

Confessional Renewal for Baptists

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ABSTRACT: Baptists in America have, in large part, been seen as an anti-confessional people. However, historically, Baptists of different stripes have held to confessions to ground their faith and practice. Arguing from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this article will examine how his observation of American Christianity as “Protestantism without Reformation” is a distinctly Baptist phenomenon. As such, Baptists have replaced their struggle for confessional unity with autonomy, which has resulted in nationalism on the one hand and liberalism on the other. This article will examine E.Y. Mullins’s particular vision of Baptist autonomy and its implications for Baptist confessionalism through the lens of Bonhoeffer’s assessment of Baptists in America as “Protestantism without Reformation.” For a constructive alternative, this article will assess early Baptist confessions as a way of understanding the role confessionalism has played in the formation of Baptist identity. Particularly, Baptist identity is rooted in the church’s obedience towards Christ, as Baptist freedom is a freedom to obey. Exploring the work of James McClendon and Curtis Freeman, this article will explore the primitive understanding of the Baptist church as well as the implications of Freeman’s understanding of “contesting catholicity” as a way for Baptists to reclaim their catholic and reformational self-understanding.

In 2022, Guidepost Solutions published a report on mishandling of sexual abuse cases in the Southern Baptist Convention. The report found that “survivors and others who reported abuse were ignored, disbelieved, or met with the constant refrain that the SBC could take no action due to its polity regarding church autonomy—even if it meant that convicted molesters continued in ministry with no notice or warning to their current church or congregation.”¹

Baptists in America have often claimed that one of their defining distinctives is the notion of autonomy. Baptists are autonomous in their church polity, claiming independence from the state and ecclesial authorities such as denominational

1. Guidepost Solutions, *Report of the Independent Investigation: The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee’s Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee* (Washington, DC: Guidepost Solutions, May 15, 2022), accessed June 18, 2026, DocumentCloud.

bodies or bishops. Moreover, individuals act as autonomous agents who can freely interpret Scripture for themselves, free from the coercion of priests or the state. The current abuse crisis within the Southern Baptist Convention, however, reveals the limits of autonomy.

The notion of autonomy exists across denominational lines. The website for American Baptist Churches USA states, “While embracing autonomy from the state, American Baptists long have affirmed the principle of interdependence. This recognizes that the Holy Spirit is at work in congregations and other organized bodies and that great things can be done in God’s name through cooperation.”² For American Baptists, “interdependence” is predicated upon autonomy.

Baptists have often been suspicious of creeds and confessions, often claiming such creeds and confessions threaten local church autonomy. The sociologist Max Weber viewed Baptists as a voluntary association of believers. As such, he viewed Baptists “not as a Church, but as a sect.”³ Weber’s indictment largely comes from the way Baptists in America have conceived of themselves ecclesially. Baptist denominational bodies function as loose associations of independent and autonomous churches. Compared to other denominational bodies, Baptists have no centralized authority structures such as bishops or a presbytery. Without such structures, it becomes difficult for Baptists to form any kind of confessional identity.

However, Baptists have not always conceived of themselves in this way. Early on, Baptists sought a unifying confessional identity in order to distinguish themselves from other groups such as Anabaptists. In their own self-understanding, Baptists viewed themselves as *reforming the Reformation*. As the historian David Bebbington has said, “Baptists were the people who took Reformation principles to their ultimate conclusion.”⁴

Baptists: A “Non-Creedal People”

In the early 20th century, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy embroiled denominations across the landscape of American Protestantism. Baptists were no different. For Northern Baptists, ruptures began at the founding of the University of Chicago in 1890, which would become a bastion of German higher criticism and the social gospel. *The Finality of the Christian Religion* by the University of Chicago’s George B. Foster embraced the quest for the historical Jesus and its separation

2. American Baptist Churches USA, “Local Churches: Autonomy and Interdependence,” accessed June 18, 2026, <https://www.abc-usa.org/what-we-believe-local-churches-autonomy-and-interdependence>

3. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, conceived trans. Talcott Parsons, with an introduction by Anthony Giddens, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2001), 93.

4. Bebbington, 23.

of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. Foster maintained, “The church’s theological Christ still supplants the real Jesus of history.”⁵ In response, over 200 churches in southern Illinois would leave to join the Southern Baptist Convention. The so-called “social gospel” would eventually take hold of the Northern Baptist Convention, spearheaded by Walter Rauschenbusch, who taught at Rochester Theological Seminary.

