BEYOND A BATH AND A BOOK: BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS[1]

STEPHEN R. HOLMES

Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology
St Mary's College, St Andrews, Scotland
(sh80@st-andrews.ac.uk)

1. INVENTING BAPTIST THEOLOGY

I recently wrote a little book entitled *Baptist Theology*.[2] It took its place in a series alongside volumes on Reformed theology, Anglican theology, Roman Catholic theology, Lutheran theology, and Methodist theology. I reflected as I wrote that volume that I felt at a distinct disadvantage compared to all my fellow authors: in every other case, the writer was being asked to summarize, perhaps to synthesize, an ongoing dialogue with at least some measure of shared methodology and agreed starting points. There are rich academic and ecclesial traditions of reflection on Anglican, Roman, Reformed, and Methodist theology; not so Baptist theology. To write a summary of Baptist theology was to invent the tradition before distilling it.

This is not to say, of course, that Baptists have not done theology—although we have few names who would rank amongst the great theologians, and fewer still who have been self-consciously "pan-Baptist" in their reflection, trying to think theologically in ways not just influenced by their own Baptist beliefs, but also somehow attentive and responsible to the breadth of lived faith of others who claimed the denomination "Baptist." (By contrast, consider, say, Rowan Williams' reflections on Anglican theology; he offers a creative and profound re-interpretation of a particular tradition of Anglo-Catholicism, and situates it in, sometimes tacit, dialogue with evangelical and broad traditions of Anglican theology. There are a series of interconnected academic dialogues in which he finds his own space.)

I say this not to claim particular merit for that essay—I am acutely aware of its failings—or to seek to excuse the failures in the book—or those in this paper—but instead to make clear that in what follows I am attempting a construction of a tradition, and that this construction is neither generally agreed nor tested by any developed academic debate. It is hesitant (even if my natural writing style is not) and it is deeply partial, in both senses of that word. Further, as will become clear, no Baptist body—not the Baptist World Alliance, nor any national or regional Union, Convention, or Association—has any ability to decide on a particular vision of what Baptist theology should be (it might *commend* a proposed vision, but that is

[1] This is a revised version of a paper prepared for the first meeting of the bilateral dialogues between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council. I am grateful to other participants for their helpful comments on the paper.

[2] Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012). Most of the argument of this paper and, I think, all of the examples can be found in that book, as can an extensive bibliography on Baptist theology.

rather different). The account of Baptist theological commitments that follows has neither the force of tradition nor the backing of any competent ecclesial authority; the only power it may bring to bear on other any other Baptist believer or congregation is that of moral suasion.

2. POSSIBLE MODELS OF BAPTIST THEOLOGY

That said, there are of course some proposed models of what Baptist theology should be. Before proposing my own, it is appropriate to offer a survey of the possible options. One way of thinking about their variety is to construct a scale ranging from "maximalist" accounts of Baptist distinctiveness to "minimalist" accounts thereof. A "maximalist" account so stresses the difference of Baptist belief from all, or most, other Christian traditions as to create a major gulf: to use a geographical analogy, the proposal here is that Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists are in various different parts of Europe; Baptists are in New Zealand. A minimalist account, by contrast, would stress the continuity and similarity of Baptist theology and practice to that of other Christian traditions. On this basis, we might group the various traditions of envisioning Baptist theology that I detect as follows:

2.1 Minimalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

The classic demonstration of a minimalist account of Baptist identity would be the Particular (i.e., Calvinistic) Baptist Second London Confession of 1677; this Confession was a fairly light revision of the Savoy Declaration, issued by English Congregationalists in 1658, which in turn was a revision of the famous (Presbyterian) Westminster Confession of 1646.[3] Some, at least, of the Congregationalists who prepared the Savoy Declaration had sat in the Westminster Assembly that produced the Westminster Confession; although that document affirmed presbyterian polity over congregationalist polity, there was certainly a sense of shared work. The Baptists were not present at Westminster, and the date of the Second London Confession may be revealing: it was issued in the middle of the persecution of nonconformists that followed the restoration of the English monarchy; when Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians alike faced the threat of imprisonment, and worse, for their ecclesial practices; finding ways of magnifying unity must have been attractive.[4]

That said, the 1677 Confession carefully locates Baptists as full members of a broader tradition of English nonconformity: a broadly shared Reformed and Calvinistic theological confession is constructed, in which there are differences over church order, which might be presbyterian or congregationalist; the relationship between church and state, and the proper mode and subjects of baptism. It is striking that, constructing the synthesis this way, Baptists and Congregationalists are on the same side on two of the

