

## **Habits of the Baptist Heart(s): “Peoplehood,” Pluralism, and the Common Good**

Andrew Black  
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### **Introduction**

In January 2008, a major gathering of North American Baptists will take place, sponsored by diverse Baptist groups representing over 20 million believers. Plans for this event were announced last year after a variety of Baptist leaders signed a statement affirming their intention to “speak and work together to create an authentic and genuine prophetic Baptist voice in these complex times.”<sup>1</sup> The upcoming convocation, titled the “New Baptist Covenant,” will include members of historically African-American Baptist denominations, smaller, regionally concentrated Baptist groups, the American Baptist Churches, USA, and a variety of entities perhaps best described as exiles from the Southern Baptist Convention (the SBC’s refusal to participate in the formal discussion has been well publicized). Many of these organizations share a common heritage in early U.S. Baptist associational life, which was sundered by the infamous 1845 split over slaveholding missionaries that gave rise to the SBC.

This unique gathering can be fairly described as a public relations effort. Thus, it is no accident that two Baptists with extraordinary name recognition -- former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton -- were front and center in the press photos at the most recent announcement of the upcoming event.<sup>2</sup> Organizers of the convocation appear to be motivated in large part by a sense that the rest of the world has a distorted understanding of what an “authentic and genuine” Baptist voice sounds like. While conference planners have recently announced that prominent Republican politicians would also

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<sup>1</sup> “A North American Baptist Covenant,” April 10, 2006. Accessed online at <http://www.thefellowship.info/documents/NABC.pdf> (22 May 2007). A subsequent meeting was held in January 2007, with even broader participation. The core group that gathered for this covenant meeting represented organizations that belong to the North American Baptist Fellowship (NABF), a regional affiliate of the Baptist World Alliance.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that President Carter is not a mere figurehead. He has played an instrumental role in bringing about this gathering, and has made efforts to bring reconciliation among Baptists in the past.

attend this intra-Baptist convocation, it is clear that one thrust of the gathering is to counter any perception that Baptist participation in public life is uniformly conservative.

The Covenant's stated goals reach beyond challenging negative stereotypes. Together, they express a desire for a unified Baptist affirmation of "traditional Baptist values," including "sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for public and private morality." More specifically, the Covenant includes a shared commitment to Baptists' obligations -- *as Christians* -- to "promote peace with justice, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and the marginalized, welcome the strangers among us, and promote religious liberty and respect for religious diversity."<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I highlight some critical theological questions raised by this attempt to articulate an "authentic and genuine prophetic Baptist voice" for the sake of Baptist self-understanding, unity, and mission in the world. Due to our diversity and notorious fractiousness, one speaks in general terms about Baptists with great trepidation, or at least with the mixture of fear and arrogance recommended to a young pitcher in the movie *Bull Durham*.<sup>4</sup> For some, this fact is a sign of vitality and should be celebrated as the inevitable outworking of Baptists' historic commitment to "freedom in Christ."

However, the New Baptist Covenant's agenda also reflects a desire to demonstrate that Baptists are not hopelessly divided and content to remain that way. The gathering will dedicate a plenary session to the theme of "Unity in Respecting Diversity" -- an ironic and enigmatic phrase that begs a number of complex questions. My basic claim is that any attempt to establish a common Baptist identity for the sake of prophetic public witness will require a discussion about the normative vision that unites Baptists across institutional, political, socio-economic, racial, and other differences. In other words, to borrow language from the twentieth-century ecumenical movement (from which Baptists have, by and large,

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<sup>3</sup> The theme of the gathering is "Unity in Christ," with plenary sessions roughly organized around the tasks outlined in Jesus' Nazareth Sermon (Luke 4:18-19): Unity in Seeking Peace with Justice; Unity in Bringing Good News to the Poor; Unity in Respecting Diversity; Unity in Welcoming the Stranger; Unity in Setting the Captives Free. (Other special-interest sections will focus on racism, religious liberty, poverty, the AIDS pandemic, faith in public policy, stewardship of the earth, evangelism, financial stewardship, and prophetic preaching.)

<sup>4</sup> This is the advice given by my professor, Dr. William Portier, to all would-be theologians.

been absent as a matter of principle), the extremely difficult, yet indispensable, question Baptists must ask is, what is “the nature of the unity we seek”?<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I argue that Baptists should attend to the notion of the “common good” in order to give a theologically adequate answer to this question. This requires moving beyond definitions of Baptist identity that rely on merely negative definitions of freedom (i.e., “freedom from”) in order to make clear how Baptists seek to embody substantive Christian convictions in their life together. While many Baptists might perceive the common good to be a characteristically “Catholic” (and therefore “un-Baptist”) concept, Baptists’ historic concerns about coercive forms of community do not invalidate the common good as an important way to discuss the ministry of reconciliation (II Cor. 5:18) that has been given to Baptists *as Christians* and members of the one body of Christ. The task for Baptists is to find ways of respecting diversity that do not reify but, rather, work to reconcile differences.

In short, the concrete challenge of speaking about the ties that bind Baptists highlights the obstacles Baptists face in speaking a prophetic word of redemptive unity to a world torn by divisions and wracked by violence. At the same time, the hard work of seeking theologically substantive, socially meaningful unity across traditional prejudices is itself the greatest witness Baptists can provide that a genuinely common good is possible. This first section clarifies the nature of the theological blind spot that makes Baptist discussion of the common good a particularly urgent topic. The paradoxical effects of Baptists’ stress on “freedom” are most clearly seen in the history of Baptists and race in the United States.

