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Southern Baptists and the Quest for Theological Identity: Unavoidable Questions for the Twenty-First Century

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The question of identity is a central feature of the modern age. In our culture individuals, institutions, and even business corporations regularly wrestle with the question of their own identity—who are we and how do we know? Yet as central as this question is to our culture, the identity question is a rather recent phenomenon—a gift of modernity. In fact, most people prior to the rise of modernism did not spend much mental energy on the question of identity. In the premodern era, one's identity was an established fact based on sociological factors such as caste, vocation, family, or tribe. Identity was fixed by external sociological, economic, cultural, and religious factors, not by individual choice.



The Enlightenment brought that stability to an end. Now the question of personal identity is unavoidable. Almost everyone now feels the responsibility to construct or negotiate an identity according to a seemingly infinite number of options for self-designation. In fact, psychiatrists, sociologists, and historians have all attested to the fact that the modern identity question creates an enormous burden for individuals and for society. In the modern age the self is a project needing constant attention, maintenance, and focused development.

While the question of identity may be a product of the modern age, Christians would do well to give this issue careful theological reflection. In fact, as Christians, and as Baptists in particular, we must clearly affirm that our identity is unavoidably theological. If we are not careful in terms of how we define our identity, we may put our doctrinal integrity and the strength of our theological convictions at risk.

In this chapter I want to explore our theological identity as Southern Baptists along historical lines, looking at our place within Protestantism and also in the modern era. If we do not understand our own theological heritage, our sense of identity will be greatly

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impaired, and our theological convictions will be muddled. Additionally, I want to consider ten unavoidable questions we, as Baptists, must consider if we are to retain a self-conscious theological identity in the twenty-first century.

THE REFORMATION AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

As Baptists we must recognize that, at least in terms of our theological convictions, we are the heirs of the Protestant Reformation.¹ While Baptists do not recognize any single “founder” of our denomination in the way Lutherans might, we also recognize we are the inheritors of the theological heritage given to us by those who went before us in the Protestant Reformation.

As we consider the Reformation, we should not forget the titanic influence these events had in shaping Western culture and religious experience even up to our current day. In fact, in some sense, our need to reflect carefully on our own theological identity is a product of the Reformation.

This reality is witnessed to by the fact that traditional Catholic historians did not refer to the events of the sixteenth century as the Protestant Reformation but as the Protestant Revolt. In their eyes Luther was doing nothing less than unraveling the fabric of Christendom. To Catholic leaders this revolt represented a decisive statement of individualist theological authority that was in contradiction to the institutional, magisterial authority of the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, Catholics predicted that Luther’s revolt would lead to doctrinal dissolution and theological anarchy. In fact, defenders of the Council of Trent regularly point to the proliferation of “thousands” of Protestant denominations as evidence that their predictions turned out to be true.

Furthermore, as many historians have pointed out, the Reformation also led to the separation of throne and altar. The medieval synthesis of faith and reason, along with the unity of the civil magistrate with the church, could not withstand the effects of the Reformation. Indeed, as Catholic apologists at the time predicted, “Christendom” ultimately unraveled—at least in part—because of the Reformation.

This unraveling of Christendom set the stage for our modern consideration of religious identity in the twenty-first century. In other words, the events of the Reformation ultimately led to a consciousness in the West that someone could identify as something other than Catholic. These effects were not, of course, immediately apparent, particularly

¹ For a helpful summary of Baptist origins, see Michael A. G. Haykin, “The Baptist Identity: A View from the Eighteenth Century,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (1995): 137–52; and Tom J. Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005).

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during the first and second generation of the Reformation when much of Protestantism was still inseparably linked to territories and to the civil magistrate. But even in these first generations, the mere fact that Lutheranism presented a rival vision of Christianity to the Catholic Church was a significant break with the past and its settled identities.

As already noted, in the initial generations of the Reformation, the question of religious identity was primarily limited to the prince. But the conditions which tied the magistrates and territories to either Protestant or Catholic versions of Christianity did not continue for long. As the outworking of the logic of the Reformation went forward, the question of identity became more and more acute.

Looking at these same issues, Peter Berger—now in his tenth decade of life and one of the most influential sociologists of our day—wrote decades ago that the “heretical imperative” of the modern era is the imperative to choose.² In Berger’s analysis, in the premodern era one did not need to choose one’s beliefs. Instead, in the West virtually everyone was born and baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, identity was externally fixed for individuals. In the modern secular world, however, this is no longer the case. Choice is endemic in every area of life—we simply cannot avoid it. As a result Berger concludes that in the modern age we must take responsibility for our identity. It is no longer given; it is self-determined.

