

*Confessions of a Baptist:
Writings on Baptist Distinctives as Confessional Theology*

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Introduction

“What makes a Baptist a Baptist?” The seeming simplicity of the question often belies the complexity of the answer. Ask any Baptist this question and you will receive as many answers as there are Baptists. Baptists usually agree that they have a distinctive theological identity. They disagree, however, over the nature of this identity.

The question of “what makes a Baptist a Baptist” typically occurs within debates over Baptist distinctives. Many different beliefs are cited as true “Baptist distinctives.” Some stress broad principles such as the priesthood of all believers, believer’s baptism, a regenerate church membership, the primacy of the Scriptures, or congregational autonomy. Others call attention to religious freedom, soul competency, or the lordship of Christ as defining criteria. A popular answer often heard in pulpits is that Baptists are the only Christians who believe in “the Book, the blood, and the blessed hope.”

Another common approach to identifying Baptist distinctives is what I call “the appeal to the Baptist precedent.” Statements such as “Baptists have always believed this” are often cited as the undisputed truth that will bring immediate resolution to the debate. One Baptist leader is fond of saying “mama taught me that this is what Baptists have always believed,” as though “mama authority” removes all doubt. With all due respect to his mother, “mama” may not be right. Although these appeals are intended to strengthen the credibility of someone’s position, more often than not what is offered as Baptist “precedent” is usually tainted by personal agendas

and ignorance of Baptist history and theology. Emotional claims of historical continuity typically bring confusion rather than clarification.

Having examined almost every document that claims to be a work on Baptist distinctives, my research has uncovered significant issues that have direct bearing on the “Baptist distinctivne” debate. First, writings on Baptist distinctives share particular theological components that are common to all these works. The contention is made that these components are the defining criteria of what are “writings on Baptist distinctives.” Second, these treatises reflect a distinctive theological method. Third, the theological components and the theological method that are found in these documents converge to form a Baptist confessional theology.

Constituent Elements of Baptist Distinctives

Certain theological components are common among writings that claim to articulate the distinctive Baptist identity. An inductive analysis has identified these mutually shared doctrinal traits.¹ These constituent elements are necessary and determinative for classifying a work as a writing on Baptist distinctives.²

¹The following overview of common components among writings on Baptist distinctives is representative and not exhaustive. The primary sources used throughout this work all comply with the components stipulated and thereby qualify for the designation of a “writing on Baptist distinctives.”

²For purposes of brevity, the term “Baptist distinctives” will be used as a synonymous expression for any and all books, monographs, pamphlets, sermons, etc., that can rightfully be classified in this theological genre.

Epistemological Component

The first component present in all writings on Baptist distinctives is the epistemological basis for theological formulation.³ Baptist distinctive writings reflect a serious commitment to establish the basis for religious authority. The goal of determining this foundation is to solidify the viability of the distinctive theological identity of Baptists. All treatises that qualify as distinctive writings contain some type of discussion regarding the source of religious authority.

The Bible as the Epistemological Foundation

The most prominently held epistemological basis for religious authority among Baptists is the Bible. Baptists, along with other Christian denominations, appeal to the Bible as their ultimate or sole source for religious authority. Baptists distance themselves from other denominations, however, by claiming a complete dependence upon Scripture as the principal foundation for their beliefs and practices. Whereas other Christian groups incorporate extra-biblical sources such as tradition for religious authority, Baptists in their distinctive writings contend that they alone consistently and exclusively hold to the Bible for their religious authority.⁴

³Paul D. Feinberg, "Epistemology," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, defines epistemology in its religious expression as the inquiry into the nature of knowledge about God and the justification of claims to religious knowledge. The objective basis for knowing religious claims will be the definition employed herein.

⁴John Quincy Adams, Baptists the Only Thorough Religious Reformers, rev. ed. (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1876), 162.

Baptists aim to restore the order of the primitive churches. They make no appeal to tradition, the Fathers, or expediency. They simply ask, "What do the Scriptures teach?" They follow the New Testament model of a church, and invite all to test them by it. It is not strange, therefore, that they confidently appeal to God's Word for proof of the correctness of all they do. They take it all from the Bible, and therefore they know it can all be found there. Take any Scripture account of the course pursued by the apostles, or of the practice of gospel churches, and you will find the counterpart in a Baptist church.

Some Baptists narrow biblical authority to the New Testament.⁵ This sub-grouping emphasizes that the New Testament as the source of religious authority is that which distinguishes Baptists from all other Christian denominations.⁶ Some Baptists go so far as to teach that doctrinal developments that are neither supported nor taught in the New Testament disqualify those beliefs from being considered “baptistic.”⁷

The assertion of the Bible as the source of religious authority is of paramount importance to the distinctive theology of Baptists.⁸ Baptists categorically oppose any authoritative human imposition between God and man. Such intrusions interfere with the essence of the faith relationship between the Creator and His creation. Because of this aversion, Baptists typically

⁵Henry Cook, What Baptists Stand for (London: Kingsgate Press, 1947), 18.

It is this emphasis on the supremacy of the New Testament in all matters of the Church’s faith and practice that constitutes the basis of the Baptist position. It is to the New Testament we must go for direction, and it is by the standards of the New Testament that we must seek to regulate our convictions and conduct.

⁶Benajah Harvey Carroll, Baptists and Their Doctrines; Sermons on Distinctive Baptist Principles, comp. by J. B. Cranfill (Chicago: F. H. Revell Co., 1913), 11, states “when Baptists say that the New Testament is the only law for Christian institutions they part company, if not theoretically at least practically, with most of the Protestant world, as well as from the Greeks and Romanists.”

⁷James Madison Pendleton, Three Reasons Why I Am a Baptist; With a Fourth Reason Added on Communion, 13th ed. (Nashville: Graves, Marks, and Rutland, 1856), 5-6. See idem, Distinctive Baptist Principles (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1882), 11, where Pendleton seems to contradict himself when he appeals to the entire Bible as the “supreme standard of faith and practice.”