### **Separate but Free**

In their study of the relationship between American evangelical Christianity and the state of race relations in the United States, sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith make this important assertion:

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<sup>5</sup> *The Nature of the Unity We Seek*, Official Report of the North American Conference on Faith and Order, September 3-10, 1957, Oberlin, Ohio, ed. Paul S. Minear (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1958).

Over the centuries, religion was . . . at times used by white and black Christians to call for America to realize its ideals. Those ideals include equality and freedom. Freedom has come to be freedom from — freedom from oppression, freedom from discrimination, and freedom from each other. In sum, through the long, arduous struggle, where religion aided racial change, it has been unidirectional: like America itself, it has occasionally helped to free people, but has been unable to bring them together or overcome racialization.<sup>6</sup>

Baptists in the United States have played a prominent role in the story sketched here, and are perhaps the prototypical example of these forces at work in a particular religious tradition. Before discussing this claim, I want to clarify more precisely Emerson and Smith’s argument.

For Emerson and Smith, a “racialized” society is one in which “race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities and social relationships.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, race continues to correlate significantly with levels of income, wealth, and education in American society; it tends to play a decisive role in determining social affiliations such as church attendance and marriage partners. In these terms, the United States remains profoundly racialized, with a variety of cultural, economic, and political goods distributed disproportionately along the socially constructed lines of “race.” (To be clear, Emerson and Smith’s focus is on the state of black-white relations, as shaped by this nation’s particular racial history. This legacy is particularly important for Baptists since the majority of African-American Christians identify themselves as Baptists.)

By employing the more precise term “racialized” instead of the more highly charged label “racist” to describe American society, Emerson and Smith are not attempting to soften the harshness of their assessment. Rather, their point is to emphasize that the problem is much more systemic and “normal” than a matter of a critical mass of Americans expressing racist attitudes in their speech and actions. In fact, as the quote above shows, they claim that individuals who explicitly reject racial prejudice and embrace colorblind principles of equality and freedom can actually reinforce the disparities and separateness of our racialized society.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 48.

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

Emerson and Smith describe their study as “a story of how well-intentioned people, their values, and their institutions actually recreate racial divisions and inequalities they ostensibly oppose.”<sup>8</sup> They conclude that the conceptual resources white American evangelicals characteristically employ for understanding and responding to the world enable the structural and systemic dimensions of racial realities to remain invisible and ultimately untouched, despite concerted and warm-hearted efforts by many to eliminate racist attitudes and promote interracial harmony. The primary elements of the white evangelical “cultural tool kit” are, according to the authors, “accountable freewill individualism,” “relationalism” (giving interpersonal relationships primary emphasis), and “antistructuralism” (the “inability to perceive or unwillingness to accept social structural influences”).<sup>9</sup> As their research shows, evangelicals who work from these assumptions propose solutions to racial issues that are extremely limited in scope (e.g., strive to be personally colorblind and seek forgiveness for past wrongs, make friends with someone from another race, eliminate overt legal discrimination to ensure equal opportunity, etc.). Moreover, while some of these proposed remedies may be costly on a personal (or, more precisely, interior) level, they rarely require financial or social sacrifice or imply the need for significant changes to the (racialized) ecclesial, economic, and cultural status quo.<sup>10</sup>

Although the relationship between Baptists and the notoriously hard to define trans-denominational phenomenon of “evangelicalism” has been the subject of much debate,<sup>11</sup> few would deny that at least white Baptists in America have historically engaged the world using a similar “cultural tool kit.” At any rate, that Emerson and Smith’s claims about the tendency of dominant forms of American religion to reinforce racialization hold true for Baptists in the United States is easy to demonstrate. Recent Baptist history corroborates their claim that a religious stress on “equality,”

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 76. The authors adopt the notion of cultural “tool kits” from sociologist Ann Swidler.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>11</sup> James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), David S. Dockery, ed., *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993).

“freedom,” and “autonomy” (with emphasis on the latter two) has served as a double-edged sword tragically bringing liberation and alienation simultaneously.

The story of Baptists and race in America is tremendously complex, as it reflects the kinds of paradoxes identified by Emerson and Smith. Africans brought to these shores as slaves were able to sustain a deep and powerful spirituality and forge a sense of peoplehood through their adoption of largely “baptist” forms of Christianity that enabled the creation of an institution – the church – that was, in a meaningful sense, theirs. But the Baptist ecclesial autonomy that made this realm of freedom as God’s gathered people possible also served to reinforce the lack of meaningful bonds between African-American and white Baptists. Two examples demonstrate these points.

In a remarkable anecdote, historian Mechal Sobel describes how the white leaders of a Baptist Association in antebellum Georgia reluctantly accepted an all-black congregation’s refusal to cede authority to outsiders.<sup>12</sup> The Sunbury Association was displeased that the White Bluff church rejected the missionary pastor whom they had sent to establish what was considered to be proper church order among this gathering of slave Christians. However, the association’s leaders recognized that their own Baptist commitment to congregational autonomy gave them no other principled option but to accept the church’s decision. While this is simply one episode in the largely tragic story of Baptists and race in the American South, the fact remains that these white Baptists left this space of genuine cultural, political, and spiritual agency alone because they recognized something sacred and inviolable in the integrity of that gathering of Christians.

