Editorial

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The search for a Baptist identity is an ongoing project, and necessarily so. Baptists do not have a founder to whom we may look for guidance or inspiration. To be sure, we have John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, or, for some, the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church in London, but these do not function in nearly the same way as a John Wesley for the Methodists or a Martin Luther for the Lutherans. Neither do we have a single confession to which all Baptists subscribe, and by which we may judge our own theology and practice. Our Presbyterian and Reformed brothers and sisters have their Westminster Confession and Three Forms of Unity, respectively, which give them a confessional foundation from which they might understand their denominational identities.

Baptists certainly do not have a Magisterium akin to that of the Roman Catholics. There is no hierarchy from which teachings and rulings are handed down. The very thought of such would make some Baptists recoil in horror. We also lack an inherent inclusiveness that other denominations enjoy. That is, Baptists are independent by nature, responsible to Christ alone as Lord, each church a city of its own. This can lead to an independence that excludes cooperation between churches, or, at the very least, limits it significantly.

Because of these things, Baptists always seem in search of an identity. The Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century produced a confession in 1644 explaining who they were, what they believed, and what they practised. This was followed by a significant revision of that confession in 1646, followed by editions in 1651 and 1652 with minor changes. Then, just over thirty years later, they produced another confession with similar theology but completely different wording. Since that time, Baptists have written dozens of confessions, some meant for denominational use and others meant only for a specific church, each striving in their own time and place to define the beliefs, practices, and identity of the group who authored it.

Perhaps that is not a bad thing, though. With no binding standard of faith, no founder to guide and influence, no Magisterium, it may well be safe to say that part of our Baptist identity is that our identity is never fixed. We are always remaking ourselves, searching Scripture and our history for hints and indicators, but ultimately making the Baptist faith anew in each generation. In that sense, we could say that Baptist identity is an evolving set of negotiated relationships with different principles.

For example, in the latter part of the last century, in the United States, Baptists fought over the issue of biblical authority. Both sides of the debate believed in biblical authority, but they did not agree on the particulars of that belief. Through debate, which was sometimes rancorous, each side negotiated their own relationship with that doctrine.

One may also consider Baptist ecclesiology. If there is any doctrine that marks out Baptists, it is this one. Despite this, Baptists have not agreed as to polity, the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, the necessity of baptism, and the form of worship. Each of those is negotiated, and often fought over, by each generation. Some negotiate a stance toward baptism, for example, that leads them to a belief in open communion, while others go through the same process and hold to strict communion. Many Baptists have reflected on the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper and concluded that he is present in some way, while others have reflected and concluded differently, holding that the supper is merely a remembrance on the part of the participant.

The examples could be multiplied. Baptists hold to these various principles, but how we believe them varies, and it is up to each successive generation of Baptists to negotiate that for themselves. The continual search for a Baptist identity, rather than being a bug in the system, is instead a feature of it.

Baptists have a need, impulse, and ability to search out and clarify their identity. The *need* for it is shown above. The *impulse* to do it is seen in our history of confessions, doctrinal statements, and, yes, conferences on Baptist identity.

Perhaps most important is our *ability* to define ourselves under the lordship of Jesus. We are not bound by a founder, and that frees us from the bounds of their theological vision. We do not have a standardised confession, and so we are not restricted in our theology and practice to the uninspired words of people who lived centuries before us. We do not have a Magisterium handing down doctrines and decrees. Baptist theology and practice are from the ground up, not from the top down. The voice of the Lord is heard in the conference of his people.

It was in this spirit that a group gathered online on 23–4 April 2021 for the *Dimensions of Baptist Identity* conference. It was originally planned to be held at the IBTS Centre in Amsterdam, but covid-19 restrictions meant that the conference was forced to go online. While the participants all missed the face-to-face interaction that we would have had in Amsterdam, we enjoyed the benefit of having more people join us than otherwise would have been possible.

The articles resulting from the conference presented in this volume are illustrative of the ongoing search for a Baptist identity in our generation. Curtis Freeman offers a theory of Baptist identity as a narratively formed construct. He offers seven ‘c’s of Baptist identity, contending that Baptist identity is construed, contested, convictional, characterised, communal, contextual, and complex. He puts his thesis to the test in the stories of Baptists in two very different contexts: Great Britain and North India.

Three articles demonstrate, in different ways, the controversies and difficulties that arise in the negotiation of identity. Over the last century, Baptists have been rethinking past attitudes and beliefs with regard to race and gender. Andy Goodliff focuses on the story of Baptists in the United Kingdom and how facing these issues has changed the life and practice of their Baptist Union. Ivan King also gives his attention to the UK Baptists, though for a quite different reason. He explores the tension that has come from the Baptist belief in the separation of church from the state on the one hand and the financial dependence of Baptist churches in the United Kingdom on government support. He shows that beliefs must always meet the solid ground of real life, and it is then that one may see how deeply held they are. Crossing the Atlantic, my own article focuses on the Texas Baptists in the United States and the controversy that erupted between the moderates and the inerrantists in the 1980s and 1990s, showing how a unique Texas Baptist identity enabled the moderates to prevent the inerrantists of taking control of their state organisation.

This volume also offers two articles that serve as examples of the current give and take of negotiating identity. In recent years, through the work of people such as Anthony Cross, Stanley Fowler, and Steven Harmon, sacramentalism and sacramental theology have seen a resurgence in Baptist life. Linda Aadne applies a Baptist sacramental view of the church, which is trinitarian and communal, to the practice of discipleship. Aadne contends that the collective practices of the local church are themselves sacramental and these practices ought to be the foundation of Christian discipleship. Roland Spjuth, however, warns against adopting a sacramental approach too quickly and without humbly listening to critiques of sacramentalism. He draws on two disparate sources of criticism: the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck and the twentieth-century liberation theology Leonardo Boff. While not written with the other in mind, the two articles show, in somewhat real time, how this particular issue is being negotiated by Baptists.

As mentioned above, Baptist cooperation has not always been a straightforward practice. Two articles deal with the question of how Baptists are connected. Matt Edminster analyses the inter-congregational partnership networks of the Baptist churches in Estonia. Tarmo Toom’s scope is much larger, as he investigates the character and place of the ancient creeds in the life of Baptists, finally contending for their recovery in congregational worship.

Finally, it has been said that the local church is the headquarters of Baptist life. It would be approaching theological malpractice to have a conference or journal volume dealing with Baptist identity and not have some focus on a particular church. Ian Randall has supplied this with his study of the history of St Andrew’s Street Baptist Church, Cambridge, focusing on the pastors who helped shape its course and showing how, through them, the church’s identity changed over the years.

The search for a Baptist identity began long before any of us took the stage, and it will continue long after we have all taken our final bow. This volume is not intended to be anything like the final word. Rather, it is offered as an additional word in the broader conversation, and it is hoped that it helps to move the conversation forward in our generation.