⁸The notion that the Bible is the source of religious authority for Baptists is regularly illustrated by the manner in which Baptist distinctives are developed. Vast amounts of material and time are devoted to some type of exposition of the Scriptures in order to develop or validate some particular doctrinal point. E.g. Baptist Why and Why Not (Nashville: Sunday School Board, Southern Baptist Convention, 1900), 169-78; Jeremiah Bell Jeter and others, Baptist Principles Reset, Consisting of a Series of Articles on Distinctive Baptist Principles, 3d ed. (Richmond, VA: Religious Herald, 1902), 14, 16, 18-26; Philip L. Jones, A Restatement of Baptist Principles (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland Press, 1909), 35, 52-53; William Richardson White, Baptist Distinctives (Nashville: Sunday School Board, Southern Baptist Convention, 1946); 28-34; P. Lovene, Distinctive Baptist Principles, 2d ed., rev. (Chicago: Baptist Conference Press, 1950), 39-43; Cook, 85-90. Joseph Burnley Moody, The Distinguishing Doctrines of Baptists (Nashville: Folk & Browder, 1901), 7-83, not only develops an elaborate biblical exposition for his formulation of Baptist distinctives but also argues for a typological hermeneutic.

reject the use of creedal statements.⁹ They instead appeal to the Bible as their authoritative creed for all matters of doctrine and practice.¹⁰

Individual, Autonomous, Religious Experience as the Epistemological Foundation

Another epistemological expression is individual, autonomous, religious experience.¹¹ Although the majority of writings on Baptist distinctives begin with some assertion of biblical authority, some Baptist distinctives contend that religious experience is the epistemological basis. This premise is asserted as a necessary stipulation in order to have a valid understanding of the role of the Bible and the process of conversion in Baptist thought. The argument for religious experience as the primary epistemological foundation is a twentieth-century development in the history of Baptist distinctives.¹²

⁹Timothy George, Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 2-4, notes that Baptists have always rejected two expressions of creedalism. Baptists have opposed forms of creedalism in which governmental authorities seek to regulate or coerce religious life. Baptists have also opposed all forms of creedalism in which man-made doctrinal constructs are elevated above the Bible. George does suggest, however, that aversion to these forms of creedalism is not the same as the voluntary, conscientious adherence to explicit doctrinal statements. Baptists, according to George, have advocated such a theological formulations and have even employed the term “creed” to describe the process.

¹⁰Cook, 18. Charles W. Gilkey, “The Distinctive Baptist Witness,” The Chronicle 8 (July 1945): 102.

¹¹Although the phrase is quite lengthy, each term is carefully and intentionally selected to convey what this component means. The word “individual” is selected to designate the emphasis upon the uniquely personal nature of religious experience. “Autonomous” suggests that the experience must be of the person alone. The notion is intended to reject ideas of imposed-faith or proxy-faith. “Religious” suggests that the discussion is not of all human experiences; only those that are uniquely and distinctly religious. Within the current discussion, these religious experiences are Christian in expression. For purposes of brevity, the phrase “religious experience” will be used herein to designate this broad concept.

¹²Edgar Young Mullins, The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1908), 59-69.

Polemical Intention

The second component found within Baptist distinctives is “polemical intention.”

Polemical intention is the notion that the author is purposefully expounding those theological traits that distinguish Baptists from other Christian denominations. This element critiques the theological distinctiveness of other Christian denominations in light of their differences with Baptists.

Part of the overall Baptist theological identity are those doctrines that they share with other Christian denominations. Theological conceptions, such as Christology, the Trinity, and eschatology that are common among Baptists, can typically be found in other Christian groups. Theological treatises or doctrinal explications written by Baptists are intentionally different from writings on Baptist distinctives. These types of writings do not in and of themselves seek to articulate the distinctive theology of Baptists. Polemical intention is significant in that it is a primary component that distinguishes the distinctive genre from other types of Baptist theology.

Polemical intention is theologically oriented and can have several differing expressions. It can critique the theological foundations or explications of other Christian groups in comparison with Baptists.¹³ Polemical intention can target specific denominations¹⁴ or certain

¹³For Baptist polemics against pedobaptism, see Adams, 25, 81-83; Herbert Gezork, “Our Baptist Faith in the World To-Day,” Baptist World Alliance Golden Jubilee Congress, London, 1955 (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1955), 44; Henry Wheeler Robinson, The Life and Faith of the Baptists (London: Kingsgate Press, 1946), 71-74; idem, Baptist Principles, rep. 4th ed. (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1966), 60-61; Jeter, Baptist Principles Reset, 34-56; Pendleton, Distinctive Principles of Baptists, 80-89; Baptist Why and Why Not, 153-62; James S. Kirtley, The Baptist Distinctive and Objective (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1926), 15-16; against state-church concepts, see Lovene, 45; Jeter, Baptist Principles Reset, 124-25; Gezork, 44; Kirtley, 20-21; James Donovan Mosteller, “Basic Baptist Principles and the Contemporary Scene,” Southwestern Journal of Theology 6 (April 1964): 75-81; against sacramentalism, see George Edwin Horr, The Baptist Heritage (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1923), 88; Kirtley, 9-15; against sacerdotalism and religious tradition, see Carroll, 21-23; Kirtley, 16-20; Jones, 16-17; Emlyn Davies, “Our Historic Baptist Distinctives,” The Chronicle 16 (October 1953): 191. George Peck, “The Baptist Heritage: Practice, Polity, and Promise,” Andover Newton Quarterly 19 (March 1979): 215-22, argues against the way Baptists have done things in the past and seeks to preserve a fluidity and viability to the Baptist identity for future ministry. In a sense, Peck is arguing against a “Baptist tradition.” For Baptist polemics against Episcopal and/or Presbyterian church polity, see Mullins, 227-33.

religious movements.¹⁵ Baptists have even criticized themselves in the way they formulate their own distinctive identity.¹⁶ The purpose of the polemic is to highlight the supremacy and uniqueness of the Baptist position in contrast to the theological deficiencies of other positions.