At the Indianapolis Convention of 1922, Fundamentalists proposed that Northern Baptists adopt the New Hampshire Confession as the official confession of the Northern Baptist Convention. Instead, Cornelius Woelfkin proposed an alternative that suggested, “the Northern Baptist Convention affirms that the New Testament is the sufficient ground of our faith and practice and we need no other statement.”⁶ Strikingly, the president of Southern Seminary, E.Y. Mullins, led the prayer at the Indianapolis Convention of 1922. Mullins would be influential in the Southern Baptist Convention, leading the way for the SBC to adopt its own version of the New Hampshire Confession in 1925. His concept of “soul competency” would later pave the way for how Baptists in America would conceive of themselves for the next century. That Mullins was present during this pivotal convention meeting for Northern Baptists in 1922 marks the influence that Mullins would have across both Northern and Southern Baptists.

As the years progressed, the Northern Baptist Convention changed its name to the American Baptist Convention in 1950 and attempted a merger with the Southern Baptist Convention. Northern Baptists would change their name again to American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) in 1972. ABCUSA would restructure in 1972 when the denomination partitioned itself into distinct regions, each with an area minister serving as its representative. To this day, regions largely function as autonomous entities with their own confessional standards and credentials for recognizing ordinations.

The fundamentalist/modernist controversy took on a similar tone in the South to that of their northern siblings in the 20th century. In the early 20th century, there were calls for the Southern Baptist Convention to adopt a confession. There were two primary reasons for doing so: on the one hand, with the founding of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905, Southern Baptists sought to define their faith as an effort toward common fraternal understanding among Baptists around the world. On the other hand, the fundamentalist movement led by J. Frank Norris, pastor of First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, was gaining headway among Southern Baptists.

Norris was an intriguing figure known for his sensationalist, demagogic preaching and for infamously murdering an unarmed man and being acquitted of multiple accounts of arson at his own church. Norris gained popularity and influence through radio programs and his time serving as the editor of *The Baptist Standard*, a newspaper

5. Annual, NBC, 1922, 133.

6. Ibid., 129-130.

published by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Norris cast suspicion on many Southern Baptist seminaries, claiming that many of their professors were teaching evolutionary biology in their classes, contrary to a literal interpretation of scripture.

The Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925 would draw the ire of many Southern Baptists as questions of biblical authority sparked increased suspicion about what was being taught in their seminaries. Southern Baptist leaders saw the fissures of disunity surfacing. A committee was formed to explore what a confession of faith for the Southern Baptist Convention might look like. The committee for the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM) was spearheaded by the former SBC president and then-current president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, E.Y. Mullins.

The 1925 BFM was a modified version of the New Hampshire confession. By and large, the confession was viewed positively by most who were in the SBC, fundamentalist and moderate alike. The *Baptist Faith and Message* would be ratified in 1963 following the publication of Ralph Elliot's *The Message of Genesis*, which leveraged the documentary hypothesis in its reading of Genesis and challenged a purely historical reading of its first eleven chapters. The latest revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* was made in 2000 following what became known as the "conservative resurgence." The *Baptist Faith and Message* in 2000 would clarify the SBC's stance on Biblical inerrancy and social issues related to gender roles, race, and homosexuality, among others.

E.Y. Mullins was a prominent figure in the early 20th century whose influence went well beyond the Southern Baptist Convention. He served as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for nearly thirty years and later served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921 to 1924. Aside from his work on the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*, Mullins wrote the book that would define Baptist identity for the next century, *Axioms of Religion*, which was published in 1908.

Axioms of Religion was written as a response to the changing challenges of the 20th century, with the rising of modernism on the one hand and of reactionary fundamentalism on the other. While written before the fundamentalist/modernist controversy took hold of the American religious landscape, *Axioms of Religion* responded to many of the impulses that would give rise to the divisions that would take hold of the American church as a whole.

Mullins proposed a Baptist vision which cuts through six axioms: theological, religious, ecclesiastical, moral, religio-civic, and social. The major innovation that Mullins proposed as an understanding of Baptist identity is that of "soul competency." Mullins maintains,

The Statement of the historical significance of Baptists in this: the competency of the soul in religion. Of course, this means a competency under God, not a competency of human self-sufficiency. There is no reference here to the question of sin and human ability in the moral and theological sense, nor in the sense of independence of the Scriptures. This is not a

creed; Baptists are not a creedal people. To the contrary, it stands as a safeguard against coercion with respect to solidifying one's faith in the form of a written creed. This should not be interpreted to mean that a person can believe anything he chooses and call himself a Baptist. Baptists are identified with truth as taught in the Scriptures, the criterion for the interpretation of which is Jesus Christ. But this competency stands as a flaming sword to protect the individual conscience in matters of faith and its relation to God.⁷

For Mullins, soul competency stood as the bulwark that defined Baptist identity. Not only was soul competency the central guiding principle for Baptists, soul competency was and is the greatest contribution Baptists have given to the world.

