

## *The Renewal of Baptist Theology* Timothy George

There is a crisis in Baptist life today, which cannot be resolved by bigger budgets, better programs, or more sophisticated systems of data processing and mass communication. It is a crisis of identity rooted in a fundamental theological failure of nerve. The two major diseases in the contemporary church are spiritual amnesia (we have forgotten who we are) and ecclesiastical myopia (whoever we are, we are glad we are not like “them”). While these maladies are not unique to the people of God called Baptists, they are perhaps most glaringly present among us.

Baptists began as a small, persecuted sect in pre-Revolutionary England, but by the late twentieth-century, in America at least, we could boast one of the largest religious “empires” in the world. There are over thirty million members in some twenty-odd Baptist groupings in this country. Not even Texas is large enough to contain all of the Baptists! We educate more students in our colleges and seminaries, sponsor more missionaries through our boards and agencies, and produce more religious literature through our publishing houses than any other comparable body of Christians in the history of the world. Yet despite such notable success all is not well in Zion. As Baptists have gained influence and status, we have also tended to approximate the values of our environing culture, including its secularity. We have lost touch with the great historic traditions which have given us our vitality and identity. Seduced by the lure of modernity (“whatever is latest is best”), we find ourselves awash on the sea of pragmatism (“whatever works is right”), indifference, and theological vacuity. The results are all about us: Church rolls stuffed with so-called “inactive members” no one has seen or heard from in years, trendy sermons which lack both biblical depth and spiritual power, a generation of young people uninstructed in the rudiments of the faith, fractious controversies which sap our strength and strain our fellowship, shallow worship services geared more to the applause of man than the praise of God, a slackening interest in evangelism and missions, all amidst a hurried activism steeped in this-worldly priorities.

This volume examines the contribution of thirty-three Baptist theologians, many of whom raised their voices against doctrinal apathy and spiritual decline in their own day. It is a measure of the dire straights we are in that so many of these giants of the faith remain virtually unknown to their spiritual descendants today. It is hoped that a study of their lives and labors, not excluding their shortcomings and blind spots, will encourage others, especially pastors and ministerial students, to think theologically about the Baptist tradition. How can the theology of these great teachers challenge and correct and inform our own efforts to theologize faithfully on the basis of the Word of God? We must ask not only *what it meant* then and there, but also *what it means* here and now. Theology is about more than getting our doctrine correct; in its most basic and comprehensive sense, it is about being rightly related to God. In the first theology textbook used at Harvard College, the Puritan divine William Ames gave the following definition: *Theologia est scientia vivendo deo*; “Theology is the knowledge of living in the presence of God.” Baptists today face a theological challenge. Will we listen reverently and obediently to what God has once and for all said in Holy Scripture and once and for all done in Jesus Christ? Will we forsake our flirtation with the false gods of this age and reclaim the godly heritage of those who did not flinch in the hour of temptation? How we respond to this challenge is not a matter of academic speculation or ecclesiastical gamesmanship. It is a question of life or death. It is the decision of whether the church will serve the true and living God of Jesus Christ, the God of the Old and New Testaments, or else succumb to the worship of Baal.

### **Theology that Matters**

In 1919 George W. McDaniels, a leading pastor and later president of the Southern Baptist Convention, lamented the growing apathy about theology which he could discern in his day.

In other decades Baptists were better indoctrinated than they are today. The environment in which they lived, sometimes inimical to them, was conducive to the mastery of their principles. Of later years, a tendency to depreciate doctrinal discussion is easily discernable, and young converts particularly are not rooted and grounded in the faith. Modern nonchalance acts as if it made little difference what one believes.<sup>1</sup>

What McDaniels identified as a trend has more recently accelerated into a full-blown ideology of indifference. A new mythology of Baptist identity has emerged which runs something like this: “Baptists are not essentially a doctrinal people. We have no creed but the Bible, which everyone should be left to interpret according to his or her personal predilection. The basic criterion of theology is individual experience. The right of private judgment in matters religious supremely overrules fixed norms of doctrine. Baptist means freedom, freedom to think, believe, and teach without constraints.” The practical upshot of such radical subjectivism is seen in the way that Baptist ordinands are frequently admitted to the ministry: A sweet smile and a pious declaration of “Jesus in my heart” will often satisfy the well-wishing examination committee.

