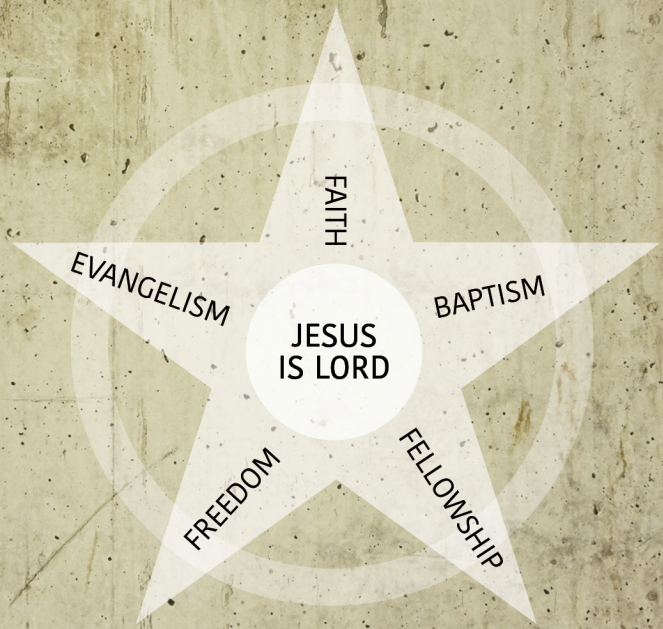


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Baptist Identity, Once More

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Abstract: *This article addresses the perennial question of Baptist identity, critiquing the oft-adopted adage that Baptists are essentially congregationalists who adopt believers' baptism. It explores critically some multi-point and single-point understandings of 'Baptist' and alights on a 'biblically different' hermeneutical understanding that bridges the divide between pragmatism and theology, construing our baptistic identity as dynamically 'under the Lordship of Christ'.*

Key Words: *Baptist identity, associationalism, lordship of Christ, mimesis, differently biblical*

I have written several pieces on Baptist identity over the past few years, and published more than one of them.¹ This essay does not, I think, contradict anything I have said before, but rather gathers various strands up and proposes a more stable theological foundation for it all. It is written from a self-consciously British perspective, although regularly discussing international writers whose ideas have been influential in these islands. By 'Baptist identity' I mean an account of what it is to be a specifically Baptist Christian or church.²

The Purpose and Mood of Proposals about Baptist Identity

Why debate Baptist identity? Most of the proposals discussed below seem to own one of four major purposes. Some were essentially utilitarian: a Baptist denomination needs some account of its own identity so that, for example, it may judge whether a church applying for membership should be accepted or not. This is important, but not very interesting theologically, and probably involves a combination of

¹ Stephen R. Holmes, 'Baptists and the Bible' *BQ* 43 (2010), pp. 410-427; *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); 'Beyond a Bath and a Book: Baptist Theological Commitments' *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 9 (2014), pp. 11-24.

² This essay grew out of some comments I prepared for a (Zoom) meeting of the Fellowship of Baptists in Britain and Ireland, which in turn grew out of a sermon I was invited to preach for the church anniversary at Belle Vue Baptist Church, Southend-on-Sea. I am very grateful for both invitations, and for the discussion at the FBBI. It feels appropriately Baptist that the core argument of this paper was first developed during sermon preparation.

intrinsic and occasional features (Baptist denominations are often defined geographically, for example, and so a congregation might be impeccably Baptist but refused membership of a denomination on grounds of geography.)

Second, accounts of Baptist identity can arise from formal ecumenical engagement: in bilateral dialogue, papers are written to explain traditions to each other.³ Any of us who have engaged in ecumenical dialogue know that one of the gifts of the process is a greater understanding of your own tradition as you are enabled in part to see yourself through the eyes of another, and so useful advances in our accounts of Baptist identity might be made in such contexts. The formal aim of all ecumenical work is mission, and so these accounts of Baptist identity might be said to have mission as their final goal; the proximate purpose, however, is being understood by another tradition.

Third, many accounts of Baptist identity arise out of a conviction that there is something of worth in the tradition that should not be lost, and so an attempt is made to identify that and to disseminate it. If a church were to lose its Baptist identity, and drift into a non-denominational evangelicalism, what (if anything) would be lost that is of genuine value? Narrating this, whether as a celebration of what we hold, or as a warning to churches that are perceived to be in danger of drifting, is another reason to give an account of Baptist identity.

Fourth, a significant number of recent accounts of Baptist identity are agonistic. The writer finds being Baptist as painful as it is inescapable, and writes to explore this difficult juxtaposition. As a dominant theme, this seems particularly common in recent US accounts, generally penned by those on the losing side of the recent troubles of the SBC;⁴ it is hard to imagine a responsible account of Baptist identity that does not have threads like this running through it, however. To take just one example, if we represent our commitment to world mission as one of the glories of our tradition, we cannot but reflect seriously on postcolonial critiques of the practice of mission, and acknowledge that

³ My own 'Beyond a Bath and a Book' started life as a paper written for the BWA-World Methodist Council dialogue.

⁴ See, for representative example, Bill J. Leonard, *The Challenge of Being Baptist: Owning a Scandalous Past and an Uncertain Future* (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2010).

that ‘glory’ has not been unmixed with racism and colonial exploitation.

Such agonistic accounts always (in my present experience) turn to (the possibility of) redemption: although the lived practice of Baptist life in this or that particular, or in a given location, has been damaging, oppressive, or simply evil, the Baptist tradition contains the necessary ideas and practices to critique the failures and build something better—less evil; more faithfully Baptist. World mission is a noble ideal, we might continue to insist, but we must learn to engage in world mission in an anti-racist way.

