

SECTION 2

**KEY ISSUES IN BAPTIST
THEOLOGY**



There is one body and one Spirit, just as
you were called in one hope of your
calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
one God and Father of all, who is above
all, and through all, and in you all.

EPHESIANS 4:4-6

THE FUTURE OF BAPTIST THEOLOGY WITH A LOOK AT ITS PAST



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Looking Back on Four Centuries of Baptist Theology

The Chief Differentiating Theological Issues among Baptists

From my studies of the four-century history of Baptist theology¹ I have come to the conclusion that the principal differentiating issues among Baptists during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were the Calvinistic-Arminian differences, or to be more specific, the issues that differentiate the Reformed Synod of Dort (1618-1619) and the followers of Jacob Arminius, who framed the five Remonstrant Articles (1610). I have also concluded that the chief differentiating doctrinal issues for Baptists during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the liberal-evangelical issues. Now, let's first take a look at the Calvinistic-Arminian debate.

These differences were initially manifested in the separate and distinct origins of the General and the Particular Baptists in England. They are essentially soteriological, dealing with the relationship of the divine and the human in our salvation. I have challenged the accuracy of the commonly used acronym to specify the Dortian doctrines, the TULIP, for it was not so much total depravity that separated these two theological systems from the Arminian viewpoint as it was the nature of repentance and faith— whether they are the gifts of God or the responses of human beings. Each of these Dutch-derived theological stances was capable of spawning extremes, notably Hyper-Calvinism from Dort and neo-Pelagianism from the Arminians. I have offered, possibly for the first time, five distinguishing marks of Hyper-Calvinism: the supralapsarian order of divine decrees; the pre-temporal covenant of redemption made by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; eternal justification somewhat separated for the exercise of faith in time; rejection of offers of grace to the non-elect; and antinomianism. Hyper-Calvinism plagued the Particular Baptists during the eighteenth century, and Pelagian positions can be detected among the liberal and modernist theologians in the Northern Baptist Convention in the early twentieth century.

¹James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009).

The liberal-evangelical issues were not essentially soteriological. Rather they centered on Christology, revelation and the Bible, human origins, and to some extent eschatology. Liberal theology for Baptists and other Protestants developed in response to the new nineteenth century theological climate—especially biblical criticism, Darwinian evolution, and the Industrial Revolution. Whereas liberals embraced the new climate, evangelicals or conservatives did not. Indeed Northern Baptists had mediating theologians such as Ezekiel G. Robinson and Augustus H. Strong. But once again extremists were spawned—modernists on the one hand and fundamentalists on the other. I concur with Kenneth Cauthen's verdict that liberals and modernists are to be differentiated. For liberals there was still a need for Jesus, however truncated, but for modernists Jesus was dispensable; modern thought instead would suffice. The question has not been settled as to how many fundamentals were defended by the fundamentalists, but George M. Marsden has aptly identified fundamentalism as "militantly antimodernist Protestant evangelicalism" between the 1870s and the 1920s, but especially during the 1920s. Marsden's definition allows us to conceive of evangelicalism as preceding and succeeding fundamentalism.

Now in the last quarter century among Southern Baptists, there arose a neo-Calvinist movement, a neo-fundamentalist movement, and a moderate movement.

Parallel Baptist Theological Trends

Parallel to, and sometimes contemporaneous with, the Calvinist-Arminian and the liberal-evangelical differences have been other theological tendencies. I cite four of these.

First, Baptists have engaged in polemic in defense of their own distinctive beliefs. This has taken two forms: the earlier and the later. The earlier form was the literature on believer's baptism by immersion, written against Paedobaptists and focused on the candidate or the mode or on both. This type of writing extended from John Spilsbury to the First London Confession (1644) to Benjamin Keach to John Gill to Dan Taylor to Alexander Carson to John Jay Butler to John L. Dagg to James Robinson Graves. Baptism was seen as the crucial issue between Baptists and other Christians. The later form was a genre of literature, written from ca. 1850 to ca. 1950, on the cluster of beliefs and practices called "Baptist distinctives." Since the genre was contemporaneous with the greatest influence of Landmarkism on Southern Baptists, it might be easy to posit a theory of cause and effect. But the fact that Northern and English Baptists were at the same time contributing significantly to this genre would undermine any such theory. As R. Stanton Norman has noted, this literature tended either to magnify the authority of the Scriptures or that of Christian experience (notably E.Y. Mullins). One may indeed ask whether the demise of this literature during the last sixty years has been a major factor in the failure of Baptist churches in the United States to teach their members about the Baptist heritage.