It is sometimes claimed that doctrinal laxity is the necessary corollary to the Baptist principles of religious liberty, soul competency, and the priesthood of all believers. Clearly, each of these principles is a cherished distinctive of the Baptist tradition. However, as they are not equivalent terms, it is necessary to define each one carefully. The doctrine of religious liberty declares that, since God alone is Lord of the conscience, the temporal realm has no authority to coerce religious commitments. As Thomas Helwys put it in his famous appeal to King James in 1612: “Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them.”<sup>2</sup> However, religious liberty guarantees not only the right of each individual to believe as he or she chooses without fear of penal reprisal, but also the ability of every congregation, indeed every voluntary society, to order its own internal life and its doctrine and discipline, in accordance with its own perception of divine truth. Thus the Standard Confession of the General Baptists, published in 1660, juxtaposed a clear call for liberty of conscience with the right, indeed the responsibility, of each congregation to maintain its own doctrinal integrity. Article 24 of this document asserts that “all men should have the free liberty of their own consciences in matters of Religion, or Worship, without the least oppression, or persecution.” This follows the admonition of article 17 that the true church should “reject all Hereticks” along with any others who teach “contrary to the Doctrine (of Christ) which they have learned.”<sup>3</sup> For these and other Baptists, including Roger Williams, liberty of conscience did not imply a fluid notion of religious authority. It presupposed instead “a free church in a free state,” that is, a church not only freed *from* improper civil constraints, but also freed *for* unswerving obedience to its Lord.

Soul competency is closely related to religious liberty in that it affirms for all persons the inalienable right of direct access to God. Put otherwise, all persons created in the image of God stand in a unique and inviolable relation to their Creator and, when quickened by divine grace, are fully “competent” or capable of responding to God directly. Soul competency pertains universally to all persons, not merely to Christians. It means that *every* individual is responsible to God. Thus, it is the basis of our indiscriminate evangelistic appeals for repentance and faith.

Baptists, however, do not teach the “*priesthood* of all human beings.” Priesthood applies only to those who, through repentance and faith, have been admitted into the covenant of grace and, consequently, have been made participants in the priestly ministry of their Mediator, Jesus Christ (i.e., to believers only). The Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers, with which Baptists have gladly identified themselves, does not merely, nor even primarily, refer to the Christian’s freedom to come before God without a human mediator. It speaks instead of the Christian’s evangelical responsibility to (as Luther put it) “be a little Christ” to his fellow believers in the church and to his lost neighbors in the world. It has more to do with service than status and more to do with the community of faith, its purpose and mission, than with individual rights. The Reformers did not speak of the priesthood of “the” believer, a lonely, isolated seeker of truth, but rather of a band of faithful believers (plural) united in a common confession as a local, visible *congregatio sanctorum*.<sup>4</sup>

Regrettably, for some, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, removed from its original Reformation and historic Baptist setting, has degenerated into the theology of “every tub sitting on its own bottom.” In this context, the concepts of priesthood of believers and soul competency are frequently conflated, the one becoming virtually interchangeable with the other. Winthrop S. Hudson, one of the most perceptive interpreters of Baptist history, has pointed to the devastating impact of this development on Baptist ecclesiology.

To the extent that Baptists were to develop an apologetic for their church life during the early decades of the twentieth century, it was to be on the basis of this highly individualistic principle. It has become increasingly apparent that this principle was derived from the general cultural and religious climate of the nineteenth century rather than from any serious study of the Bible. . . . The

practical effect of the stress upon “soul competency” as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make every man’s hat his own church.<sup>5</sup>

