

*Who Am I? Who Are You? Who Are Baptists? I Wish I Knew ; or  
A Response to Confessions of a Baptist: Writings on Baptist Distinctives as  
Confessional Theology*

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A commonality of our human existence is that each of us has at some point in our life struggled with the issue of our own identity. We have all asked ourselves the very simple question, “Who am I?” This is a first grade question that requires a post-graduate answer because any adequate attempt to answer the question must address our past, which includes our genetic, cultural, racial, social, and religious background and make-up, and our present state, which includes our current actions, thoughts, and behaviors. Thus the answer to the seemingly simple and basic, three word question “Who am I?” is extremely complex in nature.

The nagging question of identity not only addresses us on an individual basis, but it also confronts the groups and organizations to which we belong. So we collectively ask questions like, “Who are we as humans? Who are we as Americans?” and “Who are we as Baptists?” All of these are clear, understandable questions which defy simple answers, especially the question relating to our identity as Baptists. Baptists historically have produced confessions which provide details of our beliefs, resolutions which define our actions, and theological treatises which attempt to synthesize Baptist beliefs and practices, and in so doing define our Baptist Identity. Yet we still struggle to uncover that one thing that makes us, as Baptists, who we are. Indeed, the facts that we are not a creedal people, we are for the most part ignorant of our historical heritage, and we are extremely diverse in our behavior combine to cause Baptists to experience collectively the same type of identity crises that strike individuals.

Given this harsh reality, Dr. Norman has ambitiously taken up the task of examining how we as Baptists have defined ourselves in the past in order to help us answer the questions regarding our identity as Baptists. Dr. Norman has invested countless hours and much blood, sweat and tears examining every pertinent literary work dealing with the issue of Baptist identity and has sorted through all the issues to find the one thing that makes us Baptist- the purest Baptist essence, the fundamental Baptist principle, the Baptist first cause. Thus we see the importance of Dr. Norman's work, as he has uncovered and distilled the "primary distinctive" which gives us our identity and makes us who we are as Baptists.

Dr. Norman's work has made several noteworthy contributions, not the least of which are its examination of Baptist literature, its formation of a Baptist identity genre, its delineation of two primary Baptist distinctives and accompanying traditions, and its assertions regarding Baptist belief constructing a confessional theology. There is so much within the work that warrants discussion that I have had to determine, with some difficulty, which points to address here in this context and which points to let lie for future discussions. Ultimately, I have determined to restrict my discussion of the work to two general observations: the first being a commendation of one of the paper's conclusions, and the second being a concern related to one of the papers's conclusions.

As I stated previously, Dr. Norman's work has several noteworthy strengths, but I want to discuss one in particular, that being the identification of two distinct traditions within Baptist life. According to Dr. Norman's findings, as diverse as Baptists seem to be, there are ultimately only two types of Baptists. Dr. Norman has labeled these two distinct traditions as the Reformed Tradition and the Enlightenment Tradition. The Reformed Tradition is so named due

to its emphasis on the Scripture, which found its first expression through the *sola scriptura* emphasis of the Reformers. The Enlightenment Tradition is so named because of its emphasis on personal experience. Indeed, these two emphases act as the one principle criterion, “the primary distinctive,” by which each group determines its Baptists distinctives, with the Reformed group emphasizing the Bible and its teaching and the Enlightenment group emphasizing personal experience based upon the biblical doctrines of soul competency and priesthood of the believer.

Dr. Norman has alluded to the fact that these two traditions have constructed two types of Baptist churches which believe and operate in many of the same ways, yet are each built upon a different initial foundation. One type of Baptist starts with his/her own personal religious experience and relationship with Jesus Christ and interprets the Bible and constructs his/her church based upon this primary distinctive. The other type of Baptist begins with the Bible and defines his/her experience based upon the Bible. While Dr. Norman is reluctant to apply these divisions to the current situation within the Southern Baptist Convention, it is my belief that these divisions correspond with the fundamentalist and moderate parties within current Baptist life.

By defining these two groups and narrowing their understanding to one core doctrine, Dr. Norman potentially has provided us with new definitions of our identity as fundamentalists and moderates. These new definitions are significant for two reasons. First, they define the two parties by showing their difference on the most fundamental level. The significance of reducing the difference between the traditions to one principle is multiplied by the fact that the difference lies in the primary distinctive which guides development of all the thought which follows. Thus the very foundations upon which moderates and fundamentalists build their personal theologies

are the very things that are different. Secondly, these definitions provide a new explanation for the conflict which has troubled our denomination over the course of the last few decades. Indeed, as a historian, I can attest to the fact that the exact cause (or causes) of the conflict has been difficult to determine. The struggle has been called everything from a fight for the Bible to a political takeover. The Peace Committee, which studied the controversy for two years, met some fourteen times and interviewed major participants did not reduce the conflict to an ultimate cause. Even the most recent work which has attempted to deal with the issue, Jerry Sutton's *Baptist Reformation*, is undecided as to the ultimate cause of the controversy and thus adopts a shotgun approach wherein every potential influence is discussed in the hope of hitting the true cause.