Baptists in the modern age recognize that what Berger argues is both true and false in terms of our own experience. In one sense Southern Baptists must affirm that Berger is correct when he says that in the modern world we are all responsible for our own identity. In fact, Baptists, of all Christians, must affirm this point since we are unswervingly committed to a conversionist ecclesiology. In other words, Baptist theological conviction is largely built on the notion that one cannot be born a Baptist.

Yet it is also the case that for much of its history the SBC, situated in the larger context of the Bible Belt, has been defined tribally. We affirmed that no one could be born Southern Baptist, but many of us operated with the pretense that we were in fact born Southern Baptist in at least tribal terms. For instance, I was enrolled in “cradle roll” as an infant—I still have the certificate. In fact, just a few years ago I learned that I had even been enrolled in “pre-cradle roll” while I was yet to be born. In that instance my certificate of enrollment simply read, “Baby Mohler, due October 1959.” If anything indicates the SBC operated with a sense of tribal identity, my own experience at the beginning of life proves the point. I later did indeed believe the gospel at a Vacation Bible School and was baptized, thus truly identifying as a Christian and joining a Southern Baptist church. But

² Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979).

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in a real sense my tribal identity as a Southern Baptist was a reality prior to my conversion and baptism.

The point is that as Baptists we must remember the cultural factors that have made the need for a clear theological identity so pressing. The challenges of late modernity make a clear articulation of our convictions more urgent, not less so. Furthermore, we must also remember that even though we have the necessary doctrinal resources to articulate a clear theological identity, Southern Baptists have often defined ourselves more according to our tribe than according to our convictions—a strange phenomenon given our ecclesiological convictions.

BAPTISTS AND EVANGELICALS: BAPTIST IDENTITY IN THE MODERN ERA

In the aftermath of the secular revolution, fewer and fewer people can relate to the experience I had as a boy growing up in an SBC home. For those without that same heritage, the heretical imperative weighs even more heavily upon them than it did on me. For example, the rise of the “nones” (those with no religious affiliation) as a major demographic in America shows that fewer and fewer are born into the world with any tribal identity at all.

The rise of the “nones” in modern America witnesses to a shift in American religious experience that is vastly different even from what many knew at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, if a choice was then to be made, it was typically a competition between denominations. As evidence of this point, one need look no further than *Baptist Why and Why Not* published by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board at the dawn of the twentieth century.³ The chapters systemically worked through why the reader would want to be a Baptist as opposed to a Methodist, an Episcopalian, a Presbyterian, or a member of any other Christian denomination.

A huge shift, however, occurred in the twentieth century that shattered this type of denominational identification. Historically that shift is represented by the publication of *The Fundamentals*, a series of books published between 1910 and 1915.⁴ The rise of theological liberalism, at least in the American experience, caused the intense denominational competition that characterized most of the nineteenth century to change radically. Theological liberalism was not a problem confined to one denomination but rather a problem that ran through most major denominations. In this era the most significant theological identity marker shifted from one’s denomination to whether one held to traditional orthodoxy or the accommodationist revisionism of the liberal

³ J. M. Frost, *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1900).

⁴ R. A. Torrey, ed., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972).

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theologians. J. Gresham Machen made this point most emphatically in his now famous *Christianity and Liberalism*.⁵ As the title suggests, Machen argued perceptively that Christianity and liberalism are not two different streams of the same religion but two entirely different religions.

Mainline Protestantism during this time was quickly coming to embrace the program of theological liberalism. The agenda of the theological liberals was to adopt accommodationist theological convictions in order to maintain cultural dominance. The liberals at the midpoint of the twentieth century believed they needed to change their theology and accommodate themselves to an increasingly secular culture if they were to maintain their cultural significance or influence. As most readers now understand, this project has been nothing short of a disaster. Mainline Protestants have emptied their churches of people, are largely irrelevant in the culture, and worst of all have completely abandoned the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

On the other end of the spectrum, the “fundamentalists” fractured into various subgroups under the umbrella of theological conservatism. One prominent group to emerge from the fundamentalists in the middle of the twentieth century was the movement known as neoevangelicalism. Leaders like Carl F. H. Henry and Harold Ockenga were dedicated to a vision that separated them from theological accommodationist liberals while also avoiding the separatist, doctrinal reductionism of some streams of fundamentalism. The mode of evangelicalism was engagement, and even as it sought steadfastly to maintain fidelity with the faith once for all delivered to the saints, it also sought to engage the increasingly secularized culture on gospel terms. Furthermore, because neoevangelicals were defining themselves over against both liberalism and fundamentalism, early neoevangelical leaders worked hard at defining their theological identity. This was especially necessary since some of these evangelicals maintained membership and ordination in their own denominational churches.⁶

