

# WHAT IS A BAPTIST?

## NINE MARKS THAT SEPARATE BAPTISTS FROM PRESBYTERIANS

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### INTRODUCTION

Baptists and Presbyterians are both products of the Protestant Reformation. They do not share precisely the same heritage, however, since Presbyterians arose from the Magisterial Reformation and Baptists arose from the Radical Reformation. Baptists arose in a separatist tradition, and suffered horrible persecution at the hands of Calvinist authorities. The primary reason that Baptists migrated to America, and that Roger Williams migrated from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to Rhode Island, was to avoid persecution (primarily from the hands of Calvinist authorities). Baptists who suffered bitter persecution and even laid down their lives at the hands of Presbyterians would be stunned that anyone could even ask the question of whether there is any significant difference between Baptists and Presbyterians.

At the same time, most early Baptists did affirm some key Calvinistic beliefs, particularly in the area of soteriology. Not all Baptists affirmed these beliefs (especially General Baptists and Free Will Baptists), but Particular Baptists and Hard Shell Baptists did affirm many points of a Calvinistic soteriology. So although the Baptist and Presbyterian traditions arose out from separate and independent roots, they became intertwined to some degree through the years. Baptists reflect a diversity of positions with regard to Calvinism.

Throughout its history, the Southern Baptist Convention has swung periodically toward and away from Calvinism. There has been a resurgence of Calvinism among Southern Baptists in the past few decades.<sup>4</sup> “A “Together for the Gospel” conference highlighting Calvinistic Baptist and Presbyterian speakers was hosted in Louisville, KY by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in April 2006, attracting over 3,000 attendees, and

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<sup>4</sup>Keith Hinson, “Southern Baptists: Calvinism Resurging among SBC’s Elites,” *Christianity Today* (October 6, 1997); and Collin Hansen, “Young, Restless, and Reformed: Calvinism Is Making a Comeback – and Shaking Up the Church,” *Christianity Today* (September 22, 2006). The latter article, with a cover page picture of a person wearing a t-shirt with the words, “Jonathan Edwards Is My Homeboy,” has been widely circulated. For what it’s worth, Hansen described me as having “the most provocative comments in the SBC” regarding concerns about Calvinism. Clearly, many have said and are saying far harsher things than would I. In the phone interview, Hansen repeatedly tried to lead me to say negative things about Calvinism in general and a sister SBC seminary in particular, which I refused to do. However, his article portrays me as a naysayer to Calvinism, which does not reflect my position accurately.

producing a “Together for the Gospel” document emphasizing shared beliefs of Baptists and Presbyterians.<sup>5</sup>

There are at least four streams of Calvinism in contemporary SBC life (which, like all such architectonics, are broadly descriptive but imprecise and somewhat overlapping) – Founder’s Movement Calvinists, Together for the Gospel Calvinists, Reformed Relevants, and Irenic Calvinists. *Founder’s Movement Calvinists* tend to look backward nostalgically to Calvinists of prior generations, to make their Calvinism the focal point of their ministries, to be rather assertive and defensive about their Calvinism, and to be less evangelistic than the average Southern Baptist church.<sup>6</sup> They primarily interact with and attend conferences with other Calvinists. *Together for the Gospel Calvinists* tend to be well-trained theologically, and they give careful attention to Calvinism as a doctrinal system. This branch has a number of persons in key positions of convention leadership, especially at the seminaries. *Reformed Relevants*<sup>7</sup> are less doctrinaire than Founder’s Movement Calvinists or Together for the

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<sup>5</sup>The Hansen article references this conference. For more information, see the Together for the Gospel web site at [www.t4g.org](http://www.t4g.org).

<sup>6</sup>In a study comparing the baptisms, worship attendance, and membership patterns of 233 Southern Baptist churches self-identified as Founder’s Fellowship-friendly churches (as listed on the Founder’s Fellowship website), the Founder’s Fellowship churches had considerably fewer baptisms, smaller congregations, and more declining membership than the average Southern Baptist Church. In 2004, not a single one of the 233 self-identified Founder’s Fellowship Southern Baptist Churches had 40 or more baptisms. Their baptism to member ratio was 1:62; it was 1:42 in the rest of the Southern Baptist Convention (the worst baptism ration in SBC history). Nearly a fourth of the Founder’s Fellowship churches had no baptisms at all in 2004, just over 60 percent had fewer than five baptisms, and over 80 percent of the Founder’s Fellowship churches had fewer than 10 baptisms in 2004. The Founder’s Fellowship churches also tended to be smaller than the average Southern Baptist church. Only eleven of the 233 churches had more than 1,000 members in 2004, and only one had regular worship attendance of 1,000 or more. Over 42 percent of the Founder’s Fellowship churches had 100 or fewer members, and over 60 percent had 200 or fewer members; in both categories the Founder’s Fellowship churches were dramatically smaller (by double digit percentages) than the typical Southern Baptist church. The Founder’s Fellowship churches were not only smaller, but also had 10 percent more plateaued or declining churches than the SBC as a whole. For more details, see Steve Lemke, “The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention as Evangelicals,” a paper presented at the Maintaining Baptist Distinctives Conference at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in April 2005, available online at <http://www.nobts.edu/Faculty/ItoR/LemkeSW/Personal/SBCfuture.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>This nomenclature was suggested by Emergent Church leader Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, in “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” *Criswell Theological Review*, n. s., 3, no. 2 (Spring 2006):89-90. Driscoll is following Ed Stetzer’s threefold division of the Emergent Church movement into Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists. According to Driscoll, Relevants are “theologically conservative evangelicals who are not as interested in reshaping theology as much as updating such things

Gospel Calvinists. They tend to be less loyal to the SBC as a denomination, and tend to accommodate some Presbyterian practices such as openly drinking alcoholic beverages. *Irenic Calvinists* are Calvinistic in their doctrine, especially regarding some aspects of Calvinistic soteriology, but they do not share a Calvinistic missiology. They do not make their Calvinism a major issue in their ministries, and they give conscious attention to the effectiveness of means in missions and evangelism.

The resurgence of Calvinism has not been received positively by many within the SBC. Some seasoned and respected SBC leaders such as Adrian Rogers, Danny Akin, Paige Patterson, Bobby Welch, Nelson Price, and Frank Page have voiced concerns about where the current trajectory of Calvinism in the SBC will lead us.<sup>8</sup> John Connell of Georgia presented a motion at the 2006 SBC convention in Greensboro “that the Executive Committee be directed to establish a committee to study the present impact of Calvinism on Southern Baptist life; to assess what the future ramifications are likely to be; and to recommend any necessary course or courses of action.”<sup>9</sup>

Southern Baptists will be deciding in the next couple of decades what we are going to do with the resurgence of Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention. Pendulum swings are very common in human history, and there is always the danger of pendulums swinging too far in the opposite direction. Some questions we have to address are: “How far is the resurgence of Calvinism going to go in the SBC?” “What boundaries should alert us that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction toward a stronger version of Calvinism?” “Will Baptist Calvinists distinguish themselves clearly and definitively from

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as worship styles, preaching styles, and church leadership structures” (89). Their goal is to appeal to younger postmodern-minded persons. According to Driscoll, Reformed Relevants look to John Piper, Tim Keller, and D. A. Carson for theological direction.

<sup>8</sup>Adrian Rogers, “Predestined for Hell? Absolutely Not!” preached at Bellevue Baptist Church on August 23, 2003, available online from Love Worth Finding website at <http://resources.christianity.com/ministries/lwf/main/talkInfo.jhtml?id=16068>; Danny Akin, “The Danger of Loving a Theological System More Than a Savior,” chapel message delivered at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on September 17, 2002, available online at <http://www.sebts.edu/president/resources/viewResource.cfm?ResourceID=63&CategoryID=114>; Paige Patterson, “Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God,” The Gurney Lectures on Evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, delivered March 2-4, 2004, available online at <http://www.nobts.edu/Chapel/Archives/Spring2004.html>, downloadable from the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at <http://baptistcenter.com/audiofiles.html>; Bobby Welch, “Calvinism and Christ’s Great Commission,” in the weekly newsletter of First Baptist Church in Daytona Beach, FL (July 10, 2005); Joni B. Hannigan, “Welch Reflects on Two Years of Leading Southern Baptists,” *Baptist Press*, June 6, 2006; Nelson Price, “Evangelical Calvinism Is an Oxymoron,” *The Christian Index* (November 23, 2006), with more on this subject at [www.nelsonprice.com](http://www.nelsonprice.com); and Frank Page, *Trouble with the Tulip: A Closer Examination of the Five Points of Calvinism* (Canton, GA: Riverstone Group Publishing, 2000).

<sup>9</sup>“Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention (June 13-14, 2006),” items 23 and 145, *2006 SBC Annual* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 2006), 59, 93.

Presbyterians?” “Will some varieties of Calvinism limit or hinder our evangelistic focus?” There would appear to be a strong possibility that the Southern Baptist Convention may become embroiled in what could be called the “battle of Geneva.” Calvinism could be the most explosive and divisive issue facing us in the near future. This issue has already split literally dozens of churches, and it holds the potential to split the entire Convention.