An example from a century later shows the other side of this Baptist insistence on certain kinds of freedom from outside interference. Mississippi pastor Douglas Hudgins was a prominent figure in the Southern Baptist Convention during the middle of the twentieth century. In 1954, Hudgins publicly declared his opposition to the SBC’s non-binding resolution supporting the U.S. Supreme Court’s

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<sup>12</sup> Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 202-203. The entirety of chap. 7, “Coherent Lives and Visible Institutions” is instructive for this discussion. For an important look at Baptists’ antebellum transition in the South from social radicals to solid citizens see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

*Brown v. Board of Education* decision mandating school desegregation. He declared that it was completely inappropriate for a “religious body” such as the Southern Baptist Convention to entangle itself in what was a “purely civic matter.”<sup>13</sup>

Hudgins was not an overt racist, and his messages during the turbulent civil rights era were filled with calls for decency and goodwill. Charles Marsh argues that coming to terms with Hudgins’s theological vision is the key to understanding the sizeable mass of otherwise upstanding white Southern Christians who remained indifferent to the struggles of their black neighbors in the civil rights era.<sup>14</sup> At root was an ethereal piety that allowed reactionary forces to act with little accountability. Marsh portrays Hudgins as a pastor-theologian who acted and preached as if the church’s traditional language of sin and salvation made no significant contact with a world that at the time contained controversial voter registration efforts, Klan violence, and church integration campaigns.

Hudgins firmly resisted efforts to drag his congregation into the conflict. Significantly, he believed distinctively Baptist convictions justified such a course. Hudgins distilled Baptist principles into three core affirmations: 1) “The New Testament is Our Only Rule of Faith and Practice”; 2) “Individuality in Matters of Religion”; and 3) “The Autonomy of the Local Church.”<sup>15</sup> Congregational autonomy gave him permission to ignore or oppose the resolution in favor of the *Brown* decision passed by the SBC convention messengers; it also enabled him to remain aloof from the political and social status of black Mississippians, many of whom were fellow Baptists. If he and his congregation had any specifically Christian ties to these other Baptists, they were of a purely “spiritual” nature with no earthly social implications.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 100. Hudgins did not base his stance on a substantive understanding of the church’s distinct role in the world, but, rather, on a sharp metaphysical distinction between the “spiritual” and “material” realms.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 7: “Douglas Hudgins: Theologian of the Closed Society.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Hudgins's stance was reinforced by his claim that the hermeneutical key for interpreting Baptist doctrine is "the soul's competency before God."<sup>16</sup> As with the majority of Emerson and Smith's white evangelicals, Hudgins's theological framework rested on what is perhaps most accurately described as ontological atomism, in which society is never more than an aggregate of individual hearts, souls, or wills who interact with God and other people in a series of discrete encounters. Hudgins sought to keep his church from becoming entangled in social controversies that threatened to intrude upon the pristine sanctuary where souls commune with their Savior. He preached that the sixties would be a "decade of destiny" in which the satanic forces of "paganized materialism" must be challenged by Christianity's morally purifying message of "the individual soul in harmonious fellowship with a redeeming God."<sup>17</sup> Any theological statements about how this harmonious fellowship might have its counterpart in the church community itself were severely muted, and certainly did not stretch beyond the local congregation.

The Sunbury Association's decision to grant an African-American congregation freedom from external control, and Hudgins's insistence that the church needs to remain free from contaminating and disruptive external influences for the sake of its spiritual purity are merely two anecdotes drawn from Baptist life in the Southern United States. However, it seems safe to conclude that, at least in America, Baptists have led the way in embodying the fragmenting dynamics of voluntary religion as it enables and reinforces black-white racialization. To return to the observation with which this section began: on the basis of their sociological analysis of American evangelicalism, Emerson and Smith concluded that "the structure of religion in America is conducive to freeing groups from the direct control of other

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. This phrase exhibits Hudgins's indebtedness to Baptist theologian E.Y. Mullins, who identified "soul competency" as the distinctive insight of Baptist Christians in his *Axioms of Religion*. Marsh provides plenty of provocative material for debating the degree to which Hudgins faithfully set forth Mullins's own Baptist theology. James Wm. McClendon, Jr. has argued that Mullins, like most Baptists of his age, was so immersed in the fundamentalist-modernist controversies over the Bible and too beholden to "the rugged American individualism of Theodore Roosevelt" to articulate a distinctively Baptist theology that does justice to the entirety of Baptists's lived, Christian convictions (McClendon, "The Believers Church in Theological Perspective" in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, Hauerwas et al., eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 316; and *Ethics*, 29).

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Marsh, 113.

groups but not to addressing the fundamental divisions that exist in our racialized society.”<sup>18</sup> The special significance of Emerson and Smith’s study for a discussion of Baptists and the common good is located in the fact that certain dominant conceptions of Baptist identity are hard to distinguish from these quintessentially American<sup>19</sup> patterns in which “freedom” and “community” are inevitably pitted against each other. The second part of this paper begins with a description of this link between the character of American society and libertarian accounts of Baptist identity.

### **Baptists and the Paradoxes of American Freedom**

In the 1980s, church historian Martin Marty famously claimed that American Christianity has been essentially “baptistified.” By “baptistification,” he denoted the increasing dominance of a religious style that grounds religious identity in personal decision.<sup>20</sup> Marty observed that the individualistic and experiential “baptist” style seems to have successfully captured the modern *Zeitgeist*, causing leaders of traditional and more communally-oriented Christian traditions to wonder if they must get with the baptistification program or risk extinction.

