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Robert E. Johnson

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The year 2009 marked the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Baptist movement. In late July, leaders from 214 Baptist conventions and unions representing 36 million members and a community of 105 million persons from more than 120 nations gathered in Amsterdam, Holland, to celebrate the event. This gathering contrasted sharply with the first Baptist meeting in that city in 1609, when a company of about 40 English exiles organized the world's first Baptist church. In that contrast lie the stories, problems, and visions that furnish the content of this book. It is generally the case that the original DNA of a movement establishes its future possibilities and limitations. The initial Amsterdam Baptists were a homogeneous, unicultural, and contentious group. After their first major schism, half of the group moved back to England to take up a Baptist witness there. Thus, an Anglocentric interpretation of what it means to be Baptist was launched.

Unwittingly, the tendency to limit Baptist identity to those cultural parameters has lived on. Most often when the Baptist story is told and contextual exploration is undertaken, the contours are confined to the Anglo Baptist cultural experiences. Where others sometimes are treated, they usually are found in the margins – the by-products of the Anglo story. But, as the foregoing description illustrates, the Baptist movement has evolved beyond those boundaries. As the twenty-first century dawns, Baptists have entered a stage of development that demands new assessments of the movement's origins, expansion, global web of partners, and identity.

At its core, the Baptist movement began as a cause within the Anglo (English) culture. Its initial visionaries, though often well educated, addressed themes that became especially relevant to the Anglo under-classes of post-Reformation English society. Those concerns were focused around matters of faith and theology but also reflected social issues associated with the struggles experienced by those classes in seventeenth-century Britain. But, although Anglo social, political, and religious concerns were

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the early driving force, fairly quickly others added their cultural DNA to the Baptist movement, especially persons of Native and African cultural roots. Baptists' witness of their Bible-based faith had meaning for many non-Anglo hearers, but obviously for those adherents, being Baptist acquired different emphases and definitions because of their unique cultural sources and particular life situations. Ultimately, theirs was far more than simply an African or Native version of Anglo faith. The distinctives of their experiences created new centers of Baptist life from which new themes, new styles, new theological emphases, and new interpretations of the world emerged.

Because the dominant interpreters of the Baptist story have been Anglo, the history of the movement has tended to develop mostly along lines of Anglo cultural themes. But the Baptist movement long ago spread beyond its Anglo cultural core. Consequently, the need exists to expand interpretations of Baptist identity by exploring the cultural themes of the other groups that constitute the global Baptist family. The obligation to do this is persistently raised in classroom, church, and conference settings where Native, African, Asian, and other Baptists raise the question, Where are we in this story? Nothing here reflects our identity as Baptists. This book attempts to expose and survey some of those lines of development. In most instances, space limitations have not permitted a thorough elaboration, so the intent has been to outline pathways that need further exploration to liberate, empower, and value the travails, achievements, and contributions from the many cultures that make up the global Baptist family today. The desired outcome is that they would become more integral to the ongoing evolution of Baptist identity. This book seeks to introduce the global Baptist movement by acknowledging that this story has always been much larger than Anglo or Anglo American Baptists and has included unrecognized cultural roots that have demanded a much larger context. This means that Baptist identity continues in formation and must include a much broader sampling of the movement's shaping processes.

My desire has been to put elements of the Baptist experience together in a way that might allow for new possibilities. To do that, new elements have needed to be addressed in unconventional ways. Black Baptists, Native Baptists, and Asian Baptists are among the many that needed to be placed within their non-Anglo historical and cultural contexts. Baptist women needed to be interpreted from contexts different from those of male Baptists – out of which their stories typically have been told. Although many important persons, contributions, church traditions, and identity issues could not be developed, it is hoped that enough essential indicators

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have been included to encourage the research necessary for development of those primal sources for Baptist identity. Furthermore, because this is an introduction, numerous ideas necessarily are presented in seminal form without full elaboration and often without the extended supporting arguments that would be desirable. Many opportunities exist for correcting, nuancing, and extending the research that could only be presented here in a perfunctory fashion.

