

Everybody Talking 'Bout Heaven Ain't Goin' There:
"Mainstream" Baptist Theological Ethics Confronting Whiteness
Mike Broadway
Shaw University Divinity School

[Roger, et al, I regret not to be able to send you a complete version of my essay. I am sending the current version in hope that it will at least lay the groundwork for the fuller argument I intend to make, and in further hope that you will forgive the rough nature of this draft.—Mike]

The appraisal of U. S. Baptist contributions to theological ethics is integrally tied to Baptist practices of race relations. Moreover, the very telling of the history of Baptists is thoroughly intertwined with assumptions about race. In this paper I propose to argue that race is entrenched in Baptist theological ethics and Baptist historiography in ways that remain to be acknowledged and engaged. I will further identify how Baptists' theological reflection on God, creation, Christology, soteriology, Pneumatology, and eschatology can contribute toward decentering whiteness in Baptist theological ethics.

A common trope of evaluative speech asks if a proverbial glass is half full or half empty. When evaluating Baptists' ethical thought and practice concerning race, the progress away from ideologies of white supremacy is clear. However, few would dispute that there is much more progress to be made. If the glass is half full, then one of the signs of great hope in the present for Baptists dealing with racism is the widespread admiration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., among Baptists in all parts of the United States and across racial divisions. If the glass is half empty, one of the great ironies is the way that white Baptists have embraced the dead Martin Luther King, Jr., when they vilified the living person. Had progress on race relations advanced significantly since 1968, it might be possible to say that the glass is half full. But judging by the controversy over Rev. Jeremiah Wright's preaching, and the vast incongruity of responses, against the background of starkly segregated churches, it seems that the glass may be half empty.

Prominent among these responses is the assumption by many commentators that, even if they find some reason to acknowledge truth in some aspect of what he has said, Wright's words and message generally deserve condemnation or renunciation.¹

The widespread condemnation of Wright stands in contrast to the effusive praise of Martin Luther King, Jr., in contemporary white Baptist writing. For instance, in a document called The Judson Declaration, a group called The Coalition for Baptist Principles, whose steering committee is made up of white Baptists, cites the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., as demonstrating that "Baptists have been free to stand for unpopular positions."² King and Roger Williams are the two Baptist "saints" to be mentioned in the declaration. Many do not remember that in his day, King was known to harshly criticize the white majority and the U. S., state, or

¹ The classic conversational fragment for this point of view is "Of course I think Jeremiah Wright was wrong to say those things, but" One example of this sort of assumption without exegesis of Wright's remarks appears in the comments of Robert Parham on the relationship of Barack Obama to Jeremiah Wright, before the eventual renunciation of Wright occurred.

While Obama rightly distanced himself from Wright's extreme statements and static social analysis, he wrongfully defended Wright with excuses about Wright's generational vantage point and his own familial relationship with Wright," Parham said. "Obama wrongly justified his acceptance of Wright by saying that many other people of faith accept mean-spirited sermons, a claim that diminishes the many good clergy who show restraint. Obama wrongfully justified Wright's offensive remarks based on private racial comments by his own white grandmother, a morally incomparable observation. Obama mistakenly justified black anger because of white anger, an argument that will not move us toward the more perfect union for which Obama so eloquently advocates and that so many of us want. Obama's moral calculus never gets beyond excuse-making, the equation that justifies wrongful words by other examples of wrongful words. He missed completely the ethic of Jesus in his speech and an opportunity to move away from divisive preaching.

Bob Allen, "Obama Criticizes But Refuses to 'Disown' Controversial Pastor," *EthicsDaily.com*, March 19, 2008 (accessed at http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=10238, 3/29/08).

² In citing this example, the author also expresses broad and general agreement with the itemized statements which make up the articles of the Judson Declaration; "The Judson Declaration," (accessed at <http://www.baptistprinciples.org/declaration.htm> on June 24, 2008).

local governments in ways not so different from Wright in this day.³ Of course, as the declaration points out, it is true that King was free to take an unpopular position. It is also true that the majority of Baptists were free to denounce and resist his words and work and to praise civil authorities who put him in jail, encouraging worse to be done to him at times. As Bill Leonard has reminded contemporary students of history, white Baptists throughout the South (and North) disputed King's Baptist and Christian faith, not to mention many other insults and threats heaped upon him.⁴ Rare was his opportunity to speak in a white Baptist church. It does not refute this claim to say that, even facing opposition, he was free to point out the shortcomings of Baptist belief and practice, but it does challenge the implication that Baptists are above all else concerned to let every point of view gain free expression.