Many Baptists have seen in Marty’s report a long-expected vindication. These Baptists claim that much of the credit for the vitality of American religion should go to Baptists for championing voluntary religion, religious liberty, and the separation of church and state *as Christians* long before these things were fashionable and associated with secular modernity. According to Baptist historian Walter Shurden, Marty accurately located the heart of the Baptist style, posture, and attitude in matters of faith with penetrating insight. This fundamental Baptist ethos or inner logic, by his reading, is marked by the principles or values of choice and voluntarism and is permeated by a spirit of “FREEDOM.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Emerson and Smith, 18.

<sup>19</sup> By emphasizing that these dynamics are characteristically “American,” I do not deny that something similar could be said about “modernity” or all classically liberal societies. However, I prefer to remain somewhat historically and geographically circumscribed in these kinds of claims.

<sup>20</sup> Martin E. Marty, “Baptistification Takes Over,” *Christianity Today* 27, Sept. 2, 1983, 33-36.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 2.

Two critical issues emerge from Shurden's contention that Marty was substantially correct about the essentially baptist character of so much contemporary Christianity. First, Marty's deeper point was that one could now be a "baptistified" member of any ecclesial tradition, provided one's church membership and religious identity was understood in personal and/or voluntary terms. If this is increasingly the case, and individual American Christians in a variety of traditions hold essentially Baptist convictions, it makes sense to ask: why is a separate Baptist ecclesial identity important and in what does it consist? The final section will return to questions of catholicity and ecumenism in a discussion of what it means to talk specifically about *Baptists*, unity, and the common good.

Second, if Baptists want to receive credit for the continuing vitality of American religion within modern secularity, we must also take responsibility for the underside of a voluntaristic understanding of freedom, i.e., its tendency to produce social fragmentation and moral alienation. As the important sociological study of the 1980s from which this paper borrows its title argued, Americans increasingly lack an ethical grammar that envisions the possibility of substantive agreement about the nature and purpose of human life.<sup>22</sup> In a society characterized by various forms of individualism, "success" is largely interpreted as living in faithfulness to one's chosen values, "freedom" is the ability to determine these values and define one's selfhood apart from external coercion, and "justice" is a matter of establishing fair procedures that ostensibly provide equal opportunity for all individuals to exercise this liberty.<sup>23</sup> There might be unanimous agreement with the sentiment that both "equality" and "freedom" are good things, but these abstract notions offer few resources for reaching shared understandings of what freedom is to be used for, or in what ways people are to be treated as equal.

These are weighty theological matters as well as classic themes of political theory. It would seem that Baptists seeking to provide a "genuine prophetic voice in these complex times" bear the burden of proof in showing that a tradition that has essentially "grown up" alongside the emergence of

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<sup>22</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-26.

modern, liberal societies has something radically new and redemptive to say to a world in which an abstract notion of self-determination is one of the few goods nearly everyone agrees on. The notion of the common good is a particularly helpful resource for Baptists taking on this task, as it is a time-honored way of speaking about the normative vision that fills both freedom and equality with content and describes their proper relations. While the common good is a concept with a long history in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of moral reasoning, Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson provides an account of the common good that is especially fitting for this discussion.

### **The Common Good and the Possibility of Moral Politics**

In 1978, Jenson was asked to address the question of how the United States government ought to rank the importance of the various proposals it receives (e.g., for public infrastructure, national defense, social services, economic policies, etc.).<sup>24</sup> He began his talk by saying that to speak in terms of “ranking” and “prioritizing” is to picture political life as a data-processing device that receives various political preferences in the form of discrete “inputs.” According to Jenson, the only intelligible questions one can pose about such a self-contained entity are functional or procedural because neither the political device nor the expressed needs and wants that enter into the system are themselves moral subjects able to consider and respond to specific arguments. As he put it, “Nowhere but in America could the public question after each crisis be, ‘Did the system work?’”<sup>25</sup>

This is not an insignificant question, if the system ensures a genuine degree of social stability that limits random violence and unaccountable vigilante “justice” simply by functioning smoothly.<sup>26</sup> However, even an affirmative answer is never fully satisfying. Jenson’s words to this effect are worth quoting in full, as they establish the basic conception of the common good that informs this essay:

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<sup>24</sup> Robert W. Jenson, “Is There an Ordering Principle,” printed in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, “vigilante” justice is a relative term, and its use in particular cases is as contestable as “terrorism.” While I do not have space to develop this, any political system that ensures some level of social stability can be understood as a prime example of the divinely instituted yet fallen “powers” (Romans 13, Colossians 2).

I suggest that when we worry about how our system “prioritizes,” our real worry is that prioritizing may in fact be all that our polity does. . . . We want to be able to say not only that our polity in fact ranks social needs in such and such order, but that it ought to rank them in just that order, that it is right when it does so. We want our concern . . . not to be merely another input; we want it to be a moral judgment, expressed somehow from outside the great processing device.

