THE REFORMATION ROOTS
OF THE BAPTIST TRADITION

Timothy George

The Reformation of the sixteenth century was a tremendous movement of spiritual and ecclesial renewal which occurred at the critical juncture between the waning of the Middle Ages and the dawn of modern times. Contributing as it did to this basic shift in Western consciousness, the Reformation also signalled a fundamental reorientation in Christian theology. Luther’s discovery of justification by faith alone, Zwingli’s insistence on the clarity and certainty of Holy Scripture, Calvin’s emphasis on the glory and sovereignty of God, and the Anabaptist quest for a true visible church all found expression in numerous new confessions, commentaries, liturgies, hymns, martyrologies, and church orders.

The impact of the Reformation, however, was not confined to the first generation of hearers who responded to the reformers’ message. Like a great earthquake which continues to generate seismic aftereffects, the Reformation set in motion a revolution in religious life the effects of which were being felt well into the next century.

Baptists and the Reformation Heritage

Nowhere was this truer than in England, where the Reformation had begun, at least officially, as an act of state. By the time of Queen Elizabeth, there had arisen a party (first called “puritans” in the 1560s) which called for a further reformation of the Church of England. These “precise” believers, the “hotter sort of Protestants,” as they were dubbed, disliked the prayer book of the established church and opposed the wearing of vestments by the clergy. Some called for radical changes in church polity, and all insisted on a lively preaching ministry. Some Puritans, disillusioned with the slow pace of change, turned Separatist.

Like Robert Browne they were determined to effect a "Reformation without tarying for anie."²

Out of this ferment the Baptist tradition as we know it today emerged in the early seventeenth century. Modern historians have isolated two separable beginnings of the English Baptist movement: the General Baptists, who evolved out of the church planted by Thomas Helvrys at Spitalfields near London in 1612, which was an offshoot of the rebaptized exiled congregation of John Smyth; and the Particular Baptists, who arose among the underground London congregations of the 1630s. The General Baptists stressed the universal scope of the atonement, holding with the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius that Christ died for all persons. The Particular Baptists, on the other hand, were strict Calvinists who were in basic agreement with the five heads of doctrine propounded by the Synod of Dort (1618-19).³

How are Baptists related to the heritage of the Reformation? This question has proved difficult to answer for at least three reasons. First, the early English Baptists did not conform to any set typology of religious groupings, as Ernst Troeltsch discovered when he tried to fit them into his church-type/sect-type schema. On the one hand, he found strong affinities with the Continental Anabaptist tradition including believer’s baptism, voluntary church membership, and the requirements of moral discipline. Yet, he concluded, “on account of their historic origin and their permanent environment, they became strongly impregnated with the spirit of Calvinism.”⁴

Furthermore, the diverse strands in Baptist life make it difficult to speak univocally about appropriations of the Reformation tradition. In the seventeenth century, the Particular Baptists, who were more numerous, better educated, and more influential than the Generals, identified more closely with the mainline

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Protestant traditions while the Generals, who were more open to sectarian influences, betrayed a genuine kinship with the Radical Reformation. Similar inclinations were reincarnated in the struggle between the two most noted English Baptists of the nineteenth century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon and John Clifford.

In addition, the modern obsession with denominational origins has clouded the deep continuities which place Baptists within the mainstream of Christian history. Christopher Hill has bluntly evaluated the method which has characterized much of traditional Baptist historiography: "There seems to me sometimes to be as much fiction and unwarranted assumption-and sheer waste of time-in tracing the genealogy of sects as of individuals." In successionist interpretations of Baptist history, the Reformation was essentially a hunting ground for the "missing link" between contemporary Baptists and their ancient forebears. More recently, historians have labored with refined methodology to prove-or disprove-specific Anabaptist influence on the earliest English Baptists. While such research is not to be gainsaid, it has frequently missed the forest for the trees.