[3] The text of the Confession can be found in W.L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 241-95.
[4] Indeed, the authors of the Confession are explicit that this is their purpose; see Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith,* 245.

three substantive points of difference; Presbyterianism was by some distance the majority tradition in seventeenth-century English nonconformity, but this construction nonetheless embeds the (Particular) Baptists firmly within the mainstream of a nonconformist tradition.[5]

The habit of making common cause became entrenched in English nonconformity, with the founding of the Deputies of the Three Dissenting Denominations early in the eighteenth century representing one of the earliest formal trans-denominational bodies in British history, at least. The Second London Confession was adopted in America by the Philadelphia Association in 1742, and as a result became a central document in the development of US Baptist life. I am not aware of evidence that this was done with specific intention to stress theological continuity with Presbyterianism, but the fact remains that it did so, and it remained probably the most significant confessional document amongst US Baptists until the writing of the 1832 New Hampshire Confession of Faith.

In England there was a further impetus to this "minimalist" construction of Baptist identity in the Act of Toleration of 1689, which brought an end to the active persecution of (Trinitarian, protestant) dissenters; the Act required dissenting ministers seeking its protection to affirm their agreement to thirty five or thirty six of the *Thirty Nine Articles*, the confessional statement of the Church of England. (The excluded articles were those on church order and church-state relations; Baptists were in addition allowed to dissent from the Article on infant baptism.) The context of course was the immediate aftermath of the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, and the basic anti-Catholicism which was a powerful driver in English history throughout the early modern period; nonetheless, by this decision Baptists become co-opted, even if willingly so, as another member of a broad protestant alliance.

This "minimalist" construction of Baptist distinctiveness has continued to find expression, particularly in pan-evangelical movements; insofar as evangelicalism has tended to downplay the importance of ecclesiology, Baptist ecclesiological distinctives are less of an impediment to finding a basic evangelical unity. Speaking very roughly, it would be the normal position for Baptists in the UK and Europe to locate themselves happily within a broader pan-evangelicalism; in the USA and elsewhere in the world the situation is rather more varied.

That said, the most visible expressions of this Baptist minimalism at present are probably from the US. A series of broadly Calvinistic pan-evangelical bodies have been coming to prominence ("The Gospel Coalition" is probably the most famous), and have attracted much personal support from leading Baptists, if not yet any significant institutional support from Baptist conventions or denominations. We see here a self-conscious locating of Baptist identity as a subset of a broader evangelical Calvinist (or "neo-Reformed") theology. This identification would not commend itself generally to Baptists, but represents the far end of one way of constructing Baptist theology.

---

[5] There are, it should be noted, changes to the wording of Westminster Confession made by the Savoy Declaration which have nothing to do with church order, and similarly there are a few changes made by the Second London Confession to Savoy. These soteriological changes are certainly interesting, but do not I think weaken my general thesis here, that the Second London Confession is a conscious aligning of the Particular Baptists with a broader Christian tradition.

2.2 Maximalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

The maximalist vision of Baptist identity, which stresses the difference between Baptists and all, or most, other groups, finds classic expression right at the beginning of the Baptist movement. Thomas Helwys, who pastored the first Baptist church in the UK, wrote a justly-celebrated book, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*.[6] The text is famous for its robust and uncompromising assertion of the principle of freedom of belief—of which more later—but that is not the main argument of the text, rather Helwys intends to show that every other "Christian" group in existence is apostate, beginning with Rome, but moving through the Church of England to the Puritans, the Separatists ("Brownism"), and even John Robinson, pastor of the sister congregation to Helwys' church. On Helwys' telling, Baptists are basically different from all others who claim the name "Christian," a difference which is the difference between truth and error, salvation and perdition.

Arguably, the General (*i.e.*, Arminian) Baptist tradition that can trace its roots back to Helwys' church maintained this more maximalist distinctiveness through the seventeenth century, although this judgement stands in need of considerable nuance. In the 1640s both General and Particular Baptists made common cause with millennial religious radical groups with revolutionary political ideas (Fifth Monarchists and Levellers, for example); into the 1650s both traditions moved to distance themselves from immanent millennial expectations and political radicalism, however, although probably the Particulars were more successful in making a complete break. General Baptist life was somewhat porous, although never sympathetic, to Quakerism throughout the century. In the last decade of the century, the role of a leader, Matthew Caffyn, accused of heterodox views on the Trinity was debated nationally, leading to a temporary split; the evidence concerning Caffyn's actual beliefs is not unambiguous, but if he did indeed deny the Trinity then his vindication represents perhaps the earliest acceptance of trinitarian heterodoxy by a previously-orthodox denomination. (At the famous Salters' Hall synod of 1719 the General Baptists mostly sided with the proposition that no confession of trinitarian faith that was not a repetition of biblical language should be required.)