The third and fourth categories above raise the issue of what I am calling the ‘mood’ of an account of Baptist identity: is it fundamentally celebratory, somewhat chastened, or positively agonized? In calling myself ‘Baptist’, am I proudly claiming a fundamental success, humbly owning my part in a significant story of failure, or something more complex and nuanced in between? This question of mood seems a significant, but hitherto unexplored, one in recent accounts of Baptist identity; I will return to it at the end of this essay.

Non-Theological Definitions of Baptist Identity

We might think that the simplest definition of Baptist identity is organizational. We could try such formulations as ‘a Baptist is someone who is a member of a church that is a member of a denomination that is a member of the Baptist World Alliance,’ or ‘a Baptist is someone who is a member of a church that calls itself “Baptist”’. Both these definitions in fact have significant problems—there are several Baptist denominations that are not presently in membership of the BWA, including the Southern Baptist Convention; and many Baptist churches do not in fact have the word ‘Baptist’ in their title—but we could look for an account with fewer weaknesses. That said, the limitations already referenced will demonstrate the happenstance nature of any such definition: identification based on organizational affiliation or mere nomenclature is never going to capture the deep identity of a movement.

A more academic version of such an argument might look to Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential account of the nature of traditions. A

‘tradition,’ MacIntyre famously asserts, is ‘an argument extended through time’.⁵ The continuity of a tradition, that is, is a continuity of engagement: I engage with people who engaged with people who engaged with people who, after several dozen iterations, engaged with John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, and so I am a Baptist. The key point here is that, on MacIntyre’s telling, I do not need to agree with Smyth and Helwys about anything; the tradition can morph into something totally unrecognizable but still be the same tradition because there has been a continuity of engagement.⁶

There is significant utility in such an account: there is much in the life of my local Baptist church that Smyth and Helwys, or indeed Sam Sharpe, C.H. Spurgeon, Anne Steele, or J.H. Shakespeare, would find very puzzling. The appeal of the concept of ‘Baptist identity,’ however, would seem to be the hope that there is some deep continuity in the changed practices. If we live differently, it is because we are developing an authentic expression of the same core instincts in a different cultural context. When he was Principal of Spurgeon’s College, I recall Nigel Wright saying fairly regularly that the college should not do what Spurgeon did, but rather what Spurgeon would be doing were he ministering in London around the turn of the twenty-first century—different practices that express the same deep convictions or instincts. MacIntyre is right to suggest that if the tradition has morphed into something unrecognizable, then it has failed.⁷

The search for Baptist identity, then, is the search for the relatively stable principles that underlie the endlessly varying Baptist cultural expressions of church. It seems likely that such principles will be theological: they will be about God, or about other things (human beings, the church, the state...) as they relate to God. So any successful organizational or historical account of Baptist identity is likely to depend on theological themes. I turn, then, to accounts of Baptist identity that list theological distinctives.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), p. 12.

⁶ MacIntyre in fact thinks that a tradition that changes radically has failed in significant ways, but he does insist on the continuing identity of the tradition.

⁷ This is a similar argument to the one made in Kimlyn J. Bender, ‘Karl Barth, Confessionalism, and the Question of Baptist Identity’ *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45 (2018) pp. 49-67, although developed in dialogue with MacIntyre, rather than Barth.

Multi-Point Definitions of Baptist Identity

Clearly, the practice of believers' baptism (or rather, the refusal of the practice of infant baptism—all sacramental Christian traditions will baptize adult converts) is intrinsic to Baptist identity, but equally clearly, it is not sufficient as a definition: there are many Protestant groups that only baptize believers, including, for example, several Wesleyan holiness traditions, and many, probably most, Pentecostal traditions, as well as almost all of the new charismatic church streams. On this basis, it has become fairly common to offer 'multi-point' definitions of Baptist identity, the most common in the UK probably being that Baptists are distinctive in holding to both the practice of believers' baptism, and congregational church government. To give only one example, H. Wheeler Robinson's *Baptist Principles*, which was originally published in 1925, had its fourth edition in 1960, and so enjoyed long use among British Baptists, identifies Baptists simply as congregationalists who insist on believers' baptism.⁸ This appears to work quite well: it includes most of the people who would claim to be a part of the Baptist movement, and excludes most who would be unhappy at being classed as such. If it fails, it is in being a little too capacious; in particular it includes Mennonites and other anabaptist traditions who would not want to be identified as Baptists.

This twin test appears to be the right one to apply to evaluate a proposed definition, and it is striking how badly some suggestions fail it. In the Foreword to (one of several American books entitled) *Why I am a Baptist*, Morris H. Chapman suggests three 'irreducible minimums for defining Baptists': '[d]evotion to Jesus'; 'Biblical fidelity'; and '[m]issionary fervour'.⁹ I trust that this particular net would catch far more than just the Baptists!¹⁰ I will reflect a little more at the end of this essay on the extent to which our accounts of Baptist identity must

⁸ H. Wheeler Robinson *Baptist Principles* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1960⁴).

⁹ Morris H. Chapman, 'Foreword' in Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore (eds) *Why I am a Baptist* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2001), pp. xi-xiii, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁰ The various essays in the book are better, but it did not attract very much attention in the UK, being explicitly written into the internal SBC debates of the period, and the various writers all offer (various combinations of) themes that are raised anyway by the documents I am treating here, so I will not give them extensive treatment below. Unsurprisingly, given the context of the book, some sort of Scripture principle, often explicitly inerrancy, is rather to the fore.

conform to the two canons of including all those who claim the denomination, and excluding all who refuse it, but the fundamental utility is, I trust, clear.

The year that Robinson's book had its fourth edition fell in the middle of a four-year 'ter-jubilee' (i.e. 150th anniversary) celebration of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, for which Morris West was commissioned to write a short guide to Baptist principles. He selected four: biblical authority; the church as a company of believers gathered out of the world; believers' baptism; and freedom of conscience.¹¹ West's booklet outlasted the celebration for which it was written, and went through several printings to at least 1975, and so again must be taken with some seriousness. The authority of the Bible and freedom of conscience are certainly things Baptists have been committed to historically, and so are appropriate additions; they do not serve to exclude those groups improperly included by my first definition, however.