What we want, if we think there is something to discuss here, is to posit a “common good,” a common moral judgment by which inputs into the polity of need and want are weighted by a value that is entirely independent of how many people support them, of how firmly they support them, of what kind of cash and other resources they can support them with . . . . We want the polity rather to be a moral agent, a decider and discoverer of right and wrong.<sup>27</sup>

It is in this sense that the common good is a highly problematic but essential concept for any contemporary discussion of what a genuine and prophetic Baptist voice sounds like. As was noted at the outset, the “New Baptist Covenant” is slated to be a joint Baptist affirmation of the gospel’s implications for “public and private morality.” This includes what other traditions have historically called the corporal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, tending the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and housing the homeless. The reference to “public” morality presumably refers to the carrying out of these tasks on institutional and societal levels.

Even when structural and systemic dimensions of life in the world are recognized, there remains the challenge of deciding *together* what ought to be done at particular times, out of the variety of available courses of action, with the resources at hand. We have already seen how Baptists have historically cherished various forms of veto-power. Can a community that lists individual choice among its organizing principles reach such prudential judgments and have its members agree that the decisions reached were not only fair (i.e., the device did its job), but also *right*? To ask this in an explicitly theological manner: is it possible for Baptists to say that Christian faithfulness can be predicated of their common life, or does this only hold for individual Baptists, who may be more or less concentrated in particular gatherings? A closer look at Jenson’s understanding of the conditions for the possibility of a common good highlights its intrinsically theological character. At that point we can return to the linked questions of Baptist peoplehood and Baptist public witness.

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<sup>27</sup> Jenson, *Essays*, 69-70.

### The Common Good as Shared Hope

Jenson's view that politics should be a venue for the moral life has ancient precedent. Yet numerous critics, past and present, would say such a vision is hopelessly and dangerously naïve. Niccolo Machiavelli famously advised the shrewd ruler not to concern himself with what political community should be like, but rather to attend to how power relationships actually work. In Benedetto Croce's words, Machiavelli "discover[ed] the necessity and *autonomy* of politics, of politics which is beyond or, rather, below moral good and evil, which has its own laws against which it is impossible to rebel."<sup>28</sup> The verdict of those sharing this understanding of politics seems to be: better a machine concerned with checks and balances than what Hobbes famously described as the unrestrained war of "all against all."

According to one reading of modern history, the liberal societies of the West have gradually conceded that attempts to achieve or even discuss a transcendent common good are too divisive and should be abandoned. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that political liberalism allows individuals unfettered opportunity to propose and live by their own ideas of the good, "unless that conception of the good involves reshaping the rest of the life of the community in accordance with it."<sup>29</sup> The common good postulated in such polities is therefore one of freedom from enforced claims upon the community and its individual members – except, of course, the claims of the state that maintains this freedom.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, Jenson offers a definition of politics as "the whole process by which a community chooses what sort of community it ought to be in the future."<sup>31</sup> This short definition points toward what

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<sup>28</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Politics and Morals*, trans. Salvatore J. Catiglione (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 59. Quoted in Jose Miguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 18.

<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 336.

<sup>30</sup> Others might say that the implicit common good of the United States is economic expansion and the increase of the Gross National Product, yet periods of economic growth have not correlated with a widespread sense of a healthy society. Once citizens are reduced to mere individual interest-bearers rather than deliberating and accountable moral agents it becomes hard to distinguish politics from economics, a discipline that consciously views human beings in this way (*homo economicus*) for the sake of analysis. Echoing Aristotle, Jenson believes the machine metaphor for the body politic has its usefulness, but only in the realm of "housekeeping" (*oikonomia*) with its technical reason, not within the higher discipline of politics (Jenson, *Essays*, 95).

<sup>31</sup> Jenson, *Essays*, 74.

he considers to be the necessary conditions for seeking a common moral good that transcends the dynamics of winner-take-all politics:

[I]f we are able to judge the concerns that are presented to the body politic not merely by their interest weighting, but by whether they are right or not, by a common good, then the good must be knowable. *The good must be not only decreed, but also discovered; not merely chosen, but also found.*<sup>32</sup> . . . . The metaphysical condition of common good is teleological vision.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, deliberation about a community's future is only possible when the community believes such debate is worthwhile (a mutually discoverable common good is possible) and assumes that the future is meaningfully related to the present ("teleological vision"). As we will see, the two are related.

For Jenson, a polity whose only sovereign is the governmental machinery itself was made in the image of a mechanistic cosmos. The result is a nation whose formal structures presuppose the Enlightenment deists' metaphysically timeless God. Jenson claims that the orthodox, triune, personal God who acts in history was not abolished but relegated to those areas of life outside the process by which official business gets done. This does not mean, however, that the historically active and experientially present God of evangelical religion and eschatological vision was immediately exiled to the realm of the intimately personal by the legal separation of church and state. A substantive vision of the good community motivated such efforts as the abolition and civil rights movements and was achieved through semi-official public gatherings and conversations. The American people were able to maintain a sense of shared destiny (understood in different ways at various points in history) because of a symbiotic relationship between the deist religion of the official structure and the dynamic faith and conversation present in what is typically called "civil society."<sup>34</sup>

According to Jenson, this relationship, never strong to begin with, has exhausted itself. As a result, Americans are left with the data-processing machine described earlier: "a great apparatus

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>34</sup> Of course, the moralistic crusades of the nineteenth-century "evangelical empire" were exercises in majoritarian democracy at least as much as they were attempts to form a national conscience around a genuinely common good.

grinding along oblivious to all human quest for transcendence and community.”<sup>35</sup> Importantly, Jenson does not blame this state of affairs on an evil secularist conspiracy, and he recognizes the challenges pluralistic societies pose for reasoned debate that can lead to a substantive notion of the common good. Moreover, he acknowledges a partial but important truth in claims that all human rhetoric contains an element of oppression and is tainted by the will-to-power. In a provocative statement, he has suggested that perhaps the only truly non-oppressive discourse is that shared by God and the other inhabitants of heaven.<sup>36</sup> This is why the common good depends upon the capacity for envisioning a shared destiny that transcends present realities.<sup>37</sup> As flawed and dangerous as our teleological visions have been and can be, without them any pursuit of a genuinely common good is impossible.