These concerns notwithstanding, the thesis of this essay is that Baptists, along with other Protestants, are indeed heirs of the Reformation. Of course, they are not, nor have they ever been, mere clones of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, or anyone else. For Baptists the great doctrines of the Reformation were refracted through the prism of persecution and dissent which informed their intense advocacy of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Baptists are duly proud of these and other denominational distinctives and yet, at their best, they have also recognized the common ground which they share with other

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evangelical Christians. Thus the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1890, adopted a resolution calling for an interdenominational committee to study the basis of agreement on fundamental issues among Christian bodies which adhered to the sole authority of Holy Scripture. The kind of “evangelical ecumenicity” which the Convention envisioned has in fact come to pass as Baptists have worked side by side with other Christians of like persuasion on numerous concerns from the Anti-Saloon League to Billy Graham crusades and Bible translation committees. The (often unspoken) basis of such cooperative efforts has been a shared commitment to the values of evangelical Christianity. This is not to deny that Baptists have also been, at different times and in varying measures, parochial, isolationist, and even downright snobbish in their attitude toward other evangelicals. An effective antidote to such prejudice is a better knowledge of the Baptist tradition itself and the Reformation roots from which it has sprung.

Themes in Baptist Theology: “That Wholesome Protestant Doctrine“

Exactly 300 years ago, in the fall of 1689, the General Assembly of the Particular Baptists of England published what is arguably the most influential confession of faith in Baptist history. The Second London Confession, as it was called, closely paralleled two prior confessional standards: the Savoy Declaration, put forth by the English Congregationalists in 1658, and the Westminster Confession of 1646, the authoritative creed of English Presbyterians. With minor adaptations, the Second London Confession was adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association, which secured the services of Benjamin Franklin to republish it in 1743. It quickly became the dominant confessional standard of

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8 This remarkable proposal was put forth by T. T. Eaton and antedated by two decades the famous call by Episcopal bishop Charles H. Brent for a world conference on faith and order. E. C. Dargan refers to this resolution in his Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches (Louisville: Chas. T. Dearing, 1897), 153. See also James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”? (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), 105.

9 A blunt example of this attitude is the comment made by Foy Valentine during the 1976 presidential election. In an interview with Newsweek, he said concerning Southern Baptists: “We are not evangelicals. That’s a Yankee word. They want to claim us because we are big and successful and growing every year. But we have our own traditions, our own hymns and more students in our seminaries than they have in all of theirs put together.” Kenneth L. Woodard et al., “Born Again! The Year of the Evangelicals,” Newsweek 88 (October 25, 1976), 76.
Baptists in America.\(^{10}\)

In the preface to the Second London Confession, the Baptists of 1689 acknowledge the close similarity between their document and other orthodox confessions, even to the point of common wording “in all the fundamental articles of the Christian religion.” Moreover, they declare that they have deliberately pursued this strategy in order to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but to readily acquiesce in that form of sound words which hath been in consent with the holy scriptures, used by others before us; hereby declaring before God, angels, and men, our hearty agreement with them, in that wholesome Protestant doctrine, which, with so clear evidence of scriptures they have asserted.\(^{11}\)

We can discern an apologetic motive behind the Baptist insistence that they, with other Protestants, were indeed sound orthodox Christians, innocent of the “heterodoxies and fundamental errors” of which they had been accused. A similar concern had moved the framers of the earlier London Confession of 1644; indeed, they declared, it was “the maine wheele that set us a worke.”\(^{12}\) Leon McBeth has correctly observed that Baptists “often used confessions not to proclaim “Baptist distinctives” but instead to show how similar Baptists were to other orthodox Christians.”\(^{13}\) A survey of Baptist confessions reveals a preoccupation with the same themes which were central in the theology of the great reformers of the sixteenth century.

