

Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America (1997)

Dear Baptist Sisters and Brothers,

We are writing to ask you to consider the following theological proposal. Baptists in North America have long been fragmented, and far too often the fragmentation has been for most unworthy reasons. In the contemporary theological milieu, many Baptist theologians have remained timid about stepping forward to make constructive theological proposals. Even criticism of the status quo popular theology is either excessively muted, or so heavily ideological that it seldom gets to the heart of what the Baptist theological heritage has stood for.

For too long Baptist theology has railed against Catholics, Anglicans, Campbellites, and Methodists, not to mention liberals, fundamentalists, pedobaptists, holy rollers, or whoever are identified as the current "bad guys" in other churches or theological camps. But Baptist theology ought not to be against the church. Baptist theology needs to be for the church and the gospel in a hostile world.

We believe that there are a growing number of Baptists who would like to see a new theological direction. We think you may also be among them. That is why we are asking you to examine the statement Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity. Please read it carefully and give it your consideration. It is not a perfect statement. It is a beginning. We hope that it will begin a framework for dialogue among Baptists of all sorts. We are inviting you to help us place the issues raised in these affirmations before other Baptists. Let us know by mail or email if you would like to be in conversation with a growing number of people who want to pursue the task of re-envisioning Baptist identity.

Hopefully,

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To the people called Baptist in North America who in Jesus Christ have "like living stones" been "built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, may grace and peace be yours in abundance" (1 Pet 2:4-5). From our beginnings, we Baptists have celebrated the freedom graciously given by God in Jesus Christ (Gal 5:1; Jn 8:31-32). Freedom in Christ is a gift, not a given. This freedom does not subsist merely in self-determination. It is not rooted in what the world calls natural rights or social entitlements. It cannot be claimed, possessed, or granted by any human institution, community, or individual. It belongs to God's gift of the new creation in which we share through our faithfulness to Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Rom 5:15).

God's freedom is the pattern for the gift of freedom in Jesus Christ. This freedom which is ours in Christ therefore cannot be understood apart from the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:13; 3:17) who convicts us of sin (Jn 16:8-11), leads us to repentance (Rom 2:4; Acts 5:31), converts us to faith (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12:3), renews us through regeneration (Jn 3:5-6; Tit 3:4-5), sanctifies us to holiness (Rom 15:16; Gal 5:16; 1 Pet 1:2), assures us of salvation (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6; Eph 1:13-14), incorporates us into the church (1 Cor 12:13), guides us in discernment (Jn 14:26, 20:22-23; 1 Cor 2:14-16, 12:10), and readies us for ministry (1 Cor 12:11). Human freedom exists only in relationship with the triune God who lovingly creates, wisely governs, mercifully redeems, and justly judges the world. It is into this relationship of freedom that God calls a people from every tribe and language, nation and race . . . to be a royal house of priests, to serve our God and to rule upon the earth (Rev 5:9-10).

The freedom of God's people is freedom from the domination of sinful and selfish human impulses (Rom 7:24-25; Eph 2:1-10). We are free for serving Christ and one another (Gal 5:1, 13), free to be sisters and brothers of the firstborn Jesus (Rom 8:14-17, 29; Col 1:15, 18; Jn 1:12-13), and free in our participation in the new humanity that God is calling out from among the nations (Eph 2:15; 2 Cor 5:17; James 1:18; Rev 14:4). Because freedom comes to us as gift, it is not something that we possess for ourselves to use for our own ends. It is something we

encounter through the divine community of the triune God and with the Christian fellowship that shares in this holy communion (1 Jn 1:3). Human freedom in the new creation is the image of the Creator's freedom who does not will to be free in solitude but for creation (Gen 1:26-30).

Baptists at the outset faithfully bore witness to this freedom in their common life. For these early Baptists, liberty of conscience was not a libertarian notion. It was a conviction that faith must not, indeed cannot, be coerced by any power or authority. This understanding of freedom is very different from the modern account in which the mere expression of the will is the greatest good. We concede nevertheless that the conception of freedom we oppose became deeply entrenched in the North American Baptist tradition by the mid-eighteenth century. Baptist heritage, however, predates the formation of modern democratic societies in North America. We have, therefore, drawn from earlier sources of the Baptist heritage and from other examples in the believers church (or baptist) tradition that have resisted modern notions of freedom and have practiced a more communal discipleship. We thus seek an understanding of freedom that is true to the biblical witness and the earliest insights of the Baptist heritage.

