for the liberal tradition in modern social and political thought, could serve as the representative and mythical equivalent of "Constantine," if this "enlightening" process is described in Yoderian terms as yet another recurrence of Christianity's Constantinian temptation. However, outspoken colonial activist John Leland is frequently acknowledged as the Baptist who most unabashedly expressed Baptist convictions about religious freedom in

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[259]A classic expression of the dominant spirit among the eighteenth-century intellectual elite is Immanuel Kant's "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784). Printed in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* ed. and trans., Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-22.

[260]Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3.

Lockean terms of inalienable, natural rights, and the church as a voluntary association.[261]

To make this point, Freeman cited historian Nathan Hatch's account of *The Democratization of American Christianity* in which Leland is portrayed as a man who

> Turned a quest for self-reliance into a godly crusade. He believed that individuals had to make a studied effort to free themselves of natural authorities: church, state, college, seminary, even family. . . . [H]e proclaimed a divine economy that was atomistic and competitive rather than wholistic and hierarchical. This kind of liberal individualism could be easily embraced at the grass roots. Ordinary people gladly championed the promise of personal autonomy as a message they could understand and a cause to which they could subscribe—in God's name, no less.[262]

Leland, an ardent Jeffersonian (to say the least), argued tirelessly on behalf of religious liberty, and played an important role in securing James Madison's pledge to include the First Amendment's religion clauses in the Bill of Rights.[263]

Roger Williams is better known to American history and might seem a more likely personification of the "Baptist Enlightenment." However, Freeman, citing the work of LeRoy Moore, has argued that the prominent "Romantic" interpretations of Williams as a modern expressivist liberal ignore the unambiguously theological character of Williams's convictions.[264] In other words, Williams did not base "soul freedom" upon

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[261]This paragraph and the one immediately following summarize key parts of Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Re-envisioned?" 280-283.

[262]Hatch, 101. On Leland, see also J. Bradley Creed, "John Leland: American Prophet of Religious Individualism" (Ph.D. thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986).

[263]The Jeffersonian-Lockean influence can be seen in the title of one of Leland's most famous essays, "The Rights of Conscience Inalienable." See *The Writings of John Leland*, L.F. Greene, ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1969): 179-192. A substantially appreciative overview of Leland's contribution to Baptist theology by two of the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors can be found in Freeman, et al, *Baptist Roots* (introduction to Leland, "A Blow at the Root"): 172.

[264]Freeman (280) cites LeRoy Moore, "Roger Williams and the Historians," *Church History* 32 (1963): 432-51. See also McClendon's discussion of Williams in *Doctrine*, 482-87.

a theory of natural rights or philosophical individualism, but on the basis of a gospel in which Christ alone has authority in heaven and earth.

Of the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors, Thompson appears to have done the most work in attempting to disentangle the earliest English Baptists from libertarian renderings of Baptist history. His dissertation argued that the ecclesiology of seventeenth-century Baptists highlighted "the community of believers, the catholic church and a soteriology characterized by individual and corporate sanctification and formation" and studied the ways in which these emphases were gradually transformed (within a century or two, at most) into an ecclesiology marked by "the individual believer, the local church as a voluntary association of individuals, and a soteriology weighted toward individual conversion."[265] Thompson claimed that these early Baptists understood human freedom as derivative of the "two-fold freedom of God" in which God is not only free from human control (a freedom they believed was usurped in the baptism of infants) but also has the freedom for "the use of things in creation in salvation."[266]

In other words, Thompson maintained that seventeenth-century Baptists believed that many of those practices Mullins associated with "religion by proxy" (respect for the ancient ecumenical creeds, some form of episcopacy, sacramentalism) had been divinely established for the realization of genuine freedom in Christ by wounded and fallen human beings.[267] A recent collection of essays on *Baptist Sacramentalism* (with Thompson as

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[265]Philip Edward Thompson, "Toward Baptist Ecclesiology in Pneumatological Perspective" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1995) chaps. 2-3. Cited in Freeman, 286.

[266]Thompson, "Seeking a Catholic Spirit Among Early Baptists," 340, n. 26.

[267]According to Thompson, General Baptist leader Thomas Grantham referred to the "church fathers" of the first three Christian centuries as "later writers of Christianity." Ibid., 65.

co-editor) attempted to further this investigation—a study whose title many Baptists and non-Baptists might consider oxymoronic.[268]

In short, the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors argued that the Baptist story is not simply one in which Baptists helped lead Western civilization out of the dark ages and into the modern world, all the while sharing modernity's predisposition against "organized religion." This study does not attempt to enter into this historical debate in any more detail. Important features of early Baptist history (e.g. the distinction between General and Particular Baptists) have not been explained, and the distinctions between theocentric and anthropocentric conceptions of religious liberty are not always easy to draw. What is important to note, however, is that while the *Baptifesto* and its co-authors tried to deconstruct certain static versions of Baptist intellectual history, no similarly monolithic narrative is offered in its place. The closest counterpart offered by these Baptists to what Freeman called the "myth of soul competency"[269] as an explanatory key for Baptist history is, arguably, *Baptifesto* co-author McClendon's "baptist vision."[270]

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[268]Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds. *Baptist Sacramentalism* Studies in Baptist History and Thought, Vol. 5 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003).