Perhaps the purest and most carefully developed maximalist account of the distinctiveness of Baptist belief is the nineteenth-century American tradition of "Landmarkianism" (the name derives from an 1854 pamphlet by James M. Pendleton, entitled "An Old Landmark Re-set"). According to this tradition, the practice of baptism by the immersion of a confessed believer in water is central to the being of the church (and so it is necessary that those performing baptism must have themselves been baptized as believers by immersion). Landmarkian tradition constructs a line of alternative apostolic succession, common to various radical protestant groups, through which the true church, of baptized believers, may be traced back to the apostles. A classic statement of this position can be found in W.A. Jarrel's 1894 text

[6] There is a modern edition, Joe Early, *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 155-310; this is imperfect in a number of respects, however, and a facsimile of the original edition is to be preferred.

Baptist Church Perpetuity (which is still in print),[7] which begins by arguing that "church perpetuity" is a biblical promise, and so, given that the Baptist churches are the only true churches, it is necessary to suppose that there is an unbroken succession of Baptist churches in history (the minor premise here might be open to dispute…). Jarrel then traces the history of baptistic church life from the apostles to the rise of Anabaptism in the sixteenth century, his imagined line passing through Montanists, Novatians, Donatists, Paulicians, Albigenses, Paterines, Henricans, Arnoldists, and Waldenses. In treating each group he justifies classifying them as Baptist, and defends them, more successfully in some cases than others in my estimation, against the various charges of heresy or heterodoxy that have surrounded them.

The strength of this tradition at its height, around 1900, can be gauged by the story of the church historian William T. Whitsitt, who was forced to resign as president of Southern Baptist Seminary when he aroused the ire of the Landmarkian constituency by mentioning, correctly, in a historical piece that early Baptists practised baptism by effusion, not by immersion. The theological distinctiveness expressed within Landmarkian belief is, it should be said, not much greater than in other Baptist traditions, beyond this core conviction about baptism.

In contemporary Baptist life, however, a somewhat different maximalist model would be more common, finding its strength generally, but not exclusively, in Europe. On this account, Baptists find their true identity alongside Mennonites and other survivors of sixteenth-century Anabaptist radicalism in what is sometimes called (following James McClendon's coinage) a "baptistic" tradition. Here there is a very distinct way of doing theology, focused on a conviction that Christian belief derives only from Christian practice, and indeed can only be understood by one active in Christian practice, and a conviction that the heart of Christian practice is peaceable living. On this basis McClendon began his three volume systematic theology with *Ethics*, and moved through *Doctrine* to *Witness*.[8]

In recent reflection, the focus on pacifism as the core of Christian ethics, and so of Christianity, within this tradition seems to have been strong. There is undoubtedly influence here from John Howard Yoder's Mennonite vision,[9] but also (it seems to me) an appreciation of pacifism as a stance that visibly and decisively insists on the separate moral spheres of church and state. A developed and morally-serious pacifism, that is opposed to all coercive practices, is essentially impossible as a broad societal ethic, and so locates the church in a sphere of "holiness," of inevitable distance from normal cultural practices.

2.3 Modified Maximalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

Obviously, there is considerable space between these two poles of "minimal distinctiveness" and "maximal distinctiveness," and unsurprisingly most live models of Baptist identity fall somewhere in this middle space. It is perhaps not unreasonable, however, to map them as beginning with either a maximal or minimal model, and then modifying it. That is, some positions start with a stress on the difference of

[7] W.A. Jarrel, *Baptist Church Perpetuity* (Dallas, TX: 1894).
[8] James W. McClendon, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986-2000).
[9] See particularly John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit agnus noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

Baptists from all other Christians, and then soften that difference, whereas others start with a stress on the essential unity of Baptists with other Christian believers, and then work to somewhat heighten the points of difference.