The Doctrine of God

The Protestant reformers saw themselves in continuity with the Trinitarian and

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\(^{10}\) The text of the Second London Confession (hereafter abbreviated SLC) is given in W. L. Lumpkin (ed.), Baptist Confessions of faith (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), 241-295. Originally drafted in 1677, this confession formed the basis of Southern Baptists' first official doctrinal statement, the Abstract of Principles of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. According to James P. Boyce, there was strong sentiment in favor of adopting the Philadelphia Confession en toto as the Seminary's doctrinal standard. In the end, however, it was deemed that an abstract of the Confession would suffice. Nonetheless, Boyce insisted that the Abstract, in congruence with the Confession, exhibit completely “the fundamental doctrines of grace” and reflect clearly “the practices universally prevalent among us.” James P. Boyce, “The Doctrinal Position of the Seminary,” Western Recorder, June 20, 1874.

\(^{11}\) Lumpkin, Confessions, 245.

\(^{12}\) Lumpkin, Confessions, 154.

\(^{13}\) McBeth, Baptist Heritage, 68.
Perichoresis

Christological consensus of the early church. They especially emphasized the will of God, his sovereignty over creation and his providential governance of nature and history over against certain static and pantheistic conceptions of God which had arisen in the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages. Philip S. Watson has aptly interpreted Luther’s theology through the praise, “Let God be God!” “In Luther, the theocentricity of primitive Christianity returns: he seeks to eradicate every vestige of the egocentric and anthropocentric tendency from the religious relationship.”

Baptists too developed their theology in the light of Luther’s “Copernican revolution.” Their confessions usually begin with an affirmation of the being and attributes of God, who is portrayed as utterly transcendent, graciously beneficent, and immutably just in all his dealings with humankind. While thus asserting the absoluteness of God (“immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, Almighty, every way infinite”), Baptists strongly resisted the deist notion of an “absentee landlord” God who seldom if ever interfered with his creation. In their doctrine of providence Baptists echoed Calvin’s idea that in every one of life’s events, human beings have direct “business with God” (negotium cum Deo). The Abstract of Principles ably summarizes this point when it declares that God, without violating human responsibility or making himself the author of sin, “from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events.”

Just as the reformers of the sixteenth century found themselves beset with an incipient anti-Trinitarianism, so the Baptists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relived this classic debate within their own ranks. In the wake of the Act of Toleration (1689), the General Baptists were drawn more and more into a rationalistic denial of the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. Many General Baptist congregations became in fact Unitarian. A remnant, however, remained faithful to the patristic and Reformation foundations of their tradition. These faithful few continued to revere the “Orthodox

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14 Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God!* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1947), 37. For this motif in Luther’s own writings, see WA 10/1, 25.5.
15 SLC, II. 1.
16 *Institutes* 1.17.2: “Therefore no one will weigh God’s providence properly and profitably but him who considers that his business is with his Maker and the Framer of the universe, and with becoming humility submits himself to fear and reverence.”
Confession” of 1678 which had incorporated (article 38) the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds declaring that all three “ought thoroughly to be received, and believed. For we believe, they may be proved, by most undoubted authority of Holy Scripture, and are necessary to be understood of all Christians.\footnote{Lumpkin, \textit{Confessions}, 326. On the General Baptist decline and apostasy, see A. C. Underwood, \textit{A History of the English Baptists} (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947), 112-125. It has been suggested that the explicit Arminianism of the Generals contributed to their vulnerability to Unitarianism. It was an Arminian, however, Dan Taylor, who led a strong evangelical resurgence among the Generals with his “New Connection” movement in the late eighteenth century. More plausible is the suggestion of Leon McBeth that the Generals, perhaps under the influence of the Quakers, put more emphasis on “mystery” (inner, mystical experience) to the neglect of “history” (the written Scriptures). \textit{Baptist Heritage}, 155.}

\section*{Christology}

The Reformation was marked by a decided stress on the work of Christ rather than the person of Christ. Philip Melanchthon spoke for all of the mainline reformers when he declared that “to know Christ means to know His benefits, not to reflect upon His natures and the modes of His incarnation... We do better to adore the mysteries of Deity than to investigate them.”\footnote{\textit{Melanchthon and Bucer}, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 21, 23-24.} While Luther may have tended toward Monophysitism, and Calvin toward Nestorianism, both remained intentionally faithful to the Chalcedonian description of Jesus Christ as “one in person, two in nature.”