Moreover, the case of King raises another matter. He was not representing one point of view among many. He did not call for some churches to maintain the status quo so long as a minority were allowed to struggle for justice. King's message demanded change toward an orthodoxy rid of its racialized theology. He did so through a strategy which sought to place his opponents in a crisis to which they must respond. His evangelistic intent was that they would hear the gospel in his work, repent, and walk in a new way. For Baptists, the openness to hear

³ On numerous occasions in 2008 Michael Eric Dyson has been called on by news media to compare Jeremiah Wright and Martin Luther King, Jr. The following quotation comes from one such article:

In his own pulpit at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, two months before his death, King raged against America's "bitter, colossal contest for supremacy." He argued that God "didn't call America to do what she's doing in the world today," preaching that "we are criminals in that war" and that we "have committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world." King insisted that God "has a way of saying, as the God of the Old Testament used to say to the Hebrews, 'Don't play with me, Israel. Don't play with me, Babylon. Be still and know that I'm God. And if you don't stop your reckless course, I'll rise up and break the backbone of your power.' "

"The Prophetic Anger of MLK," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2008 (accessed at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-dyson4apr04,0,1840793.story>, June 30, 2008).

⁴ Bill Leonard, *Baptists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 413.

the minority position is a commitment to listen for the Spirit bearing witness to the Word, a normative word which demands a response of obedience. Respecting the minority view is not necessarily a way to allow all perspectives to coexist, but to remain open to a critical and correcting process.

A very common refrain of the slave songs was “Everybody talking about heaven ain’t going there.” It was a multipurpose, often-used lyric, which could be plugged into many songs. One reason for its widespread use was the powerful resonance of these words with the faith of the slave churches. If we are Pollyannish, we might think these words bring to mind the way that some people in every church only pose as Christians, but that the ones who walk faithfully in the calling to follow Jesus are the truly saved. While that is an accurate theological judgment, it misses the point of this lyric about who “ain’t going there” so evident from the context. The great sin of the era of slavocracy was the mistreatment and enslavement of people of African descent. It was the white, church-going, Jesus-talking folk, the ones who owned slaves or condoned slavery, who would not be going to heaven. It is a song of judgment on racism and those who benefit from it.

If there remain any doubts of this interpretation of the spiritual’s lyrics, a few citations should dispel them. In one Baptist church, a female slave was brought up for discipline for her stated belief that whites who mistreated blacks were in hell.⁵ One well-known black Baptist, W. B. Johnson, said that “Anglo-Saxon civilization” was less Christian than “the religion of Buddha, Brahmin, Confucius or Mahomet,” and encouraged Baptists to change their ways and “preach Christianity and not Anglo-Saxon civilization.”⁶ In proposing the formation of the American

⁵ Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 264.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

Baptist Anti-Caste Missionary Society, William Newman stated that among its purposes would be to convert “a nation passing from barbarism to Christianity.”⁷

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES AND BAPTIST CONTROVERSIES

A body of literature extending across more than a century seeks to identify Baptists as a group in light of their distinctive contributions to the Christian tradition and the controversies which have shaped their development. Together, these approaches constitute a way of looking at Baptist history which seeks to identify enduring characteristics of the tradition. Such an approach to historiography is a product of denominationalism, in that the distinctiveness of different confessional groups comes to the foreground, and agreements move to the background. For this reason, it is rare to read a description of Baptist tradition which focuses on their confession of the Triune God, the divinity and humanity of Christ, the doctrines of creation, sin, humanity, and many other aspects of Christian doctrine and practice. Instead, the points at which Baptists have disagreed with other Christians or with one another receive primary attention in describing Baptist identity. The focus on distinctives, as a corollary of denominational self-assertion has particular significance for reflection on race because of the racial divisions among Baptists in the U. S. Lists of distinctives assembled to articulate the identity of predominantly white conventions or associations are highly susceptible to ignoring the beliefs and practices of their separated black sisters and brothers. One direction this sort of historiography and description can take is to define Baptist identity by what Baptists are not, rather than by what they are. Such an approach to saying what one is not encourages a heroic or romantic construal of historic instances of dissent. One does not give up such a heroic self-identity readily.

⁷ James Melvin Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 76.

