THE BAPTISTS

KEY PEOPLE INVOLVED IN FORMING A BAPTIST IDENTITY

VOLUME ONE
BEGINNINGS IN BRITAIN

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MENTOR

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Dedication

To all my Baptist History students through the years
who have insisted that I learn to communicate
the relevance of Baptist History
to their present ministry and their eternal outlook

Acknowledgments

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, USA, gave marvelous help. First, it stands as a testimony to the most vibrant and enduring aspects of Baptist doctrinal commitment. Just being there during these years has given a renewed sense of how precious is our call to guard the deposit given us. Second, an excellent library loaded with Baptist materials of all sorts, including a rich archival collection, was not only indispensable for this project, but makes teaching there a consistently rich adventure for the Baptist researcher.

Next, the encouragement of a faculty and administration that encourages and practices scholarship devoted to the church's witness gives a fertile environment for writing. Finally, the generous sabbatical leave of a full academic year provided the critical time to bring to closure a project that had begun to defy me to complete it.

I give sincere thanks also to Robert Nettles, my son. I have both appreciation and admiration for his talent in art and am grateful that he was willing to provide the sketches included in this volume as well as the two to follow.

Finally, my dear wife, Margaret, has borne with me in the throes of this project for years. Our conversations have often been shorter, our meals quicker, our bed-time later, and our mornings earlier in order to accommodate an intense writing schedule. On top of that, we have had the care of her precious mother, over ninety years old and in the advanced stages of Alzheimers, here in Louisville. Margaret shouldered a massive responsibility of time, energy, and physical challenge dipping far into the reserves of strength that lie deep in the recesses of human resolve and God's grace. She more than any other has provided the encouragement and time to draw this to a conclusion.

Providing the entire context mentioned above is the gracious providence of God. Thanks now and in eternity is due to him who has called us by his grace to know and enjoy the loving favor of his beloved Son and has given us the renewing Spirit of adoption. That we are called to know and serve such a Master surpasses all possibility of sufficient praise.

Section I

Competing Models in Setting the Profile




1

A Profile in Perspective

'For, in the first place, when you come together as a church,
I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it.
For there must also be factions among you, in order that those
who are approved may become evident among you'
(1 Corinthians 11:18, 19).

Two Perspectives on the Issue of Identity

Discussions concerning Baptist *origins* excited controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The Landmark movement, according to *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?*, wanted to preserve and perpetuate a pure Baptist witness and ecclesiology. One of the leading factors in achieving this was 'to preserve and perpetuate the doctrine of the divine origin and sanctity of the churches of Christ, and the unbroken continuity of Christ's kingdom, "from the days of John the Baptist until now".' They were convinced that Matthew 16:18 and Hebrews 12:28 spoke of Baptist churches.[1] While W. H. Whitsitt agreed with Landmarkism concerning the doctrines of Baptist identity, when he expressed his dissent from their viewpoint of origins and perpetuity in *A Question in Baptist History*, it cost him the presidency of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.[2]

Although the question of Baptist origins has generated much heat and light and still has historical importance and interest, the nature of Baptist *identity* has now come to a place of critical importance in Baptist studies. William Brackney has recognized this twofold question in Baptist self-consciousness. After a brief paragraph highlighting the salient features of several views of Baptist origins, Brackney turns to the issue of identity about which he remarks, 'If Baptists disagree about their origins, they are equally disagreeable about what constitutes a Baptist.'[3]

Obviously the issue of Baptist origins, as well as Baptist perpetuity, depends largely on the question of identity. Many groups denominated Baptist by those seeking a chain of perpetuity simply do not pass muster theologically as Baptists if defined in terms of the many confessional statements of the seventeenth century. Moreover, the seventeenth-century Baptists explicitly repudiated any dependence upon succession for the legitimacy of their congregations as churches and considered as fallacious any argument that proposed a necessary connection between succession and genuineness. On the other hand, they most clearly sought to defend their status as churches through demonstrating continuity with biblical teaching on the church. Their argument presupposes an awareness that they had no organic connection with previous churches of their type. Instead, they established their theological continuity with other Protestant Christians in England and argued that they represented the logical and necessary development of the principles of Protestantism.

Renewed zeal for the issue of Baptist identity emerged in the last two decades of the twentieth century and has, in fact, replaced the question of origin as the chief interest of Baptist historical studies. The middle sixty years of the twentieth century passed for Southern Baptists in the necessary but dull and enervating task of creating loyalty to the organizational strategy of denominational structures. Similar activities can be identified among American Baptists, English Baptists, and Canadian Baptists while at the same time Baptist missionary activity was yielding results in Africa, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The energy of life-and-death engagement has often characterized the identity discussion.