Mullins's understanding of soul competency is derived from his understanding of the priesthood of all believers. For Mullins, the priesthood of all believers is "the expression of the soul's competency on the Godward side," so, as such, "no human priest may claim to be mediator between soul and God." Thus, Mullins makes the claim that "the right to private judgment as to the meaning of the Bible is ... another aspect of [the priesthood of all believers]."⁸ Mullins writes further in *Axioms of Religion* that "each priest has the right to do as he is led by the Holy Spirit."⁹

For Mullins, the priesthood of all believers is primarily to be understood through the lens of soul competency. What it means for every baptized believer to be a priest is that every baptized believer has direct access to God, meaning that each individual has the right to interpret Scripture and follow the Holy Spirit as the Spirit leads the conscience.

Baptists have historically sought freedom from coercion of the state and any ecclesial magistrates. Understood through the lens of soul competency, such authorities are not binding on the individual's conscience. Similarly, Baptists do not baptize infants because infants do not yet have the capacity to exercise competency over their soul. Thus, children are baptized only once they can freely choose baptism for themselves. Baptism functions as a means for one to exercise competency over his soul.

For Mullins, the way Baptists are to understand confessions is in light of their understanding of soul competency. Confessions are not binding to one's conscience and do not limit one's freedom to interpret Scripture or exercise rights as part of the priesthood of all believers. The preamble to the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* lists five statements that constitute a "Baptist" understanding of confessions of faith. They are as follows:

7. Edgar Young Mullins and Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1978), 48.

8. Ibid., 50.

9. Ibid., 8.

1. Confessions serve as a “consensus of opinion” for “the general instruction of guidance of our own people.” Thus, they do not “add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament.”
2. Confessions are not “complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility.” Thus, “Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith.”
3. Baptists “have the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of faith.”
4. The Scriptures are the “sole authority for faith.” Thus, “Confessions are only guides in interpretation, *having no authority over the conscience.*”
5. Finally, confessions are “statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper the freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life”¹⁰

The preamble of the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* sits well under Mullin’s understanding of soul competency. Namely, confessions are simply “statements of religious convictions” that are “drawn from the Scriptures.” Such statements are limited in that they are not infallible, are under the authority of Scripture, and do not bind to an individual’s conscience.

Thus, both Northern and Southern Baptists drew their understanding of confessionalism from the fundamentalist/modernist controversies of the 20th century. Northern Baptists rejected confessionalism and restructured around autonomous regional bodies in order to accommodate different confessional standards among different regions. Southern Baptists adopted a qualified confession of faith that sat under E.Y. Mullins’s understanding of soul competency.

One could rightly ask if confessional unity is even viable under E.Y. Mullins’s understanding of soul competency. It is easy to claim that the Southern Baptist Convention breakaway denomination, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), took Mullins’s soul competency to its natural conclusion. In lieu of a unifying confessional statement, CBF adopted Walter B. Shurden’s “four fragile freedoms” as the framework for their denominational identity. Shurden is seen as one of the key leaders in the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which sparked during the crucible of what was called the “conservative resurgence” within the SBC. Shurden’s book *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* is influential among moderate and progressive Baptists as a framework for understanding Baptist identity. Influenced by Mullins, Shurden argues that Baptist identity is built of four fragile freedoms: 1. Soul freedom, wherein each individual has the freedom to relate to God without the coercion of the state or creed; 2. Bible freedom, wherein each Christian has the right to interpret and apply Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; 3. Church freedom, wherein each church is autonomous and free to

10. Mullins, E.Y. et al., “1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*” in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 540.

order leadership, membership, and worship under the Lordship of Christ; and 4. Religious freedom, wherein all religions are free from the coercion of the state.¹¹

Shurden's "four fragile freedoms" sit well under Mullins's soul competency. Thus, under Shurden's understanding of Baptist identity, it is understandable why Max Weber would make the claim that Baptist churches are a sect rather than a church. Baptist denominations become a loose voluntary association of individuals and churches with a tenuous sense of unity outside of mission efforts.