Moreover, by bringing distinctives to the foreground, other core beliefs move to the background. The emphasis on religious liberty, rightly claimed and sustained by Baptists, does not stand alone as a doctrine, but it is an aspect of ecclesiology with connections to anthropology. The anthropological insights about the status of conscience in human nature are linked to the doctrine of creation, and ultimately to the doctrine of God. However, the creation of checklists of distinctives tends to ignore these deeper theological connections. Applying the checklists in historical analysis suggests a version of orthodox Baptist thought and practice defined without reference to the full range of Baptist convictions. The danger of using a narrowly defined filtering method gave rise to the “Trail of Blood” thesis by which nineteenth-century Baptists traced their beginnings through a so-called continuous line of independence from Protestantism and Catholicism all the way back to the baptism of Jesus. Recent use of the filtering method has been more circumspect. Other principles of historiographic method, including the self-identification by varying groups as Baptists, tempers the potential narrowing of the history. Moreover, recent lists of distinctives, by emphasizing freedom and such concepts as “soul competency” have argued that the distinctiveness of Baptists is to be diverse in their confessions.

A good example of historiographic analysis which seeks both to employ the use of a set of distinctives and at the same time recognize the limits of this methodology appears in Bill Leonard’s *Baptist Ways*. After surveying a number of ways in which scholars have portrayed Baptist distinctives, he reconstructs them as paired ideas which he labels “dialectics” in which certain doctrines must be understood in relation to certain others.⁸ In response to this survey of characteristic Baptist beliefs and practices, Leonard comments,

⁸ Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 6.

First, any attempt to delineate Baptist distinctives must begin with a confession that any effort to hold certain dynamic, sometimes contradictory, ideals in balance is a noble, but nearly impossible, task. . . . Fifth, perhaps a more realistic way of understanding Baptists' origins is to suggest that they exhibit an evolving history, shaped by archetypal beliefs but adapting through a variety of social and cultural contexts.⁹

This highly nuanced approach to Baptist distinctives deserves examination. As dialectics, Leonard's use of distinctives echoes the "antinomies" of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The antinomies of reason are four pairs of theses philosophy might offer concerning the nature of existence and human knowledge of it. As thesis and antithesis, they offer alternate generalizations about certain metaphysical discussions of the nature of reality, concerning finitude/infinity, simplicity/complexity, freedom/natural causality, and necessity/contingency. In Kant's critical philosophy, the knowledge of supersensible realities or reality in its totality goes beyond the possibilities of reason's capacities, which are constrained by the phenomenal realm of sense experience. Thus, rather than contradictions, the antinomies point to the limits of reason in pursuing dogmatic claims beyond the knowledge achieved through sense experience. To accept either thesis or antithesis would claim more than is humanly possible at the same time as it would result in claims that are ultimately unsatisfying as explanations of reality. These antinomies then function in regulative fashion to define certain limits and possibilities for human knowing.¹⁰

Leonard's dialectics function in a similar fashion by asserting that claiming either biblical authority or the liberty of conscience as an absolute distinctive fails to take account of the ways

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ Lewis White Beck, "Antinomy of Pure Reason," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. by Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973-74), electronic edition (accessed at <http://etext.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-15>, June 23, 2008); Michelle Grier, "Kant's Critique of Metaphysics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed. (accessed at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-metaphysics/>, June 30, 2008).

in which neither can fully explain the nature of Baptist belief and practice. By framing them as dialectics, they can remain regulative statements which define limits of Baptist convictions, but neither alone is a satisfying articulation of the totality of Baptist tradition. Leonard concludes that to overemphasize one is to misrepresent the breadth and complexity of Baptists whose “evolving” beliefs may point to certain “archetypal” ideas, but there is no standard or simple way that Baptists have held these ideas.

In *Baptists in America*, he presents a similar, though revised version of the dialectics. He first surveys Baptist beliefs including trinitarianism, Christology, soteriology, and other doctrines which demonstrate the commonalities between Baptists and other Christians, especially Protestants. In a section titled “Baptist Beliefs: A Study in Paradox,” he comments on the similarities with Protestants and plays down the claims to distinctives, remarking that the emphases often identified with Baptists are not necessarily exclusive or unique to one tradition. In order to retain an element of distinctiveness, Leonard suggests, “Perhaps the uniqueness is found in the way in which Baptists hold these doctrines in tension or paradox, moving across a spectrum that explains both the distinctiveness and the diversity of Baptist theology.” Again he proposes paired concepts rather than singular statements. The list, pared down from eight to six in this account, are, “Biblical authority and liberty of conscience,” “Regeneration (conversion) known through dramatic conversion and gradual nurture,” “Local autonomy and associational cooperation,” “Sacraments/ordinances: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper (foot washing),” “Priesthood of the laity and the calling out of ministers,” and “Loyalty to the state and radical religious liberty.”¹¹ The terms “paradox” and “tension” replace dialectics in this case. The function of these terms seems similar, if not exactly the same. Whereas paradox is similar to

¹¹ Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 88-89.

dialectic in its recognition that neither item of the pair can alone explain the whole, tension reflects an effort to hold together ideas which tend to pull away from one another. It is similar to the word “balance,” used in *Baptist Ways*, where it is called “a nearly impossible task.” The implication of these terms might be called a centrifugal tendency of Baptists toward fragmentation and division. Certainly paradoxical or dialectical tendencies exist in the doctrine of many if not almost all Christian confessions. This latter terminology raises questions about why Baptists are so much more prone to fragmentation over their disagreements. Such questions must be set aside for now (for this essay?).

