

UNITY

BAPTISTS BELIEVE IN
DOCTRINAL
UNIFORMITY

Robert N. Nash, Jr.

The myth of doctrinal uniformity among Baptists is easy to explode. Most Baptists would agree with historian William H. Brackney that “the reasons for disintegration among the people called Baptists often outweigh what Baptists hold in common.”¹ Baptists love controversy, especially theological controversy. In fact, Baptists fight theological battles on two fronts: against other Baptists and against everybody else. We are a bit like a pair of siblings who fight each other tooth and nail until someone else comes along and joins in the fray. Sometimes we forget our differences and battle the common enemy. Without an enemy, though, we are perfectly content to pound on family members.

Baptists have never had doctrinal uniformity. We have disagreed over hundreds of theological issues throughout our history. We have battled about the nature of Christ's atonement, the proper mode of baptism, the Sabbath, the nature of the church, missions and evangelism, footwashing, the Bible, and a myriad of other theological issues, both weighty and inconsequential.

Doctrinal Dissent and Individual Conscience

Constant doctrinal conflict should not surprise us. The Baptist tradition emerged in the early seventeenth century as a reaction against a state church, the Church of England, which was suppressing dissent. Baptists insisted that the human conscience was free to express its own theological opinions and should not be coerced by church or state. We cut our teeth upon the rights of Baptists and all other peoples to express theological opinion freely. No wonder we revel in it.

This emphasis upon the rights of individual conscience caused Baptists to create organizational and denominational structures that protected this right. Baptist churches, associations, societies, conventions, and denominations maintained a relative autonomy that allowed groups of Baptists to disagree with each other and to form new organizations when

theological differences became too great. While Baptists were loosely held together by common beliefs about baptism and personal, experiential faith in Jesus Christ, doctrinal uniformity was impossible given the Baptist insistence upon soul freedom, church freedom, Bible freedom, and religious freedom.² Baptists who disagreed theologically with other Baptists in a church, association, or denomination were always free to move down the street and start a new organization.

While minor differences have been a constant irritant, three major theological controversies have dominated in Baptist life; and each can be loosely assigned to a particular century or centuries. The earliest Baptists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries disagreed over Christology, particularly the nature of Christ's atonement, with some Baptists arguing for a limited atonement of the elect and others insisting that Christ died for all humanity. Baptists in the nineteenth century focused their disagreements upon ecclesiology, or the nature of the church. Significant battles raged over Baptist origins, mission-sending agencies, and the characteristics of a true, New Testament church. The twentieth century witnessed a great debate among Baptists over the Bible itself and its perspective upon such issues as evolution, women's roles in church and society, and pastoral authority.

Christology

Theological differences between General (universal atonement) Baptists and Particular (limited atonement) Baptists in the middle of the seventeenth century were part of a much larger debate within Protestantism itself. Early in the century, Jacobus Arminius, a Dutch Reformed professor at the University of Leyden, disagreed with prevailing Calvinist notions about human depravity, God's choice of the elect, the limited atonement of Jesus for the elect, the irresistible nature of grace, and the perseverance of the elect. Arminians insisted on a universal atonement, the goodness of humanity after salvation, and the possibility of apostasy or falling

away from faith even after experiencing salvation.³

The earliest Baptists, led by John Smyth, a Puritan separatist and Cambridge graduate, adopted Arminian views and became known as General Baptists (for their belief in a general or universal atonement). They established Baptist congregations in Amsterdam in 1609 and in London in 1612. Later, a group of Calvinists in London, led by John Spilsbury, formed a congregation that by 1640-41 would accept believer's baptism by immersion as the proper form of baptism. These Particular Baptists insisted on the classic Calvinistic emphases upon human depravity and Christ's atonement being limited only to a select group of saints.

By about 1655, some 79 General Baptist churches and about 96 Particular Baptist churches existed in Great Britain. In the eighteenth century, the General Baptists were reconstituted into the New Connection of General Baptists before merging into the larger Particular Baptist tradition the next century. Tensions still remained. Calvinist extremists in both England and America frustrated denominational efforts to establish missionary-sending societies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In America, Baptists became less Calvinistic as competition for converts on the American frontier intensified and as international missionary efforts were successful. Tensions between these two theological streams in Baptist life have continued even into the early twenty-first century.

