

**Are Southern Baptists in Danger of Losing Their Identity? A Historian's
Perspective**

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Baptist identity is the question of what it is that makes someone a Baptist. If you believe Baptist beliefs or complete Baptist rites of passage, then you are a Baptist. This is how we usually conceive the subject. This approach to the subject, however, is defective without recourse also to church membership. Can you be a Baptist if you do not belong to a Baptist church?

The assumption that Baptist identity is at bottom an individual matter derives in large part from the influence of the progressive leadership of our denomination through much of the twentieth century. Although individual belief and participation are relevant, it is a church matter at least as much as it is an individual matter. The question then is what makes a church Baptist. Individuals in large measure are Baptist by their membership in and agreement with a Baptist church. Whatever makes a church Baptist is a fundamental source of Baptist identity and unity.

Identity has to do with unity, with oneness, with cohesion. In our individualistic culture, we tend to view identity as consisting of so many markers of individual preference and choice. So we speak of one's "personal identity." Identity cards distinguish each person uniquely from every other. But identity has a more basic sense that applies in discussions of Baptist identity. It has to do with oneness. In mathematics, identity means oneness, or signifies the existence of an equivalent relationship. In

philosophy, personal identity refers to the problem of how all the discrete experiences, memories, and passages in a person's life nevertheless cohere into an individual identity. In speaking of Baptist identity, we should have in view mainly those factors that establish the unity of Baptist churches. But as we shall see, it's not that easy.

Baptist Identity before the Twentieth Century

For most Baptists prior to the twentieth century, Baptist identity derived almost entirely from the shared belief and practice of their churches. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century Baptists held that their common theology and church polity made their churches Baptist. They expressed this in a number of ways.

In the first place, Baptists recognized that their churches formed a single fellowship long before they formed any denomination-wide organizations. John Asplund, who traveled the nation gathering Baptist statistics in the 1790s, wrote that in order to be qualified to administer baptism a minister must be “must have been baptized by a qualified minister of our denomination.”¹ Thus before there was a Cooperative Program, before there were mission boards, before there were any conventions at all, Baptists held that their churches constituted one denomination.

Indeed, long after Baptists in the South organized the Southern Baptist Convention, large numbers of churches did not participate in the convention or contribute to convention agencies, but they were still Southern Baptist churches. In 1882, for example, 55 percent of Virginia's Southern Baptist churches gave nothing to any of the

¹ Asplund, *The Universal Register of the Baptist Denomination in North America* (Boston: John Folson, 1794), 5.

denomination's boards.² But Virginia was a picture of cooperative participation compared with much of the South. In 1903 the editor of Missouri's *Central Baptist* estimated that less than one-third of Southern Baptist churches contributed to the mission boards.³ How did they determine which churches belonged? Those churches that maintained the same faith and practice were part of the Baptist denomination.

This sense of denominational identity appeared in other ways. When Baptists discussed religious groups, they identified them by their faith and practice. There were many groups that were Baptist in the sense of practicing believer's baptism, but they did not all belong to the orthodox or regular Baptist denomination. The main body of Baptists in the United States did not recognize the Seventh Day Baptists, General Baptists, Free Will Baptists, Tunkers, Mennonites, and Brethren, as having authentic Baptist identity. They did not hold fellowship with them because they differed in significant ways from the faith and practice of the regular Baptists.

John Leland, for example, declared in 1790 that the Tunkers and Mennonites, although they practiced believer's baptism, were distinct sects from the Baptists. He declared that the Anabaptists generally were not orthodox or regular Baptists. Leland held for example that the practice of immersion was one essential of Baptist identity. The Anabaptists, for one thing, practiced baptism by pouring and therefore were not Baptists.⁴ He declared in fact that Baptists and Anabaptists were as different as Presbyterians and Roman Catholics.⁵ But the main body of Baptists, Leland said, were "united in their sentiments," for they interpreted the New Testament the same way. This union of faith

² A. Chiel, "Studies of the Minutes, Per Capita Income," *Religious Herald*, 16 Nov. 1882, 1.