Ecclesiological Component

The third component of these writings is the Baptist doctrine of the church. Those elements which distinguish Baptists theologically from other Christian groups are often most visible in the manner in which Baptists “do church.”¹⁷ Whenever Baptist distinctives are being developed, the work will in some capacity address Baptist ecclesiology. Although the types of church issues may vary in specificity or quantity, the presence of ecclesiastical issues is certain.

One common expression of this component is the mode of baptism. In distinctive writings, Baptists maintain that the only New Testament mode of baptism is immersion. Baptists have consistently affirmed the theological significance of baptism by immersion.¹⁸ Some Baptists have elevated the mode of baptism to such status that the Lord’s Supper was denied to

¹⁴For Baptist polemics against Roman Catholicism, see Walter Rauschenbusch, Why I Am a Baptist (Philadelphia: Baptist Leader, 1958), in Rochester Baptist Monthly 20 (1905-6), 2-3; Moody, 86-87, 135-39; Robinson, The Life and Faith of the Baptists, 20; Lovene, 23-24; Cook, 20-26; Baptist Why and Why Not, 51-80; against Episcopalianism, see Baptist Why and Why Not, 83-108; Moody, 140; against Congregationalism, see Lovene, 45; against Methodism and Presbyterianism, see Baptist Why and Why Not, 111-25, 129-36; against Lutheranism, see Mullins, 109-13; and against Campbellism, see Baptist Why and Why Not, 139-50.

¹⁵White, 57-63, where he specifically targets the National and World Council of Churches. Although White does critique doctrines and denominations, he does so within the confines of his assault upon the National and World Council of Churches. The articulation of White’s understanding of Baptist distinctives is framed within a discussion of why Baptists, particularly Southern Baptists, should not become members of these councils.

¹⁶E.g., Eric H. Ohlmann, “The Essence of the Baptists: A Reexamination,” Perspectives in Religious Studies 13 (Fall 1986): 83-92, levels his polemic against the way in which all other writings on Baptist distinctives have been formulated.

¹⁷William Thomas Whitley, A History of British Baptists (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1923), 4.

¹⁸Ohlmann, 90-91.

those not baptized by this mode in a Baptist church.¹⁹ The issue of baptism is also found within the ecclesiological component under the topic of believer's baptism. The baptism of conscious believers is a significant differentiation between Baptists and Pedobaptists. Although Baptists have insisted that baptism is not necessary for salvation, they have contended for its importance for church membership.²⁰

A regenerated, or believers', church is another feature of the ecclesiological component. Baptists maintain that a visible, local congregation should be constituted only of those who have experienced God's grace through faith, have been baptized, and have voluntarily associated themselves so as to participate in the mission of that local church. This notion stands in contradistinction to the inclusive state-church concept. For Baptists, such religious conceptions undermine the very heart of the gospel and a regenerated church membership. Due to the prevalence of the state-church position found among many Christian groups, Baptists contend that a regenerated church membership is unique to their distinctive ecclesiology.²¹

Congregational polity is also frequently discussed. Baptists readily admit that congregational polity is not their sole "theological property." They do claim, however, to make unique contributions to the doctrine by joining believer's baptism together with soul competency

¹⁹Pendleton, Three Reasons Why I Am a Baptist, 32-137.

²⁰James Leo Garrett, "Baptist 'Distinctives': Endangered Species," Sermon at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, 4 September 1991, 1-3; Thomas Treadwell Eaton, The Faith of the Baptists (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1903), 20-41; Jonathan Gaines Bow, What Baptists Believe and Why They Believe It (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1906), 25-31; Frederick L. Anderson, Historic Baptist Principles (Buffalo, NY: American Baptist Historical Society, 1920), 15; Cook, 118-38; Jones, 51-58; Kirtley, 53-54; George, 163-79; Lovene, 33-34; Horr, 48-50; Adams, 150-51; White, 29-30; Jeter, Baptist Principles Reset, 13; Carroll, 33; Robinson, Baptist Principles, 11-28; idem, The Life and Faith of Baptists, 78-85, although not rejecting immersion as the mode of baptism, is not as adamant about the form of baptism as he is about the theological meaning of baptism.

²¹ Cook, 17, 32.

in order to form a peculiar expression of church government. This arrangement of these particular doctrines permits Baptists to claim their formulation as peculiar to them.²²

Volitional Component

A fourth trait common within the distinctive genre is the “volitional” component. This element is expressed in two concepts that are somewhat distinct yet share common ground.

These two expressions are religious liberty and soul competency.²³

The first expression of the volitional component is religious liberty.²⁴ Baptists lived as a disadvantaged and persecuted sect for hundreds of years in England and in colonial America. Due to these circumstances, they constantly cried out for the freedom to follow their religious convictions and beliefs without external interferences.²⁵ The postulation of religious liberty by Baptists was quite revolutionary during the first centuries of Baptist life.²⁶ The reason for their

²²E.g., Carroll, 27-31; White, 38-39; Adams, 121-26; Lovene, 19-20; Kirtley, 52-53; Jones, 43-51; Mullins, 55; Cook, 74-84; Eaton, 17; Robinson, The Life and Faith of the Baptists, 97-110.

²³The designation of religious liberty and soul competency under the concept of volition follows that established by Mullins, 150-67. Although Mullins does give two separate discussions of the topics, the notions share similarities in their expressions within writings on Baptist distinctives. Mullins joins the concepts of freedom and responsibility together. For Mullins, every individual is made in the image of God and is therefore competent, responsible, and accountable to deal personally with God. This individual, or “soul,” competency further implies for Mullins an unhindered access to receive or to reject a personal, individual relationship with God. Each “soul” is has a volitional obligation to address his spiritual standing before God. Further, society has a volitional obligation to provide an unhindered or unobtrusive environment to allow persons the freedom to deal with God in this way. This rationale is why Mullins includes both soul competency and religious freedom together in his discussion. Ibid., 150-57. Because Mullins gave these two ideas an overlapping treatment within the general confines of his discussion, the concepts are adopted herein to embrace both ideas within this one component.