As this thesis was nearing completion, Baptist theologian Steven Harmon (a co-author of the brief 2006 statement responding to the *Baptifesto*'s critics—see chap. 2, p. 56) published *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006). I have read a draft of Harmon's introductory chapter. In addition to bolstering many of the claims Thompson has made about the earliest Baptists' "catholic spirit," Harmon provided evidence that the contemporary desire for a positive engagement by Baptists with the catholic tradition and for a renewal of a stronger ecclesiology stretches beyond the circle of scholars associated with the *Baptifesto*—including, notably, several prominent British Baptists.

[269]Freeman, "E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," 35.

[270]Interestingly, although listed in publications as one of the *Baptifesto*'s co-authors, McClendon has referred to the document as a declaration written by "some young Baptists working in Southern U.S. university settings" and in the same article summarizing the *Baptifesto*'s contents and intentions, makes no reference to any more intimate relationship with it. See "The Believers Church in Theological Perspective" in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 319.

Baptists and 'baptists'

For McClendon, the best and most natural touchstone for a genuinely third way in Baptist life could be found in the earliest Anabaptist communities that so decisively influenced Yoder's own approach to theological ethics. He told a gathering of Baptist professors of religion in 1988 that

> One of church history's perverse omissions is a due analysis of the role of the sixteenth-century baptists, the so-called ana-baptists, many of whom from the 1520s on managed to *combine* radical Biblicism with radical communtarianism, producing an authentic community of discipleship. I believe that is a worthy goal for us.[271]

His comments were made at a time when the SBC was tearing itself apart over issues of authority, with "Bible" and (individual) "experience" typically pitted against the other. Many Southern Baptists weary of the theological extremes to which the conflict had pressed denominational partisans were likely looking for a fresh alternative. McClendon's response, which had been developing for at least a decade, was to enfold Baptists into the larger and more diverse community of 'baptists'—essentially those traditions grouped together elsewhere under the "believers' church" heading.[272]

McClendon made one of his primary scholarly tasks the articulation of what he believed to be the key convictions of baptist communities true to their best insights. He

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This may well be because McClendon simply lent his name to the already-drafted statement which was crafted by a younger generation of Baptist theologians who had looked to him for inspiration.

[271]McClendon, "The Concept of Authority: A Baptist View," *PRS* 16:2 (Summer 1989): 103.

[272]McClendon intended "baptist" in the sense of the German *taufer*—an historic and generic term preferred by the first Anabaptists and their ecclesiological kin (*Ethics*, 19).

reformulated these themes into the motif he came to call the "baptist vision." In his systematic theology, the baptist vision served as shorthand for an ethically, theologically, and philosophically rich notion of the ways in which, through entering a kind of mystical relation between the biblical narrative and their present experience, believers and a believing community discover the shape of their world and how their lives are to be lived before and with God.[273] Reflecting the emphasis on "discipleship" Harold Bender included in his "Anabaptist Vision,"[274] McClendon's systematic trilogy presented theological doctrine and ethics as inseparable components of theology.

McClendon shared Yoder's view that the believers' church, or baptist, vision for the church was not tied to a particular tributary of the broader stream of historic Christianity because it views history more in terms of "fall" and "restoration"—with the Bible as critical plumbline—rather than "succession" or "growth."[275] Thus, the question of just how much the first English Baptists adopted from Anabaptists (who were by then "Mennonites") while in the Netherlands, and where they may have diverged from them is of only relative importance if both historic traditions have shared memories of being, at least at one time, radically biblicist and radically communitarian.

McClendon believed the dearth of significant and original theological work produced by baptist communities could only partly be attributed to the fact that baptists

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[273]As a hermeneutical principle, McClendon describes the baptist vision as "shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community. In a motto, the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is *our* liberty, *our* obedience, till time's end." *Ethics*, 30.

[274]See Chap. 3, pg. 69.

[275]In his description of the transformation of the earliest Christian moral motifs throughout church history, McClendon stressed both gains and losses: "'development' can become a piece of doctrinal baggage too heavy and shapeless for the Christian journey . . . sometimes serious mistakes are made; Christians, like Israel before them need to repent and return." *Ethics*, 55.

had frequently (especially in their early years) been persecuted and socially marginalized, without the access to scholarly leisure and training afforded members of other traditions. The real problem, in his view, is that baptists have "failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices, their own guiding vision, a resource for theology unlike the prevailing tendencies round about them."[276]

In McClendon's narration of baptist history, these "prevailing tendencies", ushered in by the Enlightenment, included: "(1) a new sense of the self, called *individualism*, (2) a new, science-oriented way of construing human speech that among other effects *segregated religious utterance*, and (3) a new way of doubting much that we know, retrospectively dubbed *foundationalism*."[277] These alterations in the intellectual climate were beginning to gain steam at almost the same time as the first Baptists proper appeared. Thus, according to McClendon, Baptists were hard pressed from the start to avoid getting pulled into the Calvinist-Arminian disputes over free will raised to the fore by the new emphasis on individualism. As time went by, he claimed, "modernity" (characterized by the three emphases cited above) created an intellectual chasm, forcing most baptists to take sides in a war that was not their own, using language that could not do justice to baptist convictions, and working with ill-fitting ecclesiological categories: "Baptists (large or small b) might by the grace of God survive the modern era, 1650 to our own time, but only with great difficulty could they be baptists in it."[278]

In a description of the Southern Baptist church of his childhood in Shreveport,

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[276]McClendon, *Ethics*, 26.