The centrality of Jesus Christ in Reformation theology is reflected in Baptist hymnody and preaching as well as in formal theological documents. Early Baptist confessions followed the Reformed pattern of focusing on Christ as Mediator in his threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King. Baptists have stressed both the complete deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ, just as they have emphasized both the objectivity of the atonement (“Christ... hath fully satisfied the justice of God [and] procured reconciliation”) and the experiential appropriation of the same in regeneration.\footnote{\textit{SLC}, VIII. 5.}

Huldrych Zwingli’s statement that “Christ is the only way to salvation of all who were, are now, or shall be” is a good representation of the sentiment of Baptists who, since the time of William Carey, have been pioneers in the modern missionary movement.\footnote{“Dannenher der einig weg zur siligkeit Christus ist aller, die ie warend, sind und werden.”} The importance of this Christological concern was
voiced by E. Y. Mullins in a famous address to the Southern Baptist Convention in 1923. Speaking in a time of great denominational tension, Mullins rallied the Convention around certain basic nonnegotiable truths concerning Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. He was the divine and eternal Son of God. He wrought miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead. He died as the vicarious atoning Savior of the world and was buried. He rose again from the dead. The tomb was emptied of its contents. In his risen body he appeared many times to his disciples. He ascended to the right hand of the Father. He will come again in person, the same Jesus who ascended from the Mount of Olives. We believe that adherence to the above truths and facts is a necessary condition of service for teachers of our Baptist school.22

Two years later, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted its first confessional statement, The Baptist Faith and Message, which used similar language to characterize Baptist belief in "God the Son."23

Holy Scripture

The Reformation principle of sola scriptura was first affirmed by Luther in his debate with John Eck at Leipzig in 1519. Here Luther declared that popes and church councils could err and that true doctrine could be based on the Bible alone. It should be noted that the issue between the reformers and the Church of Rome was not the divine inspiration or trustworthiness of the Bible. Everyone agreed on these cardinal truths. What was at stake was the relative authority of Scripture and tradition. Was the church to be based on what God had once and for all said (Deus dixit) in Holy Writ, or was the Bible itself to be judged in light of the cumulative traditions of the institutional church? The reformers did not discount completely the value of church tradition, but they clearly subordinated


22 Annual Southern Baptist Convention, 1923.

23 Lumpkin, _Confessions_, p. 394. The most recent theological dispute of note among British Baptists focused on Christology. In a speech before the Baptist Union Assembly in 1971, Michael Taylor compared belief in the deity of Christ to a child’s belief in the tooth fairy! George R. Beasley-Murray replied to Taylor’s views in a widely circulated paper, “The Christological Controversy in the Baptist Union.”
it to the primacy of Holy Scripture.

The mainline reformers also distanced themselves from those spiritualists and mystics who placed their own religious experience above the objectively given revelation of God. The second of the "Ten Conclusions of Berne" (1528) expressed this positive biblicism which was to govern Baptist church life no less than that of the Protestant reformers: "The Church of Christ makes no laws or commandments apart from the Word of God; hence all human traditions are not binding upon us except so far as they are grounded upon or prescribed in the Word of God."24