Given that he was writing specifically for a BUGBI celebration, it is perhaps surprising that West did not turn to the Declaration of Principle as his guide (although he does cite it once, on p.13). The three clauses of the Declaration of Principle suggest four points of identity: the authority of Christ, the liberty of each church, believers' baptism, and every-member mission. The last point is reminiscent of Oncken's famous slogan, '*Jeder Baptist ein Missionar*' ('every Baptist is a missionary'), and some focus on mission does seem, merely historically, a good candidate for being a part of a narration of Baptist identity.

Stanley Grenz's popular acronym is perhaps more clever than helpful: Believers' baptism, Autonomy of the local church, Primacy of Scripture, True believers in the church, Individual competency and believer priesthood, Separation of church and state, Two ordinances.¹² 'Separation of church and state' is certainly an important aspect of Baptist identity; 'individual competency' recalls E. Y. Mullins' language of 'soul competency,' which I shall consider in some depth below. The

¹¹ W.M.S. West, *Baptist Principles* (London: BUGBI, 1960), 6.

¹² Stanley J. Grenz, *The Baptist Congregation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 82.

paired term ‘believer priesthood’ captures something important about Baptist identity, not mentioned by other authors here. The best that can be said of ‘two ordinances’ is that it makes the acronym work; it is hardly a Baptist distinctive, and indeed might exclude historically significant strands of the Baptist tradition (e.g. the General Association of General Baptists through the second half of the seventeenth century) who have regarded the laying on of hands as significant enough to break fellowship over.¹³ Finally, I confess an allergy to the language of ‘autonomy’, whilst recognizing what it is trying to capture. Yes, the local church is not under any other human rule—but the local church is not *auto-nomos*; it does not rule itself; rather, it is under the authority of Christ, and has as its law, its *nomos*, the Scriptures.

Another long list was written for Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church by Faith Bowers, but has been taken up internationally, and published. Bowers includes all the points mentioned by West, and adds: a missionary focus; evangelicalism; ‘fellowship giving’ as the ‘chief means of financing church work’; interdependence and associationalism; and godly living.¹⁴ Given that the Baptist movement predates the evangelical revival, I am not sure about including evangelicalism as a Baptist distinctive—it would seem to disenfranchise Smyth and Helwys, among others. Associationalism does seem to me a strong candidate; as I have argued elsewhere, the instinct for churches to associate runs very deep in our history.¹⁵ ‘Fellowship giving’ is interesting: it is a reality, and probably does contribute to a lived sense of Baptist identity, but I am not sure I would elevate it to a principle—were one of our churches to receive a sufficiently large bequest that it could be put in trust to pay the minister’s stipend in perpetuity, that would not make them unBaptist. Godly living, again, is certainly something we have insisted on as a people.

¹³ This decision was taken because the practice is listed as one of the fundamentals of the faith in Heb. 6:1-2. A resolution at the 1656 General Assembly declared that ‘breaking of bread wth psns [with people] denying laying on of hands is not Lawful.’ W.T. Whitley, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the General Baptist Churches in England* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1909) (2 vols), vol. I, 6.

¹⁴ Faith Bowers, ‘Prophets and Pietists: Differing Faces of Baptist Identity’ in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haynes* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2011), 190.

¹⁵ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 104-7.

The extent to which the various proposals on these lists tend to praxis, to things we do, rather than doctrine, things we believe, is striking, and I will have more to say about this below. There are also different ways of expressing similar points in different lists, which invite some reflection: do we speak of the particular Baptist doctrine of the church as ‘congregationalism’, the ‘liberty’ or ‘autonomy’ of the local church, the ‘gathered church’, or what? And how much does that matter? In part, the difference of expression can be seen to be a first degree of abstraction away from praxis to the doctrine a particular practice embodies. One of my own earlier attempts to narrate Baptist identity centred on the suggestion that it revolves around two foci, the individual believer, and the local church.¹⁶ This was, consciously, an attempt to begin to perform this work of abstraction on the two elements of the simplest account of Baptist identity, believers’ baptism and congregational church government.

We may also ask about the inter-relatedness of these various listed Baptist distinctives. It would be relatively easy to argue, for example, that believers’ baptism is an inevitable result of a commitment to freedom of conscience (it is harder, but possible, to argue that they are mutually entailed). Similarly, belief in a gathered believers’ church probably does entail the separation of church and state. In my book, already referenced, I argued that all Baptist distinctives can be traced back to either a conviction about the dignity of the individual believer, or a conviction about the primacy of the local church. It is at least tempting to ask if we can go one better, and reduce the heart of the Baptist vision to a single commitment. There are certainly proposals that seek to do this.

Single-Point Definitions of Baptist Identity

There are two suggestions of a single commitment that can define Baptist identity that have attracted wide notice and support. The first is the suggestion that Baptists are uniquely committed to biblical authority. I have introduced this theme before with a lengthy quotation from James Bruton Gambrell (1841-1921), sometime president both of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and of

¹⁶ Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, 6-7.

the Southern Baptist Convention; his construction is sufficiently stirring that I will use it again:

God's Word is plain. A Baptist has only to read and obey. He need not be a scholar, or a philosopher, though he may be both. He has no trouble to explain away what is written. He can read it and go by it without embarrassment. He can afford to be plain, simple, straightforward, and obedient...I am a Baptist because John was, Jesus was, the apostles were, the first churches were, and all the world ought to be.¹⁷

On this account, being Baptist is being uniquely faithful to the Scriptures. Others equivocate and evade; we simply obey. This is perhaps the high-water mark of accounts of Baptist identity in a celebratory mood, but it is not very hard to find more recent examples of the same theme. To offer only one example, a 1999 volume expressed the 'wish that all evangelical Christians would search the Scriptures and thus prove what is true faith and practice'.¹⁸ Measured against my two-fold test above the claim that to be Baptist is to be obedient to the authority of Scripture fails badly as an account of Baptist identity in both directions: there are many committed to the authority of Scripture in other traditions,¹⁹ and there are many Baptists who are open enough about the fact that they are not.