Now, knowing that this issue of Calvinism is a very “hot” and sensitive topic, before I proceed I want to make several things very clear. First of all, Calvinism is a valid expression of the Christian faith and of the Baptist tradition. Its popularity has risen and fallen through history, and today it is a minority view in the Southern Baptist Convention. But it is a valid and important perspective within the Baptist tradition. Second, let me again acknowledge, as I noted earlier, that there is not just one Calvinism, but many Calvinisms. Third, it is simply not the case that Calvinism does not have a long history in Southern Baptist life, as some have suggested.<sup>10</sup> Southern Baptist roots draw directly from the Particular Baptists and Regular Baptists, who were Calvinist in orientation. Fourth, although I’ve not been a cheerleader for the resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC, Calvinism has indeed made valuable contributions to Southern Baptist life. It has probably offered a healthy counterbalance and a useful corrective to the somewhat Arminian tendencies in the revivalism and the church growth movement within the SBC. In particular, it has rightly reminded us we must never fall into the heresy that our actions or methods accomplish salvation. Calvinism has also reminded us that evangelism is not accomplished as the result of a magic formula from some church growth guru. No revival takes place by human means alone; it is God that gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). So I want to be very clear that I am not challenging the validity of Calvinism within the Southern Baptist Convention.

The sections which follow detail some areas that Baptists and Presbyterians share in common, some areas that some Baptists share with Presbyterians, and some areas which Baptists are distinct and separate from Presbyterians.

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<sup>10</sup>Paul E. Robertson and Fisher Humphreys assert that “traditional Baptists are not Calvinists” and that “the first Baptists were not Calvinists.” See Paul E. Robertson and Fisher Humphreys, *God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 2000), 2. These claims seem difficult to justify in light of the significant influence that Calvinists have had on Baptists through the years.

BAPTISTS AND PRESBYTERIANS TOGETHER:  
NINE POINTS OF GENERAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN MOST BAPTISTS AND  
PRESBYTERIANS

Baptists, Presbyterians, and other conservative evangelicals<sup>11</sup> obviously share a significant group of core Christian beliefs (including the five “fundamentals” of biblical inerrancy, the deity and virgin birth of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the return of Christ, as well as basic doctrinal affirmations on the nature of God, the Trinity, salvation through Christ alone, a complementarian view of the family, etc.). The list that follows will highlight nine key doctrinal issues which some have associated primarily with Presbyterian beliefs but in fact Baptists enthusiastically hold as well:

- *Sola Scriptura* – (*BF&M*, Article 1; *Westminster*, Article 1; *T4tG*, Articles 1-2)<sup>12</sup> – Scripture is the ultimate plumb line for all Christian truth claims. The *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms that the Bible is “the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.”<sup>13</sup> The *Together for the Gospel* statement on Scripture correctly correlates the Baptist and Presbyterian affirmations of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> It is no accident that the *Baptist Faith and Message*, the *Westminster Confession*, and the *Together for the Gospel* statement all begin their doctrinal statements with the first article addressing the authority of Scripture as foundational for theology. Not only do conservative Baptists and Presbyterians affirm *Sola Scriptura*, but they also affirm the inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture. The *BF&M* affirms that the Bible is “divinely inspired,” “a perfect treasure of divine instruction,” “totally true and trustworthy,” and the “supreme standard by which all human conduct,

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<sup>11</sup>“Baptists” in this paper is shorthand for the Baptist fellowship of which I am a part, the Southern Baptist Convention. It is not intended to be representative of other Baptist groups such as Free Will Baptists, American Baptists, or Baptist Missionary Association, although there are many points of commonality. “Presbyterians” in this paper is generic shorthand for conservative evangelical Presbyterians, such as PCA Presbyterians.

<sup>12</sup>The *BF&M* references refer to the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* unless otherwise noted. A helpful side-by-side comparison of the 1925, 1963, and 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* statements is available at <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmcomparison.asp>. *T4tG* is an abbreviation for the *Together for the Gospel* statement of “Affirmations and Denials,” which is available in English and German online at <http://www.t4g.org/T4TG-statement.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Art. 1 of *T4tG* affirms “that the sole authority for the Church is the Bible, verbally inspired, inerrant, infallible, and totally sufficient and trustworthy. We deny that the Bible is a mere witness to the divine revelation, or that any portion of Scripture is marked by error or the effects of human sinfulness.”

creeds, and religious opinions be tried.” It has “truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.”<sup>15</sup> The *Together for the Gospel* statement makes very similar affirmations.<sup>16</sup>

- *Soli Deo Gloria: The Primacy of the Glory of God* – (BF&M, Articles 2, 5, 13; *Westminster*, Article 2; *T4tG*, Articles 8, 18) -- The BF&M affirms that we owe God “the highest love, reverence, and obedience,”<sup>17</sup> and God’s electing grace is “the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness.”<sup>18</sup> Christians are under obligation to be good stewards of their time, talents, and material possessions “for the glory of God.”<sup>19</sup> These statements are similar to those in the *Westminster Confession* and the *Together for the Gospel* statement.
- *Sola Gratia and Sola Fide (Salvation by Grace Alone)* -- (BF&M, Articles 3-5; *Westminster*, Articles 7, 10-12; *T4tG*, Articles 8, 12) – The BF&M affirms that election is “the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners.”<sup>20</sup> The *T4tG* statement likewise affirms God’s determination “to save his redeemed people by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to His glory alone.”<sup>21</sup> You don’t have to be a Presbyterian to believe in “the doctrines of grace” -- salvation by grace alone through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-10) is a foundational Baptist belief.
- *Solus Christus: Salvation through the Substitutionary Atonement of Christ Alone* -- (BF&M, Articles 2b, 4; *Westminster*, Article 8; *T4tG*, Articles 7, 10) – The BF&M affirms that Jesus provided for human redemption through His “substitutionary death on the cross”<sup>22</sup> and that “there is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the *Together for the Gospel* statement denies “that the substitutionary character of Christ’s atonement for sin can be compromised without serious injury to the Gospel or denied without repudiating the Gospel.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>BF&M, Art. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Art. 2 of the *Together for the Gospel* statement reads, “We affirm that the authority and sufficiency of Scripture extends to the entire Bible, and therefore that the Bible is our final authority for all doctrine and practice.”

<sup>17</sup>BF&M, Art. 2.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., Art. 5.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., Art. 13.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., Art. 5.

<sup>21</sup>*T4tG*, Art. 8.

<sup>22</sup>BF&M, Art. 2b.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., Art. 4.

<sup>24</sup>*T4tG*, Art. 7.

- *The Sovereignty of God over All His Creation* – (BF&M, Articles 2, 5, 9; *Westminster*, Articles 2-3, 11; *T4tG*, Articles 5, 8) -- The BF&M affirms that God is the “one and only one living and true God,” the “Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the Universe” who is “infinite in holiness and all other perfections.”<sup>25</sup> God “reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history.”<sup>26</sup> Salvation is “the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness.”<sup>27</sup> The Kingdom of God includes God’s “general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King.”<sup>28</sup> Presbyterians and five point Calvinists aren’t the only ones who believe in the sovereignty of God!<sup>29</sup>
- *The Divine Calling, Election, and Predestination of Believers to Salvation* (BF&M, Article 5; *Westminster*, Articles 3, 10; *T4tG*, Article 13) – The BF&M defines election as “the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners.”<sup>30</sup> While more explicit than the *T4tG* statement and less detailed than the *Westminster Confession* on election and predestination, the BF&M clearly affirms divine election and predestination of believers.
- *The Security of the Believer* -- (BF&M article 5; *Westminster* articles 17-18; not addressed specifically in *T4tG*) – The BF&M explicitly affirms the security of the believer: “All true believers persevere to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ . . . will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end.”<sup>31</sup> In language closely reminiscent of the *Westminster Confession*, the BF&M acknowledges that believers may

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<sup>25</sup>BF&M, Art. 2.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., Art. 2a.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., Art. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., Art. 9.

<sup>29</sup>Some Calvinists, however, go to so such extremes in the name of exalting God’s sovereignty that they mistakenly and unbiblically accuse God of causing all things, including sin. R. C. Sproul Jr., for example, says, “Every Bible-believing Christian must conclude at least that God is some sense desired that man would fall into sin . . . . I am not accusing God of sinning; I am suggesting that he created sin.” R. C. Sproul Jr., *Almighty in Authority: Understanding the Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 53-54. Sproul Jr. describes God as “the Culprit” that caused Eve to sin in the garden (51). Sproul Jr.’s argument is that God changed Eve’s inclination to cause her to sin and thus created sin so that His mercy and wrath may be gloriously displayed. His views appear to be at variance with the *Westminster Confession*, which affirmed that God is not “the author of sin” (*Westminster Confession*, Art. 3, par. 1). See also Jas. 1:13-17.

<sup>30</sup>BF&M, Art. 5.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., Art. 5.

“fall into *sin* through *neglect* or *temptation*, whereby they *grieve the Spirit*, impair their *graces and comforts*, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and *temporal judgments on themselves*, yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.”<sup>32</sup> Baptists and Presbyterians clearly are together on the security of the believer.