For many years, I have struggled with the unsatisfying results of trying to make Baptist identity fit around one center. Repeatedly, that effort resulted in major parts of the global Baptist community being pushed to the margins. Women, non-Anglo Baptists, and numerous other persons could never remain an integral part of the story but continually became relegated to its periphery despite their undeniable and indispensable contributions. The perspectives of emerging postmodern social analysis have offered promising clues for addressing that dilemma.<sup>1</sup> The tools of postmodernist sociopolitical critique have enabled views of social ontology and of relationships between order and structure that unlock new possibilities for interpreting Baptists' history. Utilization of some of those methodologies in this study has accentuated global Baptists' nature as a culturally polycentric movement characterized by elements that are too diverse to permit the movement's identity to be contained under a singular cultural vista. The modernist tendency to look for one center to which all other centers must conform has prevented Baptists from recognizing the vast possibilities available to them for exploring those identities more fully. Placing Anglo cultural traditioning sources in a broader framework allows many independent and differing centers to stand side by side in the Baptist quest for identity, each with its own cultural DNA, traditioning sources, and contexts of experience. This intentionally polycentric approach offers possibilities for new understandings and practices that have the potential to transform Baptists' personal and communal lives. Baptist history has

<sup>1</sup> Naturally, these methodologies include critiques derived from the insights of philosophers like Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault (who rejected a postmodernist identification). More specifically, however, I found helpful the synthesizing work of John W. Murphy in *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) and John Murphy and Jung Min Choi in *Postmodernism: Unraveling Racism and Democratic Institutions* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1997). In those works, the authors contrast modernist forms of social analysis with those of postmodernist thinkers and illumine the opportunities they believe postmodernist perspectives offer critical social analysis. Murphy is also very helpful in the attention he gives to postmodern religious attitudes. Although this study offers no pretense of presenting a serious sociological study of Baptists, many perspectives found here are indebted to insights gained from these scholars.

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long recognized this movement's theological polycentrism, including the independent identities and practices those diverse centers have generated, along with the exclusivist claims they often have engendered. Exploration of Baptist's polycentrism now needs to be extended to include cultural, social, and gender sources and should be done in a manner that values both difference and the evolution of identity.

This book's intended audience primarily includes college and university students, seminarians, clergy, interested laity, and scholars who want to know more about the history and theology of the Baptist family of denominations and their interactions with the wider cultures in which the movement's adherents have lived. Because many readers likely will have little or no knowledge of Baptist origins, the first chapter seeks to contextualize the movement by examining its traditioning processes, early cultural settings, and primal theological sources. Although much of that information is not new, it is included here as essential background material for those unfamiliar with Baptist studies. This section attempts to help the noninitiate reader understand the location of the Anglo Baptist movement within the larger ecclesial and theological contexts of Western Christianity. It also illumines the cultural and theological roots from which the Anglo Baptist movement was forged while pointing out the early existence of additional cultural and theological sources that have not generally been included in Baptists' recounting of their history. Furthermore, the incorporation of previously excluded cultural and theological traditions adds new dimensions to Baptist identity that are explored in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 identifies seminal elements within early Baptist life that contributed to diversity, although the prevalence of Anglo constituents tended to obscure this fact. Here, pathways are traced revealing how Baptist denominations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries wove specific theological and cultural elements together in pursuit of their dreams for a life that was temporally and eternally better. Those quests became the shaping forces of major early Baptist traditions.