Baptists without Reformation

In 1930, Bonhoeffer would spend his first time in America as a Salon Fellow at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Bonhoeffer's first stay in America left a strong impression on him that would color his view of American Christianity. He had once quipped, "In New York, they preach about virtually everything except ... the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹² His first stay in New York formed his understanding of American Christianity as he witnessed "the sermons coming from American pulpits deal usually with thematic discussions of certain public events or conditions."¹³ Bonhoeffer was equally suspicious about the theology being promoted at Union, once saying, "There is no theology here."¹⁴

However, Bonhoeffer found a few kindred spirits during his time at Union. One of the companions Bonhoeffer became acquainted with was Albert Owen Franklin Fisher, a fellow student at Union. Fisher, an African American student, introduced the young Bonhoeffer to the African American Church. Fisher gave Bonhoeffer the rare opportunity to witness the famous Abyssinian Baptist Church during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Bonhoeffer would become well acquainted with the church, eventually leading a boys' Sunday School class and a women's Wednesday-evening Bible study. Disillusioned from his education at Union and the state of preaching in New York, Bonhoeffer found that the gospel was being proclaimed in the Black church. Bonhoeffer said that, "only among blacks, who were oppressed, could there be any real religion in this country."¹⁵

In 1930, Bonhoeffer took a road trip to Mexico City where he was exposed to the realities of the Jim Crow South. While Bonhoeffer did not write much about his road trip, he kept a few notes, many of them making remarks on the racial

11. Shurden.

12. Bonhoeffer, DBW, vol. 10, 420-21.

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism without Reformation," in *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, ed. Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 583.

14. Bonhoeffer, DBW, vol. 10, 309.

15. Letter to Martin Rumscheidt, December 17, 1986, in the Bonhoeffer Collection, Union Theological Seminary. First published in the Newsletter, International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, no. 39 (October 1988): 3-4.

tensions in the South, of which Bonhoeffer would remark that it was “darker than [a] thousand midnights.”¹⁶

Bonhoeffer’s experience with the African American church would later form his understanding of the American church more broadly. A major part of Bonhoeffer’s critique of the American church is the long history of racism it tolerated. Bonhoeffer writes, “For American Christendom, the racial issue has been a real problem from the beginning.” The issue at hand is that “(b)lack and whites come separately to word and sacrament. They have no common worship.”¹⁷ For Bonhoeffer, the racial issue in America and the Jewish issue in Germany were both related to the question of confessional identity. In Germany, Bonhoeffer was quick to announce a *status confessionis*, which called into question the confessional status of the German churches that adopted the Aryan Paragraph.

Reggie Williams, in his book *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, argues that Bonhoeffer’s encounter with Black Christians in New York gave him the tools to resist Nazi ideology:

The ministries that Bonhoeffer participated in at Abyssinian Baptist Church, coupled with the intellectual interrogation of Jesus within the Harlem Renaissance, provided Bonhoeffer with new resources to filter the nationalism from his Christianity and helped to develop him into an advocate of ecumenism, of peacemaking, and of social justice. As a consequence of that black experience with Jesus, his theology became more than conceptual, his Christology became more prominent, and Bonhoeffer became more serious about his faith.¹⁸

It was Bonhoeffer’s experience with the Black Church in New York that gave him the clarity to claim the Aryan Paragraph as a *status confessionis* before even the theological juggernaut Karl Barth could make the same claim.

Later, in 1939, Bonhoeffer was offered a temporary teaching position at Union Theological Seminary by his American friends who saw the looming threat of Nazi Germany from afar. This second stay in the United States of America was short-lived as Bonhoeffer became more uncomfortable with the idea of leaving his friends, colleagues, and former seminary students behind in an increasingly tenuous situation. By 1937, Bonhoeffer counted that twenty-seven of his former seminary students had been arrested by the Gestapo.

During his short visit, Bonhoeffer spent time reflecting on American Christianity as a whole and penned the essay titled “Protestantism without Reformation.” For Bonhoeffer, the issues that plagued the American church surrounding race were due in large part to the lack of confessional unity. The issues that he saw and named

16. Bonhoeffer, DBW, vol. 10, 269.

17. Ibid., 587.

18. *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, 107.

during his stay in America were largely brought about by the religious refugees who formed the American colonies, many of whom represented free church traditions. Bonhoeffer maintains, “Just as the German church cannot be understood apart from the Reformation, so likewise American Christianity remains concealed from those who do not know the beginning of the Congregationalists in New England, the Baptists in Rhode Island, or the revival movement led by Jonathan Edwards.”¹⁹ For Bonhoeffer, that America existed as a “Protestantism without Reformation” was a distinct outcome of Baptists in particular and free church traditions more broadly.