²⁴E.g., Adams, 43, 90-97; Rauschenbusch, 6, 9; Robinson, The Life and Faith of the Baptists, 123-34; idem, Baptist Principles, 63; White, 13-16; Pendleton, Distinctive Principles of Baptists, 185; Lovene, 75-77; Kirtley, 20; Horr, 93-95; Jones, 73-78; Nowlin, 48-49; Davies, 195-96; Cook, 165; Carroll, Baptists and Their Doctrines, 23-24; Baptist Why and Why Not, 269-78; Jeter, Baptist Principles Reset, 120-27.

²⁵Ohlmann, 87. He further notes that although Baptists agree with other Protestants on many points, the notion of religious liberty has radically distinguished the Baptists from other denominations.

²⁶See H. Leon McBeth, English Baptist Literature on Religious Liberty to 1689 (New York: Arno Press, 1980). Not only did Baptists include their sentiments on this subject in their distinctive writings, but also they wrote extensively on it in separate treatises and confessions of faith.

insistence of religious freedom is attributed to their understanding of the gospel as requiring a voluntary, intentional response without any external coercion. As a distinctive expression of their unique theological identity, Baptists contend that faith must be a free and voluntary response to God.²⁷

Another expression of the volitional component is soul competency.²⁸ Because of the inherent connection between the two ideas, when Baptists contend for religious freedom in their distinctive writings they normally discuss soul competency or vice versa. Baptists adamantly hold to the notion that the individual alone must approach and relate to God directly without any human intermediaries.²⁹ Soul competency can refer to the innate ability of each individual to relate to God, the responsibility of each person to know and serve God (or to reject God), or the initial experience of “doing business with God.” Soul competency has proven a useful weapon against sacerdotalism, sacramentalism, pedobaptism, and state churches. In American Baptist life, soul competency has penetrated deeply into the distinctive theological identity of Baptists.³⁰

Baptist distinctives share common theological components that define the criteria for this theological genre. Epistemological, polemical, ecclesiological, and volitional components are all found in some form in these works. Although arrangement and expression of these components

²⁷Adams, 96-97.

²⁸E.g., Rauschenbusch, 3; Robinson, The Life and Faith of the Baptists, 19; idem, Baptist Principles, 20-27, 68-69; Mullins, 59-69; 150-67; White, 12-15; Pendleton, Distinctive Principles, 185; Lovene, 57-62; Jones, 16-18, 81; Nowlin, 17, 49-50; Davies, 195-96; Carroll, 15-18, 34; Kirtley, 7-8; Horr, 92-97; James Burton Gambrell, Baptist Principles Reset, 250-51.

²⁹William Roy McNutt, Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1935), 21-25; Robinson, The Life and Faith of the Baptists, 19, 24; Mullins, 53-57.

³⁰Ohlmann, 88, asserts that soul competency in American Baptist life is shaped by three factors: rationalism’s insistence on religion as a personal matter between the individual and God, revivalism’s emphasis on a personal decision of faith, and the American enchantment for civil and religious liberty.

can be somewhat diverse, these traits are the criteria that categorize a theological work within the genre of Baptist distinctives.

Theological Hermeneutics of Baptist Distinctives

The next issue I will address is the theological hermeneutic employed in Baptist distinctives. Authors of Baptist distinctive writings develop a primary, or defining, distinctive that is more prevalent than the others. This “defining” or “organizing” distinctive serves as a foundational premise for the other distinctive doctrines.

I recognize that Baptists are too diverse and complex to be reduced to one central characteristic. The complexity of Baptist distinctives can best be understood, however, via an analysis that involves locating an organizing principle. My research has uncovered the explicit presence of such a methodology within the writings themselves.³¹

Biblical Authority as the Primary Distinctive

One group of writings on Baptist distinctives contends for biblical authority as the defining distinctive. The other distinctive components are the logical application of the core distinctive. Biblical authority is therefore the foundational premise; all the other distinctive components are the theological outflow of this core tenet.

Some distinctive writings stipulate that the existence of Baptists is the result of faithful obedience and submission to the authority of Scripture.³² “The fundamental principle of the

³¹Contra Ohlmann, 84, who, while affirming that such a prioritizing of Baptist traits exists, does not see any intentionality on the part of the Baptist writers in the delineation of characteristic Baptist emphases or the location of a central tenet of Baptist thought or foundation. Ohlmann simply affirms the fact that these writings contain a core thesis. The evidence indicates, however, that many of the writers on Baptist distinctives did intentionally formulate a central thesis that interpreted or shaped the other distinctives.

³²Odle, 94-95; Ramay, 8-9; Baker, 3; Davies, 193-95.

Baptists is their belief in the supreme authority and absolute sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures; and their separate existence is the practical and logical result of their attempt to apply this principle in all matters of faith and religion.”³³ “The Baptists have been distinguished for their close attachment to the Scriptures. They, and they alone, have never appealed to any thing else for proof of any portion of their faith and practice, as Christians. . . . The simplicity of this principle has been favorable to their success.”³⁴ “The one fundamental principle of Baptists, and the foundation stone on which they rest as an effective Christian group in the world today, is their belief in the supreme authority and absolute sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures, especially the New Testament, as the complete and infallible guide in all matters pertaining to their faith and practice; and every other peculiarity which characterizes them is the practical outcome of this principle.”³⁵ Baptist distinctives for these authors are the “natural” conclusion to the fundamental distinctive of biblical authority.³⁶

Other distinctive writings apply biblical authority to Baptist ecclesiology.³⁷ With regard to the authority of the Bible and ecclesiology, “in his doctrine of the church, the baptist [*sic*] rejects all that is not required by scripture and so the two primary principles harmonize, the

³³Baptist Why and Why Not, 26.

³⁴Curtis, 318-19.

³⁵Rone, 3.

³⁶Eaton, 4, identifies the primary distinctive of Baptists as absolute submission to the “Scripture teaching.” From this principle he derives the corollaries of soul competency, the church, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper.