Yet during this time of great denominational upheaval and the emergence of the neoevangelicals, Southern Baptists found themselves, by and large, at home in Zion—safe in the territory of the Bible Belt. In fact, SBC state papers, books, magazines, and other theological literature during this time hardly even broached the question of the theological identity of Southern Baptists. That all changed in the 1970s, however, when it

⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

⁶ For more on neoevangelicalism, see George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Hall and Strachan, *Essential Evangelicalism: The Enduring Influence of Carl F. H. Henry* (see chap. 3, n. 7); Thornbury, *Recovering Classic Evangelicalism: Applying the Wisdom and Vision of Carl F. H. Henry* (see chap. 3, n. 7).

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became clear two rival visions for the future of the Southern Baptist Convention were emerging among the denomination's leaders.

As in the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the past, Southern Baptists were split between theological liberalism and faithfulness to the denomination's conservative theological heritage. The more liberal faction, like mainline Protestants before them, adopted an accommodationist approach to theology in order to secure more cultural respectability. The influence of this agenda was so pervasive and dominant in the SBC that in the early 1970s the convention adopted an essentially pro-choice resolution and explicitly supported the legalization of abortion laws in this country.

On the other end of the spectrum, the conservatives claimed continuity, not just with the classical Christian tradition but with the theological convictions of the founders of the SBC. Further, for conservatives inerrancy became a definitional issue for epistemological and theological integrity. Conservatives argued that the abandonment of biblical inerrancy necessarily leads to the type of cultural accommodation that would eventually result in the abandonment of the gospel.

In the midst of this controversy, one of the central identity questions that arose was whether Southern Baptists were evangelicals. The conservatives in the denomination concluded that Southern Baptists were evangelicals and always had been. The intellectual and theological resources that came to define the evangelical movement were shared by conservatives in the SBC. Chief among those resources was the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.⁷ Furthermore, conservative Southern Baptists were moving with some speed into staple evangelical institutions such as the Evangelical Theological Society. In the early 1980s, Southern Baptists hardly had any presence in the ETS. Now, however, the ETS is flooded with members of Southern Baptist institutions and churches. Again, the reason for this emergence of Southern Baptists into evangelical institutions is ultimately rooted in that the Conservative Resurgence Southern Baptists recognized that they belonged to a larger theological conversation with evangelicals with whom they shared a basic theological identity. Indeed, conservative Southern Baptists recognized that we not only shared the same vision but also needed to respond with participation and contribute to the leadership of evangelicalism in America.

⁷ The importance of this issue crystallized with the publication of Harold Lindell's *The Battle of the Bible: The Book that Rocked the Evangelical World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978). For my defense of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., "When the Bible Speaks God Speaks: The Classic Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy" in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. J. Merrick, Stephen M. Garrett, and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

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THE COLLAPSE OF CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE RISE OF THE BAPTIST MOMENT

In 1987 Richard John Neuhaus published *The Catholic Moment*.⁸ Neuhaus's argument was that the Catholic Church, especially in the United States, was best poised to meet the cultural contest and its challenges. What was clear to me when I first read this book was that if there was a Catholic moment, it had already passed by the time the book was even published. I would suggest, however, that we now have every reason to believe that we may be entering "the Baptist moment." As cultural Christianity takes its final breaths, Baptists may be ousted from any place of prominent cultural influence, but our theological convictions uniquely situate us to respond to the challenges posed by late modernity. Our commitment to regenerate church membership, the baptism of believers only, and our understanding of the nature of the church gives Baptists a unique voice in the face of disappearing cultural Christianity. I honestly believe that in coming years evangelicals will increasingly look to Southern Baptists due to the ecclesiological crises created by the collapse of cultural Christianity. The coming generation will urgently need the wisdom and biblical conviction of Baptists on these issues.

But Baptists will only be prepared for this challenge if we retain our theological integrity and remain faithful to our doctrinal convictions. To that end I will conclude this chapter by posing ten questions for consideration as we reflect on the future of Southern Baptist Convention and Baptist identity in the twenty-first century.

UNAVOIDABLE QUESTIONS FOR SOUTHERN BAPTISTS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

1. Will Southern Baptists embrace an identity that is more theological than tribal? The older I get the more I recognize the value of the tribal inheritance I received as a young boy. This is why I phrased the question "more theological than tribal" rather than "theological instead of tribal." In fact, I believe it is impossible to survive as a community of conviction without having a certain amount of tribal identity. But, as many young Southern Baptists now realize, tribal identity is not enough. Tribal identity alone will eventually give way to theological accommodation. Our identity must be more theological than tribal, and that requires a change in the logic of the Southern Baptist Convention, certainly a change from the logic employed during the middle and late decades of the twentieth century.