The nineteenth century was a frontier age for the global Baptist movement. Chapter 3 examines what this meant in the British Empire, Chapter 4 illumines the frontier experiences of Baptists in the United States, and Chapter 5 explores what this age meant for Baptists on the European Continent and in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Although still largely an Anglo cultural force, missionary and evangelistic success extended the Baptist movement into a variety of new cultures, spawning additional dreamers who began to address matters relevant to their own contexts and bringing fresh sources for the enhancement of Baptist identity. Mostly

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unaware of what this meant, Anglo Baptists tended to interpret their own traditions as the truly and divinely inspired perceptions of the way life, church, government, gender roles, and all of culture should be. But the period since 1890 has witnessed the emergence of challenges to the prevailing Anglo interpretations. During this age of proliferating traditioning sources, variant Baptist communities appealed to the same Bible, the same basic faith traditions, and the same family name to espouse convictions that have sometimes clashed violently. Chapter 6 signals the start of a shift – slow at first but gaining momentum by the dawn of the twenty-first century. Baptist growth in the West began to slow and in some cases decline, whereas in Africa, Asia, and Latin America dramatic growth was occurring. Chapter 7 traces those trends into Latin America, Europe, and Eurasia, and Chapter 8 outlines the continuation of Baptist fragmentation in the United States and the multitudes of traditioning sources that were evident there by the close of the twentieth century.

A global overview of Baptist beliefs and practices is presented in Chapter 9. That survey indicates how growing diversity and proliferating traditioning sources today are reshaping Baptist identity in important ways. Although such multiformity is not totally new, it is becoming more obvious. Culturally related differences that in the past might have been ignored because geographical distances and Euro-American dominance permitted them to be subsumed under Anglo Baptist metanarratives are not so easily cast aside today. These considerations transition into the closing observations that address the new contexts in which Baptist identity is being shaped at this time.

The intent of this book, therefore, is to point toward potentially new and more inclusive dimensions for interpreting and presenting Baptists' histories and identities. My desire is not to devalue any heritage. Instead, the aim has been to construct a framework that allows each tradition (or center) to be known through its own set of experiences and beliefs without the need to judge it in light of some other tradition (except on occasions when one tradition has violated the freedom of some other tradition, thereby making critique necessary). The Anglo and Anglo-American traditions of Baptist life have contributed much to the foundations of Baptist identity. Those traditions likely will continue to offer a great deal. Yet those voices cannot be the dominant definers of Baptist identity in the future. Other voices also have much to offer. Finding helpful ways to include the "other" Baptists not only could enrich the movement's self-understanding but also could awaken Baptists to new possibilities capable of making this family of denominations far more relevant for today's world.

## PART I

*Foundations*

*And let no man be offended at us for that we differ from the ancient brethren of the separation in the Liturgy, Presbytery, and Treasury of the Church: for we hold not our faith at any man's pleasure or in respect of persons, neither do we bind ourselves to walk according to other men's lines further than they walk in the truth: neither let the world think that we approve them in all their practices: let them justify their proceedings or repent of them. We have (we willingly & thankfully acknowledge) received much light of truth from their writings, for which mercy we always bless our God: & for which help we always honor them in the Lord and in the truth. But as Paul withstood Peter to his face & separated from Barnabas that good man that was full of the holy ghost & of faith, for just causes: So must they give us leave to love the truth & honor the lord more than any man or Church upon earth.<sup>1</sup>*

John Smyth  
*Differences of the Churches of the Separation*, 1608

## A BAPTIST PROFILE

In his “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered prophetically on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed his vision of a new reality for the world in which he suffered. He envisioned a day when “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.” King was not the first to indulge such a dream, and he was not the only person in the multitude gathered that day to aspire to this new reality. The fact that his words resonated so powerfully with so many people both then and now testifies to the fact that his dream lay latent in the hearts and minds of countless people. But King, on that day, to a degree surpassing everyone before him, succeeded in giving voice to a dream that had been struggling for birth over generations. Indeed, when expanded to global proportions, this dream continues its contest for actualization. King’s words both expressed and express the hopes of many individuals for a new reality that would end brutal oppression and its debilitating wounds