³⁷Burrows, 3; Nowlin, 22-23; Moody, 7-8; Broadus, 5. Buttrick, 15-17, argues specifically that congregational polity is the application of the distinctive of biblical authority. Walthall, 13-14, contends that “another item of our faith, closely allied to the one [biblical authority] just noticed, if not logically required by it, is the individual and universal priesthood of true Christians.”

second being an extension of the first.”³⁸ Following a brief discussion regarding the significance of Baptist ecclesiology, Cook states that “this is the fundamental Baptist position. With this belief in the primacy of the New Testament Baptists always begin, and from it they draw all their conclusions.”³⁹ Based upon their distinctive biblical authority, the procedure of Baptists is “to draw inferences for the practice of the church.”⁴⁰

The practice of baptism is also considered a theological derivative from biblical authority. The “search for Scriptural baptism” is nothing more than the application of biblical authority.⁴¹ Baptism by immersion is the consistent application of the all-sufficiency of the Scriptures.⁴² Infant baptism is rejected on the basis that biblical authority propounds believer’s baptism.⁴³

Others derive soul competency from the distinctive of biblical authority.⁴⁴ Based on this fundamental principal, Baptists are compelled to “enumerate some of the inferences that Baptists have deduced,” the first of which is the competency and immediacy of the soul in communion with God.⁴⁵ The concept of soul competency is viewed as such an integral expression of biblical

³⁸Hoad, 14, contends that the second principle, the Baptist understanding of the church, is “an extension” of the first, namely, the sole authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and practice.

³⁹Cook, 19.

⁴⁰Hudson, 6-7.

⁴¹Love, 19.

⁴²Jeter, Baptist Principles Reset, 252; McDaniel, 44-45; Pendleton, Distinctive Principles, 12-13; and White, 4-7, also contend for a regenerate church membership in addition to baptism.

⁴³Bow, 4; MacArthur, 16; Lovene, 11.

⁴⁴Denison, 3-5; Boggs, 16-20.

⁴⁵F. Anderson, 16-17.

authority, that “when one is denied or explained away, the other usually suffers like fate.”⁴⁶

God’s word as the religious authority suggests that each person has the right and responsibility to approach God and appeal to Scripture.⁴⁷ Issues of individual responsibility and duty are stipulated as necessary corollaries of biblical authority.⁴⁸ Soul competency is construed as a viable and logical expression of the contention of the Bible as the absolute authority for faith and practice.⁴⁹

A Shift in Methodology

Baptist distinctive writings prior to the twentieth-century all shared the core distinctive of biblical authority. A shift in this expression occurred early in the twentieth-century. Although many Baptists continued to assert biblical authority as the primary distinctive, others began to argue for the authoritative role of individual, autonomous, religious experience prior to the authority of the Bible. The first major work to argue for a “redefining” of the primary distinctive of Baptists was E. Y. Mullins’s in his work, The Axioms of Religion.⁵⁰ Mullins elevated

⁴⁶Whitley, 28-29.

⁴⁷Adams, 33-37.

⁴⁸Carroll, 15.

⁴⁹Gezork, 42.

⁵⁰The first writing that mentioned religious experience as the characteristic distinctive of Baptists was Rauschenbusch, “Why I Am a Baptist.” Rauschenbusch’s work was a precursor to Mullins’s writing, but Mullins’s work was far more pivotal and influential in the development of religious experience as the core distinctive in Baptist life. Two reasons support this assertion. First, Rauschenbusch’s writing is more personal and testimonial. Unlike Mullins, Rauschenbusch gives no reasoning or basis for his claim. Although using personal religious experience as the foundation for the explication of other Baptist distinctives, Rauschenbusch only acknowledges the fact of personal religious experience and its implications as it pertains to his own personal spiritual pilgrimage. Mullins, however, provides careful argumentation for the philosophical and biblical basis for religious experience as expressed in soul competency and argues for its primacy as the primary Baptist distinctive. Second, others often cite Mullins’s arguments and reasoning as the basis for the rationale of soul competency as the primary Baptist distinctive. For example, see Robinson, The Life and Faith of Baptists, 18; Jones, 15; Neely, 35; McNutt, 21-25.

The influence of Mullins in shaping Baptist thought in general and religious experience in particular is noted by others. For example, Turner, 37; Baker, 88; Cook, 9, 216; Lovene, 58; Ohlmann, 88; Mosteller, 60; J.

religious experience to an authoritative role that had previously been reserved in these writings on the Bible. This is not to say that issues of religious experience did not exist as a theological component within distinctive genre; it certainly did. Mullins rather elevated this trait to a prominent role of religious authority, thereby infusing into the distinctive theological process a new, “interpretative” distinctive. The Axioms of Religion marked a significant shift in the prevailing understanding of the theological distinctives of Baptists and thereby provided an impetus for a second defining distinctive from which some Baptists would elaborate their unique theological identity.⁵¹

Experiential Authority

Certain Baptist distinctive writings advocate an experiential authority as the primary, or defining, distinctive. The works that argue for religious experience as the primary distinctive also view the other distinctive components as the logical application of this core distinctive.

Anderson, 6; Garrett, “Major Emphases in Baptist Theology,” 44. Harold Bloom, The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 199, has characterized Mullins as “the Calvin or Luther or Wesley of the Southern Baptists . . . not the founder of the Southern Baptists but their re-founder, the definer of their creedless faith.” Mullins himself seemed aware that he was postulating a shift of emphasis in Baptist distinctive writings and reflects this intention in the title The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith. Mullins continues to exert influence, especially on the popular level, through Herschel H. Hobbs, The Axioms of Religion, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), which is a revision of Mullins’s earlier work. Mark Whitten, “Philosophy of Religion,” Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Theology Since 1845, ed. Paul Basden (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 271, observes that Mullins’s influence, due to his roles as seminary president, theology teacher, author, and denominational statesman, extended beyond the perimeters of Southern Baptist life to encompass in some degree all Baptists.

⁵¹The notion of a theological shift occurring with Mullins has been asserted by others. Nettles, By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 246-57, posits that Mullins’s theological methodology “began the inimitable influence” of Southern Baptists away from what Nettles contends was an SBC Calvinistic orthodoxy. Although Nettles is addressing the issue of election in Southern Baptist theology, he is perceptive in identifying the influence which Mullins exerted not only on Southern Baptists but also, in many ways, on Baptist thought in general. Others who have made similar observation are Dwight A. Moody, “The Bible,” Has Our Theology Changed?, 12-13, with regard to Baptist understandings of the nature of the Bible; Basden, “Predestination,” Has Our Theology Changed? 50-54, with regard to Baptist understandings of predestination; Walter D. Draughon, III, “Atonement,” Has Our Theology Changed? 84-96, regarding Baptist understandings of the atonement.