- *The Perfect Omniscience and Complete Foreknowledge of God* -- (BF&M, Article 2; Westminster, Article 2; T4tG, Article 5) – The BF&M affirms that God is “all knowing” and “His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures.”<sup>33</sup> The BF&M 2000 presumably added some of this language in response to the recent ascent of freewill theism, which denies that God knows all future events. The T4tG statement likewise affirms that “God possesses perfect knowledge of all things, past, present, and future, including all human thoughts, acts, and decisions.”<sup>34</sup>
- *The Imperative of the Proclamation of the Gospel by the Church* -- (BF&M, Article 12; Westminster, Article 15; T4tG, Article 9) – The BF&M avers that it is “the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations.” Missionary efforts are a “spiritual necessity” that is “repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ,” especially “the preaching of the gospel to all nations.”<sup>35</sup> The T4tG statement also affirms that “the church is commissioned to preach and teach the Gospel to all nations,” but denies “that evangelism can be reduced to any program, technique, or marketing approach.”<sup>36</sup>

#### FLOWER POWER: POINTS OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN SOME BAPTISTS AND PRESBYTERIANS

In addition to these doctrines about which there is general agreement, there are some Calvinistic doctrines primarily related to soteriology which a minority of Baptists believes in common with most Presbyterians. Although these beliefs may be topics of intense discussion and debate among Baptists, these beliefs have a long history within the Baptist tradition and at some times and places have been the majoritarian perspective within Baptist life. Although Baptists are currently witnessing a resurgence of Calvinism to some degree, recent research suggests that only about 10 percent of full-time Southern Baptist pastors are

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid. Words in italics are identical to those in the *Westminster Confession*, Art. 17.

<sup>33</sup>BF&M, Art. 2.

<sup>34</sup>T4tG, Art. 5.

<sup>35</sup>BF&M, Art. 12.

<sup>36</sup>T4tG, Art. 9.

“five point Calvinists.”<sup>37</sup> While these Calvinistic beliefs are not currently the majority perspective among Southern Baptists, they are clearly within the broad spectrum of Baptist theology. Some hold to some of these doctrines but not others, and some Baptists hold to all these beliefs. These Calvinistic beliefs include the following.

- *Total Depravity* – Understood in the fully Calvinist sense, “total depravity” means that infants are born with original sin, and are thus “dead” spiritually (Eph. 2:1-3), and utterly incapable of responding to God without God’s election.
- *Unconditional Election* – Many Calvinists understand “unconditional election” to mean that salvation is provided by God without any involvement or free choice on the part of the sinner, counting any human response (even assent) as a work.
- *Limited Atonement* – Double predestination requires that God foreordains some to heaven and some to hell. So when Jesus died on the cross, He died only for the elect, not for all the sins of the world.
- *Irresistible Grace* – Because all of salvation is from God, the Calvinist system requires irresistible grace -- that God would even violate human freewill by forcing persons to believe in Him against their sinful wills, for these human wills are incapable of responding to God affirmatively apart from His enabling grace.
- *Perseverance of the Saints* – All Southern Baptist confessions affirm the security of the believer -- once someone is genuinely saved by God, they are saved for all eternity. Some Augustinians and Calvinists do seem to open the door for perseverance to be by works after justification has come by grace through faith.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>The study of 413 SBC pastors is documented in Libby Lovelace, “10 Percent of SBC Pastors Call Themselves 5-Point Calvinists,” *Baptist Press* (September 18, 2006), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23993>. In conversation with the researchers, they mentioned that the study addressed only full-time pastors. On further reflection, they thought that few of the large number of bivocational pastors in the SBC were five point Calvinists, and therefore they estimated the overall percentage of strongly Calvinistic pastors to be closer to 8 percent.

<sup>38</sup>Ken Keathley has raised concerns about the interpretation of the warning passages in Hebrews made by Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday in *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) in a paper presented at the 2000 Southwest regional Evangelical Theological Society meeting at Criswell College. Schreiner and Caneday propose a “means-of-salvation” view of assurance in which one is saved *by* perseverance. See Ken Keathley, “Does Anyone Really Know If They Are Saved? A Survey of the Current Views on Assurance with a Modest Proposal,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 15, no. 28 (Spring 2002): 37-59; available online at <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/index.html#AUTUMN%202002>. Some Augustinians, Pelagians, and Semi-Pelagians separated election to salvation from election to perseverance. One could be elected to salvation without human agency (since it was provided gratuitously by God), but

It should be noted that Calvinistic Baptists who affirm the five points of the TULIP *still* do not completely affirm a thoroughgoing Calvinist soteriology. To be fully Calvinist or Presbyterian requires belief in a covenantal salvation whereby “not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized”<sup>39</sup> to remove original sin. I know of no Baptists who believe this; so even though it is the doctrine of salvation that Calvinistic Baptists find most attractive about Calvinism, they do not fully affirm Calvinist soteriology.

Most Baptists seem to be about two and a half point Calvinists (as am I);<sup>40</sup> although some Calvinists might dispute the way we count the points. We usually affirm *total depravity*, although often not in the same sense as Dortian Calvinism. Virtually all Baptists would affirm universal human sinfulness (apart from Christ) and the moral and spiritual depravity of all persons over the age of accountability. But while affirming the sinfulness of all mankind, most Baptists usually see some role for human response or “point of addressability,” as suggested in Romans 1 and 2. One can raise two questions about the Calvinist interpretation of Eph. 2:1-3. First, if one takes being “dead in trespasses and sins” literally, i.e., if “dead means dead,” then one can neither accept or reject Christ. Dead people cannot accept, but on the other hand, neither can they reject, either! Second, the language of spiritual deadness is not the only description of lostness used in Ephesians 2. This description should be balanced by the “aliens and strangers” metaphor (Eph. 2:11-22). Aliens are alive; they simply do not have the proper relationship as citizens in the Kingdom. *Unconditional election* is largely affirmed by Baptists, in the sense that all Baptists agree that salvation is by grace through faith, not by works. But while Baptists believe that salvation is wholly from God, they also believe that in the economy of God’s salvation He has chosen for human response to be prerequisite to actualizing salvation. Most Baptists view *limited atonement* as the least scriptural of the five affirmations (John 3:16-18, 1 Tim. 2:4-6; 4:10; 1 John 2:2), and this doctrine is rejected by most Baptists, except in a merely functional sense that Christ’s atonement is sufficient for all, but actualized only by the elect. *Irresistible grace* or effectual calling is also flatly denied by most Baptists, except for the affirmation that salvation is through grace alone. All Southern Baptists, however, affirm *perseverance of the saints*.

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once one became a Christian one regained full moral agency. Therefore, without election to perseverance one could still lose one’s salvation. See Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, Patristic Monograph Series (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1996).

<sup>39</sup>*Westminster Confession*, Art. 28, par. 4.

<sup>40</sup>For an excellent succinct evaluation of the five points of the “TULIP” from a perspective of Scripture and the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, see Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The TULIP of Calvinism in Light of History and the Baptist Faith and Message,” *SBC Life* (April 2006), 9-10, available online at <http://www.sbclife.org/articles/2006/04/sla8.asp>. For an evaluation somewhat more sympathetic to Calvinism, see Daniel Akin, “Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: How Should Southern Baptists Respond to the Issue of Calvinism?” *SBC Life* (April 2006), 8, available online at <http://www.sbclife.org/articles/2006/04/sla8.asp>.

There are a variety of softer forms of Calvinism. Jacob Arminius, whose views are often set in apposition to those of John Calvin, was himself a devout Calvinist.<sup>41</sup> Many Calvinistic Baptists are attracted to the thought of Moise Amyraut (1596-1664 A.D.), a Calvinist who agreed with the Synod of Dort's declarations but sought to soften them by proposing what has come to be known as "hypothetical (or conditional) universalism." In Amyraldian Calvinism, God's desire is the salvation of all persons, and Jesus' atonement is at least hypothetically universally sufficient for the salvation of all persons, but is effectual just for the elect. So Christ's atonement was universal in its extent and intention, but particular in terms of its effect.<sup>42</sup>

Timothy George, himself a Calvinist, has provided a helpful alternative to the "TULIP" acronym of Synod of Dort Calvinism with a "ROSES" acronym of a softer version of Calvinism that is closer to what most Baptists believe.<sup>43</sup> "ROSES" stands for radical depravity, overcoming grace, sovereign election, eternal life, and singular redemption. Each of these phrases moves away from the harder Calvinism represented in the TULIP.

- *Radical Depravity* -- Compared with total depravity, *radical depravity* agrees that every aspect of our being was damaged through the Fall and we can do nothing to save ourselves, but affirms that humans are not totally evil because we retain the image of God despite our fallenness.
- *Overcoming Grace* – Compared with irresistible grace, *overcoming grace* (or effectual calling) affirms that God accomplishes salvation, but differs in that rather than salvation being a

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<sup>41</sup>For a helpful account of Arminius that deserves more attention, see Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Francis & Taylor, 1985). See also Mark A. Ellis, trans. and ed., *The Arminian Confession of 1621*, in the Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene: Pickwick, 2005).

<sup>42</sup>See Andrew T. B. McGowan, "Amyraldianism," in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 12-13. Some versions of Amyraldianism describe themselves as four point Calvinists or Christmas Calvinists (because there is no "eL"). A similar but different proposal is in Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004). Tiessen, himself a Calvinist, concedes to some "difficulties in Calvinism" regarding election, and proposes an alternative view of God's "universal sufficient enabling grace" (241-242), modifying the hypothetical universalism of Amyraut. In Tiessen's neo-Amyraldian "universal sufficient enabling grace," God provides everyone with a universal at-death revelatory experience with a final opportunity to confess Christ (239-258, 487-497). Since in Tiessen's proposal God's enabling grace is not efficacious and therefore not sufficient for salvation, it does not resolve the criticism voiced by Pascal that the problem with the (Jesuit) concept of "*sufficient grace*" was that it was *not sufficient* for salvation.

<sup>43</sup>Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative – Our Response* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2000), 71-83.

mechanical and deterministic process, it allows for even sinful, obstinate humans to respond to God's persistent wooing.