Historically, Baptists have used a variety of words to describe the Bible: inspired, infallible, certain, true, without error, etc. All of these terms underscore a fundamental commitment to the authority of Holy Scripture. Roger Williams spoke for many early Baptists when he declared that "every word, syllable and tittle in that Scripture or writing is the word, or immediate revealed will of God."25 For much of their history Baptists debated with Presbyterians, Methodists, and other evangelical Christians with whom they differed on baptism, church order, etc., but with whom they shared an implicit confidence in the total truthfulness of the common source to which they appealed. Since the Enlightenment, however, with the rise of modern biblical criticism, the Bible has become a focus of controversy within the Baptist family itself. In a perceptive article on "Biblical Authority According to Baptist Confessions of Faith," James Leo Garrett, Jr. points out that the question of biblical infallibility and/or inerrancy, which has evoked controversy among Baptists during the twentieth century, was not mentioned in the ancient creeds of Christianity, with their focus on the Trinity and Christology, [or] in the major sixteenth-century Reformation confessions of faith, because the issue had not yet arisen.26

It is certainly true that Baptists, with other evangelical Christians, face critical issues related to the Bible which the reformers never knew. The Downgrade Controversy, the Fundamentalist-Modernist struggles, and to some extent the current dispute over inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention are all part of a common effort: to remain faithful to the historic Baptist

confidence in the Bible as the totally true and authoritative Word of God while allowing for the legitimate advances of modern biblical scholarship. It is precisely this tension which underlies the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978), a document which appears to be gaining wider acceptance among Southern Baptists.27

Of course, the Bible was much more than an infallible artifact of revelation to the reformers; it conveyed a sense of encounter with the living God and elicited a religious response for the hearer. Baptists are most clearly the heirs of the Reformation in their stress on the existential appropriation of Holy Scripture. John Bunyan, who was deeply indebted to Luther and the other reformers, once asked: “Have you never a hill Mizar to remember? Have you forgot the close, the milk house, the stable, the barn, and the like, where God did visit your soul? Remember also the Word—the Word, I say, upon which the Lord hath caused you to hope.”28 Calvin taught that the very Holy Spirit who had inspired the prophets and apostles to pen the text of Scripture was present to illuminate the hearts of contemporary believers when they read the Bible. The internal witness of the Holy Spirit is a major feature of the Baptist doctrine of Holy Scripture, one which had prevented their lapsing into a sterile rationalism.29

**Soteriology**

The two burning questions of the Reformation were “What must I do to be

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27 I base this statement on the recent Ridgecrest conferences on inerrancy sponsored by the SBC seminary presidents where the text of the Chicago Statement seems to have been in the forefront of many of the discussions, as well as the projected new commentary from Broadman Press which uses the Chicago Statement as a guideline for writers. Of course, the term inerrancy is not a new word in the denomination. In a book published by the Sunday School Board in 1900, entitled *Baptists, Why and Why Not*, J. M. Frost, then the Corresponding Secretary of the Board, wrote: “We accept the Scriptures as an all-sufficient and infallible rule of faith and practice, and insist upon the absolute inerrancy and sole authority of the Word of God.” Many Baptists, however, are uncomfortable using the word because of its recent political connotations or because of its presumed incompatibility with sound biblical scholarship. For a collection of essays representing this point of view, see Robison B. James (ed.), *The Unfettered Word* (Waco: Word Books, 1987).


29 On this emphasis in Calvin, see George, *Reformers*, 196-199. The *Second London Confession* declares that “our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of the Bible], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 250.
saved?” and "Where can I find the true church?” Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone was, as he put it, the "article by which the church either stands or falls.” Pitched against the medieval Catholic system of works-righteousness, the Protestant doctrine of salvation harked back to the Pauline-Augustinian theology of grace. Indeed, to paraphrase Adolf von Harnack, the mainline reformers represented an acute Augustinianization of Christianity. Original sin, effectual calling, and predestination became lively topics of debate, not only between Protestants and Catholics but also among the reformers themselves.

As we have observed already, English Baptists were born amidst this controversy and became hearty participants in it. The very names which distinguished the two Baptist groupings—Generals and Particulars—recalled their differing views on the extent of the atonement. Calvin had commented sparingly on this point, but by the early seventeenth century it had become a major locus of dispute within Reformed theology. We have noted that the Arminian General Baptists were largely swallowed up by Unitarianism; by 1891 both General and Particular Baptists had merged into a single Baptist Union. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the intensity of the debate between Calvinist and Arminian Baptists in the early decades of their coexistence. B. R. White has likened it to the dispute between Fundamentalists and Liberals in some Baptist circles today.