Two mistaken paths imperil this precious freedom in contemporary Baptist life. Down one path go those who would shackle God's freedom to a narrow biblical interpretation and a coercive hierarchy of authority. Down the other path walk those who would sever freedom from our membership in the body of Christ and the community's legitimate authority, confusing the gift of God with notions of autonomy or libertarian theories. We contend that these two conceptions of freedom, while seemingly different, both define freedom as a property of human nature apart from the freedom of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We reject both of them as false and prefer neither, for false freedom will only lead Baptists to exchange the glory of God for the shame of idols (Rom 1:21-23). Only the freedom of the gospel liberates us from the worship of idols, including the idolatry of the self, so that we might serve the living and true God and await the Son from heaven whom God raised from the dead (1 Thess 1:9-10; Tit 2:11-14; Acts 1:11). We invite Baptists in the fellowship of kindred minds to join us in resisting all destructive ideologies that subvert the gospel. To that end we offer the following affirmations as a description of freedom, faithfulness, and community.

1. We affirm Bible Study in reading communities rather than relying on private interpretation or supposed 'scientific' objectivity. We believe that we are engrafted anew into God's freedom whenever we gather around the open Bible, because it is the truth of God's Word that sets us free (Rom 11:17; Jn 8:31-32). Such freedom is a consequence, not a condition, of reading the Scriptures. God therefore calls us to freedom through the faithful and communal study of the Scriptures (Jn 5:39; Acts 17:11). Because all Christians are graciously gifted everyone has something to bring to the conversation, but because some members are specifically called "to equip the saints" everyone has something to learn from those with equipping gifts (Eph 4:7-16). We thus affirm an open and orderly process whereby faithful communities deliberate together over the Scriptures with sisters and brothers of the faith, excluding no light from any source. When all exercise their gifts and callings, when every voice is heard and weighed, when no one is silenced or privileged, the Spirit leads communities to read wisely and to practice faithfully the

direction of the gospel (1 Cor 14:26-29).

We reject all forms of authoritarian interpretation, whether they come from the ranks of the academy or the clergy. Consequently, we deny that the Bible can be read as Scripture by any so-called scientific or objective interpretive method (e.g., literal-grammatical, historical-critical, etc.) apart from the gospel and the community in which the gospel is proclaimed. Scripture wisely forbids and we reject every form of private interpretation that makes Bible reading a practice which can be carried out according to the dictates of individual conscience (2 Pet 1:20-21). We therefore cannot commend Bible study that is insulated from the community of believers or that guarantees individual readers an unchecked privilege of interpretation. We call others to the freedom of faithful and communal reading of Scripture.

2. We affirm following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship rather than invoking a theory of soul competency. We believe that by following the call to discipleship we discover true freedom (Mt 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; etc.). Just as the pattern of God's freedom became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, we who are his followers partake of the gift of freedom as we offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices, thus exalting Christ in our living and in our dying (Jn 1:14; Rom 12:1; Phil 1:20). God therefore calls us to the freedom of faithful discipleship by participating in the way of Jesus, which begins with our confession of faith (Mt 16:15; Rom 10:9-13) and is lived out under the shadow of the cross which is ours to bear (Lk 9:23). Such discipleship requires a shared life of mutual accountability in the church. Disciples may not remain aloof from the church and its life, its proclamation, its fellowship, its ministry, its suffering, its peace (Lk 4:16; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 12:12-26; Heb 10:25). Only as we stand together under the Lordship of Christ can we discern by the Spirit that from which we are liberated and that to which we are obligated (Mt 18:15-20; Jn 20:22-23). In this life together, God has chosen us to serve as priests, not for our ourselves, but to one another. Through our mutually reciprocal priestly actions, confessions of faith and of fault are heard by the church to the end that together we might proclaim the mighty acts of God's mercy (Isa 61:6; 1 Pet 2:9-10; James 5:16; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

We reject all accounts of following Jesus that construe faith as a private matter between God and the individual or as an activity of competent souls who inherently enjoy unmediated, unassailable, and disembodied experience with God. We further reject all identifications of the priesthood of believers with autonomous individualism that says we may do and believe what we want regardless of the counsel and confession of the church. We finally reject the false teaching that redefines gospel freedom as the pursuit of self-realization apart from the model of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:5-11). We call others to the freedom of faithful and communal discipleship.