- *Sovereign Election* -- In contrast to the double predestinarianism of unconditional election, God sovereignly elects those whom He foreknows will respond to Him.
- *Eternal Life* -- The phrase "perseverance of the saints" might suggest that although we are saved by grace, we are kept by our good works. The phrase "Once saved, always saved" could suggest that we could claim Christ as Savior without making Him Lord of our lives. George prefers *eternal life* or eternal security to convey the scriptural truth of the assurance of the believer
- *Singular Redemption* -- Finally, unlike limited atonement, *singular redemption* communicates that Jesus' death was sufficient to save everyone but is efficient only for those who repent and believe.

While Calvinistic perspectives have a long history in Baptist life and Southern Baptists have always tolerated five-point Calvinism as a legitimate position within Baptist life, I do not believe that the majority of the Southern Baptist Convention will ever embrace or require five point Calvinism. If most Baptists really are between two and three point Calvinists, there are countervailing forces in the SBC which constitute a limit factor on Calvinism in the convention.

BAPTISTS AND PRESBYTERIANS NOT TOGETHER:  
NINE MARKS WHICH SEPARATE BAPTISTS FROM PRESBYTERIANS

Despite these many shared beliefs, there are some beliefs which one cannot abandon and still be called Baptist in any meaningful sense. Some current Baptists appear to enjoy fellowship with PCA Presbyterians more than with their fellow Southern Baptists, and even recommend that others join certain Presbyterian churches rather than Baptist churches in that area.<sup>44</sup> At some point, one crosses a Rubicon whereby one's beliefs simply align more closely with a Presbyterian confession than within a Baptist confession.

Actually, it is imprecise to say that virtually *any* Baptist is a Calvinist. A distinction can be drawn between a *Calvinist* (that is, someone who embraces all or most of the doctrines of Calvinism) and *Calvinistic* (that is, someone who embraces some doctrines of Calvinism), some Baptists might count as Calvinistic, but not Calvinist. Richard A. Muller, whose Calvinist credentials are indisputable (a *Calvinist* who was a member of the *Calvin*

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<sup>44</sup>Mark Dever created a "9 Marks" organization, so named for the nine marks that he considers most important in a church. His web site <http://churchsearch2.9marks.org/> recommends churches that meet these standards in each state, in many cities recommending non-SBC churches (often Presbyterian churches) over SBC churches in the same city. Dever was nominated but not elected as First Vice President of the Southern Baptist Convention at the 2006 SBC convention in Greensboro.

College faculty writing an article for the *Calvin Theological Journal*), makes fun of evangelicals such as Baptists who think of themselves as Calvinists simply because they believe in the five points of Calvinist soteriology:

I once met a minister who introduced himself to me as a “five-point Calvinist.” I later learned that, in addition to being a self-confessed five-point Calvinist, he was also an anti-paedobaptist who assumed that the church was a voluntary association of adult believers, that the sacraments were not means of grace but were merely “ordinances” of the church, that there was more than one covenant offering salvation in the time between the Fall and the *eschaton*, and that the church could expect a thousand-year reign on earth after Christ’s Second Coming but before the end of the world. He recognized no creeds or confessions of the church as binding in any way. I also found out that he regularly preached on the “five points” in such a way as to indicate the difficulty in finding assurance of salvation: He often taught his congregation that they had to examine their repentance continually in order to determine whether they had exerted themselves enough in renouncing the world and in “accepting” Christ. This view of Christian life was totally in accord with his conception of the church as a visible, voluntary association of “born again” adults who had “a personal relationship with Jesus.”

In retrospect, I recognize that I should not have been terribly surprised at the doctrinal context or at the practical application of the famous five points by this minister – although at the time I was astonished. After all, here was a person, proud to be a five-point Calvinist, whose doctrines would have been repudiated by Calvin. In fact, his doctrines would have gotten him tossed out of Geneva had he arrived there with his brand of “Calvinism” at any time during the late sixteenth or the seventeenth century. Perhaps, more to the point, his beliefs stood outside of the theological limits presented by the great confessions of the Reformed churches – whether the Second Helvetic Confession of the Swiss Reformed church or the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism of the Dutch Reformed churches or the Westminster standards of the Presbyterian churches. He was, in short, an American evangelical.<sup>45</sup>

Muller disdained Particular Baptists such as John Gill (called “hyper-Calvinist” by some for his rather extreme views) because he did not embrace the rest of the Calvinist doctrines.<sup>46</sup> To be a Calvinist requires much more than the five points often associated with the Synod of Dort. For Muller, to be truly a Calvinist requires the affirmation of other beliefs such as the baptism of infants, the identification of sacraments as means of grace, and an amillennial eschatology. When these additional Calvinist doctrines “are stripped away or forgotten,” Muller laments, “the remaining famous five make very little sense.”<sup>47</sup> I must

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<sup>45</sup>Richard A. Muller, “How Many Points?” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28, no. 2 (November 1993):425-426.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 428.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

confess that at times I might have to suppress a sense of *shadenfreude*<sup>48</sup> to see some purportedly Calvinistic Baptists persecuted or cast out of Geneva for their heretical non-Calvinist beliefs!

What does it mean to be distinctively Baptist? In Article 10, entitled “Baptist Loyalty to Distinctive Baptist Doctrines,” of *The Articles of Religious Belief*, a doctrinal confession written and signed by the founding faculty of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (then named Baptist Bible Institute) in 1917 before the first *Baptist Faith and Message* was written in 1925, asserts the need for affirming Baptist beliefs.

We believe that Baptists stand for vital and distinctive truths, to many of which other denominations do not adhere, and that we cannot compromise these truths without disloyalty to the Scriptures and our Lord. We believe that we should co-operate with other denominations insofar as such co-operation does not affect these truths, but no union with them is possible, except on the basis of acceptance in full of the plain teachings of the Word of God.<sup>49</sup>

Baptists have stood strongly for these distinctive Baptist beliefs, from *Baptist Why and Why Not*<sup>50</sup> at the beginning of the twentieth century to Stan Norman’s *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity*<sup>51</sup> at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Two major historical sources provide us with the starting point for understanding the distinction between Baptists and Presbyterians. First, the *Second London Confession* and the *Philadelphia Confession* were produced by the Particular Baptists, the more Calvinistic strain of Baptist heritage. In these confessions, they followed the language of the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession* rather closely, often following it section by section exactly word for word. Therefore, when the *Second London Confession* and the *Philadelphia Confession* change the language of the *Westminster Confession*, it is all the more remarkable. Each of these changes marks a significant departure by even the Calvinistically-oriented Particular Baptists from Calvinist Presbyterian doctrine. These departures from the *Westminster Confession* mark the irreducible minimum differences between Baptists and Presbyterians. The second major

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<sup>48</sup>For my non-Germanic readers, *shadenfreude* is taking a perverse delight in the discomfort of others.

<sup>49</sup>*The Articles of Religious Belief* is available through a Seminary catalog or an online version of the NOBTS catalog at [www.nobts.edu](http://www.nobts.edu).

<sup>50</sup>J. M. Frost, ed., *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1900).

<sup>51</sup>R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001). Norman identifies six overarching Baptist distinctives: authority, church, ordinance, polity, competency, and freedom. See also R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005); and John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005).

source is in the classic Baptist text *Baptist Why and Why Not*, edited by J. M. Frost,<sup>52</sup> which includes a chapter authored by T. S. Dunaway devoted to the topic, “Why Baptist and Not Presbyterian,” and other articles on distinctive Baptist doctrines. The beliefs which move outside the Baptist confession and align more closely with a Presbyterian tradition include the following:

- *Mark 1: Soul Competency/Priesthood of All Believers/Religious Liberty* (not Established Church, Christian Reconstructionism, Theocratic Dominionism, or Theonomy)

Calvin’s original model for Presbyterianism in Geneva was as an established state religion, a theocracy. When Presbyterians and their Congregationalist successors arrived in New England, they imposed the strictest limitations on religious liberty in the New World. After fighting a long rear guard action against religious liberty, the New England states were the last to relinquish Congregationalism as the established church. Even in the last fifty years, conservative Presbyterians such as R. J. Rushdoony have headed a movement known variously as Christian Reconstructionism, Theocratic Dominionism, or Theonomy, which would put the church in charge of civil government.<sup>53</sup> So Presbyterians have not been at the forefront of the fight for religious liberty.

It is an established fact of history that religious liberty is a doctrine most associated with Baptists. From our inception, Baptists have been separatists rather than establishmentarians; advocating religious liberty rather than the establishment of a state church. Many Baptists came to America seeking to avoid the religious persecution they had experienced in Europe, only to find it transported to America as well. Roger Williams, pastor of the first Baptist church in America, was exiled to Rhode Island from the Massachusetts Bay Colony because of his religious convictions. He wrote *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution* (1644) and *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution, Made Yet More Bloody* (1652) to protest the religious persecution in Massachusetts, driven by the established Congregationalist church of which Jonathan Edwards was a key leader. Imprisonment, taxation, whipping, and seizure of property were commonplace vehicles of persecution. John Clarke, who detailed persecution by Calvinist authorities in *Ill News from New England*, was imprisoned with

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<sup>52</sup>T. S. Dunaway, “Why Baptist and Not Presbyterian,” in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, 127-136. Other articles in this volume relevant to the issues at hand are “Why Baptism of Believers and Not Infants,” by R. P. Johnston, 151-162; “Why Immersion and Not Sprinkling or pouring,” by C. A. Stakely, 163-180; “Why Baptism as Symbol and Not a Saving Ordinance,” by J. B. Moody, 181-192; “Why a Converted Church Membership,” by J. O. Rust, 205-224; “Why Local Churches and Not State Church,” by G. B. Eager, 267-278; “Why the Baptist Doctrine,” by F. H. Kerfoot, 351-360; “Why Loyalty to Baptist Doctrine,” by H. F. Sproles, 361-378; “Why the Baptist Sentiment,” by W. E. Hatcher, 379-390; and “Why Become a Baptist,” by David M. Ramsey, 391-408. The volume also includes a popular Baptist doctrinal declaration of faith statement crafted by J. Newton Brown, 409-430; and the well-known “Church Covenant” that was printed and posted in many Baptist churches, 431-432.