For Jenson, while a common dedication to a vision of the common good is no easy achievement, and in truth can never be a human achievement this side of history’s end, our life together in community is at least capable of pointing to more than a negotiated cease-fire. When shared teleological vision was created in America’s “second public spaces,” real achievements were sometimes made. Moral courage requires hope. The greatest threat to this kind of hope is not selfishness *per se*, but the inability or unwillingness of a society to trust in a promised common destiny that present differences do not invalidate.

This discussion of the common good in terms of a shared hope that makes meaningful political life possible prepares the way for an understanding of the church’s foremost public task as participation in God’s formation of a community whose own social existence rests upon claims whose reality are glimpsed fully only by faith. In a separate essay about the church’s responsibility for the secular world, Jenson argues that the church’s vocation is to be a living witness to the world’s eschatological destiny. In sharp contrast with those who insist that the world and its pressing problems should set the church’s

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>36</sup> Jenson, “On Hegemonic Discourse,” *First Things* 45 (August-September 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Jenson has claimed that “story” and “promise” are two essential features of the gospel and two concepts the church must keep alive in a time when postmodern society believes in neither. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story” *First Things* 36 (October 1993): 19-24.

agenda and determine the shape of its mission, Jenson urges Christians to see that the Church is God's agenda for the world.<sup>38</sup> A church that fulfills this vocation in its own life together gives the world a glimpse of God's promised future that can then serve as the basis and goal of a meaningful, moral politics.

### **The Medium is the Message: Baptist Peoplehood and the Common Good**

The theological challenge remains: to what extent does sin, in addition to basic human fallibility, make the kind of politics Jenson proposes impossible? A formidable strand of Christian political thought, represented prominently in the 20th century by Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>39</sup> would argue that detaching eschatological vision from present social structures helps prevent sinful assertions of self-will from cloaking themselves in self-righteous religious pretension. It seems eminently reasonable to conclude that a procedural goal like fairness may be all we can reasonably hope for in the public realm.<sup>40</sup> The negative safeguards of contractual guarantees are at least better than having social ends twisted toward something less than the peace and justice of God's coming reign.

Baptists' historic dissent from attempts to give divine sanction to coercive political communities can be seen as an insistence upon the integrity of Jenson's eschatological qualification of the common good in light of the content of specifically Christian hope. The paradigmatic biblical instance of a common good oriented in an idolatrous direction by self-sufficient humanity is the account of the building of the tower of Babel located in Genesis 10. Yet the story of God's destruction of this imperial project is immediately followed by the extended narrative of the calling of Abraham and the establishment of the people of Israel. In other words, freedom from one way of life is not an end in itself; it is the prerequisite for the formation of a new community in a new covenant established by God. For Christians, the story may begin with "come out from among them" (1 Cor. 6:17), but it culminates

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<sup>38</sup> Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *The Two Cities of God: The Church's Responsibility for the Earthly City*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner, 1932).

<sup>40</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

in the Pentecostal experience of unity across linguistic divisions and the holding of all things in common in the community of God's Holy Spirit sent by the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2).

This précis of the biblical narrative captures the heart of John Howard Yoder's "radically catholic" ecclesiological ethics. His stance combines a refusal to blunt the specificity of the Christian vocation to participate in the God's redemptive mission in Christ with an insistence that this calling is addressed to all Christians and must take the form of a peaceable, reconciling community. His argument that the Church's nature is to be a social form that is itself prophetic parallels Jenson's in striking ways.<sup>41</sup> In this final section, I want to gather three considerations from Yoder's radically catholic stance as a way of summarizing the discussion and offering theological suggestions for the upcoming gathering to discuss a "New Baptist Covenant."

Yoder, a Mennonite, steadfastly maintained that his ancestors in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movements grasped something deeply important in their insistence upon the church's visible distinction from the world as a community of disciples. While these groups have frequently been considered by "mainstream" observers to be misguided idealists or sectarian zealots with little regard for church unity, Yoder was unceasingly engaged in ecumenical dialogues. For decades he repeated and refined what he considered to be a "free church" view of "the nature of the unity we seek" that shared the Faith and Order commission's desire for visible unity and catholicity, but not at the price of substantive, communal Christian witness at the local level.<sup>42</sup> Because he insisted that his "believers' church" perspective must be an ecumenically viable option, Yoder is particularly helpful for showing Baptists how a concern for Baptist unity can avoid becoming a preoccupation with denominational separateness for its own sake.

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<sup>41</sup> Though important areas for debate remain between them on the specific institutional and moral shape of this community, their convergence on these substantive issues gives support to Yoder's claim that his view is grounded in basic Christian confessions and not the idiosyncratic preferences of one Christian sub-group.

<sup>42</sup> John H. Yoder, "The Nature of the Unity We Seek: A Historic Free Church View" in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994): 221-230. Derek Hatch reminded me about this essay.