[277]McClendon, "The Believers Church in Theological Perspective," 315.

[278]Ibid.

Louisiana, McClendon nicely summarized the ways in which he believed that important

Baptist convictions could and had been redefined through identification with the

dominant social forms of secular modernity.

> [W]as our church . . . voluntary? Certainly so, if that meant we consented to be the Christians that we were. In that sense, though, the membership of every church in our town, every church in North America, was and is voluntary: no tax to support a state church; no law constituting us Lutherans or Buddhists or Catholics or Baptists. In North America those old battles had long ago been fought and won. If that is all "voluntary" meant, it has no present use and we can move on to other matters. Contrariwise, if by "voluntary" any mean to deny the influence of others' lives upon their own, that is simply mistaken: I owe what I am, including my so-called "free" choices, to a variety of influences and conditionings that make me so; beneath all these influences, as I believe, are the everlasting arms of divine election and divine providence. Our spiritual ancestors were not stupid folk; they did not use such high and holy words as "voluntary church" lightly and unadvisedly; we must take care to see what they meant if we are to mean anything useful by such words now.[279]

On the heels of this passage, McClendon enumerated the ways in which various baptist

groups "voluntarily" took up radically different ways of life that responded creatively to

their particular circumstances. His point was that the character of these communities had

to be displayed concretely in history because "their freedom was not a good or goal in

itself or in isolation from the gospel."[280]

McClendon once described himself as an "Anabaptist Baptist" yet registered his

dislike for the phrase, almost surely because it seems to deny the deep connection

between the two traditions he wanted to maintain.[281] Some Baptists supportive of the

Baptifesto, or at least sympathetic to its claims, might place more emphasis on the

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[279]McClendon, "The Believers Church in Theological Perspective," 311.

[280]Ibid., 313.

[281] McClendon, "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74:4 (October 2000), 508.

recovery of a stronger sense of catholicity in Baptist worship, theology, and self-

definition and downplay the Anabaptist-"baptist" approach, perhaps believing that it

over-privileges the sixteenth or early seventeenth-centuries.

At any rate, a "radically catholic" ecclesiology and social ethic seeks to combine a

strong claim for the indispensability of the church community with an imperative for

potentially costly witness to the public implications of its theological affirmations.

Historian Walter Klaassen has offered this description of sixteenth-century Anabaptist

leader Pilgram Marpeck's vision of the church in the world:

> Fully aware that two social structures are bound to come into conflict with each
> other, [Marpeck] resisted the temptation to merely internalize Christianity. He took
> the communal aspect of Christianity very seriously although he was aware that the
> state is threatened not so much by individual dissenters as by dissenting
> communities and by countercultures.[282]

For perhaps understandable reasons, "dissent" has been part of the basic Baptist

vocabulary from the beginning, taking a place alongside "freedom." While a great deal

of Baptist concern over the *Baptifesto* has concentrated on its ostensible disregard for

individual dissent, the last chapter showed how an emphasis on the right of such solitary

protest as a bedrock Baptist conviction ironically all but eliminates the possibility of

meaningful countercultural dissent—particularly in a culture claiming to celebrate

individuality and freedom. That such countercultural dissent had faded from the

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[282] William Klaassen, "The Limits of Political Authority as seen by Pilgram Marpeck," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 56:4 (Oct. 1982): 362. Marpeck represented the Anabaptist cause in a debate with prominent "spiritualist" Caspar Schwenckfeld in a lengthy debate George H. Williams described as the "definitive encounter between Evangelical Anabaptism and Evangelical Spiritualism" (*The Radical Reformation*, chap. 18). As the last chapter noted, this debate can be seen as a historic paradigm for tension between Baptists supportive of the *Baptifesto* and fellow exiles from the SBC who see themselves more in terms of the "liberty party."

collective self-understanding of twentieth-century Southern Baptists is shown in the way such Baptists have tended to describe their differences with those traditions stemming from the original radical reformation.

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'We Have Never Been Anabaptists'

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According to Southern Baptist historian William Estep's account of Baptist origins, "the first identifiable Baptists came into historical focus [in the early seventeenth-century] as some English Separatists came under the influence of Dutch Mennonites in the Netherlands."[283] However, as Estep tells the story, a defining moment for Baptists came when Thomas Helwys departed from this primitive Baptist community and returned to England when its leader, John Smyth, decided the congregation should unite with the Waterlander Mennonites in Amsterdam. According to Estep, Helwys's decision was largely motivated by a rejection of the Mennonites' unwillingness to allow civil magistrates into church membership, reflecting a typical Anabaptist insistence upon the church's separation from the "sword."

The fact that Estep granted continental Anabaptism such influence upon the emergence of Baptists is notable. Not all Baptist historians are agreed on this point, and there is a *prima facie* case against it in that seventeenth-century Baptists referred to themselves in confessional statements as members "of those Churches which are commonly (though falsly [sic]) called ANABAPTISTS."[284] However, Estep approvingly cited an important article in which Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen demonstrated the clear

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[283]William R. Estep, *Why Baptists? A Study of Baptist Faith and Heritage* (Dallas, TX: Baptist General Convention of Texas), 47.