The core concern for Bonhoeffer was church unity. Bonhoeffer maintains, “Americans have been less able than any other people on earth to realize the visible unity of God’s church on earth.”²⁰ The lack of church unity is made manifest through the many different denominations in America. As such, “American Christendom has no central organization, no common confession, no common ritual practices, no common church history, no common ethical, social, or political principles.”²¹ Denominations are made up of those who share common historical, political, and social experiences separate from a common confession. Thus, no denomination can “claim the name of the church of Jesus Christ for themselves, because that name seems too big and too dangerous to them.”²²

The churches of the Reformation, by contrast, viewed themselves not as a sect but as Christ’s church, a continuation of the church catholic, the one church of Christ. Bonhoeffer maintains, “The churches of the Reformation start from the assumption of the unity of the church of Christ. There can only be one church on earth. And this one church is alone the true church constituted by Jesus Christ.”²³ As a Lutheran, Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the church was undoubtedly influenced by The Augsburg Confession, which maintains “that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is a congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments are rightly administered.”²⁴ The churches of the Reformation did not seek to become a sect but sought instead to *reform* the church.

Bonhoeffer contrasts the Reformation understanding of the church with that of the way Baptists understand church. They claim “the reign of God is equated with the individual’s freedom to follow only the inner voice and inner light.”²⁵ One can hear echoes of E.Y. Mullins’s understanding of soul competency in Bonhoeffer’s writing. For Bonhoeffer, this rampant individualism is a threat to the unity of the church.

19. Ibid., 570.

20. Bonhoeffer, 570.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 571.

23. Ibid., 573.

24. The Augsburg Confession in *The Book of Concord*, accessed June 17, 2026, BookOfConcord.org: Augsburg Confession.

25. Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism without Reformation” 572.

The origins of this fragmentation of the church in America came from America's founding by religious refugees. While Bonhoeffer does not disparage Christians who have chosen to flee from persecution, he maintains that the Christian refugee "has claimed the right to avoid ultimate suffering in order to serve God in quietness and peace." Thus, "confessional stridency and intolerance must cease for the one who has left intolerant conditions." Because these Christian refugees have chosen to flee, "the Christian refugee has forfeited the right to fight."²⁶ Bonhoeffer is undoubtedly wrestling with his own decision to take up a teaching post at Union Theological Seminary in New York. At the same time, the rest of his friends, family, and former seminary students are left to suffer under the Nazi regime. In Bonhoeffer's understanding, the church in America has abandoned its struggle for confessional unity for the sake of *tolerance*. Born from Christian refugees and as a free church tradition, Baptists in America sought tolerance at the cost of confessional unity. Behind the impulse of soul, competency is the impulse for tolerance.

For Bonhoeffer, this understanding of tolerance leads to a malformed understanding of freedom, which may be defined as "the right of the individual to think, speak, and act independently."²⁷ E.Y. Mullins maintains:

Freedom is self-determination. This does not mean that the will is without bias or that human choices are uninfluenced by external forces, by other human personalities, or by divine influences of grace. It only means that when a person acts, he acts for himself. The choice is his own. He is not compelled but impelled. When all the above-mentioned forces have done their work, a person must retire into the privacy of his own soul and decide the issue. One will search in vain for the slightest hint of a proxy faith in the gospel.²⁸

Freedom, as defined by Christians in America, is a freedom of possibility. It is a freedom from rather than a freedom for. For Baptists in America, this freedom comes to be through notions of autonomy. Autonomy is another way in which tolerance is made manifest.

This understanding of freedom leads Bonhoeffer to a discussion on what is arguably the greatest contribution of Baptists, the separation of church and state. In Bonhoeffer's understanding, the American understanding of the separation of church and state is unique in that "the churches mark the boundary lines of the state."²⁹ Bonhoeffer continues, "From this perspective, the state's religionlessness is not so much a triumph of secular powers over Christianity as it is rather the

26. Letter to Martin Rumscheidt, December 17, 1986, in the Bonhoeffer Collection, Union Theological Seminary. First published in the Newsletter, International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, no. 39 (October 1988), 578.

