

Fighting the Good Fight: The Struggle for a Baptist Identity

by Stan Norman

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Southern Baptists in recent days have received an unusual amount of public attention. The adoption of the new family amendment to the *Baptist Faith and Message* created quite a stir. New state conventions have been born in protest over actions adopted by existing state conventions. A November 1998 edition of *Newsweek* sought to interpret President Bill Clinton's sex scandal in light of his Baptist beliefs. For good or bad, the beliefs and struggles of Southern Baptists have at times been the center of media attention.

These and similar conflicts contain complex issues that are unique to each situation. Yet, inherent within each of these is a common core issue: the perceived reliance upon Baptist distinctives. These events represent the ongoing struggle of Southern Baptists to articulate a theological identity that is both Christian and distinctively Baptist. These struggles could be called, to borrow a phrase from theological studies, "the quest for historical Baptist distinctives."

The Problem's Complexity

What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The seeming simplicity of this question often disguises the complexity of the answer. Ask any Baptist this question and you may 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 distinctive 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 believe in "the Book, the blood, and the blessed hope."

Another common approach to identifying Baptist distinctives is the appeal to 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." With all due respect to his mother, she may not be right. Although these appeals are intended to support a certain position, what is offered as Baptist "precedent" is often tainted by personal agendas and ignorance of Baptist history and theology. Such emotional claims of historical continuity bring only confusion rather than clarification.

A Contemporary Test Case

The discussion of Baptist distinctives will ultimately be influenced by one's perspective on Scripture. Some Southern Baptists argue that the Bible, as the authoritative standard, should serve to interpret, guide, and shape our individual and

collective experiences as Christians and Baptists. Other Southern Baptists contend that the Bible should be interpreted in light of our experiences as Christians and Baptists.

A recent event in Southern Baptist life illustrates how the relationship between biblical perspective and Baptist distinctives impacts contemporary ministry. A Texas Baptist church, associated at that time with the SBC, called a woman to serve as senior pastor.¹ As one might imagine, such a move sparked controversy among Southern Baptists. Several interesting questions surfaced in discussions over the event. For example, is a woman serving as pastor of a church faithful to the biblical revelation? Is the "woman-as-pastor" an issue of biblical authority or biblical interpretation? Is it "baptistic" for a church to call a woman to serve as pastor? Do Southern Baptist churches that have women pastors embody the essence of Baptist life and thought? Does the Baptist distinctive of Christian experience permit a Southern Baptist church to call a woman as pastor? These are only some of the questions often asked whenever this topic is discussed. Biblical teaching on the issue is crucial to this discussion and has been examined admirably in another article.² Our attention is focused on the issue of faithfulness to the Baptist distinctives. Are Southern Baptist churches that call women to serve as pastors being true to historical Baptist distinctives?

Those few Southern Baptist churches that call women as pastors declare that they are remaining true to historical Baptist distinctives.³ The Baptist distinctive of Christian experience is the reason often cited which permits Southern Baptist churches to affirm the idea that God can call a woman to be a pastor. The reasoning runs something like this: God calls and gifts many people for various forms of Christian service, one of which is pastoral ministry. God's calling is sovereign and indiscriminate - that is, He may call whomever He chooses to be a pastor. God may choose to call and gift either a woman or a man to be a pastor of a Baptist church. If such a person testifies that he or she has experienced such a call, who are we to judge whether or not this call is valid or invalid. If that person claims to have "experienced" God's call for pastoral ministry, then we must accept that call as true to God's character and God's word.

This illustrates to a degree the struggle in which many Baptists, particularly Southern Baptists find themselves. One group of Southern Baptists says that the Bible should serve as the absolute and normative standard for interpreting various "callings." That is, since the Bible teaches only men may serve as senior pastor, and since the Bible prohibits a woman from serving as such, a woman's "calling" to ministry must be interpreted in this light. Other Southern Baptists, however, would argue that a woman's "calling" to serve as pastor is valid; therefore, those passages that appear to contradict her calling should be reinterpreted in other ways.