Probably most accounts of Baptist theology that follow McClendon's vision of a "baptistic" identity should in fact be classed as modified maximalist accounts, including McClendon's own. He proposes a broad family of radical Christianity, with its radical end being inhabited by groups such as the Hutterite Brethren, devoted to communal living, or the Amish, whose patterns of sociality and attitude to technology separate them decisively from mainstream culture. Considered like this, Baptists represent the moderate end of baptistic theology, standing in closer continuity to mainstream Christianity than any other baptistic group in theology, in historical engagement, and in ecumenical practice.

A fascinating recent attempt by Irish Baptists to brand themselves as "neither Catholic nor Protestant" is another example of this modified maximalism. In the context of a community profoundly divided over decades by Protestant-Catholic sectarian violence, they drew on a reclamation of the Anabaptist heritage, noting that Anabaptists were persecuted equally by Rome and by Reformers, and so claimed to stand uniquely as a Christian tradition which was outside of the particular conflict that was blighting their society. The attempt was largely unsuccessful, as I understand it (to the best of my knowledge there is no properly written history, so I am judging merely on the basis of various personal assessments I have heard/read), because the cultural pressure to classify groups as belonging on one side or the other was too strong to resist—Baptists were perceived to be protestants, whatever they claimed. It was an interesting experiment in reclaiming radical identity for missional purposes, however.

2.4 Modified Minimalist Models of Baptist Distinctiveness

In ecumenical terms, the more influential presentations of Baptist theology are better described as modified minimalism. Recently, these include two proposals for Baptist identity which have both been developed (although in neither case exclusively) by Paul Fiddes. One, deployed in some national dialogues in the UK, focused on covenant as the organizing category of Baptist theology; in particular, the suggestion that an early Baptist idea of linking the covenant by which a local church was formed to the eternal covenant of grace, so that the former was the outworking in history of the latter, and they were, in effect, the same covenant, God's work of salvation, on this account, finds its application in the gathering of local churches. This is a radical vision in the sense that it finds such a central place for the local congregation, and it is an authentically Baptist vision: John Smyth, the founder of the Baptist movement, once asked "[i]s not the visible church of the New Testament with all the ordinances thereof the chief and principal part of the Gospel?" On the other hand, it is closely related to Puritan covenant theology, and so

is properly classed as a modified minimalism in terms of its construction of Baptist distinctiveness: Baptists, on this account, are Puritans with a twist…[10]

Fiddes' later account, which is influential in the recently-published report of the BWA dialogues with the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity,[11] stresses communion ecclesiology as an organizing principle for Baptist theology, and invites Roman Catholics to imagine their theology in similar terms. This is visibly a distinctively Baptist development of the recent Catholic tradition of communio ecclesiology, and so is again properly reported as a modified minimalism in my terms.

The very influential vision of E.Y. Mullins should be mentioned in this connexion also. In his *The Axioms of Religion*[12] he proposed six "axioms" that between them summed up Baptist theology:

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 must be free.

5. The religio-civic axiom: a free church in a free state.

6. The social axiom: love your neighbour as yourself.

Mullins suggests two things concerning this list. The first is that it is all summed up in the core Baptist conviction of "soul competency," a doctrine which denies any possibility or necessity of an intermediary between the believer and God. This is not, Mullins is careful to stress, an innate competency, but a gift of grace. The second point is that in this construction Baptists are merely perfecting the basic genius of the Reformation; he narrates the history of Christianity since the Reformation as an ongoing conflict between a belief in the direct access of the soul to God—essentially, "soul competency"—and a belief that the soul's access to God is only possible indirectly. On this basis, it is reasonable to see Mullins' vision as a modified minimalism: Baptists, on his account, are the purest protestants, but not fundamentally different from other protestants.

My own proposal, worked out in my *Baptist Theology*, is also a modified minimalism. I suggest that, first, Baptists share all doctrines except ecclesiology with other Christians. Second, however, I suggest that the effects of our distinctive ecclesiology are much broader and far-reaching than has sometimes been suggested. To say "Baptists are evangelicals with a different practice of baptism and church government" is true, but misleading, because it misrepresents the extent of difference in theology and practice that our distinctive ecclesiology suggests. I argue—and I will work on this basis in the rest of this essay—that at the core of a Baptist vision is a dialectic between an intense individualism of the sort suggested by Mullins,

---

[10] See various papers in Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003) for developments of this theme.

[11] *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*; for the text and some responses see *American Baptist Quarterly* XXXI/1 (2012).