The appeal to individual experience and private judgment corresponded to the shift away from biblical authority and the dogmatic consensus of historic Christianity. With Friedrich Schleiermacher and “the turn to the subject” in theology, “thus saith the Lord” was replaced by “it seems to me.” Historically, for Baptists, the subject of theology has been the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and its method, the exposition of Holy Scripture. Moreover, the revelation of God in His Word has been understood as something unquestionably given, objective, rational, and self-authenticating. In much of contemporary theology, however, the objectivity of divine revelation has been displaced by the religious self-consciousness as the starting point for theological reflection. In some quarters this has led to the virtual trashing of the classical documents of the Christian tradition, as in Don Cupitt’s claim that “all theology written before 1800 is only of relative value.”<sup>6</sup> In other circles, the result has been a deliberate discarding of the great themes of biblical revelation in favor of “the trendy ideas of minor modern heresies.”<sup>7</sup> In such a schema the very possibility of theology, understood as the coherent unity of biblical teaching, is denied outright while the assumptions and prejudices of the contemporary culture are accepted without being brought under Christian judgment or subjected to Christian critique. What passes as theology in many seminaries and divinity schools is little more than a thinly veiled apology for the latest item on the current social and political agenda, a better rationale for which can usually be found among secular theorists who do not sugarcoat their ideas with religious terminology. The net result is a kind of theological faddism which signals what Thomas J. J. Altizer, not known for his traditionalism, has called “a moment of profound theological breakdown—the ultimate moment of breakdown of theological tradition in the West.”<sup>8</sup> The strictures of Jeremiah against the false prophets of ancient Israel apply to the present-day purveyors of religion without revelation: “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you. . . . They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. . . . But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?” (Jer. 23:16, 18, NIV)

### Objectivity and Commitment

Theology, *theo-logia*, God-speech, is an office in the liturgy of the church. It arises out of the wonder and terror of having been confronted with the living God. It issues in confession, thanksgiving, and praise; its special function is fulfilled in that province between baptism and communion, in the realm between the Scriptures and their exposition and proclamation. Thus, the renewal of Baptist theology hinges significantly upon the recovery of an unbroken doctrine of Holy Scripture. The Scriptures are interpreted in the context of the living community of faith, the communion of saints which extends from the prophets and apostles through the Fathers and Reformers to the evangelists, missionaries, pastors, and teachers who have come before us and on whose shoulders we stand. Such an ideal presupposes a vital relationship between theology and the theologian in which the true and total person is claimed. Theology as a Christian vocation is not merely the academic study of religion, not even Christian religion. It is rather the elucidation of the confession of the church from the standpoint of one who recognizes that confession as his or her own context of commitment.

Edward Farley has traced the evolution of two distinct senses of the word *theology* in the history of Christianity. In its basic, primal meaning, theology refers to “a cognitive disposition and orientation of the soul, a knowledge of God and what God reveals.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense theology was a vital, if not the only, component in true spirituality. It had to do with the daily strengthening of believers in their inner being, the process of growth and sanctification “which shows itself in the just and devout life called for by the truth” (Eph. 4:24, NEB). In the course of time, however, the word *theology* assumed a more precise, technical meaning: It came to refer to a discipline of study, a self-conscious, scholarly enterprise carried out in a specific pedagogical setting. So long as these two definitions functioned within a common field of Christian meaning, they were mutually enriching and reinforcing. Theology, like ministry, belonged to the whole body of Christ. Just as certain individuals were set aside as pastors, so others were assigned to be teachers. The purpose, if not the function, of both were the same—the building up of the people of God through the faithful proclamation and exposition of His Holy Word.

With the rise of the Enlightenment, however, the ideal of theology as *primarily* a discipline of critical rationality deliberately divorced (at least methodologically) from the commitment of faith became the normative paradigm for doing theology “in a world come of age.” The resultant split between intellect and piety, between critical inquiry and religious experience, between head and heart, has become a standard feature in contemporary theological education. An able practitioner of the academic study of religion has expressed the dilemma posed by such a dichotomy. While acknowledging that scholars of religion should take seriously the specific faith commitments of the groups they study, he concludes that they “must ultimately regard their own modes of understanding as the arbiter of truth.”<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to see how one who approaches the study of theology from a posture of neutrality, or on the basis of independently secured epistemological premises, could arrive at any other assessment. However, the luxury of such imperious independence is precisely what is denied to the Christian theologian, whose special vocation it is to listen for and expect to find the Word of God in the documents of the church.

Schleiermacher tried to hold together the two traditional meanings of theology—spiritual discipline and critical inquiry—by replacing the objectivity of divine revelation with the Christian self-consciousness as the starting point for theological reflection. In the end, however, Schleiermacher’s dictum that “certain doctrines may be ‘entrusted to history for safe keeping’ became an axiom by means of which other thinkers could consign much of the orthodox tradition to irrelevance.”<sup>11</sup> The effort of liberal theology to identify the “essence” of Christianity, which paralleled the elusive “quest for the historical Jesus,” yielded a concept of God which was little more than the sum total of human dreams, fantasies, and self-projections. To the extent that Baptist theology has been seduced by this pattern of thought, it has lost touch with the historical roots which have sustained and nurtured it as a vital expression of classical Protestant Christianity.