<sup>53</sup>The classic presentation of this position is in R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1973).

Obadiah Holmes for the “sin” of ministering in Massachusetts. Holmes was also brutally whipped thirty times with a three-pronged whip. Governor Endicott explained that these Baptist ministers were being imprisoned because they “denied infant baptism” and that they “deserved death.”<sup>54</sup> Isaac Backus, originally a Congregationalist deeply influenced by Jonathan Edwards’ theology, helped restore Calvinistic theology to the Separate Baptists. But he was tireless in writing tracts and petitions for religious liberty in Connecticut. His mother, like many Baptists, was imprisoned for thirteen weeks for refusing to pay the tax for the established Congregationalist church.<sup>55</sup>

The Baptist leader John Leland, after playing a key role in winning religious freedom in Virginia and helping obtain the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, moved back to Massachusetts and experienced even more persecution. He wrote tracts such as *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable; and therefore Religious Opinions not Cognizable by Law: Or, The High-flying Churchman, Stript of His Legal Robe, Appears a Yahoo* (1791), in which he called for religious liberty in Connecticut for not only Baptists but for “Jews, Turks, heathen, papists, or deists.”<sup>56</sup> He even brought a 1,200 pound block of cheese to the White House on January 1, 1802, to lobby President Jefferson for religious liberty.<sup>57</sup> The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Constitution became law in 1791, but the Presbyterian/Congregationalist established churches in the New England states doggedly fought against disestablishment, and Massachusetts did not disestablish the Congregationalist state church until 1833.<sup>58</sup> So while Baptists were at the forefront of the fight for religious liberty, Presbyterian/Congregationalists fought it in a delaying action for four decades after the First Amendment granted freedom of religion.

Baptists saw the need for religious freedom not just from their own experiences, but from their convictions about soul competency (individual responsibility and accountability

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<sup>54</sup>William R. Estep, *Revolution within the Revolution: The First Amendment in Historical Context, 1612-1789* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 86-92.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 97-119.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 157-170. John Leland, *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable; and therefore Religious Opinions not Cognizable by Law: Or, The High-Flying Churchman, Stript of His Legal Robe, Appears a Yahoo*, is available online at <http://classicaliberal.tripod.com/misc/conscience.html>.

<sup>57</sup>Stephen Waldman, “The Framers and the Faithful: How Modern Evangelicals Are Ignoring Their Own History,” *Washington Monthly* (April 2006), available online at <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2006/0604.waldman.html>.

<sup>58</sup>An excellent survey of disestablishment of state churches is provided by Carl Esbeck, “Dissent and Disestablishment: The Church-State Settlement in the Early American Republic,” *Brigham Young University Law Review* (February 6, 2004), 1-69; available online at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3736/is\\_200402/ai\\_n9474018/pg\\_1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3736/is_200402/ai_n9474018/pg_1). Esbeck notes that for John Adams in 1775, disestablishing the state church was about as likely as dislodging the planets from their orbits in the solar system (p. 44).

before God), the priesthood of all believers, believer's baptism, and a gathered church.<sup>59</sup> Only in a setting of religious freedom could individuals be free to actualize these foundational Baptist beliefs.

- *Mark 2: Age of Accountability (not Original Sin as Inherited Guilt)*

The Presbyterian perspective on personal accountability flows from its conviction about original sin. According to the *Westminster Confession*, from the sin of Adam and Eve “the guilt of the sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation,”<sup>60</sup> and “[e]very sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, does in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.”<sup>61</sup> Infant baptism is a logical corollary of the belief that children are guilty of sin since birth: “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.”<sup>62</sup>

Baptists have not typically understood the impact of Adam and Eve's sin in the Presbyterian way. While the Calvinistic *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions repeat much of the *Westminster Confession* language as an attestation to the profound impact of the Fall, the focus appears to be placed on actual sins rather than inherited guilt: through the “original corruption” of Adam we are “inclined to all evil,” and from this proclivity we commit “actual transgressions.”<sup>63</sup> More noticeably, both these Calvinistic Baptist confessions delete the affirmation of the *Westminster Confession* that “Every sin, both original and actual . . . [brings] “guilt upon the sinner.”<sup>64</sup> All standard Baptist confessions of faith point to fallen human nature having a strong disposition or proclivity toward sin. For example, the *BF&M* affirms that Adam's posterity “inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin.”<sup>65</sup> However, Baptist confessions tend not to use the term “original sin” by name, and two Baptist confessions explicitly deny it. John Smyth in his *Short Confession* of 1609 affirmed, “That there is no original sin (lit., no sin of origin or descent), but all sin is actual and voluntary, viz., a word, a deed, or a design against the law of God; and therefore,

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<sup>59</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 17. For more, see G. B. Eager, “Why Local Churches and Not State Church,” in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, 267-278.

<sup>60</sup>*Westminster Confession*, Art. 6, par. 3.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, Art. 6, par.6.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, Art. 28, par. 4.

<sup>63</sup>*Westminster Confession*, *Second London Confession*, and *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 6, par. 4 in each confession.

<sup>64</sup>*Westminster Confession*, Art. 6, par. 6.

<sup>65</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 3.

infants are without sin.”<sup>66</sup> Likewise, the *Short Confession of Faith* of 1610 affirmed that *none* of Adam’s posterity “are guilty, sinful, or born in original sin.”<sup>67</sup> The focus is on guilt from actual chosen sin, not inherited guilt.

The *Westminster*, *Second London*, and *Philadelphia* confessions all allow for the divine election of “infants dying in infancy” and persons “who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”<sup>68</sup> The *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions, however, delete the *Westminster Confession’s* allowance for infants to be baptized, asserting instead that only “those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the *only* proper subjects of this ordinance.”<sup>69</sup>

The age of accountability is a key but often overlooked Baptist doctrine. It is presupposed by the concept of soul competency, and is propaedeutic to other Baptist beliefs such as believer’s baptism and the gathered church. All three *BF&M* statements assert that “as soon as they are capable of moral action” they become “transgressors” and are under condemnation.<sup>70</sup> While it may be more of a “state” of being accountable rather than an “age” of accountability, apart from mentally challenged individuals this state of accountability is normally associated with a “coming of age.” No specific age is given; it is assumed that individual children mature at different paces from each other. By affirming the age of accountability, Baptists deny that children are guilty upon birth, and so deny infant baptism. Only those who are of age for moral accountability are capable of recognizing their own sinfulness, the first step toward salvation in Christ. One cannot be born into the church by physical birth, although a Christian upbringing clearly affords wonderful opportunities for young people to grow up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. However, children are not saved by their parents’ confession. Each person must make his or her own profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; children are not included in some broader involuntary covenant.

Presbyterians such as R. C. Sproul, Jr. reject the notion that children below the age of accountability who die go to heaven. Sproul chided Billy Graham for comforting the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing (which included many victims from a children's day care center) with these words: “Someday there will be a glorious reunion with those who have died and gone to heaven before us, and that includes all those innocent children that are lost. They're not lost from God because any child that young is automatically in heaven and in God's arms.” Sproul insisted that since we are born guilty of original sin, and infants have no opportunity for justification by faith, they have no real hope of salvation. He accused

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<sup>66</sup>John Smyth, *Short Confession of Faith in 20 Articles*, Art. 5.

<sup>67</sup>*A Short Confession of Faith* (1610), Art. 4.

<sup>68</sup>Art. 10, par. 3 in the *Westminster Confession*, *Second London Confession*, and *Philadelphia Confession*.

<sup>69</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 29, par. 2; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 30, par. 2.

<sup>70</sup>*BF&M* 1925, 1963, and 2000, Art. 3.

Graham of advocating “a new gospel – justification by youth alone.”<sup>71</sup> Sproul's article was infamous in that not only did this article result in quickly setting the record for letters to the editor, but in setting this record not a single one of these letters affirmed Sproul's position. Baptists have always believed that since infants are not yet capable of actual sin, they go to heaven.<sup>72</sup>

- *Mark 3: Believer's Baptism/the Gathered Church (not Infant Baptism)*

One of the most obvious changes in the *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions from the *Westminster Confession* regards believer's baptism. According to the *Westminster Confession*, “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.”<sup>73</sup> In clear contradistinction from this statement, the *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions affirm, “Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the *only* proper subjects of this ordinance (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:36, 37, 2:41, 8:12, 18:8).<sup>74</sup> The affirmation of believer's baptism is in all major Baptist confessions, including all three *Baptist Faith and Message statements*.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, the *Westminster Confession* defined the visible church as consisting “of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion,” together with “*their children*.”<sup>76</sup> The *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions defined the church as consisting of “[A]ll persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it . . . and of such ought all

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<sup>71</sup>R. C. Sproul, “Comfort Ye My People—Justification by Youth Alone: When Does Comfort Become Confusion?” *World* (May 6, 1995). also available online at <http://highlandsstudycenter.org/articles/comfortYeMyPeople.php>.