3. We affirm a free common life in Christ in gathered, reforming communities rather than withdrawn, self-chosen, or authoritarian ones. We believe that, along with other Christians, the Holy Spirit gathers us from the nations (Isa 56:7; Mk 11:17; Rev 5:9-10) and empowers us to share in the gift of God's freedom so that in our bodies the Lord's mission of reconciling the world might continue (1 Cor 6:19-20; 2 Cor 5:18). We further believe that Baptists have an important contribution to make in God's mission of freedom. The practices of believers baptism and called-out church membership display a distinctive vision of the church as a community of

shared response to God's mission, message, and renewal (Mt 28:19-20; Acts 2:38; 22:16). As we strive to embody this vision, our life together suggests an alternative to the undisciplined practice of baptism. We find it alarming that for many Christians the fact of their baptism into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is of little or no consequence to them. Our call for a believers church, however, is not a condescension to other traditions. It is first a summons to close off nominal Christianity in our own ranks. It is only second a gesture toward other traditions and communities to the end that they might make disciples of those whom they baptize. Insofar as we are faithful in our common witness to a believers church, we embody afresh the church to which God's call to mission is given (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:46-48; Jn 20:21; Acts 1:8).

In humility, we recognize the failures of the believers church to be a faithful witness to its own ecclesial vision, and we look to the church catholic as it appears throughout the world and through history for other examples of faithful communities. Because we affirm that there is much the believers church can and must learn from other Christian traditions, we reject as false all ecclesiologies which claim either that the aggregate of Baptist (or Evangelical) congregations is the whole of God's people (1 Cor 3:16-17; 12:12) or that any one congregation (or association of congregations) exists autonomously without connection to the whole people of God (Jn 17:21; 1 Cor 12:12-26; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 2:4-5). We call others to the freedom of a faithful and communal embodiment of a believers church.

4. We affirm baptism, preaching, and the Lord's table as powerful signs that seal God's faithfulness in Christ and express our response of awed gratitude rather than as mechanical rituals or mere symbols. We do not deny that God may strengthen the faith of believers in new forms and in providential ways. Nevertheless baptism, proclamation, and the Lord's table, which were ordained by the Lord to be observed faithfully until the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25), have sustained and nourished the people of God through the ages as we make our way through this world. In and through these remembering practices, God's grace and Christian obedience converge in a visible sign of the new creation. By repeating these signs we learn to see the world as created and redeemed by God. The Spirit who proceeds from the Father through the Son makes the performance of these practices effectual so as to seal and nourish the faith and freedom of believers.

Baptism is a sign of our fellowship with the crucified and risen Lord. We are buried with Christ in a watery grave (Rom 6:3; Col 2:12), and we are raised by the Spirit to walk in the resurrection life of the new creation (Rom 6:4-5; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 3:27-28; 6:15; Col 3:1). Our rebirth through the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:3, 6; 1:12-13; Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3, 23) is sealed in baptism until the Lord comes to consummate our salvation (Acts 2:38; 10:47-48; 19:5-6; 1 Pet 3:21-22; 1 Cor 12:13; 2 Cor 1:21-22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-14; Rom 8:23). Because we have been claimed in the waters of baptism, we are reminded that our lives are not our own but have been bought with a price (Col 2:20; 3:3; 1 Cor 6:19-20). Thus by baptism we enter into a covenant of mutual accountability and discipleship with the community of the faithful (Mt 18:15-20).