[284]*First London Confession* (1644). Printed in William L. Lumpkin, ed. *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1969), 153.

influence of a widely disseminated text by Menno Simons upon these early Baptist documents.[285] Stassen, who endorsed the *Baptifesto* in 1997, argued that "Anabaptist" was an all-purpose epithet of the time, used to equate new and minority religious communities with the violent anarchy displayed in the ill-fated Anabaptist "kingdom" of Münster. (As he noted, the seventeenth-century Dutch Mennonites eschewed the "Anabaptist" label as well, for similar reasons.)[286]

Nevertheless, Estep clearly identified a willingness to endorse full engagement in public and governmental affairs as a trait that has historically distinguished Baptists from their Anabaptist kin. This can be seen in his introduction to Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier's "On the Sword," in which Hubmaier broke with the widespread Anabaptist refusal to wield governmental power. According to Estep,

> in the midst of conflicting ideologies [Hubmaier] was able to see that religious liberty and the separation of church and state did not demand that the Christian *withdraw into an isolationist cocoon of noninvolvement* in order to maintain the integrity of his faith. To the contrary, he saw such involvement a Christian responsibility.[287]

Estep's assessment was repeated by Baptist denominational statesman Foy Valentine in his claim, noted earlier, that Baptists "have never been Anabaptists." Valentine offered this colorful explication of his claim, noting Baptists' involvement with the "Roundhead" cause in the English revolution of the mid-seventeenth century:

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[285]Glen Harold Stassen, "Opening Menno Simons's *Foundation-Book* and Finding the Father of Baptist Origins Alongside the Mother—Calvinist Congregationalism" *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 1998): 34-44.

[286]Stassen, "Revisioning Baptist Identity by Naming Our Origin and Character Rightly," *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 1988), 48-50. On Münster, see chap. 3, p. 68, n.9.

[287]Estep, introduction to Hubmaier, "On the Sword" (1527), *Anabaptist Beginnings: A Sourcebook*, 107. My emphasis.

> We have never believed in withdrawing from the world. It's never been our Baptist way to pull back into pietistic enclaves and to speak in unknown tongues or *to withdraw from the real world of politics and economics and social issues*. The Baptists in England got right in there with Cromwell and kicked the king's soldiers in the seat and even killed them on occasion. We have, as Baptists, always been interested in helping to run things.[288]

Elsewhere, Valentine claimed that Baptists have had their biggest impact on American society when they "grow up" and enter the highest echelons of public life, carrying their Baptist convictions with them.[289]

For many Baptists, then, the *Baptifesto* must have sounded like a call for Baptists to retreat into Estep's "isolated cocoon of noninvolvement," to the extent it was perceived as stressing Anabaptist themes of countercultural communitarianism. (Though, as has been noted, these matters did not receive the same attention as the debate over issues of individualism and authority.) While the historical accuracy of the generalizations about Anabaptists in these excerpts from leading Southern Baptists has not been established, it should be recalled that Yoder repeatedly disavowed the notion that his approach was in any definitive way "Mennonite," and marked by merely parochial emphases. However, he did find inspiration in the earliest Anabaptist communities and he challenged the notion that the separation from "the sword" represented most prominently by the Anabaptists who agreed to the "Schleitheim Confession" implied a rejection of all involvement in civic affairs or disregard for the wider society.[290]

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[288]Oral Memoirs of Foy Dan Valentine, 199. Emphasis added.

[289]Ibid., 107. For examples, he pointed to Baptist Presidents Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary graduate Bill Moyers, former speechwriter for the Johnson administration (now a freelance television journalist who frequently produces investigative reports for public television).

[290]"This does not imply a rejection of concern for public life. This article [on "the sword"] rejects participation in ruling (*Obrigkeit*), but feudal lordship is not all the public life that there was. The

Valentine cited Baptists' involvement in the English Revolution with a kind of pride. As Yoder insisted throughout his career, the primary source of the claim that Anabaptists wanted nothing to do with the "real world" was their commitment to nonviolence rooted in theological, not pragmatic, convictions. (Thus, the most direct ecclesiological descendents of the Anabaptists are now often grouped together as the "peace churches.") The *Baptifesto* did not explicitly call Baptists to "pacifism" as a position, but a careful examination would almost certainly find that the kind of commitments supporting Yoder's "Pacifism of the Messianic Community"[291] are present, perhaps most explicitly in the statement's call for Baptists to live free from nationalism and to "affirm freedom and renounce coercion as a distinct people under God rather than relying on political theories, powers, or authorities."[292]

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suzerainties of the time had no democratic base. They were hereditary (in the Lutheran princely territories) or corporative (in the city states of the upper Rhine basin which became Reformed). They did not provide community services (health, schools, roads, post) but concentrated the use of their arms on the maintenance of their social control, the punishment of common crimes, and the persecution of Anabaptists. It is that kind of government in which, says Schleitheim, there is no place for the disciple of Jesus. Nothing is said on the other hand to exclude participation in other kinds of services in other kinds of regimes. Nor does it call for unconcern even for the governments of the time. Even without any elective voice, Anabaptists took positions about the taxation systems, usury, the death penalty, on the civil wars provoked in Switzerland by the Zwinglian movement, and on the potential crusade against 'the Turk'. Thus renunciation of 'the sword' by no means meant avoiding involvement in public life." (Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism*, 128).