Discussions of the controversy are always colored by the view of the author, such that moderates argue the controversy is about politics and fundamentalists argue the controversy is about the Bible. Dr. Norman has provided a model for understanding that there are two types of Baptists; one group, the fundamentalists tie their Baptist identity to doctrinal belief which is derived from scripture. Moderates, on the other hand, define Baptist identity in terms of personal experience via the priesthood of the believer. Thus the conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention is rooted in a disagreement over who exactly Baptists are, a disagreement that goes to our very foundations as it questions our identity. Understood in this way, a study of the convention conflict moves from being about what people did to being about who they were and what they believed. History shifts from being an account of events intended to be used as a weapon, to being a constructive discussion which explains the differences between the two parties. I believe we can all agree that this type of work is needed.

As I stated previously, I do have a serious concern regarding Dr. Norman's assertion that the Enlightenment Tradition finds its root and origin in the writings of E. Y. Mullins. I have three questions regarding this particular conclusion. The first is tied to Dr. Norman's methodology. Dr. Norman's work is a literary analysis of a particular group of writings, those he has defined as Baptist distinctive genre. Thus certain material is excluded because it does not meet the standard to be considered a part of the genre. Hence Dr. Norman's view is self-limited. He notes, "After critically examining hundreds of documents, I conclude that all writings that qualify as Baptist distinctive genre contain the following theological traits. These are: the epistemological, the polemical, the ecclesiological, and the volitional components."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, writings which do not address all four of the theological emphases are not considered to be part of the genre. Given these parameters, Dr. Norman has concluded that Mullins developed the Enlightenment tradition. I have to ask if perhaps this conclusion is in part the result of a myopic view which is tied to the limitations imposed by the literary methodology. In other words, the fact that Mullins was the first to express these ideas in a way which is accepted by the methodology does not necessarily mean that he originated the ideas. These ideas may exist in literature which does not fit the specified criteria and thus stands outside of the scope of the Baptist distinctives genre. It may be that Mullins merely gave literary expression and theological foundation for a tradition which had existed at least in part prior to his writing career. Thus Mullins stands in the stream of the Enlightenment tradition, rather than being its fountainhead.

My second concern relates to the nature of Baptists in regard to the acceptance of change. Baptists change reluctantly and slowly. When change is accelerated, controversy

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<sup>1</sup>Stan Norman, Unpublished manuscript, 13-14.

inevitably follows.<sup>2</sup> For Mullins to propose something so radical as shifting the primary distinctive of Baptist identity from an emphasis on the Bible to personal experience, one would expect to see some type of negative reaction if these were completely new ideas Mullins was introducing into Baptist life. This reticence of resistance coupled with the fact that this major change was not noticed by any Baptist scholars prior to Dr. Norman makes it difficult for me to accept that Mullins was introducing completely new ideas. Mullins had to be building upon thoughts that were already an accepted part of Baptist life.

Finally, I believe that certain historical events which predate Mullins reflect the existence of the Reformation and Enlightenment Traditions prior to Mullins' literary career. I would first call your attention to the Down-Grade controversy which was occurring in England as Mullins was receiving his seminary education in America. The controversy itself centered upon Charles Haddon Spurgeon's charge that liberalism had caused a "down-grading" of the gospel within the Particular Baptist Union in England. Spurgeon claimed,

Believers in Christ's atonement are now in declared religious union with those who make light of it; believers in Holy Scripture are in confederacy with those who deny plenary inspiration; those who hold evangelical doctrine are in open alliance with those who call the fall a fable, who deny the personality of the Holy Ghost, who call justification by faith immoral, and hold that there is another probation after death, and a future restitution for the lost. Yes, we have before us a wretched spectacle of professed orthodox Christians publicly avowing their union with those who deny the faith, and scarcely concealing their contempt for those who cannot be guilty of such gross disloyalty to Christ. To be very

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<sup>2</sup>This point can be seen in the Anti-missions movement as Baptists reacted against the new mission agencies, the Fundamentalist movement as Baptists reacted against the new naturalism ideas, and in the firings of Crawford Toy, William Whitsitt, and Ralph Elliot, all of whom introduced new ideas into Baptist life. Discussions of these various controversies can be found in: Walter Shurden, *Not a Silent People: Controversies that have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972).

plain, we are unable to call these things Christian Unions, they begin to look like confederacies in Evil.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, Spurgeon felt these ministers to be teaching outside the scope of accepted Baptist doctrine. Thus he urged the Baptist Union to adopt a creed so as to exclude these liberals from the union. The Union refused to adopt a creed or restrict the freedom of its pastors to hold and teach their views. Spurgeon responded to the Union by arguing that freedom of belief (derived from the priesthood of the believer) provides no foundation upon which to unite Baptists.