Preaching becomes a sign when those who preach and listen witness the judging and reconciling grace of God's Word (Eph 1:13-14; 1 Cor 14:24-25; Tit 3:9; Heb 4:12). Gospel proclamation is

more than the utterance of human words. Preaching is the Word of God only when by the power of the Holy Spirit it becomes God's own speech that brings the new creation within sight. Whether it is in hot gospel preaching, elegantly intoned sermons, or plain and simple messages, God graciously declares the liberating Word which seals salvation through our proclamation of the gospel (Acts 10:44; Rom 10:13-17; 1 Pet 1:23). Gospel proclamation may be performed by all who are gifted by the Spirit and called by the church (Acts 11:19-21; 1 Pet 4:10-11).

The bread is a sign of Christ's body, and the cup is a sign of the new covenant in his blood (Lk 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26). As we remember Jesus in communion through the bread of fellowship and the cup of life (1 Cor 11:24-25), the Lord himself is with us (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24, 27-29) declaring that we who are many are one body (1 Cor 10:17; Eph 4:4-6). In the Lord's Supper the Spirit thus signifies and seals the covenant that makes us one with Christ and one in Christ with one another. Yet we must continually strive to learn in the company of our sisters and brothers what it means to be a people that are reconciled and reconciling, forgiven and forgiving (1 Cor 11:17-22; 2 Cor 5:17-21). Thus each time we remember Jesus in communion we renew our pledge of faith and are renewed by the grace of God as we envision the coming fullness of the new creation (Mt 14:25; 26:29; Lk 14:15; 22:18, 30; Rev 19:9).

Baptist reflections on "the sacraments" have for too long been fixed on late medieval and early modern theories. As modernity draws to a close, it is a fitting time to revisit afresh these practices and their significance for the people of God. We reject all accounts of these practices that would limit the presence of the risen Lord to the performance of the enacted signs as we also reject all accounts that deny the reality of his presence in their enactment. The Lord is present and active both in the performance of these remembering signs and with the community that performs them. Yet the greater threat in the believers church is not from false understandings but from neglect of practice. Baptism has been superseded by the evangelical invitation. Preaching is being displaced by other media. The Supper is so infrequently observed that Christians starve for lack of nourishment. We reject all attempts to make the church and its practices incidental to our relationship with Christ and one another. We call others to the freedom of the faithful communal enactment of the Lord's remembering signs.

5. We affirm freedom and renounce coercion as a distinct people under God rather than relying on political theories, powers, or authorities. We believe that when God's people live together as a colony of heaven (Phil 1:27; 3:20; Col 3:1-4; Heb 11:8-10), the gift of God's freedom will keep them from the reach of all worldly rulers, powers, and authorities. We therefore affirm the historic free church conviction that the church is to be disestablished from the control of the state (Mt 22:15-22; 1 Pet 2:11-17) and from the use of coercive power to enforce and extend the gospel (Mt 5:21-26, 38-48; 26:52; Lk 9:51-56; Rom 12:14-21). We further believe that in order for our free church witness to be faithful we must do more than seek institutional independence of civil authorities. We must also continue to press for the independence of the church from the idols of nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, economic systems, gender domination, or any other power that resists the Lordship of Jesus Christ (Gal 3:27-28; Acts 10:34), who disarmed and triumphed over the rebellious powers in the cross (Col 2:15). We cannot merely accept the

disestablishment of the church through the cultural forces of secularity, the political measures of government, or the judicial interpretations of courts. The disestablishment of the church is constitutive of its identity as God's called-out community which foreshadows the coming reign of God as does no other community. Nor can we accept terms of agreement with nation-states which sequester the authority of faith to a private, internal, individual, and narrow sphere. The gospel we proclaim is a public message for all people. It speaks to the external lives of believers. It calls out a distinctive community seeking to embody the reign of God. It makes all-encompassing claims about the world. We affirm the disestablishment of the church as the faithful form of the church's social existence.

The disestablishment of the church is not just a curious fragment of Baptist folklore, but if the designation "free church" is to be more than an empty phrase it must refer to a distinctive way of living in and engaging the world. We believe that in the pluralistic society of North America, only a church that is politically and culturally independent can convince its own and others of gospel truth (Rom 1:16). The community of people that is to be a "city built on a hill" (Mt 5:14) is not any worldly power or authority. This exemplary community is the free and faithful church of Jesus Christ. Gospel freedom misunderstood and misused turns the church into a tool of the powers and authorities (Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:10, 15; Tit 3:1). The skills we learn in the baptized and remembering community help us to resist these powers that otherwise would determine our lives. Only such a distinct people can make known to the powers and authorities of the present age the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things (Eph 3:10). In a free and faithful church, the community of the baptized together with the whole of creation can know that there is a God who is the beginning and end of all things and especially of our freedom (Rev 1:8).