[12] E.Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publications Society, 1908).

and an equally intense focus on local community—as Smyth said, the local, visible congregation is the "principle part of the gospel."[13]

So, on the one hand, God alone is Lord, and God chooses to deal directly with every human person, and to hold every human person responsible for his/her response to God's gospel call. No priest or king—or parent, or "godparent"—can answer for me; I must make my own response. On the other hand, God calls those who respond with repentance and faith to the gospel offer into a new society, the church, and into visible local manifestations of that new society. Local church membership is at the heart of Christian faith and practice.

These claims are both essentially ecclesiological (the individualism claim can be phrased essentially as a suggestion that the church has no mediatory role between God and each particular human being) and so my proposal for Baptist theology casts Baptists as protestants with a distinctive ecclesiology, but this distinctive ecclesiology has significant repercussions which separate Baptists from other Christians in faith and practice more than might be expected. In the next section I will outline those doctrines generally identified as Baptist distinctives and explore how they might be seen to arise out of this vision of Baptist theology, and the ways in which they are distinctive.

3. CORE BAPTIST DOCTRINES

3.1 Biblicist and Communal Accounts of Authority

At the heart of Baptist distinctiveness is a particular view of authority. Baptist ecclesial practice is resolutely biblicist in a particular way, which we might denote "imitative": Baptists have traditionally defended their core ecclesial practices on the basis of a repetition of New Testament practices. Baptism by immersion (for example) is remarkably untheologised in Baptist tradition; writer after writer insists simply that this is the biblical way of baptizing, and so it is the Baptist way of baptizing. This imitative practice makes ecumenical conversation difficult, of course; there is no purchase on the practice, no doctrinal analysis to be engaged with, simply a brute insistence that this is right.

It seems to me that this imitative form of biblicism is not merely a repetition of the claim to biblical faithfulness that every Christian denomination will make in some register. Nor, however, would I claim that it is uniquely Baptist; rather, it locates Baptists amongst a broad body of radical Christian practice sometimes denoted "restorationist," in which the heart of biblical fidelity is not to believe what was believed in the New Testament church, but to do what was done there.

The most extreme example of this tendency within Baptist life is probably the "anti-missions" movement that arose in nineteenth-century America. The name refers not to a rejection of the work of evangelism, but to an opposition to mission societies—and indeed to all other Christian organizations that are not local churches. It found early classic expression in the Black Rock Address, an energetic and wide-

[13] Cited in B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 23.

ranging condemnation of everything that is not a local church. (Regarding "Theological Schools," it announces "in every age, from the school of Alexandria down to this day, they have been a real pest to the church of Christ"; regarding "the modern missionary" we are told "[h]is leading motive, judging from his movements, is not love to souls, but love of fame").

Alongside the basic imitative hermeneutic (which McClendon summed up simply as "This is that; then is now.") there is a communal dimension to Baptist accounts of authority. In response to the fundamental question: how is the Scripture properly heard, how is its true meaning determined? Baptists have consistently answered, by the gathered community. The (local) church comes together to hear and interpret Scripture, and there is a particular promise of the Spirit that it is in this gathering that Scripture will be rightly heard and understood.

The sheer radicalness of this proposal should not be missed: to make the point by heightened contrast, the Baptist conviction is that forty barely-literate members of a church are a better interpretative community, and are more likely to understand Scripture well, than forty leading professors of Biblical Studies. (Of course, this is a return to protestant origins: precisely that example was put against Luther in *Exsurge Domine*—church tradition, the leading clerics, and the university professors all agreed that his Biblical interpretation was in error; so he should recant.)[14]

This is not to say that Baptists are opposed to biblical scholarship, or to receiving guidance from the wider church. The actual practice of church meeting is not a quiescent waiting for prophetic insight, but a conversation in which each member brings whatever gifts and insight—perhaps prophetic—God has been pleased to give to them.[15] Those who have theological training, or who have simply read widely and listened to good teaching, will bring that knowledge into the discussion, and it will/should be treated with proper respect—but the insight into God's calling on the community that is only ever the gift of the Spirit is not a product of academic expertise, or of ordination to office, or of any other human qualification. The church deliberates together to hear the voice of the Spirit.

3.2 Believer's Baptism by Immersion

Baptist practice of baptism can appear very distinctive, both in terms of mode and subject, to the point of potential incomprehension.[16] In fact, however, these practices when examined closely might be less distinctive than they appear. Starting with the mode of baptism, this represents an illustration of the imitative biblicism I described above: this is the way John, Jesus, and the apostles baptized, so this is the way we should baptize.