John L. Dagg, whose *Manual of Theology* was the first textbook in systematic theology used at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, opened his great study with these words:

The study of religious truth ought to be undertaken and prosecuted from a sense of duty, and with a view to the improvement of the heart. When learned, it ought not to be laid on the shelf, as an object of speculation; but it should be deposited deep in the heart, where its sanctifying power ought to be felt. To study theology, for the purpose of gratifying curiosity, or preparing for a profession, is an abuse and profanation of what ought to be regarded as most holy. To learn things pertaining to God, merely for the sake of amusement, or secular advantage, or to gratify the mere love of knowledge, is to treat the Most High with contempt.<sup>12</sup>

Here we see the two strands in our definition of theology brought together in a beautiful balance— theology as a discipline of faith pursued arduously but not dispassionately in the service of the church to the glory of God, its gracious and sovereign Object. From this perspective every act of theological work is at one and the same time an act of prayer. Theology must take place in a realm which has both open windows and a skylight—open windows through which the life of the church and the world can be glimpsed, and a skylight so that communion with God can constantly inform and correct and illumine the theologian at work.<sup>13</sup> It is significant that Anselm of Canterbury’s famous ontological argument for the existence of God assumed the literary form of a direct address to God. The opening lines of this treatise present a model of supplication, reverent submission, and humble entreaty, which is the only proper posture for anyone who approaches these matters which “ought to be regarded as most holy.”

And do thou, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek thee, where and how to find thee. . . . When wilt thou enlighten our eyes and “show us thy face”? When wilt thou give us back thyself. Look upon us, O Lord, hear us, enlighten us, show us thy own self. . . . I am not trying, O Lord, to penetrate thy loftiness, for I cannot begin to match my understanding with it, but I desire in some measure to understand thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Faith Once Delivered**

The burden of this essay can be summarized in one sentence: The crisis of Baptist identity is closely related to the loss of a defining theological vision epitomized by the coinherence of intellect and

piety.<sup>15</sup> As a leader in the American Baptist churches put it recently in a blunt statement: Mere pluralism and diversity “is a lousy identity.”<sup>16</sup> It is not doubted that Baptists have disagreed among themselves on a host of minor matters throughout their history. Foot washing, hymn singing, tongue speaking, the laying on of hands, the appointment of missionaries, the ordination of pastors, and the proper limits of cooperation and fellowship have all produced countless splits and hurtful disharmony among Baptist peoples. There have also been several major doctrinal defections such as the Unitarian invasion of General Baptist ranks in eighteenth-century England. However, despite such incidents, for much of their history Baptists have enjoyed a remarkable unity of purpose and vision which has been a source of wonder both to themselves and others. Thus Francis Wayland, not known for his doctrinaire spirit, could write in 1861:

I do not believe that any denomination of Christians exists, which, for so long a period as the Baptist, have maintained so invariable the truth of their early confessions. . . .

The theological tenets of the Baptists, both in England and America, may be briefly stated as follows: they are emphatically the doctrines of the Reformation, and they have been held with singular unanimity and consistency.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly after the turn of the century, however, Augustus H. Strong, perhaps the leading Baptist theologian of his day, was lamenting “some common theological trends of our time.” If left unchecked, he believed, such trends would undermine historic Baptist adherence to the essential truths of the gospel.

Under the influence of Ritschl and his Kantian relativism, many of our teachers and preachers have swung off into a practical denial of Christ’s deity and of his atonement. We seem upon the verge of a second Unitarian defection, that will break up churches and compel secessions, in a worse manner than did that of Channing and Ware a century ago. American Christianity recovered from that disaster only by vigorously asserting the authority of Christ and the inspiration of the Scriptures. We need a new vision of the Savior like that which Paul saw on the way to Damascus and John saw on the isle of Patmos, to convince us that Jesus is lifted above space and time, that his existence antedated creation, that he conducted the march of Hebrew history, that he was born of a virgin, suffered on the cross, rose from the dead, and now lives forevermore, the Lord of the universe, the only God with whom we have to do, our Savior here and our Judge hereafter. Without a revival of this faith our churches will become secularized, mission enterprise will die out, and the candlestick will be removed out of its place as it was with the seven churches of Asia, and as it has been with the apostate churches of New England.<sup>18</sup>