Despite a persistent Arminian strain within Baptist life, for most of their history most Baptists have adhered faithfully to the doctrines of grace as set forth by the mainline reformers. In the first decade of the nineteenth century the Baptist historian, David Benedict, made an extensive tour of Baptist churches throughout America. He gave the following summary of the Baptist theology he encountered:

> Take this denomination at large, I believe the following will be found a pretty correct statement of their views of doctrine. They hold that man in his natural condition is entirely depraved and sinful; that unless he is born again – changed by grace or made alive unto God – he cannot be fitted for the communion of saints on earth, nor the enjoyment of God in Heaven; that where God hath begun a good work, he will carry it on to the end; that there

is an election of grace—an effectual calling, etc. and that the happiness of the righteous and the misery of the wicked will both be eternal.\textsuperscript{31}

When in 1856 James Petigru Boyce set forth his plan for Southern Baptists' first theological seminary, he warned against the twin errors of Campbellism and Arminianism, the distinctive principles of which "have been engrafted upon many of our Churches: and even some of our Ministry have not hesitated publicly to avow them."\textsuperscript{32} As late as 1905, F. H. Kerkfoot, Boyce’s successor as professor of systematic theology at Southern Seminary, could still say, "Nearly all Baptists believe what are usually termed the ‘doctrines of grace.’"\textsuperscript{33} E. Y. Mullins, who disliked the labels “Calvinist” and “Arminian,” sought to transcend the controversy altogether. While retaining most of the content of traditional Calvinist soteriology, he gave it a new casting by restating it in terms of his distinctive theology of experience.\textsuperscript{34}

For some the evangelical Calvinism of earlier Baptist generations has been eclipsed by a truncated hyper-Calvinism with its anti-missionary, anti-evangelistic emphases. Many other factors have also contributed to the blurring of this part of the Reformation heritage which has shaped Baptist identity: the routinization of revivalism, the growth of pragmatism as a denominational strategy, an attenuated doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and a general theological laxity which has resulted in doctrinal apathy. While seeking to restate traditional themes in fresh contemporary ways, Baptists would do well to connect again with the ideas which informed the theology of such great heroes of the past as John Bunyan, Rogers Williams, Andrew Fuller, Adoniram Judson, Luther Rice, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

**Ecclesiology**

In the perspective of the Reformation the church of Jesus Christ is that communion of saints and congregation of the faithful who heard the Word of

\textsuperscript{32} James P. Boyce, *Three Changes in Theological Institutions: An Inaugural Address Delivered before the Board of Trustees of the Furman University* (Greenville: C. J. Elford’s Book and Job Press, 1856), 33.
\textsuperscript{33} Quoted, Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 50. Nettles’ volume is the first comprehensive survey of the doctrines of grace in Baptist life.
\textsuperscript{34} For a comparison of Boyce and Mullins, see Timothy George, "Systematic Theology at Southern Seminary", *Review and Expositor* 82 (1985), 31-47.
God in Holy Scripture and which, through obedient service to its Lord, bears witness to that Word in the world. Luther rejected the German word for church, Kirche, preferring to speak instead of community, Gemeinde, that which is shared in common, life together. For him the church in an ultimate sense could not be defined in terms of institution, or officers, or structures. It is the people of God awakened to his grace through the proper preaching of the Word and the pure administration of the sacraments (Augsburg Confession, VII). If Luther’s predominant concern was with the evangelical center of the church, later reformers, notably Calvin, the Puritans, and the Anabaptists, took greater pains in determining its circumference. Both of these strands in Reformation ecclesiology were taken up by the Baptists who hammered out their own distinctive doctrine of the church. We can hear echoes of Reformation debates in Baptist discussions of the following five themes.