Such re-awakening to the importance of Baptist identity emerges as one of the good results of the inerrancy controversy among Southern Baptists. This controversy reveals not only a fissure among Baptists in their understanding of the nature of biblical authority, but more broadly reveals two fundamentally disparate views of Baptist identity. One party in the discussion argues for a narrow, reduced definition of Baptist identity. This group focuses on the distinctives related to liberty and independence; they minimize the importance of positive doctrinal affirmations. Doctrinal definition intruded into Baptist life from

fundamentalism and eventually neo-evangelicalism but was alien to the original Baptist ethos, so they say. They view a serious confessionalism as contrary to Baptist witness because objectivity in doctrinal formulation tends to overpower subjective experience and individual perceptions of truth. Liberty of conscience, the key to Baptist life, cannot co-exist with the broad and objective doctrinal emphasis of confessions. Many testimonies advocating this view of Baptist life may be found in the volume published by Smyth and Helwys entitled *Why I am a Baptist*. E. Y. Mullins emerges as the single most influential theologian for this understanding of Baptist identity. Mullins used the phrase 'the competency of the soul in religion' to isolate the unique Baptist contribution to Christian thought.[4] His view has been massaged to a different shape and abstracted from its theological context and has emerged from this makeover as the single most significant point in Baptist identity. Because of the particular emphases and alterations placed on Mullins' concept, I will sometimes refer to those who hold this view as the 'soul-liberty party'.

On the other hand, another group seeks to demonstrate that the distinctive tenets of freedom and *voluntarism* would never produce a Baptist church apart from a broader foundation of theological, Christological, and soteriological truths. This group sees Baptist identity not only in terms of its distinctive emphasis on freedom and individual choice. Just as important is the body of revealed truth upon which faith fastens itself. Baptists must be Christian and Protestant evangelical before they can be Baptist. Sometimes I will refer to this as the 'coherent-truth party'. This book is written to argue that this view of Baptist identity more closely corresponds to a contextually responsible interpretation of the documents than the soul-liberty view.

Identifying Identity Issues

The first attempt by a historian to paint a profile of identity for Baptists came from the pen of Thomas Crosby.[5] Crosby had given primary source material collected by Benjamin Stinton to Daniel Neal for his *History of the Puritans*,[6] on the assumption that 'under which general name, I did apprehend the *English Baptists* might very well be included'.[7] Crosby chafed with sore disappointment under the results

of Neal's use of the material; he salved his wounds by publishing his own Baptist history. In addition to his classification of Baptists as Puritans, Crosby demonstrated that their insistence upon the immersion of believers as the only true Christian baptism flows from the common Puritan acceptance of the regulative principle. He quoted with approval the opinion of Jeremiah Burroughs: 'All things in God's worship must have a warrant out of God's word, must be commanded; it is not enough that it is not forbidden.'[8] Crosby himself, then, after a historical survey designed to show that infant baptism and sprinkling, and not immersion of believers, is an innovation, enunciates the following statement as a Baptist principle: 'That the holy scriptures are to be the only rule of our faith and worship; and that we are to practise nothing, as an institution of Christ, which is not therein contained.'[9]

A survey of the rise of Baptists during the English Reformation yields Crosby's identification of Baptists as orthodox Protestants. The confession published in London in 'defence of their principles; and in the year 1643' put to rest the accusations that Baptists were Pelagian, Socinian, Arminian, and soul-sleepers. Not only did they clear themselves on these points, but they showed 'their near agreement with all other christians and protestants, in the fundamental points of religion'.[10] Crosby, therefore, sees Baptist identity as fundamentally Christian, Protestant, and Puritan, with a deep attachment to the regulative principle. That principle resulted in their practice of the immersion of believers as pre-requisite to church communion. Crosby identifies Baptists within the coherent-truth framework of identity.

The American counterpart of Crosby was Isaac Backus. Originally he wrote three volumes of a history entitled *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians called Baptists.* The volumes appeared in 1777, 1784, and 1796. He wrote during some of the most politically acute days in the history of the world, but especially of the United States. A persistent and aggressively developed theme throughout the three volumes is the Baptist ideal of a regenerate church and its political concomitant, separation of church and state. He believed that the Baptists incarnated

the logical development of orthodox, Calvinistic, Protestant theology. While the persecuting policy of some Puritans and the practice of infant baptism contradicted their gospel, Baptists such as Roger Williams, John Clarke, and Obadiah Holmes asserted full liberty of conscience and remained 'sound in the faith and much acquainted with experimental and practical religion'.[11] The growth and continuing orthodoxy of Baptists did not diminish their commitment to liberty. In fact, Backus' historical treatment argues that only a Calvinistic Baptist system supports a proper relation between the true church and true civil government.