From the perspective of the late-twentieth century we are tempted to read Strong’s warning through the lenses of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies which have left deep scars on most Baptist bodies. Baptist theologians would do well to transcend the obscurantism, sectarianism, and legalism which marked vast areas of church life in the period of retrenchment and reaction which followed the storms of the early-twentieth century. We dare not minimize, however, the urgency of Strong’s warning against the unbelieving theology of his day, nor his constructive mission of presenting a contemporary account of “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints,” which he hoped would be a corrective to the “fast advancing tide” of revision and denial. (The word *demythologizing* had yet to be coined!) Nor should we forget that Strong’s counterpart in the South, E. Y. Mullins, also identified himself with the early fundamentalists and supported their legitimate concerns by writing one of the famous tracts included in *The Fundamentals*.

As Baptists approach the twenty-first century, what are the great theological themes which press for clarification and restatement? Among many topics which could be mentioned, the following five concerns constitute an urgent agenda for Baptist theology.

### ***The Authority of Scripture***

Historically, Baptists have used a variety of words to describe the Bible: *inspired*, *infallible*, *certain*, *true*, *without error*, and so forth. All of these terms underscore a fundamental commitment to the authority of Holy Scripture. Roger Williams spoke for many early Baptists when he declared that “every word, syllable, and tittle in that Scripture or writing is the word, or immediate revealed will of God.”<sup>19</sup> Baptists cannot avoid the issues raised by the current debate over biblical inerrancy. The question is not

whether the word *inerrancy* should be used to describe the Bible, but rather to what extent one can appropriate the “advances” of modern biblical scholarship while still remaining faithful to the historic Baptist confidence in the Bible as the totally true and authoritative Word of God. It is precisely this tension which underlies the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978), a document which seems to be gaining wider acceptance among Baptists and other evangelicals. In practice, of course, the affirmation of *sola Scriptura* cannot be separated from the difficult hermeneutical task of actually listening to the Bible and applying its message to our lives. There is no shortcut past serious engagement with the text of Scripture itself. The purpose of such an exercise, however, is not to make the Bible “relevant” to our modern world, but rather, in the light of the Bible through which God has once and for all spoken, to see how *irrelevant* the modern world—and we ourselves—have become in our rebellion against God. Let us affirm clearly: what the Bible says, God says; what the Bible says happened, happened—every miracle, every event in every book of the Old and New Testaments is altogether true and trustworthy. But let us not think that such an affirmation excuses us from accountability. Most assuredly, it places us in the arena of judgment, that judgment which begins with the family of God (1 Pet. 4:17).

### ***The Doctrine of God***

Throughout our history, Baptists have been explicitly orthodox in our continuity with the Trinitarian and Christological consensus of the early church. Our confessions usually begin with an affirmation of the being and attributes of God, who is portrayed as utterly transcendent, graciously beneficent, and immutably just in all His dealing with humankind. While thus asserting the *absoluteness* of God (“immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, Almighty, every way infinite”),<sup>20</sup> Baptists strongly resisted the deist notion of an “absentee-landlord” God who seldom if ever interfered with His creation. In their doctrine of providence, Baptists echoed Calvin’s idea that in every one of life’s events human beings have direct “business with God” (*negotium cum Deo*): The God who, without violating human responsibility or making Himself the author of sin, “from eternity, decrees or permits all things to come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events.”<sup>21</sup>

Baptists should resist efforts to replace this robust, biblical view of God with the transcendence-starved deity of process theology. Little comfort can be offered by a limited God who struggles with us against the chaos but who finally is too impotent to prevent it or even possibly to overcome it. We need a fresh emphasis on the priority and absolute authority of the living God, the real God with whom we have to do in life and death, in judgment and grace. In former days Baptist associational sermons frequently focused on the attributes of God, His holiness and power, His love and omniscience, His eternity and truth. Why are these grand themes so neglected in our preaching and teaching today? Who can deny that a broken doctrine of Scripture has produced an attenuated view of God? We cannot truly reclaim the one without embracing the other. Isaiah’s prophetic ministry began when he saw the Lord high and lifted up. His response was confession, adoration, and commitment. True theology is born in the tremors of such a vision.