<sup>72</sup>See Daniel L. Akin and R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Why We Believe that Infants Who Die Go to Heaven,” available online at Dr. Akin's website at <http://www.sebts.edu/president/resources/viewFile.cfm?DocumentID=422>.

<sup>73</sup>Believer's baptism was the first distinction between Baptists and Presbyterians that T. S. Dunaway addressed in “Why Baptist and Not Presbyterian,” in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, 127-136. Dunaway cited Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge that “children of one or both believing parents” are proper candidates for baptism (131-132), and the *Book of Church Order* adopted by the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1879 that “the infant seed of believers are through the covenant and by right of birth members of the church” and thus “entitled to baptism” (132). See also R. P. Johnston, “Why Baptism of Believers and Not Infants,” 151-162; and J. O. Rust, “Why a Converted Church Membership,” 205-224, in *Baptist Why and Why Not*.

<sup>74</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 29, par. 2; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 30, par. 2.

<sup>75</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 7.

<sup>76</sup>*Westminster Confession*, Art. 25, par. 2.

particular congregations to be constituted (Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:20-22).<sup>77</sup> Obviously, the Baptist confessions omitted the children of church members from membership until they had made their own profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. The Baptist confessions speak of a “gathered” church. The three editions of the Baptist Faith and Message follow the New Hampshire Confession in describing the church as consisting of “baptized believers.”<sup>78</sup>

It is, after all, because of Baptists’ distinctive practice of baptizing new believers (rather than sprinkling infants) that separated us from other Reformation denominations. And it was this practice that gave us the name “Anabaptists” (baptize again) or, more simply, Baptists. Believer’s baptism is central to our identity as Baptists. The notion of sprinkling of infants to wash away their original sin is repugnant to Baptists throughout our history. This is not a peripheral issue for Baptists. Baptists have literally given their lives for this belief at the hands of Calvinist authorities. The New Testament is utterly bereft of any reference to infant baptism, and thus it is one of the most unbiblical Presbyterian doctrines.

However, some modern-day Baptists understand believer’s baptism to be a secondary or peripheral issue or deny it altogether. Just how important is this issue? Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. has provided a helpful rubric for considering this issue. In “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity,”<sup>79</sup> Mohler calls for a more careful delineation of first-order, second-order, and third-order theological issues, urging Christians to be more unified around the first-order beliefs. His distinction between first-order doctrines and second-order doctrines is that “believing Christians may disagree on the second-order issues.” Mohler clearly appears to be applying the old medieval dictum: “In the essentials, unity; in the non-essentials, diversity; in all things, charity.” Of course, all Christians should affirm oneness in Christ, as Jesus called us to practice (John 17:20-23).

The key issue is, however, which doctrines are essential and which doctrines are non-essential? The first-order beliefs listed by Mohler include such “essential” and “crucial” doctrines as the Trinity, the full humanity and deity of Christ, justification by faith, and the authority of Scripture. Among the issues Mohler lists as secondary is “the meaning and mode of baptism.” While noting that Baptists and Presbyterians “ferently disagree over the most basic understanding of Christian baptism,” Mohler asserts that “Baptists and Presbyterians eagerly recognize each other as believing Christians.”

The doctrine of salvation must obviously be listed among the “essential” beliefs. However, might not Mohler’s proposal be enhanced by adding believer’s baptism (or the age of accountability) as a first order belief, since it is so closely tied to a Baptist understanding

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<sup>77</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 26, par. 2; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 27, par. 2.

<sup>78</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 6.

<sup>79</sup>Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity,” in *Baptist Press* (August 23, 2006), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23842>; and at Dr. Mohler’s web site at [http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary\\_print.php?cdate=2005-07-12](http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2005-07-12)).

of salvation? Clearly, Baptists deny belief in baptismal regeneration – that baptism is required for salvation. Baptism is a symbol of a salvific event that has already taken place. Nonetheless, the point is that for Baptists, persons are not viewed as saved (and thus candidates for baptism) until they have repented of their sins and placed their faith personally and consciously in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. This is impossible for infants. The question at stake is whether Baptists would recognize Presbyterian infants as saved Christians on the basis of their infant baptism. So while the mode of baptism is indeed an important but secondary issue, do any of Mohler’s “essentials” rule out declaring that a Presbyterian infant who has been sprinkled is *saved* (or, for that matter, that the infant was *lost* before the age of accountability)?<sup>80</sup> If Mohler’s “essentials” were applied literally, could not these guidelines imply that we should not recognize as a Christian a fervent, mature Pentecostal Christian who affirms Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord but has a defective view of the Trinity, while we would “eagerly recognize” a sprinkled Presbyterian infant as a Christian? Most Baptists would not recognize the salvation of those sprinkled as infants, and would be very reluctant to relegate the meaning of baptism as only for *believers* to be merely a secondary issue, because what is at stake is the doctrine of salvation. Modern day Baptists should not compromise this soteriological issue and count it as merely a peripheral issue. Baptists in prior generations suffered persecution and even martyrdom from Calvinist and Catholic authorities in defense of their beliefs. Clearly, their convictions were that believer’s baptism was an essential rather than secondary issue.

What about those who would deny believer’s baptism altogether? Suppose that a very bright and popular faculty member employed at an SBC seminary resigned his position in large measure because he came to have Presbyterian convictions and baptized his infant children as a matter of conviction. However, what if in conversation with other faculty members he came to understand that his views were at variance with Baptist beliefs, and he later joined the faculty of a Presbyterian seminary. Would this be a significant issue for someone teaching or pastoring in Southern Baptist life? I believe that is a significant issue. Baptizing those who are not yet the age of accountability and have not affirmed Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is a crucial soteriological issue, not merely a secondary ecclesiological one.

- *Mark 4: Baptism by the Mode of Immersion (not Sprinkling or Pouring)*

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<sup>80</sup>One might suggest that “justification by faith” would be sufficient to deny infant baptism. However, without desiring to be uncharitable to Dr. Mohler, one of the key Baptist and Presbyterian signatories of the *Together for the Gospel* document, in which Article XII affirms, “We affirm that sinners are justified only through faith in Christ, and that justification by faith alone is both essential and central to the Gospel,” and denies “that any teaching that minimizes, denies, or confuses justification by faith alone can be considered true to the Gospel.” Since many Presbyterians (who affirm infant baptism because of their covenant theology) also signed this document, justification by faith is apparently not a clear enough standard to rule out infant baptism. *Clearly, Dr. Mohler is not an advocate of infant baptism.* As he affirms, Baptists and Presbyterians “fervently disagree over the most basic understanding of Christian baptism.” Therefore, it would enhance his proposal to add believer’s baptism (or the age of accountability) to his list of first-order doctrinal essentials.

The *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions differ strikingly from the *Westminster Confession* regarding the mode of baptism. According to the *Westminster Confession*, “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.”<sup>81</sup> In stark contrast to this Presbyterian mode of baptism, the *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions affirm that “immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance (Matt. 3:16; John 3:23).”<sup>82</sup> Baptism by immersion is again affirmed in Article 7 of the *BF&M*.

Like all distinctive Baptist beliefs, believer’s baptism is not merely a tradition, but arises out of a careful reading of God’s Word. The Greek word *baptizo* literally means to immerse in water. Since many early translations of the Bible into English were done by persons from denominations which practice sprinkling, rather than translate the word *baptizo* as “immerse,” they transliterated it into a new anglicized version of the word, “baptize.” However, the main scriptural reason for affirming that baptism should be by immersion is what baptism signifies. According to Rom. 6:1-11, the proper symbol of baptism is not washing away sin, but of death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism looks back to the past as a memorial and reminder of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. As Paul affirms, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death” (Rom. 6:3-4). Regarding the present, baptism symbolizes the death to the old self and the resurrection to the new life in Christ. Paul refers several times to this symbol of our old sinful nature being “crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom 6:6), but “should walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). We should therefore reckon ourselves, Paul says, “to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:11). Baptism also looks forward to the resurrection at the end of time, for “if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection” (Rom. 6:5).

There are some Baptists today, however, who are willing to compromise this distinctive Baptist belief that even the Calvinistic Particular Baptists required. For example, John Piper, Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, (a Baptist General Conference church rather than an SBC church, but Piper is popular among many younger Southern Baptist pastors) presented a paper to the church’s elders in January 2002 called, “Twelve Theses on Baptism and Its Relationship to Church Membership, Church Leadership, and Wider Affiliations and Partnerships of Bethlehem Baptist Church.” In this paper, Piper proposed the following amendment concerning the requirement for baptism for membership in the church:

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<sup>81</sup>*Westminster Confession*, Art. 28, par. 3.

<sup>82</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 29, par. 4; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 30, par. 4. Dunaway cites the findings of the 1894 Presbyterian General Assembly that “Baptism by immersion is not Scriptural as to its mode,” in Dunaway, “Why Baptist and Not Presbyterian,” in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, 131. See also C. A. Stakely, “Why Immersion and Not Sprinkling or Pouring,” in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, 163-180.