¹⁷ Cited from <https://swbts.edu/news/swbts-legacy-j-b-gambrell/> (last accessed 10/12/2020).

¹⁸ L. Russ Bush & Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible (Revised and Expanded Edition)* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), xvii.

¹⁹ To address directly the central point: I cannot find a firm denial of infant baptism in the New Testament, and I can appreciate why the claim that a typological reading of circumcision mandates the baptism of infants born into the church covenant is found convincing by some. (Indiscriminate infant baptism seems impossible to square with Scripture to me.) Obviously I think that I am right on this issue, but I do not think that those who differ are denying straightforward biblical truths. Rather, we differ over accounts of the relationship of the two Testaments, the nature of typology and fulfilment, and the strength of certain inferences (made from the necessity of repentance before baptism, for example). From their perspective, my refusal to accept their exegetical argument concerning circumcision is no less an unwillingness to listen to Scripture than I would charge them with over NT teaching about repentance. We both take our stand firmly on Scripture, but coordinate its various claims in different ways. We are, to use language that I am about to invoke in this essay, 'differently biblical'.

I have argued before that Baptists are ‘differently biblical’ from other traditions,²⁰ which may be a way of retaining a Scripture principle as the single defining point of Baptist identity. My earlier argument had to do with how we hear Scripture—fundamentally, in church meeting—but also in what we understand Scripture to be—fundamentally as law, a call to praxis, rather than doctrine, a call to belief. Believers’ baptism is a helpful example here: one can read thousands of pages of Baptist polemic on baptism, from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, and discover nothing about what baptism is or does. Instead, the endlessly repeated message will be: the apostolic church baptized only believers; therefore we should baptize only believers. On baptism, Baptists have argued, the Scriptures teach a practice, not an account of what that practice means. I have regularly (although not in print before now, I think) termed the Baptist approach to the New Testament in particular as ‘mimetic’: we seek to do what the apostles did, often without any reflection on the theological constructions behind the practice.²¹

This mimetic approach is visible in our informal liturgies. In many UK Baptist churches, at least, the celebration of the Eucharist will involve the reading of the words of institution from 1 Cor. 11, and then a phrase like ‘as Jesus gave thanks before he broke the bread, so shall we’. This is mimesis in liturgy: we examine the Scriptures to determine what was done then, and do the same now. When we felt the need for a public ritual welcoming a new baby into the life of the church fellowship, we read a passage in Mark that described Jesus taking little children into his arms, laying hands on them, and blessing them, and

²⁰ Holmes, ‘Baptists and the Bible’ *passim*.

²¹ If I am right in suggesting that others do not share this mimetic approach to Bible reading, it helpfully explains differences over baptism. It is not hard to find discussions of baptism from paedobaptist writers who are committed to the authority of Scripture, and who accept completely the claim that baptism of believers by immersion was the apostolic practice. They, however, are prepared then to argue for an extension or development of practice based on a theological understanding of what this apostolic practice means. (See, for example, David F. Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the End of Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005)). In the long history of Baptist polemics on the issue, we have generally greeted such suggestions with incomprehension: it is not so much that we thought the arguments failed, as that we failed to understand that an argument like this could even be attempted. This is the mimetic aspect of our identity.

we imitated his actions.²² Our rite of infant presentations is mimetic—and also untheologized;²³ we have a pattern of action designed to imitate a NT narrative, with no shared agreement about how to understand it. Of course, our mimesis is partial: in the Eucharist we do not have a single cup, nor do we fill it with wine. Wherever we are mimetic, however, we draw attention to the fact, suggesting that this is how we want to be perceived as relating to Scripture.

James McClendon's famous account of the 'baptist vision', often summed up in the phrase 'this is that; then is now,' could be read as mimesis as I am describing it here.²⁴ McClendon offered a well-theorized defence, of course, arguing that the typological shape of Scripture authorized a particular sort of typological hermeneutic. In his coinage 'small-b baptist' McClendon essentially surrendered the quest for a specifically Baptist identity—we are not distinct in any interesting way from anabaptist traditions on his account. The proposal I will develop below does not deny that we share a heritage with other baptists (in McClendon's terms), but it does propose a way of specifying a distinctive identity within that shared heritage.²⁵

²² *Patterns and Prayers* makes this remarkably clear: after the promises, the rubric reads 'Taking the child from the mother ... the leader ...' and then, before pronouncing the Aaronic blessing, 'Placing his or her hand on the child's head, the leader ...' The alternative pattern is even more direct: 'The mother gives the child to the minister who, placing his or her hand on the child's head [pronounces the blessing].' Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship: A Guidebook for Worship Leaders* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 113 & 116.

²³ As with other mimetic practices, there have been attempts to theologize infant presentation retrospectively—see for example Andrew J. Goodliff, *To Such as These: The Child in Baptist Thought* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2012). My point here is that we did not feel any pressure to give a theological account of what we were doing before doing it, and commending the doing of it by inclusion in our ministers' manuals; the defence of the introduction of the practice was merely mimetic.

²⁴ 'So the vision can be expressed as a hermeneutical principle: shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive Christian and the eschatological community. In a motto, the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is our liberty, our obedience, till time's end.' James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 30. The best interpretation of this theme in McClendon that I have read is Spencer M. Boersma, *The baptist Vision: Narrative Theology and Baptist Identity in the Thought of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.* (PhD thesis, Wycliffe College/University of Toronto, 2017), 50-79.