Religious experience is for them the foundational premise. All other distinctive doctrinal formulations are the natural, theological outflow of this tenet. This phenomenon is intentional in expression and is often explicitly stated as such.

Walter Rauschenbusch illustrates the derivation of other Baptist distinctives from religious experience. After stipulating individual religious experience as the core distinctive theological trait of Baptists, Rauschenbusch applies this principle by asserting that the baptism of believers is the application of the prior principal of religious experience.⁵² The baptism of believers is the consistent application of Rauschenbusch's understanding of religious experience. This notion is also determinative for his understanding of congregational polity, ministry, evangelism, and the Lord's Supper.

A contemporary example is Walter B. Shurden's work on Baptist distinctives.⁵³ Following Martin Marty, Shurden asserts that the notion of individual freedom is the "stackpole around which Baptist convictions develop."⁵⁴ He then uses the notion of individual freedom to address the topics of Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom, and religious freedom.

Other distinctive works apply their multi-faceted expressions of religious experience in various ways. Soul competency is one expression of religious experience. Soul competency is posited as the "unifying principle" for all distinctive aspects of Baptist theology.⁵⁵ No doctrine is more "baptistic" than soul competency, and no doctrine is more determinative of the

⁵²Rauschenbusch, 2.

⁵³Walter B. Shurden, The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 1993), 1-4.

⁵⁴Martin E. Marty, "Baptistification Takes Over," Christianity Today, 2 September 1983. It is interesting that Shurden looks to an American Lutheran church historian for his understanding of Baptist distinctives.

theological peculiarities of Baptists than this concept.⁵⁶ Soul competency “is the principle which has shaped our [Baptist] history, dictated our attitude toward the Scriptures, formulated our conceptions of the Church, interpreted for us the meaning of the two New Testament ordinances, made us champions of soul [religious] liberty, sent us everywhere as missionaries of the cross, and given us a peculiar fitness to meet the spiritual needs of the age in which we are now beginning to live.”⁵⁷ The believers’ church is the theological application of soul competency.⁵⁸ Soul competency necessitates the correlative of biblical revelation, thereby deriving an understanding of Scripture from the notion of soul competency.⁵⁹ The Baptist distinctive of religious experience as expressed in soul competency provides the focal point around which all other doctrines are developed.⁶⁰

Religious experience as expressed in Christ’s lordship and in religious freedom is also determinative for other Baptist distinctives. With regard to the former, the lordship of Christ is

⁵⁵Rushbrooke, 70. Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 77, states that “the six axioms, taken in connection with the fundamental general principle out of which they spring--the competency of the soul in religion under God--may be regarded as the platform of human rights in religion.”

⁵⁶Jones, 16-17.

⁵⁷Skevington, 9-10.

⁵⁸Hays, 38-47.

⁵⁹Kirtley, 7-8.

⁶⁰Wayne E. Ward, “What Is a Baptist? Personal Religious Freedom,” *Western Recorder*, 4 April, 1970, 2. Although there is much variety of theology and practice among Baptists, certain emphases do characterize Baptists all over the United States and around the world. It is often said that Baptists have as many different viewpoints as there are Baptists—and even that quip points to the most basic characteristic of Baptist life, the religious freedom of each individual believer in his personal relationship to God. Almost all of the other Baptist distinctives flow from this basic one: their great stress upon religious liberty for all men; their rejection of any official hierarchy or bishop; their affirmation of the direct Lordship of Jesus Christ over the church congregation without any church officer to mediate it; emphasis upon a personal experience of regeneration and faith in Christ; their requirement of a personal confession of faith in Christ before baptism; and their emphasis upon a personal call of God as the basic credential for the ministry.

“the root principle from which all the others evolve.”⁶¹ The distinctive doctrines are then construed as “emanating” ideas that flow from this doctrinal tenet.⁶² With regard to the latter, religious freedom is the distinctive by which the other distinctives of the authority of the Bible, the believers’ church, believer’s baptism, and church/state relations are understood.⁶³

Conclusion: A Baptist Hermeneutic

The evidence from the materials examined reveals several aspects of Baptist distinctives. First, identification and establishment of a core, or primary, distinctive is an essential part of developing Baptist distinctives. The writings typically distill the peculiarities of Baptist theology to one determinative theological concept. Second, Baptist distinctives are the application of the core distinctive to Baptist theology. This organizing tenet is applied logically and consistently by the formulators in order to shape the other distinctive components. This phenomenon demonstrates that “Baptist distinctives” are as much a “method of theology” as a “defined body” of literature.⁶⁴

The evidence therefore suggests that writings on Baptist distinctives reflect a theological hermeneutic. These writings begin with a primary distinctive that is used to formulate certain

⁶¹Mosteller, 61.

⁶²J. Anderson, 6.

⁶³Earle G. Griffith, Baptists: Their History, Principles, and Polity (New York: Interstate Evangelistic Association, 1935), 39; Halbrooks, 1-8; Cecil E. Sherman, “Freedom of the Individual To Interpret the Bible,” in Being Baptist Means Freedom, 9-24; Richard E. Grove, “The Freedom of the Local Church,” in Being Baptist Means Freedom, 25-36; Norman Cavendar, “Freedom for the Church in a Free State,” in Being Baptist Means Freedom, 83-96.