## **Baptists are a people, not a set of principles**

The principled congregationalism exhibited by some nineteenth-century Baptists helped the traditions of black Christianity in America to develop apart from heavy-handed and demeaning paternalism. However, this same rationale, along with a deeply individualistic piety, worked against the development of any sense of peoplehood among white and black Baptists in which their destinies would be seen as linked *on earth* as they would be in heaven. Put another way, these Baptists might have recognized one another as “free in Christ,” but any sense in which they were, together, “one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) on the plane of human history was denied, ignored, or left incredibly vague. This allowed race, region, ideology and other factors to serve as Baptists’ primary identity-markers.

A negative or protective stance that insists upon some level of autonomy, while registering a proper protest against too-easy notions of solidarity and the common good, ultimately remains theologically unsatisfying. As Yoder stated in a friendly dialogue with liberation theologians during the 1970s: “Liberation is *from* bondage and *for* covenant, and *what for* matters more than *what from*.”<sup>43</sup> God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery both presupposed and renewed the covenant with Abraham and his descendants, with the intention that their liberation would not be the replacement of one form of tyranny with another. To press the contemporary point and return to the opening discussion, the abolition of slavery and the passing of civil rights legislation removed certain legal obstacles but they have not necessarily brought the world *or the church* closer to realizing Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of the “beloved community.”

In the earlier discussion of the dynamics of racialization, it seemed appropriate to begin with an inductive, historical approach when dealing with the geographically, racially, and theologically diverse Christians called Baptists. It would be presumptuous to attempt to distill from those compressed examples *the* timeless principles governing the faith and practice of all Baptists. At any rate, it is by no

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<sup>43</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Exodus and Exile: The Two Faces of Liberation” in Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), 398.

means clear that black Baptists, for example, would recognize Hudgins's three axioms as the organizing principles of their faith.

In Yoder's view, free-church congregationalism does not place trust that "the people" or the majority will unfailingly discern God's will (i.e., the common good) in particular situations. It simply trusts that "decisions will be better and community more whole if all can speak."<sup>44</sup> To say that Baptists are best understood theologically as a people in Christ rather than an aggregate of believers who have individually chosen a certain polity does not deny the possibility of substantive Baptist convictions worth identifying and discussing, but these convictions, to be genuinely Christian, are intended to be embodied in a shared life. As Jenson observed, a procedural democracy has strong arguments in its favor, as it protects certain limited but important goods. However, Robert's Rules of Order will not sustain a genuine community if its members do not believe they are accountable to and participate in something or someone authoritatively good and true. "Peoplehood" is simply the recognition of a mutually discoverable common good by a group of people. In the same way, "Baptist" names a group of Christians seeking together to affirm, clarify, and transform their shared, life-shaping convictions in the light of the Word of God.<sup>45</sup>

### **The common good as the search for radical catholicity**

At the most abstract philosophical level, the issues raised in this discussion have to do with "identity" and "difference" or the classic problem of the one and the many. The claim Jenson's account of the common good gestures toward and Yoder consistently stressed is that the church is not the world. In history, the problem is not to be resolved, but a genuine unity is being formed in the Christian

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<sup>44</sup> Yoder, "Firstfruits: The Paradigmatic Public Role of God's People," in *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19 ), 32. Yoder's extensive description of this process at work can be found in "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> This wording is inspired by James Wm. McClendon's definition of theology as the "discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is." *Ethics. Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 23.

community when the church is true to itself. It would seem that a desire for Baptist peoplehood simply reinforces fragmentation and distracts from the more pressing task of Christian unity.

In 1970, Yoder addressed these issues when he provided an assessment of Southern Baptists from the perspective of a friendly critic claiming common roots in the “believers church” tradition. Before making his observations, Yoder first established that he had no intention of urging Southern Baptists away from their well-known organizational self-sufficiency (the SBC had recently become the nation’s largest Protestant denomination) for the sake of a least-common denominator ecumenism that diluted the distinctive character of Christian community. Neither did he want to engage in a debate over the kinds of secondary doctrinal matters that divided Baptists from other low-church traditions (e.g. modes of baptism, etc.).

With these clarifications established, Yoder claimed that Southern Baptists had over-identified themselves with particular cultural values and structures, blurring the distinction between their Christian allegiances and their status as Americans and Southerners. In an important turn of phrase, Yoder charged Southern Baptists with a variety of “provincialisms which put the distinctive identity of a Christian body at the wrong place.”<sup>46</sup> In theological terms, when what is distinctive about one’s religious identity is permeated by the assumptions of the surrounding culture and thus socially innocuous, emphasis upon these now largely trivial matters becomes idolatry. That is to say, if the church cannot compellingly articulate its own account of the goal of human life, its members will pursue the other ends promised by other communities, severing the common good from its proper end in God’s coming reign.