27. Ibid., 579.

28. Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 120.

29. Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism without Reformation," 58.1

victory of the churches over any unlimited claims of the state.”³⁰ The way this plays out is that “the church proclaims the principles of social and political order, while the state merely lends the technical means to achieve these.”³¹ As such, American democracy is seen as a “Christian” form of government wherein the church uses the state as the means to accomplish its ends.

Bonhoeffer claims that this unique way in which the church relates to the state in America ironically blurs the line between the church and the state, as Bonhoeffer maintains, “The life of the state and public life in general are subsumed under the judgment of the church without distinction; hence, there can be no significant public decision in which the church would not raise its voice and issue pronouncements.”³² As such, “a church that is independent of the state is no more protected from secularization than a state church.”³³ The secularization of the American church stems from “the lack of the distinction of the kingdoms and offices of state and church, as well as from the Enthusiast claim that the church is the agent of the universal formation of the world.”³⁴ The irony is that in advocating for a separation of church and state, Baptists in America have flattened the distinction between the two, which increased its secularization.

As a free church, one whose people came to America as religious refugees, Baptists sought independence from the state. This reality bolstered Baptists as champions of religious liberty insofar as they used the state as a vehicle to accomplish that end. The irony is that the greatest invention of Baptists would lead to civil religion on the left and nationalism on the right. What happens when a separatist tradition no longer has a state church to separate itself from? It attaches itself to ideals of freedom and individualism. It abandons confessional unity for the sake of tolerance. Ultimately, it capitulates to the state as it’s the only way it can ensure greater freedom.

A Constructive Response: A Freedom toward Obedience

In his essay, Bonhoeffer outlines a constructive response that is thoroughly Baptist in its fervor while also Reformational in its appeal:

Unity cannot be forced, either through theological discussion or through common action. But we know that God may bring the churches together through both the path of common understanding and common action. Often, common understanding is granted only through common action and common action from common understanding. There are no methods that will lead to the unity of the church.³⁵

30. Ibid., 581.

31. Ibid., 582.

32. Ibid., 583.

33. Ibid., 583.

34. Ibid., 583.

35. Ibid., 576.

Confessional unity is never something that can be forced or coerced. However, for Bonhoeffer, the church's common confession does not originate from the sense of one's individual conscience. Rather, the church's common confession is grounded in *obedience*. Bonhoeffer maintains, "Only total obedience to the Holy Spirit will lead us to common understanding, confession, action, and suffering."³⁶

Obedience is the primary concern of the Baptist theologian James McClendon, who famously began his systematic theology with ethics. McClendon's approach runs contrary to the impulse of many modern theologians whose starting point is a prolegomena outlining the epistemology and methodological approach to their theological programs. Instead, McClendon's approach is grounded in his little "b" baptist vision in which the church's obedience becomes the grounds for its confession. Thus, a theology that is sufficiently "baptist" starts with ethics.

For McClendon, the baptist vision serves as an organizing principle for free church traditions. This vision contains a *primitive* self-understanding of the church following a "this is that" biblical hermeneutic. The primitive understanding of the church comes from Peter's exclamation in Acts 2 after the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost: "*this is that* which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (2:16 KJV).³⁷ For Peter, the words of the prophet Joel are not merely *appropriated* to apply to the present, but the words of Joel are being *reenacted* in the present.

As examples of this baptist vision, McClendon looks to the American restorationists who saw themselves as the New Testament church and Black Baptists who identified their liberation from slavery with the Israelite liberation from Egyptian bondage. This baptist vision is why the Baptist missionary William Carey could say that the Great Commission outlined in Matthew 18 is not merely a command for the apostles but rather the "commission was as extensive as possible, and laid them under obligation to disperse themselves to every country of the habitable globe, and preach to all the inhabitants, without exception or limitation."³⁸

McClendon maintains that "this is not merely a reading strategy by which the church understands scripture; it is a way—for us, it is *the way*—of Christian existence itself."³⁹ As such, McClendon's baptist vision entails "all the awareness of the *biblical* story as our story, but also *liberty* as the duty to obey God without state help or hindrance, of *discipleship* as a life transformed into obedience to Jesus' lordship, of *community* as daily sharing in the vision, and of *mission* as responsibility for costly witness."⁴⁰

36. Ibid., 576.

37. James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 501.

38. Carey, William, "An Enquiry" in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 113.

39. McClendon, *Ethics*, 515.

40. Ibid., 537.

It follows from McClendon's baptist vision that the starting point for constructing a Baptist identity is *obedience*. Obedience is the sign of the "this is that" nature of the primitive church, not merely as an appropriation of scripture but as God's reenactment of scripture and the church's participation in it. It is out of this obedience to the Triune God that Baptists find their common confession. As such, Baptist freedom is not a freedom of possibility. Rather, Baptist freedom is a freedom towards obedience. Baptists seek freedom from the coercion of the state as a freedom to obey. Baptists champion believer's baptism as it is a sign of a new life in Christ and as a sign of obedience produced by faith.