⁶⁴Bernard Ramm, “Baptist Theology,” Watchman-Examiner 43 (November 24, 1955): 1070-73, argues that the true essence of Baptists is not in their unique theological components but rather in their unique and consistent method of doing theology. Although contending for the primary distinctive of religious freedom via soul competency, Ramm argues that Baptists must produce their theology within certain theological boundaries. Doctrines that are formulated outside these established perimeters result in theological constructions which transgress the distinctive theological identity of Baptists. Ramm contends that the boundaries for Baptists are the evangelical doctrines of the Protestant Reformation.

other theological components. Although diversity of arrangement and nuance of application exist, Baptist distinctive writings reflect shared components that are common to all distinctive writings and are determinative for the “distinctive genre.” The theological components, while similar in their overall content, also contain differing nuances of emphasis. These writings reflect a concern for the process of theology as much as the result. The employment of this approach has produced a thread of theological continuity throughout the distinctive theology of Baptists. When deviation from this approach occurs, then the thread of theological continuity is broken, and the result is a theological formulation foreign to the Baptist identity.⁶⁵

Two Distinctive Traditions

The theological components and hermeneutics of this genre disclose further revelations in the quest to discover the distinctive doctrinal identity of Baptists. Two understandings, or “traditions,” of Baptist distinctives have emerged within Baptist life, particularly within the Southern Baptist Convention. Both of these traditions have existed side by side throughout most of the twentieth-century. In recent years, however, the differences between the two have grown so great that they no longer appear able to coexist.

These differences exist due to the manner in which the core distinctive shapes the development of theological identity. Works that affirm the primacy of biblical authority as the core distinctive develop and interpret the other distinctives in light of this organizing principle. This method reflects the Protestant Reformation tradition of *sola scriptura*. In fact, many of the authors of these writings believed that the Baptists and their distinctive theology were the logical outcome to the Reformation assumption of the preeminence of biblical authority. Those

distinctive works that affirm the primacy of biblical authority can be categorized as “Reformation Baptist distinctives.”

Writings on Baptist distinctives that affirm religious experience as the core distinctive embrace the Enlightenment assumption of individual autonomy. This profound emphasis upon the individual is often expressed in terms of individual freedoms, individual rights, and individual morality. This strand of distinctives can be called “Enlightenment Baptist distinctives.” This tradition was birthed in Mullins’ The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith. As indicated by the title, Mullins intentionally sought to redefine the existing Reformation Baptist distinctive tradition. He wanted to stress that both religious experience and biblical authority are equal and necessary for developing Baptist distinctives. He did not, in my estimation, achieve this balance. His understanding of religious experience overshadowed his understanding of biblical authority. Religious experience became for Mullins the core distinctive that shaped his understanding of biblical authority. Baptist distinctive writings that evolved in conjunction with this tradition continued this emphasis.

Writings on Baptist distinctives have a unique ordering that affects the theological process. The Reformation tradition first asserts the primacy of biblical authority. These works construct a Baptist doctrine of the church based upon biblical authority. Religious experience in its various expressions is a necessary by-product of having a New Testament church built upon biblical revelation. The Reformation distinctive tradition affirms the role of individual accountability and responsibility. It does so, however, within the broader scope of the overall life and teachings of the church.

⁶⁵Ramm, 1070-73.

The Enlightenment distinctive tradition has over a period of time inverted this view. Following Mullins, this tradition moved from a “biblical authority core distinctive” that shaped church life and religious experience to a “religious experience core distinctive” that shaped biblical authority and church life. The defining distinctive in this tradition became a form of individual, autonomous, religious experience. On this foundation, a doctrine of the church developed that strongly emphasized the individual, sometimes to the neglect of the corporate life of the church. The Bible became a repository of information for individual spiritual blessings, individual Christian living, and individual religious freedoms, rather than an authoritative revelation for a community of born-again believers working together for the extension of God’s kingdom. Religious experience replaced biblical authority as the core distinctive that interpreted the other Baptist distinctives.

In the earliest stages of Baptist life, the only distinctive tradition that existed was the Reformation Baptist distinctive tradition. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, the Enlightenment Baptist distinctive tradition was birthed. These two traditions initially shared similar theological convictions. Over time, however, the two distinctive traditions grew further apart in their convictions and emphases.

These two distinctive traditions still thrive today. The Reformation tradition continues to demonstrate theological stability and historical continuity. Based upon its past historical continuity and theological stability, the Reformation tradition of Baptist distinctives will likely continue to flourish and to formulate a distinctive theological identity for many Baptists in the future. This tradition provides a large segment of Baptists with a theological connection to their past and strong theological identity for the future. If the past is any indication, this tradition will continue to exist and provide a theological identity for many Baptists yet to come.

The Enlightenment Baptist distinctive tradition has in recent days experienced a loss of theological stability and historical continuity. The exaggerated emphasis on individual, autonomous, religious experience makes theological cohesiveness almost impossible. Further, the Enlightenment distinctive tradition appears to be fragmenting within itself. Writings in this tradition not only have decreasing similarities with the Reformation tradition, but they also have fewer similarities with other works in the same Enlightenment tradition.⁶⁶

The future prospects are not so bright in my assessment for the Enlightenment tradition of Baptist distinctives. Based upon its growing fragmentation, this tradition will likely either digress into theological oblivion or birth a new theological perspective, continuing its drift from an historic Baptist identity. It will either eventually reject any connection with Baptists or further try to redefine the distinctive identity of Baptists in “un-baptistic” terms. Such a redefinition would, however, eliminate any historical or theological claim to the name “Baptist.”⁶⁷

These divisions within Baptist distinctives explain, to some degree, the current controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. Those who are often theologically described as “conservatives” tend to represent the Reformation tradition emphasis of biblical authority. “Moderates,” or those who are more comfortable with some form of religious experience as the foundational distinctive, tend to represent the Enlightenment distinctive

⁶⁶Examples of two such works include Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Charlotte, NC: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), and Alan Neely, ed., *Being Baptist Means Freedom* (Charlotte, NC: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988).

⁶⁷Such an enterprise is already underway. See the plea for a new Baptist identity in Curtis Freeman and others, “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” unpublished paper submitted to various Baptist leaders, 1996. This paper argues for a postmodern Baptist identity.

tradition. Although these two distinctive traditions cannot account for all the divisions within the controversy, they help explain in part a major source of the controversy.