In the sixteenth century, Pilgram Marpeck represented a kind of mediating position on governmental involvement between Hubmaier and the Schleitheim Confession that focused on a more case-by-case approach. Marpeck himself served in several imperial administrative posts, yet he insisted that it was indeed likely that one could not be a faithful follower of Christ and fulfill the duties of certain official positions. When a skeptic asked how the story of the conversion of a Roman Centurion recorded in the book of Acts (chap. 10) could be reconciled with the conviction that Christians should not wield the sword, Marpeck replied with a question of his own: "Who knows how long Cornelius remained an officer after he became a Christian and began to follow the Holy Spirit and his conscience?" See Klassen, "The Limits of Political Authority as seen by Pilgram Marpeck," 356-357.

[291] Yoder, Nevertheless: The Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism (Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1992), 133-138.

[292] *Re-envisioning Baptist Identity*," 308. McClendon wished that the *Baptifesto* had included a clearer statement about "the peacemaking task of Christ's church," though he recognized that concern for brevity might be the primary cause of this omission ("The Believers' Church in Theological Perspective,"

What made Yoder's twentieth-century appropriation of his heritage so significant was his "catholic" insistence that Christianity's most basic doctrinal claims implied a commitment to peacemaking and non-violence by all Christians. It was not just the particular vocation of eccentric minorities whose social insignificance afforded them the luxury of such political irresponsibility. This was essentially the argument of his most famous work, *The Politics of Jesus*. While Yoder saw the respective claims of the brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr as decisive influences upon the prevailing bias against such radical witness in mainstream Christian ethics, his critique of Richard Niebuhr's most famous work sheds the greatest light on the matrix of social, ethical, and theological issues at the heart of the *Baptifesto*'s call for a revisioned Baptist identity.

The Church of Christ in the World of Culture

In *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr identified five basic ways in which Christians have historically understood the relationship between "Christ" (the teacher and embodiment of "radical monotheism" who "points away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good[293]) and "that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name *culture*, now the name *civilization*, is applied in common speech."[294] His types ranged from the radical "Christ against Culture" approach, which stresses the ever-present conflict between obedience to Christ and all other ways of life, to the accomodationist "Christ of Culture" stance, which

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[293]H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 28 (1st edition, 1951). Niebuhr's introductory definition of "Christ" is exceedingly difficult to summarize.

[294]Ibid., 32.

identifies Christ with humanity's best thoughts and highest values. Among those

Christians who reject these extremes, Niebuhr found three mediating types: "Christ

Above Culture," "Christ and Culture in Paradox," and "Christ the Transformer of

Culture."[295]

While Niebuhr claimed that his typology was merely intended to serve as an aid

for description and clarification, Methodist ethicist Paul Ramsey lamented that the vast

majority of readers adopted the "transformationist" position as their own after only

superficial engagement with Niebuhr's text and the other types:

> When Richard Niebuhr's book first appeared almost everyone in American
> Christendom rushed to locate himself among the "transformists": naturalists,
> process theologians, personalists, idealists, Lutherans and Anglicans who were
> sometimes Thomists, as well as those you would have expected. It was as if the
> "typology" or clustering of Christian approaches to man's work in culture and
> history had suddenly collapsed in 1951, so universal was the conviction that, of
> course, the Christian always joins in the transformation of the world whenever this
> is proposed.[296]

For Yoder, this phenomenon demonstrated that Niebuhr's description of the

"transforming culture" position was sufficiently vague that its popularity with readers

stemmed from its apparent congruence with the modern Western notion of progress: "i.e.

that society moves forward from one transformation to the next, always getting better by

coming nearer to what 'culture' was intended to be."[297]

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[295]While he conceded that particular individuals or traditions were too complex to fit completely within any of the types, Niebuhr listed representative figures of each group: Tertullian, Leo Tolstoy, and the Mennonites ("against culture"); Liberal Protestantism ("of culture"); Thomas Aquinas ("above culture"); Martin Luther ("paradox"); Augustine of Hippo, John Calvin, and nineteenth-century British theologian and socialist F.D. Maurice ("transforming culture").

[296]Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1961), 112ff, cited in Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*" in Glen H. Stassen, Diane M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds. *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 53.

[297]Yoder, ibid.

Yoder's "radical reformation" position, with its stress on the church community's specific ethic of discipleship embedded in a biblically- and theologically-informed sense of "peoplehood," can be easily identified with the "Christ against Culture" type on the radical extreme of Niebuhr's typology.[298] It is therefore likely to be quickly dismissed as inadequate by those who hold to the standard reading of Niebuhr's typology as described by Ramsey. (Valentine, Southern Baptists' most prominent ethicist in the second half of the twentieth century, surely knew *Christ and Culture* well). Niebuhr admitted that the "against culture" stance, with its unswerving allegiance to Christ as lord, appears to address the Christian with the most forceful logic and would seem to be closest to the New Testament's own view, yet in the final analysis he considered it "a necessary and inadequate position."[299] Yoder claimed Niebuhr's assumptions and structure made it the least tenable of all positions and the one *Christ and Culture* critiques most stringently.[300]

In a critical response written as the book was just reaching "classic" status[301] Yoder argued that Niebuhr arranged and described his types in such a way that the

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[298]Ibid, 32. Yoder claimed that Niebuhr seems to have incorrectly equated Mennonites with the Old Order Amish in Niebuhr's description of what he saw as their well-meaning, yet self-deluded attempt at total rejection of the dominant culture (perhaps the fatal flaw of the "against culture" Christians in Niebuhr's analysis).