Second, Baptists have continued to affirm those basic Christian doctrines that they share with other professing Christian and with all Protestants. Baptists have adhered to the patristic consensus regarding the Trinity and the person of Christ, or made the march from Nicaea I to

Chalcedon, even when they did not formally acknowledge such. Note John Gill on the Trinity. Hence Baptists were able to identify heresy, such as the earliest English General Baptists becoming Unitarian in belief by the early eighteenth century. The Second London Confession (1677) of Particular Baptists and the Orthodox Creed (1678) of General Baptists stressed both in structure and in content kinship with the Presbyterian Westminster Confession. Baptists have shared with the heirs of the magisterial Reformation such beliefs as the authority of Scripture, justification by grace through faith, the priesthood of all believers, predestination, church discipline, and either Zwinglian or Calvinist understandings of the Lord's Supper.

Third, Baptists in the twentieth century made different responses to the Ecumenical Movement with its emphasis on structured transdenominational church union. British Baptists, Northern Baptists, most African-America conventions in the United States, and a scattering of other unions and conventions joined the World Council of Churches. Southern Baptists, Latin American Baptists, and a larger number of unions and conventions did not, being unwilling to go beyond spiritual unity and limited cooperation and expressing fears of a "one world church." Ernest A. Payne and Edward Roberts-Thompson championed the ecumenical cause, and H.E. Dana and William R. Estep, Jr. represented the other side. The World's Council's involvement in social and political issues, such as financial aid to revolutionary movements in Africa during the 1960s and 1970s, and away from evangelization and church planting, decelerated any flow of Baptist bodies into the WCC and led to the withdrawal of a few.

Fourth, more recently among Baptists has been the interaction or interpenetration of theology and missiology. We must go back to William Carey's *An Enquiry to the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792). This treatise was not theological, but rather missiological; however, it may have helped to turn missiology into a theological discipline. William Owen Carver, the first Baptist to hold an academic chair of missions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1899, at first leaning to the society method, treated missions as the duty of individual Christians in relation to the kingdom of God. Through the twentieth century more attention was given to the missionary role of the churches, especially with the advent of short-term church-sent volunteer missionaries to supplement the career missionaries. Missiology, as may be seen in the volume entitled *Missiology* (1998), edited by Mark Terry, Justice Anderson, and Ebbie Smith, had its essential theological component. Moreover, at the end of the twentieth century with the systematic theologies written by James W. McClendon and by myself, Baptist systematic theologies include chapters on missions. Concurrent with this greater interaction of missiology and theology has been the contextualization of Baptist theology outside of Europe and North America. Perhaps the most notable has been the work of Latin American Baptist theologians, Orlando Costas, René Padilla, and Samuel Escobar. They have joined the the supreme authority of Scripture and the need for evangelization and missions with a strong emphasis on social justice and a keen awareness of the Latin American, i.e., Roman Catholic, context. In Nigeria confrontation with African Traditional Religion has been pursued, and in South Korea missiological concerns have loomed large.

Looking to the Future of Baptist Theology

Will the Chief Differentiating and Characterizing Issues of the Past Have a Significant Bearing on the Future?

First, because Baptists closely connect salvation with church membership, it is likely that soteriological concerns about the relationship between humanity and the divine will continue to resurface in Baptist life.

Second, likewise the issues surrounding revelation and the Bible, Christology, human origins, and eschatology are likely to resurface among Baptists.

Third, although some of the Baptist distinctives will continue to be strictly less distinctive of Baptists as other Christian denominations and nondenominational indigenous movements embrace some of them, Baptists may continue to be less than effective in teaching and fleshing out these historic distinctives amid their own people.

Fourth, Baptists may continue to rediscover their debt to the patristic consensus and to recognize their debt to the Magisterial Reformation as well as the Radical Reformation.

Fifth, perhaps the question of interdenominational Christian unity will be answered in rather different ways in the twenty-first century than in the twentieth.

Sixth, it is very probable that the interactions of missiology and theology among Baptists will markedly increase.