Under James McClendon's baptist vision, theology is contextual, narrative-based, relational, and self-involved. Theology is contextual, responding as "God, having created the varieties we human beings comprise, wants us to theologize in varied ways."⁴¹ However, this isn't a "laissez-faire subjectivism" as Christian theology is rooted in a particular community and encounters other contexts "for mutual witness and critical correction."⁴² Theology is narrative-based such that "the baptist vision sees that the narrative the Bible reflects, the story of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church is intimately related to the narrative we ourselves live."⁴³ Thus, theology must also look back to how the church has participated in this narrative as God's unfolding narrative reverberates into the present context. Theology is relational, which means that theology can and must relate to other disciplines in the sciences and the humanities while "[it] is not required [to accept] a philosophical basis purported to be a more certain foundation than theological certainty itself."⁴⁴ Theology is also relational towards its own "internal organization" such that "the theologian receives the heritage and by transforming it creates new possibilities for reclaiming inherited convictions."⁴⁵ Finally, theology is self-involving. Theology requires the theologian to participate in Scripture's narrative. McClendon maintains that "the theologian's proposals require confirmation by way of his or her participation in the common life."⁴⁶ A Baptist confessionalism, as viewed through the lens of McClendon's baptist vision, has all of these same characteristics. Grounded in the church's obedience towards Christ, Baptist confessionalism is contextual, narrative-based, relational, and self-involving.

Drawing from McClendon's baptist vision, Curtis Freeman argues that there have historically been two different ways of understanding Baptist identity: the "churchly" understanding and the "non-churchly" understanding. Freeman maintains that "one acknowledges the frailty of the individual and need for and the need for

41. McClendon, *Ethics*, 562.

42. *Ibid.*, 562.

43. *Ibid.*, 576.

44. *Ibid.*, 607.

45. *Ibid.*, 618.

46. *Ibid.*, 623.

interdependency. The other affirms the competency of the individual and exhibits confidence in the capacity of each Christian to know the will of God.”⁴⁷

Freeman suggests that early Baptists held to a churchly self-understanding, not as a sectarian group who sought to withdraw from the world but as a radical reform movement that sought to reform the church catholic. If Freeman is correct, it would mean that it is possible for Baptists to claim the broader Reformation as their own. Baptists are a Reformation tradition that seeks to reform the Reformation. Baptists exist to bring a radical critique to the Reformation.

There is a historical precedent for this. The First and Second London Baptist Confessions were largely based on the Westminster Confession, thereby pointing towards a continuity with the broader Protestant church. Early confessions such as Thomas Helwys’ *A Declaration of Faith of English People* written in 1611, viewed the local church in continuity with the one universal church: “That though in respect off CHRIST, the Church bee one, Ephes. 4.4. yet it consisteth off divers particuler congregacions, even so manie as there shall bee in the World, every off which congregacion, though they be but two or three, have CHRIST given them, with all the meanes off their salvacion.”⁴⁸ Moreover, with concern to other Christians, John Smyth’s *Confession of Faith* maintains that “we salute them all with a holie kisse, being hartilie grieved that wee which follow after one faith, and one spirit, one lord, and one God, one bodie, and one baptism, should be rent into so many sects, and schismes: and that only for matter of lesse moment.”⁴⁹

From this historical understanding of Baptist catholicity, Freeman suggests that Baptists are a people who are “contesting catholicity.” In other words, Baptists are primarily a reformational people seeking confessional unity in continuity with the church catholic while seeking to reform it. Baptists who contest catholicity are reformational as they seek to struggle for greater confessional unity.

Under McClendon’s baptist vision, Baptists contest catholicity as they seek to be the primitive church as God reenacts Pentecost each week amidst the local gathered community. Thus, Baptists find freedom grounded in obedience as they continually seek to struggle for confession while remaining within the church catholic.