(1) The Church as the Body of Christ. This phrasing was a significant addendum in the 1963 revision of the Baptist Faith and Message. The earlier 1925 statement had spoken only of the church in a local sense as a “congregation of baptized believers.” The reluctance to speak of the universal church is part of the legacy of Landmarkism which still lingers in some quarters of Baptist life. Early Baptist confessions, however, acknowledged with Luther and Calvin the connection between ecclesiology and the doctrine of election. They speak of the universal, invisible, even “Catholick” church which “consists of the whole number of the Elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head thereof.”

(2) Priesthood of All Believers. Perhaps at no point would contemporary Baptists consider themselves more the heirs of Luther than in their adherence to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Yet no element in his teaching is more misunderstood. For Luther the priesthood of all believers did not mean that every Christian is his or her own priest and hence possesses the “right of private judgment” in matters of faith and doctrine. This is a modern perversion of Luther’s original intention. The essence of his doctrine can be put in one sentence: Every Christian is someone else’s priest, and we are all priests to one another. The priesthood of all believers speaks more of the Christian’s service than his status. The early Baptists spoke of the local church as a “compact and knit Citie” composed of visible saints who maintain “an holy fellowship and

35 SLC, XXVI. 1; Lumpkin, Confessions, 285.
communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification." Russell Aldwinckle has reminded Baptists of the importance of recovering the original Reformation meaning of this great principle.

In our claims to freedom Baptists need to be on guard against a serious misunderstanding of the priesthood of all believers as this was understood by the Protestant Reformers. The Priesthood of all believers means the freedom within the community of believers to be, as Luther said, Christ to our neighbour, to show forth the special kind of love and compassion which flows from Christ and works in those who are members of His body, the church.

(3) Covenant and Discipline. Baptist ecclesiology most closely approximates the Anabaptist ideal in its emphasis on the church as an intentional community composed of regenerated and baptized believers who are bound to one another and to their Lord by a solemn covenant. Historically, the ritual of covenant taking was both the means of gathering a new congregation at its inception and a rite of passage into the fellowship for new members. The early Baptists, like the English Separatists and the Anabaptists before them, regarded discipline as an essential mark of a true visible church. Following Matthew 18:15-18, Baptist confessions outline the procedures of admonition, censure, and excommunication. Although susceptible to abuse, church discipline was intended to be remedial: it aimed at restoring the lapsed brother or sister to full fellowship if possible. Beyond that, it served to mark off clearly the boundaries between the church and its environing culture and thus to preserve the purity of the witness of the church in the world. As Baptists have evolved from small sectarian beginnings into what one historian has called "the catholic phase of their history," both the covenantal and disciplinary features of their church life have become marginal to their identity. With the loss of these historic distinctives has come a new crisis of spirituality.

(4) Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptists have followed the Protestant

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36 Lumpkin, Confessions, 168, 290.
37 This is an excerpt from an address on "The Nature and Purpose of our Freedom," delivered to the Baptist World Alliance in 1965. It is reprinted in Walter B. Shurden (ed.), The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), 213-219. For a further elucidation of this theme, see Timothy George, "The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity", Criswell Theological Review 3 (1989).
reformers in retaining only two of the seven sacraments observed by the
central church. Most Baptists prefer the word *ordinances* to sacraments as a
way of distorting themselves from sacramentalism, a view which imputes
salvific efficacy to the creaturely elements or the liturgical rite rather than to the
Creator and Redeemer. One of the most important contributions which Baptists
have made to the wider life of the church is their recovery of the early church
practice of baptism as an adult rite of initiation signifying a committed
participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In many
contemporary Baptist settings, however, baptism is in danger of being divorced
from the context of a decisive life commitment. This unfortunate development is
reflected both in the liturgical placement of baptism in the worship service—often
tackled on at the end as a kind of afterthought—and also in the proper age and
preparation of baptism candidates. This situation mutes the historic Baptist
protest against infant baptism, a protest which insisted on the intrinsic connec-
tion between biblical baptism and repentance and faith.