³ J. C. Armstrong, "Baptist Affairs in the South," *Central Baptist*, 21 May 1903, 1.

⁴ Leland, "Virginia Chronicle," in *Works*, 121.

⁵ Leland, "Virginia Chronicle," in *Works*, 121.

and practice was the basis for the “free correspondence and communion” that circulated among them.⁶ They were the same denomination.

T. P. Tustin, editor of the *Southern Baptist*, argued similarly in 1856 that orthodox Baptists had no fellowship with other groups just because they had the name of a Baptist. Although Primitive Baptists, Advent Baptists, and Mennonites practiced believer’s baptism, Tustin wrote, they held errors in other important areas. Regular Baptists could not therefore hold them in fellowship. There could be no identity with them.⁷

But the Separate Baptists and Regular Baptists in the South believed the same things in essential areas and in the end explicitly declared their mutual fellowship and identity. When Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall began establishing Separate Baptist churches throughout the South in the eighteenth century, they differed in some ways from the Regular Baptist churches that already occupied the South. The Separates had withdrawn from the legally established churches of New England and had become Baptists. Their heritage was distinct from that of the Regular Baptists. But when preachers of the two movements met, they recognized one another as holding the same faith and practice (with some minor exceptions) and hence being in fact the same denomination. Separate Baptist preacher John Taylor could unite in fellowship with Regular Baptist preachers because, he said, “we found no difference as to doctrinal opinions.”⁸ They worked out their minor differences, dropped their different names, and formally declared their union based on a common confession of faith and practice.

⁶ Leland, “Circular Letter of the Shaftsbury Association, 1793,” in *Works*, 196.

⁷ T. P. Tustin, “Schismatics—Hard-Shell Baptists,” *Southern Baptist*, 1 July 1856, 2.

⁸ Taylor, *A History of Ten Baptist Churches*, 2nd ed. (Bloomfield, Kentucky: Will. H. Holmes, 1827), 30.

Baptist churches expressed their commitment to unity of faith and practice as the source of Baptist identity also by insisting that those who departed from Baptist doctrine disqualified themselves as Baptists and could no longer remain members in their churches. Such persons could no longer lay claim to be Baptist. The churches did not however approach departures from Baptist beliefs as a betrayal of Baptist identity, but as a departure from Christian discipleship. Those who rejected scripture truth sinned against Christ and jeopardized their souls. Baptist churches sought to correct and reclaim those who strayed, but they excluded from fellowship those who refused to repent. Baptist churches excluded members who embraced doctrinal or ecclesiastical aberrations of all sorts: Deists, annihilationists, universalists, unitarians, certain Arminians, open communionists, and the like. Persons excluded from the church were no longer Baptists.

The motto for Baptist identity came from Amos 3:3: “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” Since Baptist identity was rooted in believing and practicing the same things, Baptist churches held that members who introduced false doctrine divided the denomination and relinquished any valid claim to be a Baptist. Baptist churches expelled them from membership as schismatics and errorists. Texas leader B. A. Copass summed up the Baptist position: “To withdraw fellowship from one who differs in matters of faith is not an attempt to stifle freedom, but only getting rid of one who does not belong to that body. Why should the body tolerate in its fellowship one who is teaching heresy? Such a thing would be moral suicide.”⁹

When modernism or liberalism began to spread among Baptists in the late nineteenth century, most Baptists asserted that those who embraced modernist beliefs were no

⁹ B. A. Copass, “Concerning Our Confession or Declaration of Faith,” *Baptist Standard*, 4 June 1914, 2.

longer legitimate Baptists. When J. E. Roberts, pastor of Kansas City, Missouri, First Baptist Church, for example, began preaching modernist views in the 1880s, even the most progressive of the Southern Baptist newspapers declared that he was no longer a Baptist. Baptists, the editors of Virginia's *Religious Herald* wrote, "stoutly insist that those who wear the Baptist name shall maintain the Baptist doctrines."