²⁵ We might consider how McClendon's proposal relates to T.L. Underwood's fine account of Baptist and Quaker origins, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and The Lamb's War: The*

I am therefore not wholly dismissive of the claim that submission to biblical authority is the single decisive point of Baptist identity. It is possible to argue that we do engage with the Bible in a somewhat different way to other Christians, and so, *pace* Bush & Nettles, we do not need to claim that other evangelicals/Christians are not as committed to following the Bible as we are to establish our particular identity. Rather, our identity might consist in being as committed to Scripture, but also in hearing its summons in a somewhat different way than others.

Although it is not narrated, it is not hard to find this mimetic vision in the multi-point proposals I outlined above. West, for example, offers briefly two ways of engaging with the Bible. The first is locating the Christian community in the already-but-not-yet tension of the coming Kingdom; the second is locating the individual Christian in the biblical narrative: '[t]he Fall is my fall ... [t]he call to the disciples is the call to me ...'²⁶ This story is my story, and so I am called to act the way that Jesus and the apostles acted—this is mimesis. Again, the fact that so many of the proposed distinctives were practices might be seen to relate to this mimetic approach to Scripture: if we are fundamentally concerned to do what the apostles did, then our distinctives will be in our praxis. Mimesis, then, is a significant part of Baptist identity, but it is not a sufficient single identification. It narrates believers' baptism well, but it cannot, as far as I can see, narrate church meeting.²⁷

Baptist-Quaker Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England (Oxford: OUP, 2001), which argues that the distinction between Baptists and Quakers was between what I have termed mimesis, copying apostolic practice, and Quaker attempts to actually become the New Testament church (see p. 4 for a clear introductory statement of this theme). In these terms, 'then is now' (and the longer quotation in n. 23 above) sounds like it is on the Quaker side, not the Baptist side. McClendon could no doubt simply claim that both Baptists and Quakers share his baptist vision, but a consideration of Underwood's historical work makes the point that there are distinctions to be made still within that shared vision.

²⁶ West, *Baptist Principles*, 11-12; this sounds very like (an anticipation of) McClendon.

²⁷ This perhaps requires a little defence: I am not claiming that church meeting is an unbiblical practice—I am committed to the view that if we hold a biblical view of human capacity, of the work of the Spirit, of the nature of the church, and so on, then we will conclude that congregationalism is a proper way of governing the church. But this is not something we can establish mimetically: there is no example of church meeting in the New Testament. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 was explicitly a meeting of 'apostles and elders' (v. 6), and so cannot be used as an example; Acts 13:1-2 at least implies that those who were worshipping and fasting (v.2) were the 'prophets

Arguably the most successful narration of Baptist Identity in history is that of E. Y. Mullins in *The Axioms of Religion*.²⁸ Mullins gives a six-point statement of Baptist identity, in the following axioms:

1. The theological axiom: the holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign.
2. The religious axiom: all souls have an equal right to direct access to God
3. The ecclesiastical axiom: all believers have a right to equal privileges in the church
4. The moral axiom: to be responsible, man [*sic*] must be free
5. The religio-civic axiom: a free church in a free state.
6. The social axiom: love your neighbour as yourself (pp73-4)

Mullins asserts, however, that the single confession of ‘the competency of the soul in religion under God’ (p73) is the core Baptist distinctive, which the previous six will immediately be seen to arise from. (This last claim is fortunate if true, as he does not pause to make the demonstrations.²⁹) He argues that this doctrine of ‘soul competency’ is the unique contribution of Baptists to history (pp59-69). What does soul competency mean? Mullins is emphatic that it is not an assertion of human autonomy—it is a ‘competency under God’ (p53). The competent soul has no need for any mediation in religious matters, but can approach God directly, so this principle excludes ‘episcopacy and infant baptism, and every form of religion by proxy’ (p54).

The success of Mullins’ account can be indicated by quoting the opening words of a 1939 BWA declaration: ‘[w]orthy religion rests on the conviction that the individual soul is competent to deal directly with God, and has the right and the need of this direct dealing’.³⁰

and teachers’ (v.1). Mt. 18:15-20 gives a clear procedure for dealing with reports of sin, but no general guidance on the ordering of the church.

²⁸ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908). I wrote about Mullins in *Baptist Theology*, 132-36; I am basically summarizing that discussion and critique here, although I am now rather more appreciative of the strength of his proposal, if just as critical of its distorting effect.

²⁹ I cannot see how Mullins’ theological axiom can be argued from soul competency at all; I will discuss some of the others below.

³⁰ ‘Text of the Declaration of Religious Liberty adopted...’ in Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand For* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1964), 248-9.

Thirty years after he published, the world body found his language natural to use. Nor is this success surprising: Mullins' one idea does indeed lead directly to many of the Baptist distinctives I have been discussing in this essay. Believers' baptism, the priesthood of all believers, and freedom of religion/conscience follow directly, as does the missionary imperative if we also confess human sinfulness. If all members of a church are equally competent in religion, then congregationalism becomes the natural form of church government.

The separation of church and state is more interesting. Mullins argues that a state church arises from a belief that human beings need 'civil government' to fulfil their 'religious destiny' (p54), and so is excluded by soul competency. This seems to me wrong. That said, the affirmation of soul competency does seem to remove any justification for coercion in matters of religion, which in turn rules out any imposition of a state church, at least. It is hard to see how any sort of commitment to biblical authority flows from an affirmation of soul competency. Nonetheless, this single principle is remarkably generative for Baptist identity.