---

[14] I develop this point in my "Baptists and the Bible," *Baptist Quarterly* 43.7 (2010).

[15] See my "Knowing Together the Mind of Christ: Congregational Government and the Church Meeting" in Cross et al., eds., *Questions of Identity: Festschrift Brian Haymes* (Regent's Park College, 2011).

[16] We recently as a family visited a Roman Catholic cathedral, and were shown its treasures, including a magnificently carved modern font, by a very enthusiastic guide; after she had left us, my twelve year old daughter took me aside and asked "So what is the big drinking fountain thing?"

Turning to the question of the subjects of baptism, the Baptist distinctive is not the baptism of converts on profession of faith; every denomination that maintains the sacrament of baptism would do that; rather Baptists are distinct in their refusal to baptize the infant children of fellow believers. In a context where virtually the entire population is at least nominally Christian—the whole of Europe and the USA until recently—the baptism of adults (or adolescents) is profoundly unusual and appears anomalous to members of churches that accept paedobaptism; in a missionary context it will be far less so.

Further, it should be noted that the decision to baptize only converts is one made by many protestant denominations, including many of the broadly Pentecostal denominations in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa; there are areas or nations where most or all of the non-Catholic Christian traditions restrict baptism to believers, and so this practice is not a Baptist distinctive at all. That said, in most areas of the world it is a Baptist distinctive; I would suggest that the refusal to baptize infants represents a powerful illustration of what I have called the individualist theme in Baptist theology: it is an insistence that no-one, not my parents, not any sponsors, not my church community, can answer to God for me; God calls each human soul directly and personally.

3.3 Congregational Church Government

Baptists are committed to a congregational model of church government, which is to say that we believe that the local, gathered church is the primary ecclesial reality, and that the local church should be governed by communal discernment of God's will involving every member of the community in the process of discernment. If believer's baptism stresses the individualist pole of Baptist theology, congregationalism stresses the communal pole. The two, however, should not be separated: the proper result of immersion into water in confession of the triune name is immersion into the local community that confesses the triune name.

As noted above, there have been forms of Baptist theology that take this so seriously that they deny the legitimate existence of any ecclesial organization that is not a local church; a more moderate, but still authentically Baptist, position, that is rather easier to embrace in the context of BWA sponsored dialogue, is to insist that the local church will always be the primary ecclesial reality, and that translocal ecclesial bodies (including global alliances) have a representative and advisory role that may however never supersede or intrude on the ability and responsibility of the local church to seek its own understanding of Christ's call on its life. One would hope that, in a well-ordered and normal Baptist context, the decisions taken on serious matters by a representative body would be received with great respect by its several local congregations, and treated with great weight in their own deliberations—but their deliberations remain their own; the association, convention, union, or alliance (all common Baptist words for translocal fellowships) advises, it never commands. The most a Baptist association might do is choose to adjust its articles of association, so that churches who refuse to comply with a new decision are excluded from membership. Even a decision like this, however (and there are recent examples), would widely be viewed

as unacceptably coercive, somehow improper, too strong an attempt to influence the local churches' decisions.

On the basis of considerations like this, it is common to see or hear local Baptist churches described as "autonomous." The accuracy of this description—and to this extent it is helpful—is that it stresses the total lack of central control over the churches, a point that non-congregational Christians can find it difficult to grasp. That said, theologically a Baptist church can never properly be described as "autonomous"; its law, its *nomos*, comes from Christ and Christ alone. Just as (as we shall see later) a Baptist concern for freedom of conscience is not an expression of interior sovereignty over self, but merely an insistence that Christ alone has the right to command belief, so the Baptist conviction about congregational government is at heart a belief that Christ rules in the church through his direct address through word and Spirit to local congregations, not mediately by way of Bishops or Councils. With due respect to the excellent service offered by many holders of the papal office, it is at the heart of Baptist belief that Christ has no vicar on earth.

All that said, the practice of association of local churches together in wider bodies is also natively Baptist. That those bodies have no power to command does not stop them having great wisdom to guide, and great usefulness in prosecuting shared designs. But a Baptist account of association goes beyond the merely pragmatic, or so I believe; the practice is so widespread and so apparently instinctive to Baptist churches, that some stronger account needs to be offered. Baptists see it as a duty to be in fellowship with all true Christians (even at our most sectarian, it seems to me that we have held to this principle, while simultaneously offering a woefully limited account of who might be encompassed in the class of "true Christians"...). If the requirement to be in membership of a local church is the first working out of this duty, the requirement for local churches who share the same faith to find an appropriate measure of love and unity with each other; this is the heart of the practice of association.