In the twentieth century likewise, a majority of Baptists insisted repeatedly that the rejection of certain doctrines was a rejection of Baptist identity. James B. Gambrell, who with E. Y. Mullins was perhaps the most influential leader of his era, taught that Baptist identity derived from unity of faith and practice. Denominationalism, he said, represented the fellowship that existed "among churches of the same faith and order, leading to cooperation in building up interests common to all."¹⁰ As long as Baptists agreed on matters of faith and practice, Missouri editor J. C. Armstrong wrote in 1903, there was little danger of a division of fellowship. He held that the denomination's Baptist identity was remarkably strong because "in the main, there is perfect uniformity in doctrine and practice among the churches."¹¹

Because Baptist identity derived from orthodox faith and practice, Baptist leaders argued that persons who departed from that faith and practice should have the integrity to seek fellowship with the denomination with which they most agreed. To the consternation and confusion of orthodox Baptists, liberal Baptists generally sought to remain in fellowship. The editors of Virginia's *Religious Herald* tried to explain the behavior of modernist Baptist preachers: "As soon as he found that he was not a Baptist, the thing for him to do was to hand in his credentials, wish his brethren well and quietly

¹⁰ Gambrell, "The Growth of the Denominational Idea," *Biblical Recorder*, 15 Apr. 1903, 2.

¹¹ J. C. Armstrong, "Baptist Affairs in the South," *Central Baptist*, 21 May 1903, 1.

walk out of their ranks. . . . But not so. About the last thing that one of these unhinged and noisy men who have an attack of omniscient liberalism will do is to quit us. He holds on to his place, draws his salary, and makes a brilliant effort to ‘reform’ the Baptists. So long as he can find a few shallow and blustering supporters, he will cling to his position. He goes only when it becomes impossible for him to stay. His staying may upheave and disrupt the church or school which employed him under the mistaken notion that he was a Baptist; but what cares he for that?”¹²

One important reason that that liberal Baptists sought to remain in the denomination was because they developed a different view of Baptist identity. For them, being Baptist was not about doctrines. It was about commitment to a formal principle inherent in religious experience, the principle of individual freedom. In their new understanding of Baptist identity, they could reject the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, and much more, and still be authentic Baptists.

Baptist Identity in the Twentieth Century

This new understanding of Baptist identity bloomed in the twentieth century as progressive leaders and cultural trends promoted the redefinition. Progressive Baptists subordinated doctrine and practice to some spiritual principle or eternal essence which they generally called the “Baptist idea” or the “Baptist principle.” They embraced the historical idealism of German philosophy as reflected in the thought Hegel, Strauss, and Feuerbach. Many German religious leaders embraced historical idealism as a way to rescue Christianity from the assaults of scientific empiricism. The new religion they constructed is generally known as Liberal Christianity. The essence of Christianity, the

¹² *Religious Herald*, 1884.

Liberals from Schleiermacher to Harnack argued, was not in its doctrines and practices, but in its lived experience. Underneath its various historical forms was an abiding essence which was the life and experience of religion. Doctrines were only temporary expressions of religious experience. Belief was extrinsic.

Baptist progressives embraced the Liberals' historical idealism and defined Baptist identity in terms of an abiding essence or genius. This Baptist principle, they argued, was the source of all the various doctrines and practices of the Baptists, but the doctrines and practices were temporary expressions suited to specific historical needs. Different historical needs would lead to different doctrinal expression. The abiding essence could therefore adapt its faith and practice to every age in order to be relevant. For Baptist progressives, this meant adapting the traditional beliefs to accommodate the new learning represented by the historical criticism of the Bible and by Darwinism. True Baptists altered their doctrine to keep up with the times. Thus Baptist modernists could modify their beliefs without ever losing their Baptist identity.

What then was the essence of Baptist identity for progressive Baptist leaders? Using the Schleiermacher's idealist method, they concluded that it was individualism. Baptists, they said, had discovered the truth of the sovereign individual. Individualism meant freedom from extrinsic authority in all matters of the heart and mind, especially religion. This was Baptists' gift to the world. This was their genius. This was what it meant to be Baptist.