That said, there are four problems that I see with Mullins' proposal. The first is that, on Mullins' telling, soul competency is also the core idea of American democracy, and so there is a worrying—and to my mind profoundly unBaptist—conflation of a core theological commitment and a particular political system. This is at its most egregious when Mullins offers a quite astonishing typological reading of the American flag ('...and the cluster of stars in the flag, each star separate from the other stars, tells of the principles of autonomy and individualism which underlie our whole system; and they are stars to show that those principles of freedom were born in heaven...') and immediately goes on to assert '[w]e are approaching the Baptist age of the world, because we are approaching the triumph of democracy' (p275). The Baptist witness I have received simply and steadfastly refuses to identify any human political system with the Kingdom of God, and I will stand by that as a Baptist principle alongside the others named above.³¹

³¹ To put it in terms that have unfortunately become familiar very recently, an authentic Baptist vision must declare 'Christian nationalism' to be a grave error.

That said, if Mullins is wrong in seeing something particularly Baptist in his nation's political system, this does not affect his fundamental proposal. This linkage with American democracy, that is, is not entailed by anything in the theological claims he makes—his error is to associate a political system with those theological claims. So the charitable reader might discount these political claims, and yet still follow his account of Baptist identity.

The second problem I see is in the inevitable implications of his chosen terminology. There is a basically optimistic register to all Mullins has to say about the spiritual status of each human person. We are each competent in religious matters, able to approach God without any need for mediation. This seems to me to be the wrong levelling, even though I agree with Mullins that levelling is necessary. If we are to be responsible to the gospel, we have to insist, rather, that all human beings are, without the gracious and miraculous intervention of God, utterly incompetent in spiritual matters. The sacerdotal error is not to suggest that lay people cannot approach God without priests, but rather to suggest that priests can somehow enable other people to approach God. East of Eden, my soul has no religious competency—and nor does the soul of the Pope. We are equally and utterly reliant on divine grace. This seems to me to be fatal to Mullins' chosen language; the extent to which it is fatal to his proposal is less clear.

My third problem is that Mullins' proposal is essentially untheological: he grounds Baptist identity in a claim about human capacity, not in a claim about the work of the triune God. I indicated above that claims about Baptist identity should be theological: about God, or about other things in relation to God. Mullins' proposal might be retrievable in the face of this criticism: soul competency for him is only 'under God' as we have seen, and it may be that the idea could be developed in a more thoroughly theological key. That said, this lack of any basic theological register is why Mullins' account cannot locate a Scripture-principle as a Baptist distinctive, and so this does seem a significant weakness.

My fourth problem is that, theologically considered, I think Mullins' account of 'soul competency' contradicts fundamental Christian doctrine in at least two areas: creation, and soteriology. To take the latter first, it seems fairly foundational biblically that we sinful human

beings do require mediation to approach God, but that God supplies the necessary mediation in the incarnation. Hebrews in particular tells us not that we need no priest, but that Jesus our great high priest surpasses and supplants every human priest.³² On creation, I lean on my *doktorvater* Colin Gunton's claim, which he attributed to Irenaeus, that creation must be mediated to have its own adequate reality, but that God again supplies the necessary mediation through God's 'two hands', the Son and the Spirit.³³

This might sound rather damning of Mullins, but I do not think it is: I suppose that, presented with these points, he would have acceded to both, protesting that by 'no mediator' he meant 'no mediator other than Jesus and the Spirit'. The distinction feels too important to be elided or assumed, however, and I wonder how different his account would have been in the three areas of criticism above had he made it, and written the relevant sections while consciously aware of it.

I am not simply dismissive of Mullins' proposal: it clearly found a ready audience in international Baptist life in the decades after it was published,³⁴ and that is a testimony to its seriousness; it does, as I have acknowledged, successfully ground almost all Baptist distinctives; its weaknesses can easily be but down to Mullins' particular presentation of it, and so relativized. It, to my mind, has to remain a serious candidate for a single-point definition of Baptist identity, for an account of what it is to be Baptist reduced to a single theme.

An Alternative Proposal: The Active, Direct, Lordship of Jesus

That said, the criticisms, particularly the latter two theological criticisms, of Mullins' proposal are enough to give me pause, and I have an alternative to offer: to be Baptist is to believe in the active, direct, Lordship of Jesus over every person and over every local

³² David Moffitt, both my academic colleague, and a fellow-elder of St Andrews Baptist Church, has argued this, simply convincingly in my view. David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011); see also *idem*, 'Jesus' Heavenly Sacrifice in Early Christian Reception of Hebrews: A Survey', *JTS ns* 68 (2017), 46-71.

³³ Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1998).

³⁴ Although not, as far as I can see, particularly in UK Baptist self-reflection.

congregation. I will (a) explain what I mean by this; (b) show how it grounds each of the distinctives identified above; (c) compare it to other accounts, particularly to some that sound superficially similar, and also to Mullins' account; and (d) argue that it is deeply-rooted in British Baptist identity, at least.

The key to my proposal is the words 'active,' and 'direct' that specify the nature of the Lordship; clearly the confession that 'Jesus is Lord' is not a Baptist distinctive! By 'direct' I mean that Jesus reigns over each local congregation, and over each human person, directly, without any intermediaries—Jesus is the only mediator between us and the Father. By 'active' I mean that Jesus' reign is dynamic, not static: the call to each individual and church is contextual and changing, not merely a demand to obey the laws of Scripture or similar. In the sermon that I noted was the deep inspiration for this essay, I read Jesus walking among the lampstands and directly addressing the churches in Rev. 1-3 in these terms. On the one hand, Jesus who alone has the right to sit on the throne of heaven is pictured in the first vision of Revelation as eschewing that right, and choosing instead to be close to, present with, his suffering churches; on the other, in the letters to the churches, Jesus speaks directly to each particular congregation about the details of their life at the given moment. Asserting that this is the normal way Jesus exercises his reign over his churches is the heart of what I mean by direct and active Lordship; I claim that Jesus exercises his reign over each human person in the same direct and active way.