Therefore, where the belief in the Biblical validity of infant baptism does not involve baptismal regeneration or the guarantee of saving grace, this belief is not viewed by the elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church as a weighty or central enough departure from Biblical teaching to exclude a person from membership, if he meets all other relevant qualifications and is persuaded from Bible study and a clear conscience that his baptism is valid. In such a case we would not require baptism by immersion as a believer for membership but would teach and pray toward a change of mind that would lead such members eventually to such a baptism.<sup>83</sup>

The doctrinal confession of the Baptist General Conference of which Bethlehem Baptist Church is a part, by the way, affirms: “We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water into the name of the triune God.”<sup>84</sup> Piper’s proposed statement did not find initial agreement among the church’s elders, but Piper continued pushing the issue with the elders in multiple meetings over several years. Piper finally persuaded the elders to approve an amended policy in August 2005. Although expressing preference for baptism by immersion, the amended membership statement (somewhat echoing Mohler’s proposed theological triage) expressed the desire “not to elevate beliefs and practices that are nonessential to the level of prerequisites for church membership.” Thus, according to the proposed amended policy, “Christians who have not been baptized by immersion as believers, but, as they believe, by some other method or before they believed, may under some circumstances be members of this church.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>John Piper, “Twelve Theses on Baptism and Its Relationship to Church Membership, Church Leadership, and Wider Affiliations and Partnerships of Bethlehem Baptist Church,” p. 14 in “Baptism and Church Membership at Bethlehem Baptist Church: Eight Recommendations for Constitutional Revision,” by John Piper, Alex Chediak, and Tom Steller, available online at [http://desiringgod.org/media/pdf/baptism\\_and\\_membership.pdf](http://desiringgod.org/media/pdf/baptism_and_membership.pdf).

<sup>84</sup>“The Ordinances,” Art. 9 of *An Affirmation of Our Faith*, available at the Baptist General Conference web site at <http://www.bgcworld.org/intro/affirm.htm>.

<sup>85</sup>“Eight Recommendations Approved by the Council of Elders, August 2005,” p. 11 in “Baptism and Church Membership at Bethlehem Baptist Church: Eight Recommendations for Constitutional Revision,” by John Piper, Alex Chediak, and Tom Steller, available online at [http://desiringgod.org/media/pdf/baptism\\_and\\_membership.pdf](http://desiringgod.org/media/pdf/baptism_and_membership.pdf). Although not noted anywhere in that document, Piper and the elders later withdrew the proposal in December 2005 when some elders again doubted the wisdom of moving forward in response to a public outcry against the proposal (thanks to Timmy Brister for pointing out this later development). On a different web site, the Bethlehem Baptist Church web site, an undated statement is posted under the heading, “Present Status of the Baptism & Membership Issue.” This statement describes the timing and reasons for withdrawing the proposed amendment, and adds the following statement about future plans for dealing with this issue: “The elders realize that the issue cannot be dropped because the majority of the elders still favor the motion, including almost all the pastoral staff, and because that conviction puts most of the elders and staff in conflict with at least one literal reading of the [Bethlehem](#)

The danger of compromising doctrinal convictions in order to be tolerant or in the interest of ecumenical unity is that the call for one compromise after another never ends. Once one starts down the path of compromising one's own biblical convictions, it is difficult to hold any doctrine uncompromisingly. Should one ever compromise what one believes to be not merely a private opinion, but a scriptural teaching?

- *Mark 5: Baptism and Lord's Supper as Symbolic Ordinances (not as Sacraments)*

While the *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions copy word for word much of the *Westminster Confession* regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper, there is one very obvious change in wording: the Presbyterian confession consistently refers to baptism and the Lord's Supper as "sacraments," while the Baptist confessions describe them as "ordinances" appointed by Christ. Sacraments are, according to the *Westminster Confession*, "holy seals and signs of the covenant of grace," and "in every sacrament there is a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the effects of the one are attributed to the other."<sup>86</sup> The Baptist confessions omit this sacramental language altogether, substituting statements that these ordinances were

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[Affirmation of Faith](#). Our Affirmation of Faith defines the local church as follows: "*We believe in the local church, consisting of a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work, and fellowship. . . .*" Noting that their current affirmation of faith differs from Presbyterian doctrine on this point, the elders state, "In view of these things, we will be praying and thinking and discussing various ways to move forward together as a church." (See "Present Status of the Baptism and Membership Issue," accessible online at <http://www.hopeingod.org/CurrentTopicsBaptismMembership.aspx>, last accessed 10/28/08).

In an interview done a year later and posted on the Desiring God web site, Piper repeats this information but states, "I still think it was a mistake" to withdraw the amendment, and "I would love to see this go forward someday if we could get more of our people on board." (See "Can You Update Us on the Baptism and Church Membership Issue from 2005?" by John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)). So despite temporarily withdrawing the amendment for pragmatic reasons in the face of a negative public response, Piper and the majority of the elders at Bethlehem Baptist Church remain adamant that the church should not require believer's baptism by immersion for church membership, and express the desire to change the existing policy when opposition subsides. Again, this is a doctrinal compromise that our Particular Baptist forbears were not willing to make.

<sup>86</sup>The comparison is between the *Westminster Confession*, Art. 27; with *Second London Confession*, Art. 28, par. 1; and *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 29, par. 1.

“appointed,” “ordained,” or “instituted” by Jesus Christ.<sup>87</sup> The ordinances are seen as symbolic rather than sacramental in character.<sup>88</sup>

- *Mark 6: Congregational Church Polity (not Presbyterian Church Polity)*

The early Baptist confessions consistently describe church governance as congregational. It is to local churches that Jesus has given “all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline.”<sup>89</sup> Bishops/elders should be chosen by “the church itself.”<sup>90</sup> All church members are subject to “the censures and government” of the church “according to the rule of Christ.”<sup>91</sup> Church members taking offense at the actions of other members should not act on their own, but should “wait upon Christ, in the further proceeding of the church.”<sup>92</sup> At every point of authority, then, whether in choosing congregational leaders, practicing church discipline, or resolving problems, it was the church as a whole (not some smaller appointed group) which was authorized to decide the issue according to the mind of Christ. Likewise, the 1963 and 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* statements refer to the local church as “autonomous” but operating “under the Lordship of Jesus Christ” through “democratic processes.”<sup>93</sup>

- *Mark 7: Local Church Autonomy (not a Hierarchical Denomination)*

The *BF&M* describes the church as “an *autonomous* local congregation of baptized believers.”<sup>94</sup> Each Southern Baptist church is independent and autonomous. Local churches voluntarily cooperate with Baptist associations, state conventions, the national SBC, and

<sup>87</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 7.

<sup>88</sup>For more discussion of this issue, see J. B. Moody, “Why Baptism as Symbol and not a Saving Ordinance,” in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, 181-192.

<sup>89</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 26, par. 7; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 27, par. 7.

<sup>90</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 26, par. 9; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 27, par. 9.

<sup>91</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 26, par. 12; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 27, par. 12.

<sup>92</sup>*Second London Confession*, Art. 26, par. 13; *Philadelphia Confession*, Art. 27, par. 13.

<sup>93</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 6. For a biblical defense of congregational church governance, see the perspective of James Leo Garrett in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, with Daniel Akin, James Leo Garrett, Jr., Robert Reymond, James R. White, and Paul F. M. Zaul, ed. by Chad Brand and Stan Norman (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004); James Leo Garrett, Jr., “An Affirmation of Congregational Polity,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2005):38-55; and Paige Patterson’s perspective in *Who Runs the Church? Four Views of Church Government*, with Peter Toon, L. Roy Taylor, Paige Patterson, and Samuel L. Waldron, ed. by Steven Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

<sup>94</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 6.

other entities, but in terms of authority the organizational flowchart of the SBC is a pyramid. All the authority and freedom reside in the autonomous local church. No denominational official, whether associational, state, or national, can impose anything on an autonomous Southern Baptist church, even when that church is practicing things that are outside of the *BF&M*. The associations and conventions may refuse to seat messengers from these churches at annual meetings, or even withdraw fellowship from them, but no Baptist entity can force a local church to change any policy. The associations and conventions draw all of their guidance from messengers appointed by local Baptist churches. But the associations and conventions cannot in turn impose regulations on the local churches. In contrast, Presbyterian churches are guided by presbyteries, synods, and councils<sup>95</sup>. Although these meetings have representatives from local churches, the broader entities can impose rules and regulations on the local churches. That could never happen in Baptist life.

One expression of local church autonomy is its ability under God's leadership to choose its own leadership. Dunaway noted the distinctive that Baptists do not have a requirement for a seminary-educated ministry.<sup>96</sup> This requirement could only be imposed by a "top-down" denominational structure, not "bottom-up" structure like that of Baptists. Local church autonomy is a keynote of Southern Baptist life.

- Mark 8: Two Scriptural Officers -- (Pastor/Bishop/Elder and Deacon) (not Three Officers -- Pastor/Bishop, Elder, and Deacon)

Given our current debates over the role of elders in Baptist life, it is striking to see that the Particular Baptist confessions did not share this confusion. Both the *Second London Confession* and the *Philadelphia Confession* identify two offices in a New Testament church. The first office is known variously as pastor, bishop, or elder, and the second office is of deacon. Clearly, pastors, bishops, and elders are seen as the same office in these Calvinistic Baptist confessions. In one of the rare places that the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* appears to reflect the language of the *Philadelphia Confession*, it identifies the two scriptural offices as "bishops, or elders, and deacons." The subsequent 1963 and 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* statements omit reference to elders altogether, referring to just two scriptural offices, "pastors and deacons."<sup>97</sup> While many churches utilize multiple persons in pastoral staff roles

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<sup>95</sup>The role of synods and councils in Presbyterian life is delineated in the *Westminster Confession*, Art. 31, "Of Synods and Councils." This article was deleted in the *Second London* and *Philadelphia* confessions.