George A. Lofton, a prominent Southern Baptist pastor in Atlanta, Memphis, and St. Louis, argued that "the Baptist idea" was "personal freedom in all matters of religion."¹³

¹³ Lofton, "Baptist Position Stated and Contrasted—The Purely Personal Idea," *Christian Index*, 20 Aug. 1896, 2.

A. J. S. Thomas, editor of South Carolina's Baptist paper, held similarly that freedom is "the very soul of the Baptist faith."¹⁴

Progressive Baptists recognized that their heritage was nevertheless thick with doctrine. But the theological heritage posed little threat to their new Baptist identity because theology was merely a historically conditioned byproduct of religious experience. J. W. Bailey, editor of North Carolina's *Biblical Recorder*, argued that although Baptists do have some definite beliefs, these beliefs are subordinate to the true Baptist idea. "The Baptist Principle, is, therefore, in its root—Individualism," Bailey said. "Their Principle, not their doctrine, marks them."¹⁵

Charles S. Gardner, professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued similarly that "Liberty is of the very essence of Baptist polity and life." Gardner also recognized Baptist identity must entail some definite beliefs. "There clearly must be a limit beyond which a man cannot go and retain any just claim to denominational fellowship," Gardner claimed, though his principles did not seem to support this contention. He in fact advocated preserving a "Baptist type or expression of Christianity which is easily felt," but he insisted that "hard and fast lines can not be drawn" and no one could "mark out the limits of our fellowship."¹⁶

The essence of the Baptist faith, as Baptist liberals viewed it, was not in its doctrines, but in its life, its spirit. And that spirit, most progressive Baptists felt, was individual freedom. The unique mission of the Baptists is to inculcate individualism, which, as Bailey put it, is the "very secret of all progress" and the "great motive for the rise of the race." This meant that no person or institution had a right to encroach upon the

¹⁴ Thomas, "Are Baptists Calvinists?," *Baptist Courier*, 16 Feb. 1911, 4.

¹⁵ Bailey, "The Baptist Principle," *Biblical Recorder*, 12 Nov. 1902, 8.

¹⁶ Gardner, "Southern Baptists and Theological Liberty," *Biblical Recorder*, 18 Feb. 1903, 2.

conscientious beliefs of any individual. Although Bailey held each local church is perfectly sovereign, he held also that not even the church could reproach an individual on account of doctrine.¹⁷

Ironically Bailey held that Baptists should constrain any individual who reproached another for erroneous beliefs. He inconsistently called upon Baptists to be vigilant against the “slightest trenching” upon the Baptist principle of individualism. There was no room among the Baptists for persons who held that right doctrine was essential to Baptist identity. The least encroachment of individual freedom, he urged, should be “ended forthwith.”¹⁸ They were not true Baptists, it seems, if they insisted that a common faith and practice was essential to Baptist identity.

The Emergence of Southern Baptist Ethnicity

This new understanding of Baptist identity fit well with an additional source of identity that emerged powerfully after the Second World War. Postwar Southern Baptist leaders succeeded in enlisting the majority of Southern Baptist churches in establishing and maintaining uniform Baptist programs. The proliferation of these programs combined with the rapid growth of Southern Baptist churches in the postwar period to produce a powerful Baptist subculture in the South. The wide participation in the programs of the

¹⁷ Bailey was inconsistent on this point. When arguing against the right of the mission board to evaluate orthodoxy, he stated that “only the church can challenge a Baptist’s faith” (“The Right of Challenge in Matters of Faith,” *Biblical Recorder*, 26 Nov. 1902, 8), but elsewhere argued that the church could not challenge individual conscience: “The ordinary Protestant conception of Religious Liberty is freedom of the church from interference by the State. The Baptist conception is freedom of the believer from interference by State or church or anything else whatsoever touching conscience.” (“The Baptist Principle,” *Biblical Recorder*, 12 Nov. 1902, 8.) To vary from Baptist beliefs, Bailey conceded, was “to cease to be a Baptist.” But only baptism is “the creed of the Baptists.” And baptism is just a form of individualism. “It is in baptism that the Individual and the Democracy meet and plight their faith.” “The Creed of the Baptists,” *Biblical Recorder*, 10 Dec. 1902, 8.