### ***The Person and Work of Jesus Christ***

Baptists have never understood the sovereignty of God in an abstract or metaphysical sense. As preachers of the gospel, we know that the only saving revelation of God is embodied in the historical existence of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. We have emphasized both the complete deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ, just as we have stressed both the objectivity of the atonement (“Christ...hath fully satisfied the justice of God [and] procured reconciliation”—Second London Confession) and the experiential appropriation of the same in regeneration.

It is a sign of proper humility to confess the mystery of the incarnation, for who, this side of heaven, can fully plumb the depths of its meaning? However, it is a mark of outrageous blasphemy to deny its reality, as a prominent Baptist leader recently did when he compared belief in the incarnation to a child’s belief in the tooth fairy.<sup>22</sup> We must beware of revisionist Christologies which dismiss such verities as the virginal conception of Jesus on the grounds that “it won’t do in an age that knows what genes are and has, with regrettable exceptions, a more enlightened view of the equality of men and women.”<sup>23</sup> The centrality and finality of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Baptist commitment to evangelism and missions. Yet, confronted with the fact of religious pluralism, some have begun to question the most basic presupposition

of Christian witness, namely that “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, NIV) A potent expression of this perspective appeared in 1932 in a report published by a committee representing seven American Protestant denominations. It declared that the task of the evangelist and missionary

is to see the best in other religions, to help the adherents of those religions to discover, or to rediscover, all that is best in their own traditions. . . . The aim should not be conversion. The ultimate aim...is the emergence of the various religions out of their isolation into a world fellowship in which each will find its appropriate place.<sup>24</sup>

Is it any surprise that the sending of missionaries from these denominations has dwindled to a trickle, while *evangelism* has become for many a dirty word not to be spoken about in polite company? The doctrine of hell, the necessity of conversion, and the preaching of the cross have all given way to the implicit universalism of many contemporary theologies. The vision of “sinners in the hands of an angry God” has been displaced by a more palatable view—“a God without wrath who brings men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Certainly, the truth about Jesus must be conveyed in the spirit of Jesus, not with blustering arrogance or cultural chauvinism. Christians should be good listeners as well as bold proclaimers. It is good to remember, however, that Paul did not establish an interfaith dialogue with the Stoics and Epicureans of Athens. He called on them to repent and believe in Jesus and the resurrection.

### ***The Ministry of the Holy Spirit***

Once the early church had struggled through the debates over the essential oneness of the Son and Father, it became necessary to defend the full deity of the Holy Spirit against the “spirit fighters” who conceived of His ministry as that of a mere creature. Thus the Nicene Creed (as it was received by the Western churches) calls the Spirit “the Holy One, the Lord and Giver of Life who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified.” The Holy Spirit is not an It but a Thou, not a force or power, but a Person, the divine Person who regenerates indwells, and baptizes every true believer, because, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom. 8:9, RSV).

A renewed focus on the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation will bring to Baptist churches a deeper appreciation for the long-neglected doctrines of grace. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin, draws the lost person to Christ, and effects the miracle of the new birth. This truth stands as an indictment against much of the “quick-fix” evangelism of our times which ignores the great biblical themes of human depravity, repentance, justification by faith, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of salvation. The Holy Spirit also superintends the study of Scripture through His ministry of illumination. We must never forget that the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles to commit to writing the divine revelation is also present to open our minds and hearts as we approach the received text with reverence and prayer. Baptists have experienced great movings of the Spirit throughout our history and are doing so now, particularly in Great Britain and some Third World countries. Charismatic renewal must be matched with doctrinal insight lest it degenerate into mere enthusiasm. But, conversely, dead orthodoxy without the invigorating power of the <sup>25</sup>Spirit will produce stale congregations and stultified Christians. Baptists have an opportunity to make a significant theological contribution to the entire body of Christ because our tradition has taught us to hold in tension the two ideals of a balanced piety—sound doctrine and Spirit-filled living. Together they issue in a life of faith which is active in love.

### ***The Church***

More than any other doctrine, early English Baptists’ understanding of the church led them to separate from the established religious structures of their country and also set them apart from other dissenting groups such as the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Methodists. Baptist ecclesiology most closely approximates the Anabaptist ideal in its emphasis on the church as an intentional community of regenerated and baptized believers who are bound to one another and to the Lord by a solemn covenant.