Yoder did not criticize Baptists’ emphasis on the “priority” of the local congregation, but he lamented that this conviction had often become an affirmation of the local fellowship’s “exclusive” right to consider itself “the church.”<sup>47</sup> He maintained that the faithful Christian community should always be

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<sup>46</sup>Yoder, “A Non-Baptist View of Southern Baptists” *Review and Expositor*, 222.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 223.

distinct within its host society, but this distinctiveness belongs to all Christians who claim Christ as Lord and must not be located in one's particular denominational label. Without such a genuinely catholic perspective, he believed, the local emphasis of Baptist ecclesiology "risks giving the impression that meeting in one place is sufficient for the local congregation to be accredited as church, even if what goes on there is too mechanical or too massive or too routine to be genuinely recognizable as a community of believers."<sup>48</sup>

Believing that complacent denominationalism dulls prophetic religion by slicing potentially subversive religious convictions and communities into smaller and less threatening segments, Yoder hoped that Southern Baptist would adopt "a theological commitment to the acceptance of conversation with other Christians as one of the ways any group's identity must be affirmed and tested."<sup>49</sup> For Yoder, this conversation must take place on a variety of levels, but the primary goal should be disciplined conversation toward substantive unity in particular places. This requires the skills of patience and prudence necessary for all community formation.

### **Reconciled Unity in Diversity: The Common Good as the New Covenant**

In light of Emerson and Smith's disturbing demonstration that traditional and at times well-intentioned habits have furthered racialization both within and without American Christianity, surely the most prophetic witness Baptists can provide would be the formation of a socially-meaningful people in which racial differences are not ignored in the name of an abstract notion of individual equality, but reconciled in a shared commitment to a genuinely common good. As Yoder reminds us, this is the costly task of the church as Christ's presence in the world:

According to the apostolic witness, interethnic harmony is a work, not of creation, but of redemption. To make anyone believe in the equal *dignity* of all humans God must intervene. . . .

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 224.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 226. With regard to this discussion, such conversation would include engagement with the Catholic insistence on the necessity of the Petrine charism as an embodied symbol of the church's unity as well as the recent Princeton Proposal for Church Unity (a document drafted under Jenson's leadership).

In the movements of Gandhi and King it took freely chosen, innocent suffering to renew in our century the possibility of reconciliation between peoples.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, visible progress in this regard will be nothing short of a divine miracle requiring tremendous faith and sacrifice.<sup>51</sup>

Concrete, strategic proposals must bear in mind the spiritual magnitude and tangible costliness of this task. In this regard, the “three R’s” of the Christian Community Development Association provide a hopeful yet challenging model. The CCDA consists primarily of theologically conservative evangelicals committed to a “wholistic” gospel embodied in three non-negotiable commitments. These include *relocation* (“living among the poor”); *reconciliation* (“people to God, neighbor to neighbor” -- across ethnic and racial lines, as well as inner-city to suburb, etc.); and *redistribution* (“empowering the poor” through sharing of wealth and power within the community).<sup>52</sup> Of these steps, “relocation” poses the most concrete challenge, but none of these commitments can be sustained in a shared way by a group committed to procedural values of freedom and choice. Importantly, Emerson and Smith’s findings showed that white evangelicals’ inability to see the problem of racialization tends to change when they have frequent social interactions in fairly intimate settings with a significant number of people of another race.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>50</sup> Yoder, *For the Nations*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Emerson and Smith provide this chilling prediction from Alexis de Tocqueville :

I do not imagine that the white and black races will ever live in any country upon an equal footing. But I believe the difficulty to be still greater in the United States than elsewhere. An isolated individual may surmount the prejudices of religion, of his country, or of his race, and if this individual is a king he may effect surprising changes in society; but a whole people cannot rise, as it were, above itself. A despot who should subject the Americans and their former slaves to the same yoke, might perhaps succeed in commingling their races; but as long as the American democracy remains at the head of affairs no one will undertake so difficult a task; and it may be foreseen that the freer the white population of the United States becomes, the more isolated will it remain – *Democracy in America* (1835)

<sup>52</sup> *Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing it Together & Doing it Right*. Official Handbook of the Christian Community Development Association, ed. John M. Perkins (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

<sup>53</sup> Emerson and Smith, 132. In search of models for a better way, Emerson joined a multi-racial team of sociologists and “reconciliation theologian” Curtiss Paul DeYoung to write *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). (The other co-authors are George Yancey and Karen Chai Kim).

I recognize two risks that come with framing my topic as a response to the upcoming Baptist convocation. First, giving such attention to a contemporary event such as the gathering to inaugurate a New Baptist Covenant might be perceived as a sacrifice of scholarly rigor and theological substance for the sake of explicit political engagement. Second, the raising of critical concerns in advance about a good-faith effort for Baptist unity in service to the world might be dismissed as academic nit-picking that has little respect for the pragmatic skills required to build coalitions and draft consensus statements. However, it seems to me that the issues in question deserve formal theological attention, and I have tried to be critical yet hopeful in an attempt to contribute to this commendable search for unity in service and witness.

This paper was motivated in large part by a recognition that the Baptist theological “we” almost inevitably fails to include the voices of non-white Baptists in a discussion of Baptist identity, as well as an awareness that many American Christians consider discussions about denominational identity *passé*. Baptists need to engage these difficult issues because, as Yoder claimed,

Only a believing community with a ‘thick’ particular identity has something to say to whatever ‘public’ is ‘out there’ to address. . . .only the community which welcomes the challenge of public witness can justify (not merely to outsiders but also to its own children) its distinctive witness.<sup>54</sup>

A vision of the common good as reconciling Christian peoplehood offers Baptists a way toward a public witness that is genuinely prophetic because it is socially embodied and substantively theological, while not asking Christians to rig the machinery of the state in their favor in the name of a presumptively-established common good. In short, the task is to work and pray toward a Baptist unity that is not a mere marriage of convenience but a tangible witness to the New Covenant in Christ.

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<sup>54</sup> Yoder, *For the Nations*, 42.