¹⁸ Bailey, “Some Fruits of the Baptist Principle,” *Biblical Recorder*, 19 Nov. 1902, 8.

Southern Baptist Convention now combined with efforts to subordinate doctrine to experience and resulted in what can only be called an ethnic or tribal source of identity.

The cooperative endeavors that Baptist churches initiated in 1845 became increasingly important in strengthening Baptist identity throughout the twentieth century. W. O. Carver, professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued for example that cooperative missionary efforts created Baptist denominationalism and were the source of Baptist unity. “Before the beginning of the missionary movement among us, there were Baptist churches, but there was hardly a Baptist denomination.” Missions created Baptist identity. “It took missions to give us a sense of oneness.” Missions also, Carver said, drove Baptist progress in doctrine, education, culture, and Christian piety.¹⁹ Without the cooperative endeavors, Carver seemed to say, there could be no authentic Baptist identity.

In the postwar period Southern Baptist programs proliferated widely and established deep roots in most churches. These programs produced a powerful Southern Baptist subculture that fostered tribal identity. Churches made Southern Baptists in the following way. They were born into the group, nurtured in the rituals and practices of the group, and upon completion of certain rites of passage, certified as a member of the group.

Many contemporary moderate leaders have explained this view of Baptist identity in recent years. Cecil Sherman said that he was Baptist because his parents were. Donna Forrester, who refused to leave Southern Baptists despite opposition to her ordination, considered her Baptist identity a birthright similar to nationality: “I could no more be a Methodist than I could be from Wisconsin.” She was born a Baptist in the same way she

¹⁹ Carver, “Why Baptists Grow: The Importance of Missions in Relation to Baptist Progress,” *Baptist Argus*, 25 June 1903, 6.

was born an American and a southerner. Molly Marshall said that she had always been a Baptist, for it was her heritage and was the same as being alive. Gary Parker concluded that many are Baptists because they born and nurtured in it: “We breathe Baptist air and drink Baptist water and eat Baptist chicken.” Nancy Sehested recognized the ethnic or tribal character of her Baptist identity: “I was born into the tribe of Baptists . . . My siblings and I were all schooled in the tribal ways from the Texas branch of the house of Southern Baptists.” Cecil Staton summarized the experience of so many postwar Southern Baptists: “I am Baptist born and Baptist bred. . . . it would be almost impossible for me to be anything other than a Baptist.”²⁰

When postwar Baptists said that they were “born” Southern Baptist, they meant that they were nurtured in an ethnic tradition, a distinct Southern Baptist vision of life, values, and society. The elements that shaped this identity included such experiences as walking the aisle and receiving baptism by immersion, attending Baptist youth camps, participating in the Baptist Young People’s Union or its successor the Baptist Training Union, attending a Baptist college or seminary, and receiving a weekly dose of ethnic indoctrination in Sunday School classes that taught the curricula sent down from Nashville’s Baptist Sunday School Board. Perhaps more than any other program, however, the Woman’s Missionary Union shaped this Baptist identity. The WMU enrolled the youth of each church in such weekly training programs as the Girls’ Auxiliary (GA’s) and the Royal Ambassadors (RA’s). Here they trained children in the Bible, discipleship, world missions, history, and culture. They required them to memorize the structure and workings of the SBC. Here especially they created “Baptists.”

²⁰ All from Cecil Staton, ed., *Why I Am a Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1999).

For much of the twentieth century this Southern Baptist ethnicity was the glue that held the denomination together while our growing diversity pushed us apart. Like the strong nuclear force that holds an atom's protons and neutrons together despite the fact that the protons naturally repel each other, ethnicity held Southern Baptists with differing doctrines and identities together. There were some defections. Some conservative churches withdrew and identified with one or another fundamentalist movement. Some modernists withdrew and joined the Episcopal church or some other denomination. But most remained. Whether conservative or moderate, they felt in their bones that they were authentic Southern Baptists and could not conceive of any other identity. Their identity was not chosen, it was given. They were born Baptist.