⁸ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987).

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2. Will today's generation summon and maintain the courage to minister Christ in a context of constant conflict and confrontation? In our generation and the generations to follow, there will never be a faithful ministry that does not face constant conflict and confrontation with the larger culture. If we are seeking peace with the culture, we will abandon the gospel. Are we ready for the challenge? Will we demonstrate theological and moral courage in the face of stiffening cultural opposition?

3. Will Southern Baptists find a healthy balance between evangelical identity and Baptist conviction? One of the lessons we can learn from the evangelical movement is that its central weakness was not epistemological. Its central weakness was not its commitment to the core doctrines of the Christian faith. Its central weakness was ecclesiological—an undervaluing of the local church in particular. As Southern Baptists we must be staunchly evangelical, but we must also be unashamedly Baptist. Evangelical is essential, but it is not enough.

4. Will Southern Baptists maintain the intellectual and moral credibility to speak truth as we live truth? As Southern Baptists we must not only define what we believe but affirm those same truths with our lives. Southern Baptists must live before the world the convictions we teach, or we will lose all credibility to teach and preach those convictions. Even as Carl F. H. Henry called a generation for the evangelical demonstration of our faith, the same call must now be issued to Southern Baptists.

5. Will Southern Baptists embrace the deep roots and riches of the historic Christian tradition without apology? Far from being merely of academic interest, our understanding of Baptist origins really does matter. We must remember that while the early Baptists were at pains to demonstrate their differences in matters of ecclesiology from other Protestants, they also went to great lengths to demonstrate that they stood in continuity with confessing, believing Christians throughout the ages. Early Baptists recognized that they had inherited a theological treasure from previous generations that was not distinctively Baptist but was rather, to use Thomas Oden's term, classically Christian.⁹

One of my most important moments at seminary came in the first minutes of my first church history class with Timothy George. He began the class with these words, "My name is Timothy George, and my responsibility is to convince you that there was someone between your grandmother and Jesus and it matters." As Baptists, we need to learn that lesson well. Southern Baptists, particularly SBC pastors, must understand that

⁹ For a helpful introduction to Oden see his memoir, Thomas C. Oden, *A Change of Heart: A Personal and Theological Memoir* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).

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they are in a long line of godly men that goes back, not just to 1845, but to a room in Jerusalem where Jesus sent his disciples into the world.

6. Will Southern Baptists preserve the essential gains of the Conservative Resurgence of the last quarter of the twentieth century? Will we unashamedly and rigorously hold to inerrancy? Baptists must recognize that Scripture and Scripture alone is the norma normans non normata, the norm of norms that cannot be normed. The Bible alone, inerrant and infallible, must remain foundational for our epistemology and always serve as our highest authority—the norm that norms all others.

7. Will Southern Baptists be comprehensively confessional and not merely anecdotally confessional? Baptists must recognize that our confession must be more than a document we turn to in crisis or emergency situations. Our confessional identity should shape our articulation of the faith and regulate our theology, teaching, and preaching. If we do not regain a sense of being comprehensively confessional in all we believe, teach, and preach, then we will ultimately fail to be confessional when it matters most.

8. Will a new generation of Southern Baptists be eagerly and authentically Baptist? This means Baptists must unashamedly and with theological depth articulate, defend, and live out our ecclesiology. Even as we claim continuity with classic Christian tradition, we also must unashamedly hold our dissenting opinions from other traditions in terms of our doctrine of the church and the ordinances. We must be authentically Baptist because we believe our convictions on these matters are authentically biblical and essential to a right understanding of the church.

9. Will Southern Baptists produce a generation of pastor-theologians adequate to the challenge of late modernity? It is not enough that we produce theologians. Of course, we should be grateful for the wonderful theologians and professors faithfully serving our denomination in colleges and seminaries across the world. But the future of the denomination comes down to whether we are producing pastor-theologians—men who can faithfully do the work of theology in local congregations situated in a hostile culture.

10. In the words of Jesus in Luke 18:8, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? Though we do not know the future of the Southern Baptist Convention, we ought to at least ask this question of ourselves. When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith in the Southern Baptist Convention? If so, and we must pray that it will be so, it will require us to regain a clear and robust understanding of theological identity. Our responsibility for our denomination and our churches is to be found faithful to that end.

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May the Lord, indeed, find us faithful. Amen.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mohler, R. A. J. (2019). "Southern Baptists and the Quest for Theological Identity: Unavoidable Questions for the Twenty-First Century." In *The SBC and the 21st Century: Reflection, Renewal & Recommitment* (pp. 69–77). B&H Academic.