What Other Theological Issues are Likely to be Faced by Baptists in the Near Future?

My proposals, of course, do not constitute a complete list even as we acknowledge the difficulty of speaking about the future. I would ask seven questions.

- (1) Can Baptists in various conventions and unions find a common biblical hermeneutic, especially in reference to contemporary social and moral issues?

This question takes us into ethics. To raise such a question is not to assume that Baptists have always had such a common hermeneutic in the past. The history of American Baptist attitudes toward slavery and racial segregation is a well-known exception. But issues such as homosexual practice, cohabitation outside of marriage, and abortion have tested Baptists as to anything like a common stance in today's worlds. Moreover, present-day happenings in the Episcopal Church in the United States and in the Anglican communion worldwide make it clear that differences

on these burning issues, together with their underpinnings of biblical hermeneutics and biblical authority, can produce major schisms and a divided witness. If Baptists can still agree on the supreme authority of the Holy Scriptures, then hopefully they can responsibly address these exegetical, hermeneutical, and socio-ethical issues.

(2) Is the Baptist embrace of the doctrine of the Trinity sufficient for an effective witness to Muslims?

Baptist theological history for four centuries is replete with evidence that Baptists have consistently affirmed that God is one God yet in three “persons” or “subsistences” – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In such affirmations Baptists have used language hammered out by ecumenical councils of the patristic era. Baptists have also recognized that denial of the Trinity and of the deity of Christ puts one outside the ranks of truth and into the ranks of heresy, as in the case of the majority of the earliest English General Baptists who by the early eighteenth century had become Unitarians in belief, and in the case of modernists in the Northern Baptist Convention in the early twentieth century. But for many Southern Baptists from the latter part of the twentieth century to the present, the Trinity has been a doctrine, the denial of which could evoke charges of heresy while the affirmation of which—through preaching, teaching, worship, hymnody and praise songs, and piety—has been woefully deficient. Now as a major missionary sending body, the Southern Baptist Convention faces the great challenge of witnessing to the Islamic world, in both predominantly Muslim nations, as well as in the United States and Europe. A major roadblock is the Muslim perception that we Christians believe in three Gods, that Jesus is not the Son of God, and that Jesus did not die on the cross. Can Baptists be expected to lead Muslims to saving faith in Jesus Christ if their doctrine of the Trinity is stored in mothballs?

(3) Can Baptists agree on the destiny of the unevangelized?

Before the end of the twentieth century, especially among evangelicals, there surfaced as a major theological issue the destiny of unevangelized peoples. The question, of course, was not new, but it had a new intensity, as contacts with the adherents of non-Christian religions increased. Three major positions soon came to be differentiated. First, there is pluralism, or the view that humans can be made right with God or eschatologically saved in and through non-Christian religions. Second, there is inclusivism, or the view that salvation can come only through Jesus Christ but can occur without particular knowledge of Jesus, without a confession of faith in Jesus, and without Christian baptism but through the agency of the transcendent Christ or Logos. Third, there is exclusivism, or the view that salvation can with certainty come only through Jesus Christ and only through an identifiable acknowledgement of Jesus as Savior and Lord with at least a minimal awareness of the Christian gospel. Few Baptists, if any, have embraced pluralism, as expounded by John Hick. Rather to the extent that they have addressed this issue Baptists have espoused either inclusivism or exclusivism. As to monographs on this subject, more Baptist authors have espoused inclusivism (Russell Aldwinckle, Clark H. Pinnock, Molly Marshall) than have espoused exclusivism (Ronald H. Nash). Some would join this issue with the question

of the destiny of infants and young children who die at an early age. Others would join it with post-mortem evangelization, which the older theologians call “probation after death,” and which has been popularly dubbed “a second chance.” Clear evangelistic and missionary strategy would seem to call for a relatively clear answer to such questions. The 2000 SBC *Baptist Faith and Message* statement is clearly exclusivistic, but the monographs for exclusivism are few. Moreover, to affirm exclusivism on the basis of John 3:16; John 14:6; Acts 4:12 et al. is not to usurp the omniscience of God but to state what the church today ought to declare with any certainty, leaving final salvation, where it belongs, in the hands of God.

(4) What are Baptists to do with Dispensationalism?

