



SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

BAPTISTS AND UNITY

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The challenge of ecumenism has confronted Baptists ever since their emergence as a distinct group of free churches who base their theology definitively upon the New Testament. In Acts 15 the Apostles demonstrated the path to local church autonomy, coupled with respectful inter-church cooperation, as they discerned together proper Christian doctrine and practice. The congregational sensitivity of the Apostles during the great Jerusalem church conference and elsewhere (cf. Acts 13:2–3, 15:22; 1 Cor 5:2–5; 2 Cor 2:6, 10; 1 Tim 5:19–20) is the standard to which Baptists have historically aspired. Unfortunately, the practice of the Apostles and the commands of the Lord, upon which those practices were based (e.g. Matt 18:15–20; John 20:19–23), have not held the same authority for all Christians. Roman Catholic and Protestant innovations beyond Scripture have provided the historical wedge that requires the free churches to remain separate.

When the Anabaptists recovered New Testament congregationalism and proper Christian baptism in the sixteenth century, they were brutally slaughtered by Catholics and Protestants alike. When the early English and American Baptists clamored for the direct Lordship of Jesus Christ over personal consciences and His rule over His churches, they were often thrown in prison. Others were whipped; some even received the death penalty. And against such “Christian” coercion, voices like that of Isaac Backus cried out for religious liberty. Backus and other early Baptists were not pursuing libertarian freedom. They only wished the freedom to follow Christ according to the commands He gave to His churches in the New Testament. Backus and the early American Baptists separated from their closest co-religionists, the Congregationalists of Jonathan Edwards, because the latter followed “a way beside *Scripture rule*.”¹

¹Isaac Backus, “Government and Liberty Described,” in *Isaac Backus on Church, State, and Calvinism: Pamphlets, 1754–1789*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 352.

Today, due to the unwavering convictions of these earlier dissenters, many Christians live under political regimes that recognize a legal basis for universal religious liberty. But in this new context, Baptist memories are in danger of waning. This is especially the case for those who have not been taught nor personally embraced the Lord's commands. Unfortunately, the story of Francis J. Beckwith, a prominent evangelical and Baylor University professor who recently converted to Roman Catholicism, is not particularly unusual.² The transition from Free Church membership to Reformed soteriology and ecclesiology, or even further into Roman Catholicism, is an attractive narrative for an increasing number. And as Christians worldwide remember the advance for ecumenism that occurred with the 1910 Edinburgh meetings, questions again arise about whether Baptists should join with fellow evangelicals in common evangelistic and church planting endeavors.

Fortunately, there is a substantial body of material available from the last time Baptists were tempted to follow the siren song of evangelical ecumenism. And in that corpus are collected the thoughts of prominent Southern Baptists who led the denomination to forgo unbiblical entanglements. As part of the centennial celebration of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, this issue assembles the contributions of a number of Southwestern's founders to the Baptist doctrine of unity and cooperation. Each of these articles appeared in the first series of *The Southwestern Journal of Theology* (1917–1924) or its related publication, *The Bulletin of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary*. The seminary during this period was primarily concerned to promote orthodox doctrine, Christian fidelity to Christ and evangelistic zeal; therefore, it perceived in ecumenism, which they termed "Unionism," a singular danger.

These foundational figures in the history of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary spoke with one voice in response to ecumenism. They considered it a threat to biblical Christianity, for instance with Unionism's embrace of the social gospel. What most disturbed them, however, was that ecumenists were willing to trample upon the prerogatives of the Lord Jesus Christ over His churches. At the time, Southern Baptists appeared unduly sectarian to their

²Francis J. Beckwith, *Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009).

northern brethren, who were heavily committed to the ecumenical movement. But, as is well known, the later twentieth century witnessed a precipitous decline among ecumenically oriented northern Baptists while the separatist Southern Baptists demonstrated unparalleled strength. The Southern Baptist rejection of evangelical ecumenism was thereby vindicated as northern evangelicals slipped increasingly into theological Liberalism and numerical decline.