[299]Niebuhr, 65.

[300]Per Yoder, Niebuhr's controlling assumptions about culture were: because culture is monolithic, each position can be measured by the consistency of its response to culture; and because culture is autonomous, the value of culture is "independent of Christ in the orders of being and knowing" (ibid, 54-55). He described Niebuhr's Christ as a moralist preaching transcendent values who is distanced (not explicitly, and perhaps unintentionally) from the major historic Christian dogmatic claims about Jesus of Nazareth, and who is portrayed as inadequate, in a certain manner—his insights need to be supplemented by those available through "creation," "history" and, ultimately, the other members of the Trinity who lay mysteriously behind these realms (ibid., 59). (Yoder submitted Niebuhr's Trinitarian argument to particularly harsh critique.)

[301]Written initially for university study groups, it was widely circulated for years, though not published (in a revised and updated version) until 1996.

"transformationist" type would emerge as the clear favorite.[302] He also challenged the

appropriateness of Niebuhr's basic categories.[303] Put briefly, Yoder claimed that Niebuhr

defined "Christ" too abstractly and "culture" too monolithically: a more concrete

description of the claims of Christ would require the church to be "against" some aspect

of the surrounding culture (even if only to be "for" it in another sense); further, he

claimed, it is possible to take strong stands "against" particular aspects of one's culture

(its political establishment, for example) while contributing to other aspects of common

life (the arts, economic exchanges, etc.).

In Yoder's mind, *Christ and Culture* deserved serious challenge because "a

typology which is more convincing to the naïve than it is true when examined . . . gets in

the way of wholeness and understanding rather than furthering those goals."[304] He spoke

from long experience of being stereotyped as an "against culture" sectarian who might be

invited to ecumenical ethics conferences, but only to serve as the token ("necessary . . .")

representative of a stance others could define themselves over against (". . . and

inadequate").

'Authentic Transformation'

Niebuhr ultimately ruled out the "against culture" stance as a coherent and

commendable option because "it affirms in words what it denies in action; namely, the

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[302] For example, the description of "Christ transforming culture" does not conclude with the same section of critical reservations that accompanied the others.

[303]Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 31-89.

[304]Ibid., 47.

possibility of sole dependence on Jesus Christ to the exclusion of culture."[305] That is, in

his view, the advocates of a pure Christian ethic are self-deluded in their attempts to

escape culture, making their naïve sense of righteousness all the more dangerous. A

mundane example might be a fundamentalist Christian oil prospector who adamantly

insists upon a literal reading of the Genesis creation account but still consults the best

geological data produced by the same "secular science" whose evolutionary biases he

despises when drilling. For Niebuhr, "culture" was inescapable. The ethically important

question is how to conserve, select, and convert the various cultural achievements of

human existence.[306] This is the deepest level at which *Christ and Culture* appears to

challenge what Yoder called an "ethic of discipleship" that shares the "against culture"

position's unswerving allegiance to Christ as the source of concrete ethical guidance in

all of life.

Within the context of late twentieth century Baptist life, Southern Baptist

moderates almost certainly would have characterized their conservative opponents as

militant, "against" culture-warriors who pronounced jeremiads upon increasingly godless

American culture, all while reaping the material benefits of the very same society.

However, the kind of moderate Baptist sensibility represented by Shurden's earnest plea

on behalf of staying within "polarities" (freedom and responsibility) in depicting

authentic Baptist identity cannot simply be lined up on the opposite side of any pervasive

cultural conflict. As the last chapter attempted to demonstrate, Baptist identification with

an essentially libertarian notion of freedom would make any strong corporate stance

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[305]Niebuhr, 69.

[306]Ibid., 70.

outside the mainstream impossible to maintain: individual dissenters could be tolerated with little trouble, so long as they did not try to reshape the status quo in any substantial manner. To the extent that the *Baptifesto* represented a "sectarian" concern for corporate commitment to countercultural discipleship, it posed the same threat as the conservatives to this ideal of Baptist unity-in-diversity.

In the more than half-century since the publication of *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr's types have entered the vocabulary of theologically-informed Americans. When read together with Yoder's critique, this classic work provides the grounds for a provocative, yet surely insightful angle from which to view the Baptist debate over the *Baptifesto* and Baptist identity.[307] With Yoder's critique of *Christ and Culture* in the background, it would appear that supporters of the *Baptifesto* could reply to the charge of "against culture" sectarianism and describe an alternative response to "the enduring problem" in two ways: by retaining the typology but challenging its application; or by proposing an entirely different lens for viewing the shape of the problem.

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[307]In "Southern Baptists and Northern Evangelicals: Cultural Factors and the Nature of Religious Alliances," Barry Hankins used Niebuhr's types to explain why Southern Baptists remained aloof from northern evangelicals until the late twentieth century (*Religion and American Culture* 7:2 (Summer 1997): 271-298). For Hankins, Southern Baptists' regional clout and their virtual status as a "church" in Troeltsch's sociological sense led them to adopt a stance closest to "Christ of Culture" whereas the more culturally and socially embattled evangelicals emphasized the motifs of "Christ against Culture" or, possible, "Christ and Culture in Paradox" (279ff).