This theological system, so widely embraced today among Southern Baptists, did not enter Southern Baptist theological history until James Robinson Graves embraced it late in the nineteenth century. I have proposed that we should reckon Dispensationalism, both a distinctive hermeneutic and a distinctive eschatology, as an “incursion” into Baptist theology. By incursion I do not mean “heresy,” as one of my reviewers seems to think, but rather as a novelty without precedent during the earlier two and a half centuries of Baptist life. Although one cannot with certainty posit any cause-effect relationship, it is noteworthy that the era of Dispensationalism’s greatest influence on Southern Baptists, i.e., the turn of the twenty-first century, was concurrently the time of the greatest restriction of missionary methods in the history of the IMB SBC – the curtailment of theological education, primary and secondary schools, publishing, medical missions, and agricultural missions in favor of direct evangelism and church planting alone. To be sure, American Dispensationalism has undergone at least two transformations since C.I. Scofield published his *Scofield Reference Bible* a century ago, but its abiding hiatus between the church (the Christians) and Israel (the Jews) is difficult to harmonize with Paul’s teaching about Jew-Gentile reconciliation through the cross and the creation of the “one new man” (Eph. 2:15b-16). Furthermore, Dispensationalism’s two eschatological comings of Christ, “the rapture” and the “revelation,” are hard to reconcile with the synonymous use of *parousia*, *epiphaneia*, *apokalupsis* in the Greek New Testament, all used in reference to the second coming, as scholars of historical premillennialism have readily acknowledged.

(5) Are many Baptist churches to adopt ruling elders? Will Baptist megachurches retain a residue of congregational polity?

Although the Philadelphia Association for a time in the eighteenth century had the practice of ruling elders, such has been almost totally absent from Baptist churches in the United States until recent years. Perhaps as a consequence of the neo-Calvinism among Southern Baptists and or the influence of Dallas Theological Seminary, not a few Southern Baptist churches have established ruling elders, sometimes so as to produce major division in the congregation. Some have argued that elders are almost identical with “church staff,” but the crucial issue is whether the elders alone make decisions that according to congregational polity are normally to be made by the congregation. Some insist that all elders be ministers of the church, but to be decided is the question as to whether all elders are equal in authority or one elder, the pastor, has unique leadership. New Christians in

Baptist churches or members who have come from other denominations often are quite amenable to ruling elders, whereas traditional or lifetime Baptists tend to be opposed to such. Few seem to realize that this is one of the marks that historically differentiated Baptists from Presbyterians.

For Baptist megachurches the question may not be ruling elders but rather pastor, church staff, and a leadership team. Some have argued that as churches increase in membership and ultimately become megachurches, it is inevitable from the standpoint of practicality that they abandon congregational polity. Such megachurches cannot seat their members for a congregational meeting, for they have multiple locations and/or multiple services. Most all decisions are made by the leadership and reported to the membership. Will the megachurch pattern spread to other churches? Can the great number of Baptist laypeople who are engaged in short-term mission trips overseas and at home be permanently denied participation in the decision-making of their church?

(6) Are Baptists to surrender or retain believer's baptism by immersion and its implications?

From John Bunyan's day some Baptists have advocated and practiced open communion in observing the Lord's Supper, i.e., open to all who profess to be Christians. Such has been defended on the basis of Christian unity, Christian love, and/or the absence of factiousness. In England John Collett Ryland, his son John Ryland, and Robert Hall, Jr. defended open communion, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon practiced it. Contemporary with open communion were the advocacy and practice of strict communion, i.e., making believer's baptism by immersion prerequisite to participation in the Lord's Supper in a Baptist church. William Kiffin, Abraham Booth, and Joseph Kinghorn strongly defended such, arguing that if believer's baptism by immersion is required for membership, it should be for the Lord's Supper and that open communion is a denigration of believer's immersion. Among Baptists the warning has been sounded that open communion will lead to open membership; and, in fact, it has.