It is also, I suggest, the heart of a properly Baptist ecumenism. Insofar as a Baptist congregation can recognize another congregation as a true church of Jesus Christ, it has an ethical duty to be in fellowship. In many parts of the world this is now visibly worked out in local ecumenical practice, formal or informal, for which we may be thankful to God; given the particular account of congregational relationships sketched above it is almost certain that there are Baptist churches—perhaps particularly in the UK, where history has, as noted above, led to something of a willingness to set aside differences over baptismal practice—who in practice extend virtually the same measure of recognition to a local Methodist congregation as they do to other Baptist congregations.

What of ordained ministry? Three things should be said. First, in calling every member of the local congregation to take a share in leadership and church governance, to be involved in the mission of the church, and to minister for the common good within the congregation, Baptists do decisively relativize the distinctive role of ordained ministers. This has often been described as a "levelling down," refusing any special role for the minister, but it may perhaps better be considered as a "levelling up"; a recent fine phrase (variously ascribed) describes the Baptist position as "the abolition of the laity."

Second, however, Baptists have generally nonetheless had a practice of setting apart congregational leadership. Two broad patterns are in evidence: a bipartite pattern of pastors/elders and deacons, and a tripartite pattern of pastors, elders, and deacons. In each case the motivation for the practice is simple obedience to perceived New Testament church practice, as an application of the imitative biblicism I described above. These leaders have, as indicated above, no ability to command the congregation; they are called by congregational meeting and are bound to execute the decisions of the congregational meeting. Nor, generally, do they have roles to perform that are uniquely theirs: any member of the church may preach or preside at the Eucharist. That said, they are possessed of real authority by virtue of office (and one trusts by virtue of the character that led them being called to that office); if they cannot command the obedience of the congregational meeting, they should certainly command a respectful and serious hearing within that meeting's deliberations. Equally, the teaching ministry of the church, including its preaching, the conduct of its worship, including its Eucharistic celebrations, and the pastoral care of its members would normally each be under the guidance of the pastor(s) and or elders; and the practical running of the church and the disbursement of its finances would normally be the particular care of the deacons. To risk an analogy which has the potential to mislead, the various leaders function like business executives, with the congregation acting as shareholders: the ultimate ability to take decisions lies with the congregation, and it may choose to review and overturn any decision taken by the leadership, but the leadership in fact, and by virtue of gifting, expertise, and appointment, run the church day by day.

Third, the reader will have noticed that in all of this I have ducked the question of ordination. By the ecumenically-proposed definition of ordination in the Lima Text,[17] Baptists ordain all the leaders named over and also many others—Sunday School teachers; volunteer youth leaders; coordinators of food-distribution ministries; ... Indeed, as already noted, Baptist practices of baptism could be perceived as ordaining all church members on the standard definition. That said, this does not look like the practice of ordination exercised in other Christian traditions, in particular through being local and temporary (and, rather visibly, if also rather trivially, in not bestowing the style "Reverend" or the right to wear clerical vestments). Whilst some Baptist traditions have been happy with this and have eschewed more traditional-looking ordination (the Scotch Baptists for instance, who insisted on a plurality of elders with essentially no precedence amongst them), most have located within the pastoral role a particular "ordained" ministry. This has sometimes been understood merely functionally: a Baptist minister is the pastor of a Baptist church, and may style him/herself "Reverend" while occupying that office. (There are recent examples of Baptist pastors who, on moving from local church pastorate to an academic or denominational role, have refused any longer to use the clerical style.)

Most Baptists, however, seem to see something more significant and lasting in the practice of ordaining pastors, and allow that (for example) someone moving from a pastorate to an academic post remains an ordained minister. This is a deduction from practice: their name might remain on the list of ordained ministers maintained by the denomination, or they may be permitted still personal voting rights

[17] World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (Faith and Order paper 111;* WCC, 1982).

at conventions, or, most simply, there will be no service of "re-ordination" should they later return to pastoral charge. All that said, the theological logic behind these practices is often fairly opaque: they seem to suggest that ordination confers some sort of indelible character, but, if asked directly, many (not all...) Baptists would hotly deny such a claim. Other proposals suggest the conferral of a representative role, and/or a measure of translocal recognition; there is, it is fair to say, little agreement on the point.