Second, I suggest that this direct reign over each human person establishes all the points that Mullins' assertion of soul competency established, but does so with each point transposed into a more theological key. The possibility of, as Mullins had it, 'religion by proxy', is excluded at least as effectively by this account as by soul competency; arguably it is excluded far more effectively as on this account, echoing resonant themes from Thomas Helwys, the one who seeks to set themselves up as a proxy/mediator between God and the human person has no power at all over any human conscience, and is usurping the proper office of the Lord Jesus in seeking to claim such power. I will not follow Helwys in borrowing the biblical language of 'anti-Christ' for anyone who does this, but I will note that his use of it demonstrates how strongly these points are established by my proposal.

The direct reign of the Lord Jesus over every particular congregation also establishes firmly those Baptist distinctives that Mullins perhaps struggled to articulate: the separation of church and state; the gathered nature of the church; the call to communal holiness; and congregational government. On the first, if Jesus reigns directly over the local church, then the state (or any other earthly authority) cannot pretend to be able to govern it. On the second, Jesus calls particular human beings together into the gathered fellowship, and so its identity is established and guaranteed by him. On the third, the call of Jesus to each church is to grow together in holiness. On the last, we need to be clear: the heart of congregationalism is not democracy (here Mullins was surely in error), but the shared duty of gathered believers to discern and obey the particular call of Jesus on that church at that moment in its life. Voting, agendas, and the adoption of Robert's rules of order, are each merely means to accomplish this fundamental end, which could—should—each be set aside tomorrow if they are becoming more important than the end they exist to serve.³⁵

To take the particular point I made against Mullins concerning a Scripture principle, my account fares rather better than his: if Scripture is inspired by the triune God, then the call of Scripture is a major part of—although not all of, as my claim that the Lordship is active must insist—the call of Jesus to each person and each congregation. The Lord who alone claims our allegiance calls us to obey his written laws, as well as his contextual calls.

Third, I note a number of accounts of Baptist identity, some relatively venerable, which sound similar to what I am proposing here; I would very much like to be able to point to a nineteenth-century US account and merely agree: novelty is rarely positive in theology, and I am rather conscious that my arguments are mostly built east of the Atlantic Ocean. That said, I believe that honesty compels me to distinguish my

³⁵ I have written before about how the use of secret ballots was prophetic when it was first proposed in British Baptist life, but has since become, at least, in grave danger of being an impediment to the proper role of the church meeting. Stephen R. Holmes, 'Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting' in *Questions of Identity: Studies in Honour of Brian Haymes* edited by Anthony R. Cross and Ruth Gouldbourne (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2011), 172-88. See particularly pp.180-83.

proposal from such similar-sounding predecessors of which I am aware. Consider, for example, Wilkinson's *The Baptist Principle*.³⁶ Wilkinson starts his essay with the affirmation, '[t]he true organising principle of Baptist churches may be stated in three words: it is OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST' (p7; emphasis original). It is clear in the exposition, however, that 'obedience to Christ' for Wilkinson is another way of stating a Scripture-principle: Christ has declared his will in Scripture's commands, and so to obey Christ is to search and follow the Scriptures.

As I hope is already clear, I do not deny this; indeed, I affirm it with passion and conviction; in Rev. 1-3 however I see something more, the direct, contextual command of Jesus to each local church. We might argue exegetically that Jesus's various commands to each church merely re-affirm what is found elsewhere in Scripture, but that is not the point: there is direct, urgent challenge to each church. There is not a command to the church at Pergamum to go and study Num. 22-24 carefully and to reflect on it; rather there is a demand that they repent of the sin of Balaam (Rev. 2:14); similarly; the teaching of the 'Nicolaitans' is condemned (2:15; c.f. 2:6) directly, with no supporting Scriptural reference (leaving us, incidentally, with no real idea of what they taught).

Wilkinson, or someone who took a similar position today, might argue that this is to mistake the unique charisms of apostolic times, necessary because the New Testament had not then been written and collected, for the normal life of the church. My discussion of the particular shape of the Baptist Scripture principle above, however, makes this a very weak argument. Whether we take my mimetic hermeneutic, or McClendon's 'this is that' hermeneutic, it is clear that living out the faith just as the apostles lived it out is central. Drawing artificial distinctions between the apostolic church and the church of every other age is dealing with the Bible in an unBaptist way.³⁷ We cannot insist that we imitate the apostles in the way we baptize and govern

³⁶ William Cleaver Wilkinson, *The Baptist Principle in its Application to Baptist and the Lord's Supper* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1881).

³⁷ If this were to be read as implying an argument that Baptists should not hold a hard cessationist view on the charismatic gifts, I would not be overly disappointed.

our churches, but then refuse to imitate them in the way we hear the call of our Lord Jesus.

To obey Christ is to search and follow the Scriptures;³⁸ it is also to be attentive to his present word to each particular church. The present word will never be in contradiction to Scripture, and will probably be coordinated to it, but it will be more specific and direct. To offer an example, at a recent church meeting in my own congregation a major and challenging opportunity was shared. There was no Scripture principle that I, or anyone else who spoke in the meeting, could see that mandated the refusal or acceptance of the opportunity. I was asked to pray as the discussion concluded. I referenced the previous Sunday's sermon on Acts 16:6-15, and prayed that the 'Spirit of Jesus' would prevent us from going places we should not go, and would also give us a clear vision of the particular call on our communal life at this moment. I prayed, that is, that we would be helped to hear the present word of Jesus, his direct and immediate contextual calling on our life together. I deliberately and consciously (if extemporaneously) took the teaching of Scripture that we had recently received from our pastor, and applied it in prayer to the questions facing us, to ask for this present word, trusting and praying that Jesus would directly instruct us in the way we should go.