Confessional Theology

Different definitions exist for the concept of “confessionalism/confessional theology.”⁶⁸ Martin Cook has developed a paradigm that permits classifying writings on Baptist distinctives as a form of confessional theology. He states that confessional theology is that endeavor that seeks to derive its core insights and its theological starting point from a perspective that is unique to a particular Christian religious community. This form of confessional theology may or may not be an interpretation of the formal creedal statements of particular denominations.⁶⁹

Cook identifies three primary ingredients that define confessionalism. First, confessional theology is that theological discipline which has a “cognizant awareness” of a particular theological community in which a theological position is constructed. A confessional theology intentionally formulates its doctrinal expression within a specific community of faith. This intention may be explicitly stated or implicitly assumed. Statement of intention is not as important as its actual presence.

⁶⁸George, 1-5, notes that confessionalism is the production of confessions of faith that seek to provide a doctrinal identity and to promote denominational unity. Confessionalism in this sense also strives to identify common areas of belief among differing communities of faith. Alan Richardson, “Confession(s), Confessionalism,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 116-17, defines confessionalism in the Reformation context as the formal presentation of beliefs produced by Protestants that provide interpretative guides to Scripture and/or creedal traditions. Confessionalism in this sense produced formal theological treatises labeled as confessional theologies. These confessions usually but not always sought to profess a Protestant understanding of the faith in opposition to Roman Catholicism. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1941), 38-42, employs the term “confessional theology” to articulate a theological method that accepts the cultural and historical relativism of modern social sciences and yet affirms a distinct Christian revelation. Theology does its proper work when it articulates the language and view of the world that characterizes the Christian faith in all its particularity. Niebuhr contends that self-defense is the most prevalent error in all thinking and perhaps especially in theology and ethics. He is therefore most concerned to advocate a theology that finds communally shared affirmations of Christians.

⁶⁹Martin Cook, *The Open Circle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 2-3.

Second, a confessional theology is “analytic.” It identifies the epistemological basis for its own distinctive theology and the epistemological basis for other faith communities. The analytic is akin to a “theological diagnostic.” It grapples with the inner workings and perspectives of its own theological heritage as well as diagnosing the doctrinal inner workings of other theological communities.

Finally, a confessional theology is “dialectic.” The process contrasts and critiques the theological premises of other religious communities in light of its own. The results of the process vary. The dialectic may result in descriptive observations void of critical judgments. It may conclude by advocating the superiority of one confessional tradition over the theological deficiencies of another position. The endeavor may propose a synthesis of the two positions.

Baptist Distinctives: Confessional Theology

Based upon these criteria, Baptist distinctives can rightfully be classified as one form of confessional theology. By use of Cook’s definition, these writings do reflect a distinct awareness of the Baptist community in which they are constructed. The distinctive genre is formulated within the Baptist community. It speaks with a “cognizant awareness” of the Baptist heritage and attempts to preserve its distinctive theological identity. The intention may or may not be stated explicitly within this genre.

Distinctive writings also conform to the analytic dynamic of confessional theology. The analytic component investigates and identifies the epistemological basis, or the religious authority, for the Baptist position. This endeavor also identifies and critiques the epistemological basis of other Christian denominations.

These works are also confessional in their dialectic interaction with other denominations. The dialectic typically contrasts the unique theology of Baptists with that of other

denominations. This aspect of the confessional method is typically found in the polemical intention component in this genre. In its theological interaction, the distinctive genre never seeks a synthesis. It instead expresses its confessional theology by advocating the superiority of the Baptist doctrinal position in opposition to other denominations.

“Everything That Glitters Is Not Gold”:
or, Not All “baptists” Are “Baptist”

The analysis lends itself to the conclusion that Baptists have a definitive, confessional theological tradition. This tradition is a clearly identifiable genre and is comprised of certain theological components that must be present in order to be classified as a distinctive writing. The components share doctrinal emphases that are present to some degree in all writings within this genre. The expressions “Baptist confessional theology,” “Baptist confessional tradition,” and “Baptist theological method” are accurate and appropriate phrases to use in reference to this genre.

The confessional theological tradition of Baptists may be used to identify and define the theological essence of Baptists. Being “Baptist” is more than just a name. They are known by clearly defined and historically established theological components. Baptists are more than just adherents of religious freedom, advocates of baptism via immersion, or practitioners of congregational polity. They are those individuals and churches that embrace to some degree all the core theological components that have been defined herein as common among writings on Baptist distinctives. For a person simply to advocate one or two of the theological components found within the distinctive genre does not designate that person as a Baptist. Deviation beyond these identified theological components is a deviation beyond the historically established boundaries that define Baptist distinctives.

Baptists do possess a continuity of theological identity. Our confessional tradition reflects diversity of emphasis in its doctrinal expressions. These differences may be shaped by various historical, contextual, and theological influences; they are transcended, however, by greater theological concerns. All distinctive writings share certain common theological conceptions as defined herein. In other words, Baptists in the twentieth-century share certain common doctrinal convictions that were espoused by Baptists in previous centuries. When viewed from this perspective, Baptists can be said to have a common theological tradition that binds them all together around a common theological identity. Even persons like Mullins, who sought to propose a new interpretation of Baptist identity, cannot escape the common theological components that are true of all Baptists. These persons may change the nuances of meaning or the arrangement of the components, but they cannot change the essential nature of the distinctives and still remain within the confessional tradition of Baptists. The fact that Baptists adhere to certain distinctive theological traits is an attestation to the doctrinal adequacy of these traits. These convictions transcend cultural and historical differences and bind Baptists around established theological components.

A third observation is that the theological commonality shared among Baptists in no way diminishes the great theological diversity found in Baptist theology. This continuous theological tradition strengthens the notion that Baptist distinctives provide a commonality of theological identity while simultaneously providing a sound theological basis from which to address the contextual, historical, and theological concerns that confront differing Baptists in differing times and contexts. A Baptist confessional tradition provides doctrinal continuity so that Baptists can formulate their doctrinal conceptions within the well-established parameters of the Baptist confessional tradition. This confessional tradition likewise provides enormous flexibility by

allowing Baptists to address specific cultural concerns and contemporary issues theologically while permitting the formulators to remain within the confines of the Baptist confessional tradition.