3.4 Freedom of Conscience

A commitment to freedom of conscience, already briefly referenced, would be widely held to be a Baptist distinctive. This is easily narratable in terms of the theological perspective I have been developing in this paper: Christ alone is Lord of the human heart, and alone has the right to command belief; and Christ's mode of exercising his Lordship is never to delegate it to human viceroys who may command with his authority, and never through coercive means. On this basis, then, no government or ecclesial authority may legitimately seek to impose or enforce belief. So Thomas Helwys, in a famous passage always (and appropriately so) quoted in this connection:

> For we do freely profess that our lord the king has no more power over their [*sic*, Roman Catholics] consciences than over ours, and that is none at all. For our lord the king is but an earthly king, and he has no authority as a king but over earthly causes. If the king's people are obedient and true subjects, obeying all human laws made by the king, our lord the king can require no more. For man's religion to God is between God and themselves. The king will not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it does not appertain to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.[18]

Two points are worth making here. First, Helwys, in the quotation above, and most of the classical Baptist accounts of freedom of conscience, assume, essentially, a totalitarian politics. That is, they work on the basis that the only significant threat to human freedom of belief, expression, and practice is the state, and so focus on denouncing the idea of an "established" (i.e. state-sponsored and supported) church and legislation that seeks to restrict or coerce religious belief and practice. (Roger Williams was particularly concerned that civic participation in the New England colonies imposed the saying of certain prayers; Isaac Backus fought a memorable campaign after American independence against the requirements of nonconformists to pay taxes, charges, and tithes to support state churches, cleverly focusing in on one charge that happened to be of the same monetary value as the tea tax that had sparked the revolution, and so on.) I would certainly not want to suggest either that any of this is wrong, or that state-sponsored denials of freedom of religion have ceased to be a problem; I have taught, albeit briefly, in China. I do want to insist that these various positions now appear inadequate, or (perhaps better) incomplete; in a

[18] Helwys, *Mystery of Iniquity,* in Early, *Helwys*, 209.

world where power is more distributed than early modern totalitarianisms, the potential sources of threats to freedom of conscience must be expanded from merely the state and its religious arm, if any.

Second, it is worth exploring in slightly more detail one very influential twentieth-century version of this doctrine already noted, Mullins' development of the idea of "soul competency." There is a line of criticism of this idea that, although slightly unfair to Mullins (in that he recognized the problem and sought to guard against it) is helpful in exploring the theological logic of this Baptist commitment. The criticism focuses on the language of "competency"; while Mullins was clear that he was speaking of a possibility grounded in grace, not of some innate human ability, the language is too positive. Helwys' objection to the imposition of prayers and the practice of priests hearing confession was not based on a conviction that human beings could demand of God anyway, and that the priests and liturgies were an unnecessary imposition; rather it was based on the conviction of our utter incompetence in the face of the divine demand, which was not helped one iota by priests and liturgies. (This is particularly clear when Helwys discusses confession and absolution; he is utterly scathing about the idea that divine forgiveness of sin can be guaranteed by following a liturgical practice, or offered by a priest.) We have no access to divine grace save directly through Christ, and so Christ alone may command our beliefs and religious practices.

3.5 Visible Holiness

Baptists have routinely expected and demanded that church members would live according to higher ethical standards than those around, and have been active, sometimes perhaps over-zealous, in policing this expectation and demand. Of course, it is easy to find examples in history of Baptist churches straining gnats, or fragments of gnats, while swallowing camels, but the misuse of a belief does not render that belief false; historically, Baptists have been concerned for the visibility of practices of holy living amongst their church members.

The most interesting facet of this for our purposes is the account of how holiness is to be achieved. In brief, Baptists become holy together or not at all. The local church watches over each other in love, and so challenges, calls, and spurs each member to holiness. We see here again the complex interplay between individualistic and congregationalist impulses in Baptist theology as I am constructing it: each particular believer is to become holy, but the way they will do it is by active participation in the life of the local congregation.

4. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning, the construction of Baptist theology is a task not so much uncompleted as almost unbegun. I propose that any adequate account will have to be able to narrate the importance of the various themes listed here, although it would be possible to add some more; I further suggest that the account I have offered at least adequately makes sense of these themes, and so deserves consideration as one possible mode of constructing Baptist theology.