The present analysis of another (albeit small) strand in Baptist life (the *Baptifesto* and its supporters) adds two elements to Hankins's portrait. First, the observations by Yoder and Ramsey about the popular appropriation of *Christ and Culture* show the ways in which American Christians who would never publicly identify with the accomodationist "of culture" stance might unknowingly adopt something very similar. Second, these observations help clarify how and why the heirs of the twentieth-century Southern Baptist denominational center would perceive both the *Baptifesto* and Southern Baptist conservatives as similar threats to Baptist identity.

Theologian Charles Scriven has claimed that "the true Niebuhrian ["transforming culture"] way is the Anabaptist way."[308] Echoing Yoder, Scriven argued that withdrawal from certain aspects of a society can be a profoundly political and culturally creative act:

> Anabaptist witness addressed social and political structures as well as individuals. It spoke judgment upon rulers and institutions while upholding an alternative form of social life as a way of changing the world. This was a form of political engagement. Anabaptists believed that the Bible requires such engagement, and I am saying they were right.[309]

Scriven provided the most direct answer to the general readers Ramsey identified who equated "Christ transforming culture" with any commitment to social progress. The claim is that "authentic transformation" of culture requires a much more substantive alternative than isolated witnesses or a pragmatic or bureaucratic commitment to pluralism can provide.

Yoder argued that Niebuhr's "Christ" turned the identifiable, historic Jesus, with all his Jewish particularity, into "one of the poles of a dualism," leaving mature Christians the challenge of finding the right balance between radical discipleship and worldly wisdom.[310] Thus, he disagreed on a fundamental level with the very categories of "Christ" and "culture" as helpful heuristic tools. Yoder repeatedly insisted (not systematically, in the context of a philosophical superstructure, but in slightly different ways in various contexts) that the ethically significant distinction for Christians is that

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[308]Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 20. Cited in Diane M. Yeager, "The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church," Stassen et al., 101.

[309]Scriven, in ibid., 170.

[310]Ibid., 43. Yoder claimed that Niebuhr's portrait of Christ as pointing away from "culture" evinced no serious engagement with biblical scholarship.

between "church" and "world." This passage is perhaps his most extensive description of

the core assumption of what he called "gospel social ethics":

> The definition of the gathering of Christians is their confessing Jesus Christ as
> Lord. The definition of the whole of human society is the absence of that
> confession, whether through conscious negation or simple ignorance, despite the
> fact that Christ is ("objectively," "cosmically") Lord for them as well. The duality
> of church and world is not a slice separating the religious from the profane, nor the
> ecclesiastical from the civil, nor the spiritual from the material. It is the divide on
> the side of which there are those who confess Jesus as Lord, who in so doing are
> both secular and profane, both spiritual and physical, both ecclesiastical and civil,
> both individual and organized, in their relationships to one another and to others.
> The difference as to whether Christ is confessed as Lord is a difference on the level
> of real history and personal choices; not a matter of realm or levels or even
> dimensions.[311]

In short, this is the line that "Constantinianism" blurs by allowing the world to absorb the

church, or vice-versa.

Conclusion

The major assumption implied by Yoder's duality is that it is intelligible to speak

about "the church" as a discernible social entity whose confession of Christ gives it a

specific social and ethical character. Significantly, Yoder's distinction does not make the

church the exclusive realm of all truth and goodness, but it does insist that the church is

the place where God's ultimate intentions for the world are known, proclaimed, and

given concrete expression.[312] He insisted that the biblical view of the church required

that it be a community whose common resources (including the Holy Spirit) would

enable the will of God in particular situations to be known.[313]

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[311]Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 108-109.

[312]In *The Christian Witness to the State*, Yoder maintained, "the Christian speaking to social issues should expect most often to be taking the unpopular side" (Scottdale Penn.: Herald Press, 2001), 41.

[313]Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned," 71.

This last claim raises a host of practical questions and understandably prompts concern from all who have encountered willful and powerful entities confident that they knew the will of God for themselves and others. The vast majority of the debate over the *Baptifesto* in the pages of the moderate or "liberty party" publication *Baptists Today* focused on such issues. In response, the *Baptifesto'*s co-authors and their supporters pointed to the statement's express commitment to an orderly and inclusive process of community conversation and prayer for discernment. Most fundamentally—and this seems to get to the heart of the matter—they claimed that procedural concerns must not be allowed to overshadow the critical theological and ethical significance of the church. McClendon expressed this conviction when responding to Southern Baptist biblical scholar Frank Stagg, who worried that the statement's advocacy of Bible study in "reading communities" in opposition to a right of private judgment leaves churches open to demagoguery and authoritarianism. McClendon admitted that such things had certainly happened and could happen again, but he saw this as beside the point because, in his words, "the misuse of a practice does not abolish it, does it?"[314]

In Yoder's case, he believed a commitment to an "ethic of discipleship" required the same immense patience in pressing one's case as does the refusal to use more expedient violent means to achieve otherwise worthy ends.[315] Significantly, he stated that "the fundamental wrongness of the vision of Christendom is its illegitimate takeover of the world: its ascription of a Christian loyalty or duty to those who have made no

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[314]McClendon, "An Open Letter to Frank Stagg," *Baptists Today*, October 16, 1997.