What radical critique do Baptists have to offer Protestants and Catholics? As a people whose confession is founded on obedience to Christ, Baptists have often criticized infant baptism. The baptism of infants restricts the child’s ability to obey Christ into the waters of baptism freely. There becomes no reason for the child to confess Christ as Lord. Baptism loses its salience as a sign pointing to the faith and

47. Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 333.

48. Helwys, Thomas, “A Short Declaration of Faith of English People” in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 40.

49. John Smyth, *A Confession of Faith*, in *The Works of John Smyth, Fellow of Christ’s College, 1594–1598*, ed. W.T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 69.

confession given freely by the Holy Spirit to the child. Moreover, those who were baptized as infants no longer have their baptism to remember to ground them in their obedience towards Christ. McClendon makes the claim:

The diminution of baptism coincided with the dissolving of Christian faith into culture, the Constantinian compromise. Though from time to time over the centuries individuals and groups rebelled (often at their life's risk), baptism for most became a birth-ceremony, or a safe-conduct badge for the dying, and lost its status as the commissioning of disciples setting out on their faith journey.⁵⁰

In other words, baptism is the first step in a life of obedience. With no memory of the Christian's baptism, Christianity becomes an artifact of culture.

Concerning ecclesiology, Baptists have long held that the ministry of Word and Sacrament applies to all baptized Christians. Baptism is an anointing into the priesthood of all believers. Baptists have carried this Reformational principle to its natural conclusion: if all who are baptized are called to be priests, all are participants in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The priesthood of all believers is not merely the grounds for soul competency. Rather, the priesthood of all believers is an invitation for others to act as priests outwardly towards the world around them. The priesthood of all believers is not a freedom of possibility but rather a freedom towards obedience in a "this is that" and "now is then" understanding of I Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."⁵¹

In the Baptist understanding, there is no longer any distinction between laity and clergy. James McClendon states:

Here, then, is the challenge of radical reformation in ministry: not a set-apart ministry of those who work for God while others work for themselves, and not a flock of secular "callings" (doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief) tended by a shepherd with a religious calling (priest or preacher, pope or pastor), but a *people set apart*, earning their daily bread in honest toil to be sure, but living to become for others the bread of life.⁵²

A radical critique Baptists offer to the Reformation is that the distinction between laity and clergy often limits baptized Christians from fulfilling their priestly functions in obedience towards Christ.

This radical reform applies to the church's relationship with the state. Baptists have long believed that the state does not hold any divine authority over the church.

50. James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 391.

51. NRSV I Peter 2:9.

52. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 369.

When the state holds any kind of divine authority over the church, the confession of the church is often compromised. Religious liberty is not a freedom of possibility but a freedom to confess Jesus as Lord. The separation of church and state is not the privatization of religion; it is the freedom for the church to publicly confess Christ free from the coercion of the state, as “Christ alone is K[ing] of Israel, [and] sits upon Davids Throne, [and] that the K[ing] ought to be subject of his Kingdome.”⁵³

Baptist confessionalism is reformational and catholic while providing reform to both Protestants and Catholics alike. It is grounded in a freedom towards obedience as it contests catholicity, providing a radical critique situated within a primitive reading of Scripture.

Conclusion

The way forward for Baptists to continue to claim to be Christ’s church is to reclaim its confessional and reformational identity. Autonomy and soul competency are weak sources of Baptist identity. As Bonhoeffer articulated, such sources for Baptist identity ultimately lead to a church that is Protestant but lives without the Reformation. Thus, as Baptists in America have proven, there is a reluctance to claim to be the one church of Christ.

Instead, Baptists have historically been confessional on the grounds of their obedience to Christ. Baptist freedom is not a freedom of possibility but a freedom towards obedience. This freedom is a gift to the world as Baptists continue to champion believers’ baptism, the priesthood of all believers, and religious liberty as each person has the freedom to obey Christ.

Baptists are also situated within the larger Reformation tradition as they see themselves as a reformational movement rather than a voluntary association of sectarian believers. As such, Baptists seek to continually reform the church while being situated within the broader church catholic as it seeks to become the primitive New Testament church. Baptists are a people who contest catholicity through a primitive “this is that” and “now is then” reading of Scripture.

Baptists continue to be a free people who are called into obedience as priests at the moment of their baptisms. Upon this freedom to confess Jesus as Lord, all who are baptized are called into a life of obedience and into the ministry of Word and Sacrament and are free to bear witness to the risen Lord.

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53. Helwys, “Mystery of Iniquity,” 71.

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