Every Union, unless it is a mere fiction, must be based upon certain principles. How can we unite except upon some great common truths? And the doctrine of baptism by immersion is not sufficient for a groundwork. Surely, to be a Baptist is not everything. If I disagree with a man on ninety-nine points, but happen to be with him in baptism, this can never furnish such ground of unity as I have with another with whom I believe ninety-nine points, and only happen to differ upon one ordinance. To form a union with a single scriptural ordinance as its sole distinctive reason for existence has been well likened to erecting a pyramid upon its apex: the whole edifice must sooner or later come down.<sup>4</sup>

Spurgeon ultimately responded to the union's refusal to establish a doctrinal confession by withdrawing his church from the Baptist Union.

I believe that this controversy was in fact a conflict caused by the two traditions outlined by Dr. Norman, with Spurgeon representing the Reformation tradition and the Baptist Union representing the Enlightenment tradition. Spurgeon wanted to exclude from the Baptist Union those who did not hold to his beliefs, which were derived from the Bible. The Union did not want to enforce a particular belief and thereby limit the freedom (which is based upon the priesthood of the believer and soul competency) of its pastors and churches. Spurgeon wanted to

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "A Fragment upon the Down-Grade Controversy," in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon Mc Beth (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 200.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Baptist Union Censure," in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon Mc Beth (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 203.

regulate belief because according to his understanding that is what makes one a Baptist. The Union defended the freedom of the believer, for in their view experience is what makes us Baptist. Thus this English Baptist controversy may show that the two traditions existed in some form prior to Mullins.

A second historical example is found in America within the context of the First Great Awakening, a century prior to the birth of Mullins. Baptists in America, for the most part, did not participate in George Whitefield and Jonathan Edward's revival. However, various groups of Presbyterians and Congregationalists who did participate experienced regenerative, second birth conversion experiences. As these newly converted groups studied the Bible, they became attracted to Baptist views, such that many attempted to join Baptist churches. However, while they shared some similar doctrinal beliefs, the Baptists refused to accept these new converts into their churches. The result was the formation of new Baptist churches composed solely of these revival converts, such that a division between old and new Baptists, known as Regular and Separate Baptists was born.

I believe that within these two divisions, we can again see these two traditions, or at least antecedents to them, interacting with one another. The Separate Baptists, coming out of the revival movement, emphasized personal experience with God. They were much more emotional and charismatic in their worship styles, even to the point of allowing women to preach, yet they clearly considered themselves to be Baptists.<sup>5</sup> However, the Regular Baptists, who centered their churches primarily around the Bible, found the differences in belief and liturgical practices too

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<sup>5</sup>A discussion of the Separate Baptists and their characteristics can be found in the following: H. Leon Mc Beth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 227-32.

great to allow the groups to associate together . I would suggest that the Separate Baptists and their emphasis on personal religious experience, which they absorbed from the revival movement, was reflective of the Enlightenment Tradition. Furthermore, the Regular Baptists, who refused to associate with groups which did not enforce the Bible's teaching regarding women's roles in the church, were within the Reformation Tradition.

I might further discuss the differences between the seventeenth century English Baptists William Kiffin and John Bunyan to illustrate my point, but time does not allow me to delve into the matter within this context, so I will move on. As I consider these three factors, I feel that the evidence to the contrary is too heavy to accept Dr. Norman's contention that Mullins in the fountainhead of the Enlightenment Tradition. I believe it to be more historically correct to say he articulated a tradition which had preceded him. I have no doubt that others will question this same conclusion when Dr. Norman's complete work is released next year.

Dr. Norman's work makes no claim to be a definitive, infallible, or final word on the matter. In fact, Dr. Norman clearly states that he hopes the work will be the beginning of a scholastic discussion. I believe that if it does nothing else, the work most assuredly will evoke a lively debate. Ultimately, whether you agree with all of Dr. Norman's conclusions or not, one thing is certain: his work certainly does engage the reader in deep thought and contemplation, an activity which is the first step in answering the question, "Who Am I?"