Ecclesiology

Debate over ecclesiology or the nature of the church dominated Baptist life in the United States in the nineteenth century. Once again, the Baptist debate was part of a much larger theological conflict among Protestants in America. The Second Great Awakening, beginning about 1800, resulted in thousands of frontier converts to the Christian faith. Religious freedom dictated that, since no group could enforce belief, denominations gain converts by insisting upon the truth of their own theological perspectives. In the 1830s,

Alexander Campbell formed a new denomination called the Disciples of Christ or Churches of Christ that insisted that it was restoring the New Testament church. Hundreds of Baptist churches on the frontier switched allegiance to the new denomination.

Some Baptists responded by insisting that "the church instituted by Jesus and the apostles was a Baptist church."⁴ These Baptists, known as Landmarkists, believed that certain characteristics were essential for a New Testament church: it must be a local church; it must not allow non-Baptists to preach from its pulpit; and it must insist that baptism, the Lord's Supper, and preaching can only occur in a local church. The implication of Landmark belief was that Baptist churches and the kingdom of God were identical; therefore, salvation could occur only in the context of the Baptist tradition.⁵

The Landmark controversy caused great disruption in Baptist life well into the twentieth century. The Landmark focus upon the local church had implications for denominational identity, worship practices, ecumenical dialogue with other denominations, and a range of other theological issues. The movement lost some of its force by the middle of the twentieth century, but vestiges of Landmark influence are still evident in Baptist attitudes toward church membership, communion, and salvation.

Scripture

A theological debate over the Bible shaped the Baptist tradition in the twentieth century. And, once again, this debate was part of a larger controversy among British and American Protestants. Scientific discoveries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century created a significant crisis for Christianity. By the late nineteenth century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution brought the crisis to a head. Catholics responded by clinging more tightly to papal authority even as conservative Protestants clung more tightly to biblical authority.

In England, Charles Spurgeon of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, decried the lack of prayer in Baptist churches, the worldliness of ministers, and the doctrinal decay that was occurring as a result of modernism. Citing a “downgrade” within the Baptist Union, Spurgeon withdrew his congregation, and a very minor split in the Baptist Union occurred as five other churches joined him.

The controversy caused a much deeper rift among Northern and Southern Baptists in the United States. In the North, Baptist professors at institutions like the University of Chicago and Rochester Theological Seminary were charged with doctrinal heresy. Concerns were also raised about liberalism among missionaries and within denominational publications. In time, conservative and fundamentalist Baptists withdrew from the Northern Baptist Convention and established the Baptist Bible Union (1923), The General Association of Regular Baptists (1932), and the Conservative Baptist Association of America (1947).

Southern Baptists staved off the controversy over biblical authority until much later in the century. Allegiance to southern culture provided a loose kind of unity; but by the 1960s, charges of liberalism were made against professors at the denomination’s seminaries. Conservative and fundamentalist Baptists insisted upon a literal interpretation of scripture that decried evolution, denied to women the role of pastor in a local church, and emphasized pastoral authority over the authority of the laity. Southern Baptist conservatives wrested control of the Southern Baptist Convention from more moderate leadership during the 1980s. By the early 1990s, disenfranchised moderate Baptists had formed new autonomous organizations such as the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Conclusion

Walter Shurden claimed that “Baptists are born fighters because they were born fighting.”⁶ He was exactly right. The siblings have slugged it out over the course of almost 400 years of history. Sometimes they have fought a common enemy, but quite often they have fought each other over some significant or insignificant interpretation of Christian doctrine. Baptists have been the kind of people who always believed that doctrine was worth fighting for. This explains why the three battles over Christology, ecclesiology, and scripture have continued to rage even into the early years of the twenty-first century. Say what you will about Baptists—but never say that Baptists have always had doctrinal uniformity. It is simply not true.

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1. William H. Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1994), ix.

2. See Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1993) for a succinct description of these basic Baptist freedoms.

3. See Jacobus Arminius, *Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius, delivered before the States of Holland*, in *The Works of Jacobus Arminius*, trans. James Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 613-732.

4. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 450-52.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Walter B. Shurden, *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 12.

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