To be clear, I am thus claiming that at every point in the life of a particular congregation where there is a decision that is of consequence, but not clearly mandated by Scripture in either direction, the authentic Baptist position is to believe that we should seek, together, the mind of Christ to determine the correct response. There may be no Biblical warrant for either decision (should our local mission efforts be directed to community X, or community Y? Should we call Revd A or Revd B, each eminently qualified, to be our new pastor? Should we commit time, money, and energy over several years to refurbish our current building, or give the resources elsewhere? ...), but it is the Baptist way to believe that Jesus speaks to our local church about such issues as directly as he once spoke to the church at

³⁸ Searching and following the Scriptures, properly understood, includes serious engagement with tradition. See my arguments about the invocation of tradition in church meeting in Holmes, 'Knowing Together...', 175-6.

Pergamum, and to be concerned to follow his direct and active Lordship in all matters.

Fourth, I want to suggest that this proposal for Baptist identity has deep roots in the British Baptist tradition, at least. The *munus triplex*, the threefold office of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King, was emphasized by Calvin and goes back to St Thomas, but it became an organizing principle for understanding the church among the English Separatists out of whom the Baptists arose.³⁹ The complaint of the Separatists when challenged by others was monotonous: ‘You will have Jesus as your Prophet, and as your Priest, but you will not own Him as your King!’⁴⁰ Separatist congregations—including the Gainsborough-Scrooby church out of which Smyth and Helwys came, and the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey congregation which gave birth to the first Particular Baptists—justified their existence in the face of fierce, sometimes fatal, legal challenge by appealing to the direct Lordship of Christ over their affairs. We Baptists inherited such protests and appeals, and—as I have indicated above—they shape the distinctive appeals to liberty of conscience that Helwys offered at the beginnings of our movement. The identification of the direct and active Lordship of Jesus with the freedom of each human being to choose their own belief, and the conviction that Jesus directly and actively guides each particular congregation, was fundamental to Baptist beginnings in the UK.

Today, British Baptists are mostly organized into various Unions that share a very similar Declaration of Principle. There is a little variation in currently extant versions in the opening Christological descriptors, but every version asserts that ‘Jesus Christ ... is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice...’ The active Lordship of Jesus is today asserted in terms as the beginning of our account of who we are as a people. The account I am giving of our distinctiveness, then, is both embedded in our beginnings, and

³⁹ On this theme see now Ian Birch, *To Follow the Lamb Wheresoever He Goeth: The Ecclesial Polity of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1640-1660* (Monographs in Baptist History 5; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 65-95.

⁴⁰ Birch gives several examples in the chapter referenced above; see also citations in Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: The Separate Churches of London 1616-1649* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), 85-119; and Mark R. Bell, *Apocalypse How? Baptist Movements During the English Revolution* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2000), 55-72.

foundational to our current accounts of our identity. It is neither novel nor partial, but an authentic expression of what it is, and has been, to be Baptist, at least in a British context.

Of course, most British Baptists would not articulate their identity in these terms. As I indicated above, a theological account of identity is an act of abstraction: is there an ideal that might hold together this distinctive set of practices, so that they are not merely haphazard coincidence? The coherence of a set of lived practices, however, is always likely to be tacit: we are inducted into the community by learning the practices, not by being given the theoretical basis which justifies them all. Although I claim that, in our Separatist beginnings, and in the Declarations of Principle today, this theme is explicit, for most Baptists it will be implicit—the organizing centre which makes the several practical distinctives feel like they belong together, even if it is never articulated.

King Jesus reigns. He reigns actively and directly, over every human heart and over every congregation of Christian people. That conviction alone is adequate to explain each one of our Baptist distinctives, and so that one single conviction sums up what it means to be Baptist.

Postscript: On Principles, Portraits, and Procrustes' Bed

There is a danger in writing about communal identity, which I have reflected on already above, that the proposals made become an ideological version of the bed of Procrustes, stretching the community under investigation unnaturally in certain ways, and chopping off other parts, to make the reality fit the theory. Three things should be said about this:

First, we must distinguish between theoretical attempts at definition and reality, which is always messier. As Baptists, we must give priority to reality: our confession of freedom of conscience must imply the right to self-denominate, and so, fundamentally, anyone who claims

the title 'Baptist' is one, and anyone who refuses it is not. Our Baptist definitions, at least, cannot function like the bed of myth.⁴¹

Second, however, the work of definition is not thereby rendered irrelevant. A congregation which calls itself 'Baptist' after giving up on any practice of baptism⁴² is an anomaly, which should be tolerated (of course), but should not be allowed to obscure the value of definitional work. We will need to debate what can be safely dismissed as an anomaly, and what must be accommodated within our definitions, but the definitional work is still useful.

Third, the point of the definition is to paint a portrait of our communities, in the hope that they will see things about themselves they never had seen before when they look at it. I am no painter, but as a photographer this is a fairly common experience for me. Taking a photo of a scene I know well, or even of a family member, I see something in the image which has always been there, of course, but which I had never noticed consciously before. If the test of an account of Baptist identity is to ask Baptists around the world, 'does this look like you?', then the point of such an account is to invite them to see themselves more clearly. Sometimes the recognition will be with a wince—'ouch! Is that really who we are?'—contributing to what I called above the agonistic mood of Baptist identity; sometimes it might be with a smile—'yes, I see now something I have always valued, but have never been able to articulate'. Both are important results of this line of research.

Notes on Contributor

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⁴¹ This is not true for other Christian traditions: what it is to be Roman Catholic, for example, is identified clearly in magisterial teaching. Given the shape of Catholic theology, someone who claimed to be Catholic without having been validly baptized (say) would be making a false claim, and should be told so.

⁴² There probably were one or two in the UK as the old General Baptists decayed into unitarianism in the early decades of the nineteenth century.