It is similar in some ways being Jewish. Baptist girls went through all the stages of the Girls-in-Action missions education program: maiden, lady-in-waiting, princess, queen, queen-with-a-sceptre, and queen regent. Baptist boys did the same in the Royal Ambassadors: page, squire, knight, ambassador, ambassador extraordinary, and ambassador plenipotentiary. The experience functioned in many like a bar-mitzvah. Having completed the rites of passage, they were now Baptists. Conversion, walking the aisle, saying the sinner's prayer, being baptized, and believing a few Baptist-like ideas, were important, but they could not make you authentically Baptist. Once you were a queen regent or an ambassador plenipotentiary, however, your Baptist identity was secure.

Moderates instead took pride in the tradition of freedom and tolerance they discovered in college and seminary and embedded this idea in their native Baptist tribalism. They valued religious liberty, individual freedom, and church autonomy as the

essence of being Baptist. They honored Baptists for their contributions of western democracy and religious liberty.

This powerful strand of Southern Baptist identity was not therefore mere ethnicity. For moderates, the ethnicity had a meaning, a purpose. Being Baptist meant supporting and perpetuating the “Baptist idea” of individual freedom. Since progressive moderates held that Baptist identity inhered primarily in individual freedom, they concluded that conservatives who placed doctrinal limits on denominational service were “not true Southern Baptists.”²¹

Reflections on Current Trends

Although the progressives made extraordinary progress, they found it tough sledding. Most rank-and-file Baptists rejected the unbelieving historical criticism that seemed to deny much that the Bible taught. They rejected Darwinism. And they did not embrace the rather subtle historical idealism that sought to reconcile the Bible with the criticism and evolution. J. W. Bailey acknowledged that “not one Baptist in a thousand conceives the genius of the Baptist position.”²²

Conservative Southern Baptists felt that being Baptist must include commitment to certain fundamental doctrines like the inerrancy of the Bible, substitutionary atonement, and salvation only by personal faith in Christ. Being Baptist was first and foremost about faithfulness to Christ as revealed in his inspired and inerrant word. And if necessary, conservatives were prepared to leave the tribe in order to remain Baptists. Conservatives made it a fighting point that tribal credentials could not suffice for Baptist identity.

²¹ Cecil Sherman, quoted in “Denominational Loyalists Meet,” *Baptist Courier*, 13 Nov. 1980, 16.

²² Bailey, “The Baptists and Periods of Transition,” *Biblical Recorder*, 6 May 1903, 1.

But conservatives have nevertheless been deeply influenced by the progressive leadership of the convention in the twentieth century. Moderates controlled what was taught in the college and seminary classrooms and in the Sunday School. They wrote the books that told us our history, our doctrine, and our identity. They taught us how to function as churches, associations, and conventions. We recognized readily the unscriptural character of some of that heritage. But much of that influence remains unrecognized. In some areas we continue in the thoughts and ways that they taught us.

But moderate leadership was not the only source of trouble. Trends in modern western culture aided and abetted moderate views of Baptist identity on the one hand, and constituted an independent source of influence that has also corroded Baptist identity. Americans embraced a more expansive view of individual freedom as the twentieth century progressed and conservatives have not escaped its influence.

The question posed in the title is this: “Are Southern Baptists in danger of losing their identity?” My response is, “No, it is already gone.” Not entirely gone. Rather it is a withered relic of what it once was and what it should be.

Conservatives have established, for example, that doctrine is central to Baptist identity. But we seem content to teach only a small set of Bible truth. Is it enough to believe in the full inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, in the deity of Christ, in necessity of the new birth for salvation, and in the reality of miracles? Should we not preach the truths and practical benefits of God’s providential control and perfect knowledge of future events? Should we not preach that justification is by faith alone—else we lose the very heart of our missionary motive? Should we not preach the

sufficiency of scripture for Christian life, church order, and truth—and urge its relevance?