Admittedly, the issue is more intricate and complex than this. However, it accurately illustrates the broader, theological issue that exists among Baptists. Some Southern Baptists stipulate that the core, or primary Baptist distinctive is the authority of the Bible for all matters of faith and practice. Other Southern Baptists argue that Christian experience is the core Baptist distinctive. These distinctions are very real and have been with Southern Baptists for most of this century.

Two Distinctive Traditions

As part of a Ph.D. dissertation, over the past four years this writer has spent a great deal of effort collecting, critically examining, and categorizing all forms of writings that claim in some measure to be writings on Baptist distinctives. The process revealed these two understandings, or "traditions," of Baptist distinctives within Southern Baptist life. Both of these traditions have existed side by side in Southern Baptist life 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 because of how a "core" distinctive impacts the development of theological identity. Works on Baptist distinctives that affirm the primacy of biblical authority as the core distinctive will develop and interpret the other distinctives in light of this core.⁴ This method reflects the Protestant Reformation tradition. In fact, many of the authors of writings on Baptist distinctives 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 Christian experience as the core distinctive embrace the Enlightenment assumption of individual autonomy.⁵ 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 Edgar Young Mullins' *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*.⁶ As indicated by the title, Mullins intentionally sought to redefine the existing "Reformation Baptist distinctives" tradition. He wanted to stress that both Christian experience and biblical authority are equal and necessary for developing Baptist distinctives. He did not, however, achieve this balance. His understanding of Christian experience overshadowed his understanding of biblical authority. Christian experience became for Mullins the core distinctive that shaped his understanding of biblical authority. Baptist distinctives that evolved in conjunction with this tradition continued this theological 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. Christian 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.

The Enlightenment distinctive tradition has over a period of time inverted this view. Following Mullins, the distinctive tradition moved from a core distinctive of biblical authority that shaped church life and Christian experience interpretation, to a Christian experience core distinctive that shaped biblical authority and church life. The defining distinctive in this tradition became a form of Christian 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 freedoms, rather than an authoritative revelation for a community of born-again believers working together for the extension of God's kingdom. Christian experience replaced biblical authority as the core distinctive that interpreted the other Baptist distinctives.

In the earliest stages of Baptist life, the only 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.

A Contemporary Assessment

These two distinctive traditions still exist today. The Reformation tradition continues to demonstrate theological stability and historical continuity. The Enlightenment Baptist distinctive tradition has in recent days experienced a loss of theological stability and historical continuity. The exaggerated emphasis on individual Christian 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.⁷

These divisions within Baptist distinctives explain, to a degree, the current controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. Those who are often described as "conservatives" tend to represent the Reformation tradition emphasis of biblical authority. "Moderates," or those who are more comfortable with some form of Christian experience as the foundational distinctive, tend to represent the Enlightenment distinctive tradition. Although these two distinctive traditions cannot account for all the divisions within the controversy, they help us understand a major source of the controversy.

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. The Reformation 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 of Baptist distinctives will enjoy a bright and meaningful future in the promotion of the kingdom of God.

The prospects are not so bright 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 a distinctive identity of Baptists in "un-baptistic" terms. However, such a redefinition would eliminate any historical or theological claim to the name "Baptist."

Only time and Baptists will reveal what the future holds for this tradition.

NOTES:

1. For purposes of this article, the term "pastor" will be used to describe the ministerial office of "senior pastor."
2. Richard R. Melick, Jr., "Women Pastors: What Does the Bible Teach?" *SBC LIFE*, May 1998, pp. 4-6.
3. It should be noted that many Southern Baptist churches that call a woman as senior pastor usually do not remain within the SBC.
4. The category of "biblical authority" would include those writings on Baptist distinctives, which argue for the entire Bible or the New Testament as the sole or supreme source for faith and practice.
5. The category of "Christian experience" would include those writings on Baptist distinctives, which define experiential concepts in categories such as: soul competency, religious freedom, individual autonomy, the lordship of Christ, and the experience of believer's baptism, to list but a few.
6. Published by Griffith & Rowland, Philadelphia, 1908.
7. Examples 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).

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