With this historical reality in mind, we here republish for the twenty-first century reader the well-formed responses of the founding fathers of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to calls for evangelical unity and cooperation. First, Lee Rutland Scarborough, the seminary's second president and first holder of the first chair of evangelism, sets his sights upon the problems of ecumenism. As will be seen, Scarborough left no doubt that he wanted to preserve the churches from the poisonous doctrines of ecumenism. On the other hand, Scarborough was no isolationist, for he possessed "an intense spirit of co-operation in denominational work."³ Indeed, it has been surmised correctly that Scarborough's advocacy for an additional article to the New Hampshire Confession resulted in the inclusion of an article entitled "Co-operation," which still graces the *Baptist Faith and Message*.⁴ Scarborough's writings herein are the standard theological basis for explaining the goal and limits of Southern Baptist cooperation.

President Scarborough was not alone, for his faculty stood squarely with him in opposing false organizational union even as they argued for the biblical doctrine of unity. Southwestern's premier systematic theologian was Walter Thomas Conner, who argued that unity must be spiritual, doctrinal and symbolic: "The only kind of union that we can have, in agreement with the principles here enunciated, is the co-operation of free churches for the purpose of extending the kingdom of God." Charles Bray Williams and Harvey Eugene Dana, both highly respected Greek exegetical scholars who launched their ministries through Southwestern, explicated the New Testament ideal of unity and concluded that it must be first and foremost spiritual if it wishes to be biblical.

³Franklin M. Segler, "Scarborough, Lee Rutland," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, ed. Norman Wade Cox, 2 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), 2:1187.

⁴See below, pp. 17–20. Cf. James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 446n141.

James Bruton Gambrell, a Southwestern professor elected for four terms as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, understood the local churches' sentiments well because he possessed the quintessential heart of a Baptist. The effete evangelical may want to bypass reading Gambrell for the Texas firebrand brooked no deviancy from New Testament essentials. He proclaimed that Christ's will alone is the basis for Christian unity. "Are the fundamentals of the Baptist faith worth contending for and living for? . . . [If] Baptist fundamentals are, in fact, fundamentals of the Christian faith; if they are, in essence and form, the truth, as taught by Jesus and His apostles, then they must take a large place in the future of Christianity and must be guarded with ceaseless and zealous care." With the other Southwesterners, Gambrell left no room for disloyalty to Jesus Christ through the downplaying of Baptist identity: converted church membership and immersion were classified with the deity of Christ and personal faith as "the Baptist fundamentals."

After Gambrell, H.E. Dana, a capable academic with a deep love for the churches and his students, expounds upon the insurmountable differences between Baptists on the one side and Roman Catholics and Protestants on the other. The last individual theologian in the lineup is Franz Marshall McConnell, a staff evangelist at Southwestern, whose local church emphasis was so profound that he was entrusted with the leadership of three state conventions in the southwest. McConnell likens the attempt to combine unbiblical church polities with Baptist polity to the mixing of early German imperialism with American democracy. He concludes that if Baptists try to combine with other evangelicals, "you would have an explosion." There were other contributors, such as the president of the Foreign Mission Board, who similarly addressed the challenge of ecumenism in the first series of this journal, but space sadly limits further inclusions.

Concluding this issue are the corporate proclamations of both Texas Baptists and Southern Baptists in 1913 and 1914, taken here from Southwestern's *Bulletin*. These demonstrate that Southwestern Seminary represented the center of Baptist life in a dark day when evangelical ecumenism lurked at the denominational door. The Southern Baptist Convention as a whole expressed its sincere and fervent desire for unity with other evangelical Christians. However,

“the interests of Christian unity cannot be best promoted by a policy of compromise.” Specifically, Southern Baptists affirmed the spiritual responsibility of every person before God apart from priest or sacrament, the necessity of regeneration associated with faith and repentance, the maintenance of believers’ baptism by immersion alone, and congregational polity according to the New Testament. With humility towards other evangelicals, Southern Baptists concluded that until repentance occurs, union should not happen. In the meantime, they were willing to cooperate on moral, social and civic issues, as long as Christ’s will for His churches was not abrogated. Southern Baptists in the twenty-first century would be wise to listen to our forefathers.