Historically, the ritual of covenant taking was both the means of gathering a newly formed congregation at its inception and also a rite of passage into the fellowship for new members. Church discipline, in accordance with the procedures of admonition, censure, and excommunication as outlined in Matthew 18:15-18, was regarded as an essential mark of a true, visible church. The practice of discipline served a twofold function in Baptist life: it aimed at restoring the lapsed brother or sister to full fellowship if possible, and it marked off clearly the boundaries between the church and its environing culture. In both of these ways, discipline helped to preserve the purity of the church's witness in the world.

As Baptists have evolved from small sectarian beginnings into what one historian has called "the catholic phase of their history," both the covenantal and disciplinary features of our church life have become marginal to our identity. The loss of these historic distinctives has resulted in the crisis of Baptist spirituality which pervades so much of our church life today. Theological renewal cannot evade the issues raised by this devolution. What are the standards of personal holiness which ought to distinguish a man or woman of God? What are the ethical implications of our corporate decisions? Without engaging in partisan politics, can the church speak prophetically to the great moral concerns of our day such as the proliferation of violence and war, the persistence of racial injustice, and the genocidal slaughter of the innocent unborn? Can we recover a structure of accountability in our congregational life without relapsing into narrow judgmentalism? Such issues of "practical" theology along with other pressing concerns such as worship, pastoral care, and church governance, cannot be resolved merely by better administrative procedures or more "how-to" manuals. They go to the very heart of the doctrine of the church itself.

At the turn of the century, J. B. Gambrell observed that "heresies have their habitation in cold hearts and cold churches." The awakening that must come will have its start in local congregations where there is an atmosphere of hospitality to the truth. It will be reflected in a renewal of doctrinal preaching and systematic expository study of the Scriptures. It will issue in a greater burden for the lost, a wider missionary vision, and the equipping of God's people in the discipling of *panta ta ethne* in fulfillment of the Great Commission. Like all true spiritual phenomena, theological revival cannot be brought about by mere human means. We cannot work it up; only God can send it down. However, we can pray for it and prepare ourselves for it through the study and reclamation of the theological legacy we have received and are charged as a sacred duty to pass on.

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<sup>1</sup> George W. McDaniels, *The People Called Baptists* (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the SBC, 1919), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Myster of Iniquity* (London: n.p., 1612), 46. For a fuller treatment of Helwys in the context of the early Baptist literature of toleration, see Timothy George, "Between Pacifism and Coercion: The English Baptist Doctrine of Religious Toleration," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (1984): 30-49.

<sup>3</sup> W. L. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959), 230-32.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller elucidation of these themes, see Timothy George, "The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity," *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1989): 283-94.

<sup>5</sup> Winthrop S. Hudson, ed., *Baptist Concepts of the Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959), 215-16. Cf. also the lament of Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Don Cupitt, *The Debate About Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 110.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 11.

<sup>8</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), xi.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 35.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Burhenn, "The Study of Religion and Liberal Education," *Bulletin*, The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion, 18 (April 1989): 28.

<sup>11</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 160.

<sup>12</sup> John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology and Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1982), 13.

<sup>13</sup> The metaphor of the skylight is that of Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 161.

<sup>14</sup> E. R. Fairweather, ed., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* (New York: MacMillan, 1970, 70-73).

<sup>15</sup> The crisis is felt in varying measures among most of the more than twenty-five distinct Baptist groups in North America. The continuing controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention is but one symptom of this wider phenomenon. As recently as 1984 the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. authorized a "blue ribbon commission on Denominational Identity" to address this theme.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted, William H. Brackney, "'Commonly, (Though Falsely) Called. . .': Reflections on the Search for Baptist Identity," in *Perspectives in Churchmanship: Essays in Honor of Robert G. Torbet*, ed. David M. Scholer (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 81.

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (London: J. Heaton and Son, 1861), 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), ix.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 5:387. Cf. David S. Dockery, "Toward a Balanced Hermeneutic in Baptist Life," *Search* 19 (1989): 47-51.

<sup>20</sup> This from the article "Of God and of the Holy Trinity" in the Second London Confession of 1677. The complete text is in Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 244-95.

<sup>21</sup> From the article on providence in the *Abstract of Principles*, the guiding confessional document of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Printed in Robert A. Baker, ed., *A Baptist Source Book* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 138.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 517-18.

<sup>23</sup> Eric James, ed., *God's Truth: Essays to Celebrate the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 197.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted, Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 299.