Backus had a full-orbed perception of Baptist identity. The historical narrative shows the great difficulties and evil opposition faced by those who wanted to establish churches formed on New Testament principles. Trinitarian orthodoxy and Calvinistic evangelicalism supported the New Testament witness to a believers' church practicing the immersion of only those who have faith in the righteousness of Christ and manifest the marks of the new birth. Members of this kind of church never can seek advantage through earthly power, nor participate in the forcing of worship through the use of civil law, nor tear away the property of any person unjustly. Backus' view expresses with grand symmetry the coherent-truth view of Baptist identity.

Joseph Ivimey, in bringing the Baptist story in England up to date from the close of Crosby's work, while arguing that Baptist ideas to some extent characterized ancient British Christians and the Lollards, aligned Baptists with the Reformation. The Reformation removed the fetters of popery and led men to the Bible through which they embraced 'those sentiments in doctrine and discipline, which accorded with the simplicity of Christ'. Baptists, according to Ivimey, 'held the genuine principles of the Reformation, and pursued them to their legitimate consequences. Believing that the bible [sic] alone contains the religion of Protestants, they rejected every thing in the worship of God which was not found in the sacred oracles.' Two aspects of those 'legitimate consequences' Ivimey identifies immediately: first, infant baptism, rejected by Baptists, 'owes its origin to Popery'; second, 'the English Baptists were the first persons who understood the important doctrine of Christian liberty, and who zealously opposed

all persecution for the sake of conscience.'[12] A dozen years later, in 1823, Ivimey felt even more confidence in that specific characteristic and contribution of Baptists: 'It is a fact which cannot be disproved, and which ought to be universally known, that the Baptists first understood the principles of unrestricted religious liberty – that they were the first to propagate them – and that they have never violated them by abridging others of the liberty which they claimed for themselves.'[13]

Several key theological points of both Particular and General Baptists gave more breadth to Ivimey's concept of Baptist identity. 'They all maintained the Doctrine of a Trinity of Persons in the Godhead; the proper Divinity of Christ; free justification through the imputed righteousness of Christ, the necessity of personal sanctification, &c.' He also noted that they 'addressed the invitations of the gospel to unconverted sinners, and by the most awakening appeals to their hearts called upon them to "repent and believe the gospel".' The desired effect of his history was that ministers might emulate the piety, simplicity, and zeal of their Baptist forefathers and that they might try to promote 'general Associations of the churches who were agreed in doctrine and discipline'.[14] The decline and extinction of some Baptist churches, which Ivimey had the sad duty of narrating, came when they 'departed from the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity, the proper divinity of the Son of God, and of the Holy Spirit, &c'. Others experienced the same demise 'from the non-application of the invitations of the gospel to unconverted hearers of the gospel'. In others, the 'non-observance of strict scriptural discipline' brought about their dissolution.[15]

Ivimey not only narrated such decline, but believed that toleration of error, or even failure to teach positive truth insistently, naturally inclined to destroy a church, or to use his suggestive phrase, 'the baneful tendency of doctrines which pervert the gospel of Christ.' A case in point was the church at the Barbican in London. Mr. Burroughs, an orthodox, but Arminian minister, had adopted the sentiment of 'the innocency of mere mental error'. Careful lest he seem to deprive others of 'their christian liberty', he allowed a Socinian minister, Dr. Foster, to serve with him as co-pastor. The church declined gradually

in numbers, in zeal, and in purity. Ultimately it became extinct. This sad lapse led Ivimey to hold it forth as a 'beacon to all surrounding churches, that they never patronise any error in doctrine, subversive of the gospel, either in minister or people, but "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints".'[16]

Ivimey identified himself as an Englishman, a Protestant, a Dissenter, a Baptist, and a Calvinist. He venerated the consitutional liberties of the Glorious Revolution, admired the principles of the Reformation, claimed the right of private judgment in matters of religion, rejected infant baptism as innovative and unscriptural, and gloried in the doctrines of free grace 'because no one owes more to sovereign grace, or expects more from it, than himself.'[17] Baptist identity in Ivimey's view, therefore, included the orthodox doctrines of theology and Christology, the Protestant understanding of justification and grace, and the distinctive marks of baptism, church discipline, and liberty of conscience. His understanding of Baptist identity contributes to the coherent-truth model.