As far as the agenda of this essay is concerned, one notable aspect of discussions about Baptist distinctives is their tendency to identify characteristics of Baptist identity which provide little insight into the heritage of white supremacy and racial division in Baptist history.

Recognizing that alone, the “distinctives” approach cannot adequately tell the story of Baptists, Leonard also organizes approximately half of *Baptists in America* around controversies which have shaped the history, thought, and practices of Baptists. The virtue of such a method is that it can identify pivotal times of ferment and growth, and of corruption and decline, in an institution or movement. Of course, the critical question arises concerning which controversies are selected as the most significant and how they will be portrayed. The selection will depend to a great extent on the perspective or social location of the interpreter. Thus, in telling the story of Southern Baptists, a kind of orthodox historiography grew up around the origins of the convention. Leonard and most contemporary historians have disavowed this orthodox retelling, but it bears rehearsal. By taking note of the name of the convention and the era of its formation as a separate Southern organization, most observers would identify the rising national divisions over slavery as the pivotal reason for its existence. Instead, a counter-intuitive story was often

told. The approved story highlighted certain truthful events and debates during the early efforts of U. S. Baptists to unite in the work of missions and education. It is said that the Northern churches tended to favor a “society” model of organizing, in which individual church members joined specific cause-related societies with little coordinated work of churches and associations. In contrast, the Southern churches were said to prefer a convention model wherein greater coordination of various mission and education activities would be guided by a convention made up of churches and associations, not individual church members. In the years of expansion in the predominantly white Southern Baptist Convention, such a story better served the interests of their point of view, even if it depended on ignoring central events and writings of Baptists in the 1840s. Telling the story of Baptists by focusing on controversies is a useful critical methodological tool, but as with all such tools its critical usefulness is never foolproof.

Perhaps the classic example of a history of Baptists which uses the “controversies” approach is a series of popular articles by Walter Shurden, published in book form under the title *Not a Silent People*. Writing for a serial whose audience was college students, Shurden demonstrated a well-researched yet reader-friendly style with minimal use of the apparatus of academic writing. Selecting an interesting and defensible set of controversies for analysis, he gives insight into how Baptists of the early 1970s came to believe and practice as they did. For the purpose of this essay, it makes sense to focus on the chapter describing the controversy that led to the division between Northern and Southern Baptists and to the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention. Shurden, in similar fashion to Leonard, rejects the “party line” narrative which would exclude slavery as a cause for these events. He makes plain that the argument was about slavery, and throughout the essay he describes the variety and progress of ideas about

slavery and race held by white Southern Baptists across the two centuries since they began to take root as a movement in the southern U. S.

The role of whiteness in shaping Baptist ethics, theology, and history appears in this controversy from the beginning, which should not be a surprise to anyone. A critical aspect relating to the purpose of this essay appears in a quotation from the “Proceedings” of that first Southern Baptist Convention meeting in 1845. Shurden quotes from those proceedings to emphasize that the Southern group did not see themselves as forming a distinct denomination on a different path from their brothers and sisters in the North.

Let not the extent of this disunion be exaggerated. . . . Northern and Southern Baptists are still brethren. *They differ in no article of the faith.* They are guided by the same principles of gospel order. . . . We do not regard the rupture as extending to foundation principles, nor can we think that the great body of our Northern brethren will so regard it.

Shurden goes on to echo their sentiment, “Theology was not the issue in Augusta. Not at all!”¹²

Based on all that follows, it is likely that he does not fully agree with their assessment, as he points out that the “Southern Baptist Convention was organized in defense of the mid-nineteenth-century Southern culture.” This strategy of evasion, of denying the relevance of theology to racial issues, had been well-rehearsed by 1845 in many statements in which “they began to say that slavery was an economic and civil issue and did not therefore properly belong in religious discussions.”¹³

Writing in the midst of the heated aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement in the South, Shurden addressed with courage one of the critical ethical issues of the time. In the context of Southern Baptist churches and in the popular style of these articles, Shurden’s catchy title for this chapter is not unexpected: “The ‘What About the Blacks?’ Controversy; or Baptists Argue over

¹² Walter Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, updated edition (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1995), 29-30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

Slavery and Segregation.” It is a title which clearly reveals the perspective of the mostly white Southern Baptist context of its writing. In the era after the Civil War, including the middle of the twentieth century, whites often labeled racial matters as “the Negro problem.” White Southern Baptists, assuming the normativity of white and European culture, theology, and society, understood racial issues as a “black problem.”¹⁴ From Shurden’s analysis of the historical narrative, one can discern a dissatisfaction with the way that this story has been told to serve the interests of white Baptists. Limited by the structure and purpose of his article series, he does not pursue the larger agenda of identifying the narration and perspective on this controversy from another unsilent people, black Baptists.