Baptist understandings of the Lord’s Supper have followed a similar
minimalist trajectory. While the reformers of the sixteenth century debated
furiously over proper eucharistic theology, they all deeply valued the Lord’s
Supper as a centering experience of worship in the life of the church. Luther
declared that the Supper is given for “daily food and sustenance to refresh and
strengthen us.” Calvin called it a “spiritual banquet,” while even Zwingli, with
his memorialist emphasis, admitted that it “supports and augments faith.” For
none of the Reformation traditions is it correct to characterize the Lord’s Supper
as “merely” a symbol. In seeking to articulate a balanced eucharistic theology,
Baptists can do no better than to listen afresh to what their seventeenth-century
forbears declared in the *Second London Confession:*

> Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible Elements in this Ordi-
nance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not cardinally,
and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified and all
the benefits of his death: the Body and Blood of Christ, being then not
corporally, or carnally, but spiritually present to the faith of Believers, in that
Ordinance, as the Elements themselves are to their outward senses.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{38}\) Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 293. For an excellent summary of the Reformation debates over the Lord’s
228, 303-339. On baptism, see Timothy George, ”The Southern Baptists,” *Baptism and Church: A
(5) Cooperation and Mission. One of the tragic consequences of the Reformation was the splitting into competing parities, camps, and movements of committed Christians who were united in their basic adherence to the evangelical faith. Out of this very ferment, however, there arose a quest for Christian unity. Indeed, the first efforts to isolate certain "fundamentals" of the faith—an exercise usually associated with a fractious, divisive spirit—were part of an irenicist movement among the reformers of conflicting confessions.

Despite their reserve about full participation in modern ecumenical endeavors, Baptists have cooperated among themselves and with other evangelical Christians throughout their history. The development of associational connections, support for missionary and educational movements, the organizing of conventions and denominations all bear witness to this fact. The recent evangelical resurgence in American Christianity offers Southern Baptists in particular an opportunity to extend the frontiers of fellowship and cooperation with likeminded brothers and sisters who share many of the same Reformation roots and among whom may be found many willing partners in a common witness to a lost world.

Conclusion

In 1928 F. W. Patterson, then president of Acadia University, addressed the Baptist World Alliance which was meeting in Toronto. In the context of resisting calls for Baptists to join with other Protestants in a church merger, Patterson nonetheless spoke warmly of the common linkage which joined Baptists with other heirs of the Reformation.

The things that Baptists have in common with other Protestants are much more important than the things in which they differ from them. If we think of other Protestants in terms of origins, Baptists spring from the same general stock; if we think of them in terms of truth, Baptists confess joyfully that they hold great areas of truth in common; they are nourished by the same Scriptures: they believe in the same God and in His grace; they worship in the same spirit; they recognize equally the fact of sin, the necessity of redemption, the initiative of God in the work of redemption, and the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the way of God. If we think of them in terms of objectives, our general aim and our major emphasis are the same. We know that Baptists have no monopoly of Christianity

Patterson had no intention of denigrating the distinctive features of the Baptist heritage. Indeed, his concluding argument was that Baptists could best serve Christ not by joining a pan-church union but rather by “becoming better Baptists.” He knew and valued the great role Baptists had played in the struggle for religious liberty; he appreciated the special patterns of worship, church order, and missionary outreach which to his mind justified the continued existence of Baptists as a unique denomination. Yet he analyzed correctly, I believe, the wider theological and spiritual context which placed Baptists within the larger family of evangelical Christianity. He called on Baptists of his generation to recognize and celebrate this affinity while not forgetting their own specific history and mission within the Body of Christ. This is a message Baptists still need urgently to hear as they face a new identity crisis in the last decade of the twentieth century.

39 Shurden (ed.), Life of Baptists, 86.