Perhaps the most obvious area that we neglect is the Bible's teaching on the church. We have practically abandoned regenerate church membership, for we barely preach a discriminating gospel and little know how to recognize credible signs of saving faith—and indeed we think it uncharitable to judge them. The result is that in our churches there has been an overproduction of professed Christians. We have diminished the standards of evidence for conversion to the ability to repeat a prayer and a wish to join the church. The result is like when a company waters down its stock by issuing new shares—the volume is increased but the value is reduced.²³ And judging by the decreasing ages at which we baptize children, we seem to practice what we do not preach—we are making Baptists by birth, not by faith. And our membership rolls, with their extensive lists of inactive members, testify against us in this area.

On the Lord's Supper we are disorderly and seem reject the scripture's clear teaching. For example, in the New Testament baptism is prerequisite to participating in the Lord's Supper, but in many churches we invite unbaptized professing believers to take and eat—indeed, in some churches, we invite all persons, including any unbelievers who are present. We are inviting them eat and drink judgment on themselves (1 Cor. 11:27-30). And shall we escape judgment also?

Many of our churches have abandoned or want to distance themselves from congregational church government. We have forgotten why we are congregational. Moderates taught us that we are congregational because of our commitment to freedom

²³ See H. H. Tucker's more extensive comments on the decline of commitment to truth ("Has the Time Come?," *Christian Index*, 9 July 1885, 8.

and autonomy. We show that we have drunk deeply from the moderates' well here.

Baptists once believed that congregationalism was scriptural and could readily point out passages that taught it (Mt. 18:15-17, 1 Cor. 5:5, 12-13, 2 Cor. 2:6).

Our churches have abandoned scriptural church discipline. We practice a slender discipline—church staff who sin are given paid leave, Christian counseling, a severance package, and we declare them cured and commend them to another church to repeat their crimes. This is an area where most conservative pastors are aware of our disobedience as churches. Moderates and our individualist culture have taught us that it ought not and can not be done. But Baptists once thought otherwise. Christ commands it. Shall we who know our Master's will refuse to do it?

We have established that we will not support seminary professors who teach contrary to the beliefs that we confess. But we have seen disagreement about the need to require other denominational servants to subscribe to our beliefs as a condition of service.

In other ways we show that we have adopted moderate views of Baptist identity. We are not sure that we can draw doctrinal boundaries to our fellowship. Baptist associations traditionally expelled member churches that departed from the beliefs and practices that the churches of the association professed as the foundation of their fellowship. And some of our associations in recent years have successfully expelled churches that departed from scripture in certain areas (homosexuality, ordination of women, baptism, Pentecostalism). But in many of these cases the expulsions came only with greatest difficulty. And in many associations, churches with such disorders remain members in good standing.

There is a church that refuses to name the name of Jesus Christ. There is another that has tolerated in its membership persons who proudly paraded their serial adultery. And

yet our associations often refuse to expel such aberrant churches. Both remain in associational fellowship. To permit such aberrant churches to remain in the association constitutes an endorsement of their errors, for the association represents fellowship of doctrine and practice. The other member churches thus participate in the sins of these churches. Most of our churches repudiate such errors, but have no heart for expelling heretical churches. It seems churlish and unkind because of modern sensibilities of what constitutes civility. But above all, even conservatives churches seem to agree with the moderates that such action is a violation of the autonomy and independence of the churches which is allegedly at the heart of Baptist identity.

Let us say, once and for all, that true Baptist churches will not walk together with churches that discount the authority of the Holy Scriptures or deny the deity of Jesus Christ or who give false hope of salvation apart from faith in Christ. Let us insist on unity based on sound denominational principles, on our commitment to the same faith and practice. Agreement on fundamental principles is necessary to fellowship. And let us determine that our faith and practice shall be based on scripture, not on modern sensibilities, not on some interpretation of Baptist tradition, not even on the beliefs and practices of some ostensible golden age of Baptist orthodoxy. Let us recover our Baptist identity—let us recover a fully Biblical Christian identity.