Because white Baptists construed the problem as what *they* should think and do about the blacks one gains insight into a key element of whiteness, white privilege, or white domination, in shaping theological ethics. This construal reveals the assumed possession of a normative gaze. Apparently, defining a problem adequately requires knowing only the perspective of whites. It privileges whites to make a judgment about what is good and right for blacks. The question is not framed, “What about the whites?” Leonard cites the work of Paul Harvey to make this point: “Harvey notes that for most white Baptists in the South, racial divisions were less an ‘American dilemma’ than merely a ‘Negro problem’ that could be managed successfully by judicious whites.”¹⁵ It was, and largely remains, rare for white Baptists to escape the normative gaze long enough to say, with A. C. Miller, in the 1940s, that whites will have to change their dealings with

¹⁴ Elsewhere I have developed more fully the identification of race and racism as black problems, drawing on the well-known question, “How does it feel to be a problem?”, from W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 100th Anniversary Edition (New York: Signet Classics, 1995), 43, in “Confessing Whiteness? The Normativity of Black Theologies,” unpublished address to the At Large Region of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, June 1, 2008.

¹⁵ Leonard, *Baptists in America*, 189; commenting on Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

race to think and act “not so much in the spirit of what we can do for them as in the spirit of what we can do along with them.”¹⁶

WHITENESS AND BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

In what ways has Baptist thought and practice on theological ethics been shaped by whiteness? The examination of historiography is a crucial step toward answering this question because Southern Baptist historians have done much of the important work toward letting these questions emerge. Within the narrow limits of this paper, attention has focused on two influential historians, Bill Leonard and Walter Shurden, because of their ongoing record of reflection on critical issues of Baptist identity and appropriate frameworks in which to tell the story of Baptists. From analyzing their work in context, one may note certain key points from which to begin reflection.

First is the claim that where disputes about race appeared in Baptist history, they were primarily cultural, social, economic, and political matters, but not significant theological matters. Baptist approaches to ethics often have difficulty maintaining this sort of division of reality consistently, and much of the progress from justifying slavery to advocating equal rights among white Baptists has come when ethicists have delved into theological insights concerning race. Second is the instability of Baptist distinctives approaches to Baptist history and identity. These schemes of describing Baptist identity often function as support for the agendas of institutional bureaucracies or denominational elites within the organizational structures of white Baptists. As a tool of controversy, lists of distinctives become disputed texts by which competing groups of whites attempt to make the claim to be true Baptists. Missing from this context of discourse is

¹⁶ Foy Valentine, *A Historical Study of Southern Baptists and Race Relations, 1917-1947* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 209.

the broader view of groups who as Baptists may not conform to a stipulative definition of Baptists. When it comes to the ethical reflection on race, the framing of distinctives by white Baptists results in problematic perspectives on black Baptists or other non-white Baptists. Third is the framing of race issues from the normative gaze of white privilege and domination. Further progress on race by white Baptists cannot avoid a path on which whites to relinquish normative claims on Baptist theology, ethics, and identity and become fellow travelers with black Baptists whose history, theology, and ethics have equal claim to normativity. Only on such a path can whites hear the full force and substance of the black systemic theological critique of white privilege in such a way that dialogue (rather than talking past one another) may become possible. Each of these points helps in the excavation of the invisible influence of whiteness on certain approaches to theological ethics among Baptists.

Whiteness, Race, and Theology. One prominent perspective on ethics in U. S. culture would separate theology from ethics as two distinct fields. This approach to ethics accepts certain assumptions of modernity which detach the understanding of the normatively human from “parochial” or “sectarian” religious views and situate it in a project to construct universal, or at least pluralistic, modes of ethical discourse. From this point of view, theology serves at best as a set of propositions which can provide guidance, of the sort a journalist might call “deep background,” toward the practical reasoning toward ethical judgments. While the influence of this perspective has been widespread in Baptist academics, Baptists doing theological ethics have seldom managed to maintain it consistently because of certain characteristic Baptist approaches to theology, such as the close link for Baptists between the way of Jesus and the way of the disciple. . . .