Virtually simultaneously with Ivimey, David Benedict began his labors as a Baptist historian in the United States. He was familiar with Crosby of the English Baptists and of course with Backus of America. He remarked about the similarity of these approaches, 'a vast fund of valuable information, but ... deficient in style and arrangement.'[18] Benedict obtained a copy of Ivimey's first volume and used it in his discussion of English Baptists. After devoting 265 pages to 'other parts of the World' Benedict turned his attention to Baptists in America. Biographical sketches, histories of churches, the development and spread of associations, the relation of Baptists to the different political establishments, their advocacy of the principles of religious freedom, revival, growth, decline, doctrinal principles, and other issues filled the next 900 pages of the two-volume work.

Ironically, as a statement of the institutional condition of the churches, his *History* was rendered obsolete the year after its publication. In 1814, prompted by the unforeseen circumstance of the Congregational missionaries Ann and Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice adopting Baptist convictions, Baptists founded the Triennial Convention as a nationwide denominational effort to support foreign

missions.[19] The massive amount of research and travel involved in the production, however, and the frank way of relating the conditions and events make Benedict's volumes an invaluable resource for knowledge of Baptist principles and practice up to the first decade of the nineteenth century. He closed the two volumes with general observations about Baptist life in America. Given the autonomy of the congregations, the expanse of land they inhabit, the diversity of ethnic backgrounds involved, and that they are not bound, as a denomination, by a single confession nor dictated to by controlling assemblies, it is a 'subject of wonder that there is such an agreement in their doctrinal views, and such a correspondence in their maxims and modes of procedure'.[20] Most of the observations were taken up with issues of hospitality, payment (or non-payment) of ministers, ministerial zeal, education, titles, and the idea behind associations. He did summarize, however, the general doctrinal profile that he had developed throughout the text.

> Take this denominations [sic] 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, &c. and that the happiness of the righteous and the misery of the wicked will both be eternal.[21]

When Benedict discussed the Baptists of Poland and Transylvania, he reported candidly their tendency toward deficient views of Christ and the atonement. His personal view of this issue also often entered his narrative. Such opinions were 'not of divine origin, but an invention of speculative and unhumbled men'. Those who held them were 'wrong, and they had set out in a path which led them by degrees to a cold, comfortless, and dangerous region'. He also lamented this greatly and believed that 'there were, in obscure retreats, many genuine Baptists, the descendants of the old Moravians, who chose to keep away from the splendour and bustle of the great, and who, of course,

avoided the speculations and snares'.[22]

Benedict shows intense interest in the progress of Baptist work among the slaves and freedmen and makes peculiarly insightful and poignant observations concerning them and the implications of slavery. One minister, a former slave, to whom he gave several pages was named George Leile. Included in the discussion was a brief statement of Leile's faith: 'I agree to election, redemption, the fall of Adam, regeneration, and perseverance, knowing the promise is to all who endure, in grace, faith, and good works, to the end shall be saved.'[23]

For Benedict, therefore, Baptist identity consisted largely of the distinctive ecclesiology built on believers' baptism and the implications of that ecclesiology for matters of religious liberty. Embraced within the issues of true saving faith, however, one sees his ongoing concern for doctrinal purity. Both historic orthodoxy on the person of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as the leading principles of Reformed Protestantism, fit within his perspective of Baptist identity. His history is consistent with a coherent–truth understanding of Baptist identity.

J. M. Cramp, an English and Canadian Baptist educator, pastor, and author, believed in the organic succession of Baptist churches from the first century to the present. A characteristic of his history, therefore, is the careful examination of available sources in order to confirm who, prior to the Reformation period, may legitimately be seen as a Baptist. He admits the perilous nature of this venture, criticises some historians, such as Orchard,[24] who are careless in this search, but remains confident that Baptists stretch from the New Testament to the present. An example of both his care and his confidence comes in the discussion of several dissenting groups of the late Middle Ages. After outlining their views consistent with evangelical Christianity and explaining the possible origin of accusations of heresy, Cramp says:

> My readers may be surprised that I am saying nothing about the Baptists. Let them be patient. I am working my way toward them. In fact, many of those of whom I have just been writing advocated Baptist sentiments, and will have to be mentioned again before the account of his period is closed. But I think it preferable to give first a general outline of the history of all the dissenting parties.[25]