[315]Yoder, "'Patience' as Method in Moral Reasoning: Is an Ethic of Discipleship 'Absolute'?" in Stanley Hauerwas et al., eds., *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 24-42.

confession and, thereby, its denying to the non-confessing creation the freedom of unbelief that the nonresistance of God in creation gave to a rebellious humanity."[316]

For the *Baptifesto* and its supporters in Baptist life, the important issue was not the relative importance of the "individual" vis-à-vis the "community" (or vice-versa), but the recovery of a substantive church-world distinction, not for its own sake, or for purposes of self-justification, but to enable the church's gospel mission and message to be seen and heard as a genuine alternative full of good news within the concreteness of history. The *Baptifesto's* most radical challenge to mainstream Baptist thought in America was its attempt to press the claim that concern for pragmatic unity-in-diversity—both within the Christian (or Baptist) community and between the church and its host culture—must not take precedence over the church's faithful corporate witness. This is the force of the statement's rejection of "any and all efforts to allow secular political versions of church-state separation to define the boundaries or the nature of our witness as the free and faithful people of God.[317] The *Baptifesto* wanted to convince late twentieth century Baptists that the real "enduring problem" is that the world has not yet become the church, and the church is prone to forget this when it becomes inconvenient.

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[316]Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," *The Royal Priesthood*, 109.

[317]"Re-envisioning Baptist Identity," 309.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Moderate Southern Baptists debated the viability of the *Baptifesto*'s call for a new

direction throughout 1997-1998, primarily via the opinion pages of the moderate

newsweekly *Baptists Today.* During the debate, Texas pastor Kyle Childress explained

that his decision to sign the statement was not motivated by partisan interest in an

abstract theologian's debate, but because he believed the *Baptifesto*

> helps to point us in the direction of being a church, a community of Jesus Christ,
> who will have the sense to know the difference between justice and injustice and
> have the gumption to stand up and say so. We need churches such as the black
> church of the spring and summer of 1963 in Birmingham, which raised and
> trained children capable of facing police dogs, firehoses and jail. We need to be a
> people such as the people of Le Chambon, France, who sheltered Jews and
> smuggled them to safety in Switzerland in the face of the Nazi Holocaust. We
> need a prophetic people, not just a few individual voices. Like Moses said,
> 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets' (Num. 11:29)."[318]

Childress urged his fellow Baptists to acknowledge and give full theological significance

to the fact that notable prophetic voices, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., are shaped

by and speak to and for particular communities. Of the competing visions for Baptist life

on offer, Childress claimed the *Baptifesto* alone described the kind of churches that could

form believers ready and able to pursue such costly faithfulness.

Childress's endorsement of the statement on these grounds provides evidence for

a link between the *Baptifesto* and the strand of twentieth-century Southern Baptist

radicals and "liberals" who took controversial positions on such issues as race relations

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[318] Kyle Childress, "No Lonely Prophets," *Baptists Today*, Oct. 16, 1997, 22 (letter to editor).

and war and peace and were alienated from the mainstream of Southern Baptist life. However, while the statement can be read as a possible trajectory of the "genealogy of dissent" described by David Stricklin[319], this is only a partial description. The *Baptifesto* represented a fascinating confluence of countercultural activism and a catholic, even sacramental, sensibility.

As the introductory chapter noted, this thesis has modest goals. I have attempted to provide a thick description of the 1997 *Baptifesto* that moves beyond abstract debates over "individualism" and "communitarianism" and clarifies the statement's relationship to rival renderings of the Baptist story being offered in the ongoing debate over Baptist identity. I have argued that the *Baptifesto* merits attention because of its ties to an important and influential contemporary school of thought in theology and ethics. Moreover, the concerns it expressed about privatized religion bring into focus issues central to wide-ranging discussions both inside and outside the contemporary academy and various Christian traditions.

There is no way around the essentially-contested nature of the notion of "Baptist identity." By showing the substantial affinities between the *Baptifesto* and Yoder's advocacy of a radically catholic ecclesiological and ethical stance, I hope to have established that the *Baptifesto* can be read as an internal critique of an influential strand of Baptist self-understanding (the "moderate" tradition that looks to E.Y. Mullins and "soul competency for inspiration) posed from within the radical reformation tradition. In other words, while some Baptists may continue to insist that "we have never been Anabaptist," the various challenges the *Baptifesto* raised, while not solely indebted to

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[319] See chap. 2, p. 36.

Anabaptist, "radical reformation", or believers' church influences, are indeed part of what could be described as a family quarrel. At the very least, intellectually-honest Baptists cannot summarily dismiss the statement as an attempt at subversion by crypto-Catholics who have adopted convictions alien to the Baptist heritage.

The *Baptifesto* needs continued critical scrutiny, and its sympathizers will need to demonstrate that the kind of church it envisioned can indeed exist in twenty-first century America. In the end, it would be tragic if the substantive concerns the statement raised about privatized religion and the churches' cultural captivity in America were lost or distorted amid the still-reverberating shouts of the recent Southern Baptist civil war. The quarrel over Baptist identity can only avoid a permanent descent into the swift and mutual condemnations of so much contemporary political discourse by recognizing that there is much more in heaven and earth than dreamt of in the philosophies of late-twentieth century (Southern) Baptist politics or the calcified (yet likely fading) liberal-conservative camps of American Christianity.

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