On the contrary, open membership is a relatively modern development among Baptists, especially in Great Britain. This is the practice whereby a Baptist church does not require that all its members be baptized on confession of faith by immersion. Hence in the membership may be persons having been baptized as infants or by sprinkling or pouring or even having had no baptism at all. The priority of baptism to the Lord's Supper is not recognized. During the twentieth century conciliar ecumenism has influenced some Baptists to embrace open membership. At issue is the importance of believer's immersion. Oddly enough, whereas numerous English Baptist churches have adopted open membership, in the United States the Baptist witness has been strong enough to help several new Christian denominations, especially between 1830 and 1930, to adopt believer's immersion. Among Southern Baptists open membership has had few practitioners, but now two leading articles in *Baptists Today* (December 2009) have advocated open membership. *The Alabama Baptist* (29 April 2010, among other papers) published my article that advocated that Baptist churches should not adopt open membership. With open membership, immersion becomes dispensable, and there seems to be little rationale for a continuing Baptist denomination.

Coupled with the open membership trend in Britain has been a movement toward baptismal sacramentalism. Beginning with World War II a number of English Baptist authors have advocated the use of the term “sacraments” and disfavored the use of “ordinances.” Moreover, baptism is said to be “more than a symbol” in the sense that divine agency and divine grace are said to be involved uniquely in Christian baptism, not merely the confession of faith of the candidate, and conversion is reckoned as incomplete without baptism. George R. Beasley-Murray and R.E.O. White led the way in these views of baptism. Neville Clark, Anthony Cross, and others followed. English Baptists as a whole are divided on this issue, while Baptists in the United States who know their history are prone to find likeness to the views of Alexander Campbell and Archibald McLean, the “Scotch Baptist,” which were rejected by early nineteenth-century Baptists.

(7) Can Baptists mend their fractured unity?

We know that Baptists began as two separate bodies, the General and the Particular Baptists. We also acknowledge that Baptists, perhaps more than other Christians, have had a tendency to divide or separate. It has been said that our congregational polity has made us more prone to schism. The SBC was constituted in an act of separation in 1845. Northern Baptists sustained major defections in the 1930s and 1940s as a consequence of theological controversy, and now more recently the American Baptist Churches (USA) have lost their Pacific Southwest churches over homosexuality and other issues. There are now four Afro-American Baptist conventions. Southern Baptists have had the Frank Norris movement, the Lee Roberson movement, the Alliance of Baptists, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. A quarter of century ago Brazilian Baptists divided over charismaticism and now the same has happened to Argentine Baptists.

Even so, Baptists must know the Pauline teaching about Christian unity (Eph. 2:14-22; 4:3-6, 11-13; Phil. 4:2-3) and how our Lord Jesus, according to John 17 prayed for the unity of his disciples, even as he and the Father are one, so that the unbelieving world may believe that God has sent Jesus. Sometimes those Baptists who have consistently rejected the structured union of conciliar ecumenism have provided meager examples of any form of unity among the people called Baptists. More recently (2004) the unity of the Baptist World Alliance has been fractured by the withdrawal of the Southern Baptist Convention. Once again Baptists have the great challenge of repairing or mending their broken unity without forsaking the gospel or losing

essential Christian truth. Cooperation has been an unchanged article of faith in the SBC Baptist Faith and Message Statement in 1925, 1963 and 2000.²

Conclusion

In conclusion, we acknowledge that there may be in the near future other pressing issues for Baptists not mentioned here. Likewise, Baptists will continue to need to know how other Christians are doing theology, for such developments have a way of affecting Baptists. But it is of paramount importance that Baptists in the twenty-first century think theologically as Baptists and in reference to the Baptist heritage. I invite and challenge you to engage in Baptist theology and to make your contribution to it. May our Lord abundantly enable, bless, and use you in doing so.

²Two issues that have not been identified but are widely discussed among Baptists are (1) the music wars in Baptist and other churches and (2) the role or roles of women in Baptist churches. As to the first, it seems that the conflicts are for the most part not theological but cultural and generational. As to the second, the decision as to male pastors only has seemingly been made among SBC churches but not among the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, American Baptist Churches (USA), and certain Baptist unions in Europe. Furthermore, the role of women, if any, on the staffs of larger Baptist churches is being disputed, and the ecclesiological significance of the church staff itself remains undefined. Similarly, Baptist churches are not agreed as to whether women should serve as deacons. Concurrently the widespread and crucial service rendered by women in Baptist churches is realistically and gratefully acknowledged. These questions will likely continue to be dealt with as Baptists argue from and over the Scriptures in a changing culture that has granted women heretofore unavailable roles.