<sup>96</sup>Dunaway, "Why Baptist and Not Presbyterian," in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, 135-136.

<sup>97</sup>*BF&M* Art. 6. For a scriptural defense of pastor-teachers, elders, and pastors being the same office, see Steve Lemke, "The Elder in the Early Church," *Biblical Illustrator* 19 (Fall 1992): 59-62; Gerald Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government*, with foreword by Jerry Vines and appendices by Emir E. Caner and Stephen Prescott (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003); and Gerald Cowan, "An Elder and His Ministry: From a Baptist Perspective," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2005):56-73.

or a plurality of elders, churches that have a third office apart from pastors and deacons have departed from Baptist ecclesiology.

- *Mark 9: Decisional Conversion/Gospel Invitations (not Confirmation)*

One basic fault line between most Baptists and Presbyterians regards the ability of sinful humans to respond to God. The *BF&M* repeatedly affirms human freedom to respond and to make decisions. The “future decisions of His free creatures” are foreknown by God;<sup>98</sup> and God’s election to salvation “is consistent with the free agency of man.”<sup>99</sup> Persons are created by God “in His own image,” originally “innocent of sin” and endowed by God with “freedom of choice.” Even after the Fall, “every person of every race possesses full dignity.”<sup>100</sup> Salvation “is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” (This free offer of salvation would seem to fly in the face of a limited atonement.) In regeneration the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus,” and repentance “is a genuine turning from sin toward God” and faith is “acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Savior.”<sup>101</sup> The picture that emerges from the *BF&M* is that while sinful humans certainly cannot save themselves by any good work, God requires persons to utilize the freedom of choice He created within them to respond to His gracious offer of salvation by grace through faith in Christ.<sup>102</sup> Central to this Baptist perspective is that salvation fundamentally involves a *response* or choice on the part of the convert. Note the role for human response in the words of W. T. Conner, longtime theology professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in expressing the balance between God’s sovereign grace and human agency:

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<sup>98</sup>*BF&M*, Art. 2.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, Art. 5.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, Art. 3.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, Art. 4.

<sup>102</sup>These issues of interpretation about the human and divine role in salvation did not arise originally with Calvin and Arminius, of course, but from Augustine and his successors in conversation with Pelagius and the semi-Pelagians. As Rebecca Harden Weaver ably details in *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, Augustine had argued that salvation comes totally and gratuitously from God, because fallen humans are incapable of responding positively to God in any way. Pelagius and the Semi-Pelagians affirmed that salvation is by grace, but Pelagius (to a greater degree) and the Semi-Pelagians (to a lesser degree) affirmed some role for human agency in salvation. In an excellent survey of the controversy, Rebecca Harden Weaver points to the role that the culture of good works in the monastic system played in discussion. Personally, I found the Augustinians to understate the role of human response in salvation and the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians to understate the role of divine grace in salvation. I suppose you could call me a semi-Augustinian semi-Pelagian, or, as we are better known, a Baptist.

Jesus regarded men as sinful--all men--but He did not believe that men were fixed in their sinful state. He knew the love of God toward men, and He believed in the possibility of winning men to a favorable response to God's grace. . . . Jesus did not believe, then, that man could lift himself out of his sinful state in his own strength, but He did believe that men could respond to God's grace and let God lift them out of their sins. It is true that this response was one that was won from the man by the grace of God offering to save man. Yet it was man's response. And Jesus counted on such a response on the part of sinful men. . . . He welcomed such a response. He eagerly watched for it. He said there was rejoicing over it in the presence of the angels in heaven.<sup>103</sup>

The Second Great Awakening engendered the explosion of Baptists in North America, and although models for offering public invitations go all the way back to Pentecost, the use of the public invitation or altar call became a fixture in Baptist worship services after the Great Awakening. There are scriptural reasons for offering such a public invitation (see discussion below), but doctrinally a decisional public invitation is logically entailed in other Baptist beliefs such as soul competency, believer's baptism, and the gathered church. In particular, it presupposes what might be called a "decisional" or "crisis" view of salvation, as opposed to a more gradual or developmental view of salvation. In "decisional" view of salvation, a sinner presented with the gospel can respond to God's calling in a decisional moment through repentance and faith.

Presbyterians, on the other hand, tend to downplay public invitations and decisional presentations of the gospel. After infants are sprinkled, they later undergo catechetical training and are confirmed. The catechetical training is more cognitive than volitional, and confirmation is more age-driven and developmental than decision-driven.

Some strongly Calvinistic Baptists have become enchanted with the Presbyterian model and would like to inject it into Southern Baptist life. In a discussion that would be astonishing to most Southern Baptists in the pew, a Southern Baptist seminary publication printed a debate between three of its faculty members about whether or not it is unbiblical for churches to have an invitation for the lost to be saved at the end of the worship

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<sup>103</sup>W. T. Conner, "Jesus, The Friend of Sinners," in *The Christ We Need* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1938), 45. Mark Coppenger in his article in *The Founder's Journal* on "The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching" cited this quotation as a mistaken view of human depravity. I believe that most Southern Baptists would resonate with the balance between divine sovereignty and human response in Conner's perspective. But in the Calvinistic understanding of total depravity, humans are incapable of such a response to God's gracious offer of salvation. Although many Southern Baptists say they believe in the "T" of the TULIP (total depravity), in fact their view is closer to the *radical depravity* described by Timothy George. While all Baptists believe that all persons of age are sinners, and that they cannot be saved without the grace of God and the conviction of the Holy Spirit, most Baptists still believe in a role for human choice or response to the gracious offer of God.

service.<sup>104</sup> Jim Elliff argued that “it is my contention that our use of the altar call and the accouterment of a ‘sinner’s prayer’ is a sign of our lack of trust in God.”<sup>105</sup> Elliff claimed that “there is no biblical precedent or command regarding a public altar call,” but it was an invention of Charles Finney, and that “the sad truth is that it [the sinner’s prayer] is not found anywhere but in the back of evangelistic booklets.”<sup>106</sup> Elliff further questions the practice of pastors who would share Scripture verses about assurance of salvation with new believers, or to present them to the church publicly for baptism, because Elliff believes that the majority of these would-be converts are probably not genuinely saved.<sup>107</sup>

As Ken Keathley has demonstrated,<sup>108</sup> Elliff’s suggestions do not stand up to the tests of Scripture and logic. While we should always guard against excesses of revivalism or emotional manipulation which might lead to a mere emotional response that lacks any real commitment, we should be eager to accept even a thief on a cross into the Kingdom. Even C. H. Spurgeon complained that some of his fellow Calvinists seemed “half afraid that perhaps some may overstep the bounds of election and get saved who should not be,” and claimed that “there will be more in heaven than we expect to see there by a long way.”<sup>109</sup>

#### A CALL FOR DOCTRINAL INTEGRITY AND DIVERSITY WITHIN CHRISTIAN UNITY

In the previously mentioned hypothetical case study of a SBC faculty member who resigned his position and subsequently joined the faculty of a Presbyterian seminary after he came to have Presbyterian beliefs and baptized his infant children out of his convictions about original sin, it is notable that he did so in recognition of the fact that his beliefs were fundamentally at variance with historic Baptist beliefs. Is it possible that there are other

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<sup>104</sup>The three articles were printed under the heading of “Walking the Aisle,” in *Heartland* (Summer 1999):1, 4-9, a publication of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The three articles were “Closing with Christ,” by Jim Elliff, which argued that altar calls were unbiblical; “Rescuing the Perishing,” by Ken Keathley, which argued that invitations were biblical and appropriate, and “Kairos and the ‘Altar Call,’” by Mark Coppenger, which allowed for some limited use of altar calls.

<sup>105</sup>Elliff, “Closing with Christ,” 6.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid.

<sup>108</sup>Keathley more than adequately refutes these claims with biblical evidence in “Rescuing the Perishing,” 4-5. See Ken Keathley, “Rescue the Perishing: A Defense of Giving Invitations,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003):4-16, available online from the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at <http://baptistcenter.com/Journal%20Articles/Spr%202003/02%20Rescuing%20the%20Perishing%20-%20Spr%202003.pdf>.

<sup>109</sup>C. H. Spurgeon, *Tabernacle Pulpit*, 17:449, and 12:477, cited in George, *Amazing Grace*, 77.

conservative evangelicals who currently attend Baptist churches or serve in Baptist institutions who actually belong more comfortably within a Presbyterian fellowship? If so, they need to follow the example of the gentleman suggested in this case, who had the integrity and courage of convictions to align himself with a denomination whose confession he could affirm wholeheartedly. He recognized that it would reflect a fundamental lack of integrity to be paid by Baptists to proselytize their young Baptist ministers into Presbyterians. And, as many have said, every pastoral candidate who intends to lead a church to change fundamental Baptist polity or doctrine should have the integrity to tell the church his intentions before coming to the church. Let Baptists be Baptists by conviction, and let Presbyterians be Presbyterians by conviction. May we be unified as witnesses to Christ for the glory of God, and one in the Spirit in our affirmation of Jesus as Lord, but also people of integrity who do not compromise our doctrinal convictions.