We reject any attempt to establish a vision of the church, whether Baptist or any other, by means of civil or political power. We thus reject all such constantinian strategies. Although we attempt to live at peace with all people (Rom 2:10; 14:19; 2 Tim 2:22; Heb 12:14) and to seek the peace of the earthly city (Jer 29:7), we do so with our eyes on the peace of the other city (1 Cor 7:15; Heb 11:10; Rev 21:1-2), whose citizenship we share (Eph 2:19-22), whose politics we practice (Phil 1:27; 3:20; 1 Pet 2:11-12), and whose Lord alone is our peace (Eph 2:14-15; Col 1:21-22; Heb 7:2, 15-17; Rev 1:4). Thus we heed the call to be salt and light, engaging the world and challenging the powers with the peace and freedom of the gospel (Mt 5:13-14). We therefore reject any and all efforts to allow secular political versions of church-state separation to define the boundaries or the nature of our witness as the free and faithful people of God. We call others to the freedom of faithful and communal witness in society.

Among Baptists today this witness is in danger of falling to ideologies of the right and of the left that are foreign to the content and direction of the gospel. To many observers the crisis may appear to be merely a manifestation of the culture wars that pit conservatives against liberals, people of color against 'white America', women against men, interest group against interest group. What these agendas call freedom is what the gospel calls bondage to the false gods of nationalism, classism, or narcissism. The tragedy for Christians is that the culture wars have overwhelmed and co-opted the agenda of the church. The struggle for the soul of Baptists in

North America is a struggle against all these false gods. It is, therefore, not a struggle between one such god and another. Yet some Baptists believe that it is. We disagree.

Ideologies and theologies of the right and the left, as different as they may appear, are really siblings under the skin by virtue of their accommodation to modernity and its Enlightenment assumptions. Some Baptists (in the tradition of E. Y. Mullins' Axioms of Religion or D. C. Macintosh's Personal Religion) embraced modernity by defining freedom in terms of the Enlightenment notions of autonomous moral agency and objective rationality. Others (in the tradition of the Princeton Theology and The Fundamentals) have reacted against modernity, but ironically they perpetuated the same modern assumptions through the individualism of revivalistic religious experience and through the self-evidence of truth available by means of common sense reason. It is not a question of whether these adversaries have adopted modernity. Both drank deeply from the same waters even if they have done so at different wells. We believe that this accommodation to the individualism and rationalism of modernity weakens the church by transforming the living and embodied Christian faith into an abstract and mythic gnosis (1 Tim 1:3-7).

Since the patterns of certitude, privilege, and power that modernity engendered are passing away (1 Cor 7:31), it is time to admit that all theologies tied to the foundational assumptions of the Enlightenment will share the same fate. We thus urge our fellow Baptists to say farewell to modernity and its theological offspring because there is no other foundation for our faith than Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). We further believe that the real struggle facing Baptist Christians today is for the embodiment of free, faithful, and communal discipleship that adheres to the gospel rather than submitting to intellectual and social agendas that have no stake in the gospel (Rom 1:16; Gal 1:6).

We embrace neither modern alternative. We call instead for a reclaiming of the Baptist heritage as we re-envision the study of Scripture, the life of discipleship, the embodiment of a faithful church, the enactment of remembering signs, and the disestablishment of the church from worldly powers. We believe these affirmations to be true to the gospel and to the best of our heritage as Baptists. We are convinced that by proclaiming this vision of freedom, faithfulness, and community the church can be renewed through the Holy Spirit. We invite those who disagree with us or have questions to engage us in conversation. Through such interaction we gain a clearer understanding of these issues which are essential for the flourishing of the church of Jesus Christ. We call upon all those who can join us in this declaration to do so, and more importantly to display it in the worship, work, and witness of the free and faithful people of God.