<sup>1</sup> John Smyth, *Differences of the Churches of the Separation*, 1608. Reprinted in W. T. Whitley, ed., *The Works of John Smyth*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 1:269–92. The typeface and spelling in this quotation have been modernized to accommodate a global readership.

and pain. This dream took King to the “mountaintop,” from which he could faintly glimpse the Promised Land, although others, not he, would be the earthly benefactors of that dream.<sup>2</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr. globally stands among Baptists’ best-known luminaries. And because his character and ideals are so widely known and respected, his dream illustrates a powerful metaphor through which the Baptist story might be communicated to a global audience. For King’s dream was not only a product of his social and political experiences; it also was born in the matrix of his African American Baptist heritage and was thereby informed by particular ways of reading and valuing the Bible, by the dreams of his larger faith community, and by his understanding of how God engages in the human condition. Captured in a memorial inscription erected outside the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where King was martyred, are words expressing the truth that he embodied best: “And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him . . . and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” King’s legacy as a man of dreams epitomizes the essence of the global Baptist tradition – a people of dreams.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. “I Have a Dream Speech,” qtd. in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Time Warner Book Group, 1998), 223–7.

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## CHAPTER I

*The Primal Shaping Processes of the  
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Dreams for a life that is new and better (however a particular Baptist group might define that) characterize the global experience of Baptists more than any other single set of qualities. Baptist identity has been marked less by a commonly acknowledged body of valued traditions preserved from the past than by the power of dreams to forge the future. Over their history, Baptists, individually and collectively, have been guided by a wide variety of dreams. Among them was the dream of freedom to worship without external coercion; the dream of liberty to study and apply the Bible as conscience, knowledge, and reflection might dictate; the dream of freedom to organize and govern themselves in churches free of ecclesiastical and governmental interference; the dream of liberation from human enslavement; the dream of freedom from cultural discrimination in the formulation of belief and practice; the dream of being trusted as true servants of the common good and not as enemies of the people in socialist regimes; the dream of deliverance from gender bias in religious and communal life; and the list could be continued in extenso.

The foregoing Baptist profile highlighted Martin Luther King Jr. as an exemplar to the global community of Baptist dreaming. He also demonstrates another aspect of the Baptist experience – living a dream is not easy. Power holders tend not to like dreamers, for power holders prefer to keep things as they are. Dreamers, however, like to think revolutionary thoughts. They hope for a new way, being unwilling to accept the hopelessness of things as they currently stand when injustices prevail. Inspired by the Bible, faith traditions, courageous leaders, and the unacceptable situations of the societies in which they have been located, Baptists have been people of many dreams. Sometimes those dreams have clashed with one another. Too often some within the Baptist family have assumed positions as power holders seeking to ossify their own dreams into structures that would enslave or deny the dreams of others, even those of fellow Baptists. During such times, Baptists have entered into conflict with one another



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as competing dreams have struggled for expression. At their best, Baptists have found the toleration and forms needed to give life to the dreams of all. At their worst, they have tried to crush opposing dreams, usually with less-than-satisfying outcomes. Still, their dreams have provided the force that has propelled the Baptist movement onto a global stage.

Dreams are not born in a vacuum, however. They are products of historical realities, cultural traditions, personal experiences, imagination, hope, faith, and related qualities. The motivating power of Baptist dreaming becomes intelligible only as we comprehend the processes of theological, cultural, and historical traditioning that give form to Baptist convictions. Furthermore, dreams require dreamers. The Baptist story includes individuals and communities whose lives, in significant ways, have embodied the things dreamed. Woven together, these elements form the tapestry of a family of denominations whose most consistent thread is their dreams of achieving life that is abundant, both now and eternally. Baptists believe the blueprints for that life should be drawn from the Bible. Different expressions of Baptist life have emerged as individuals and communities have interpreted the biblical texts, Christian traditions, and human societies in varied ways.

Baptists cannot point to a single individual or group as the fundamental shaping source of their faith tradition. They have never been inspired by just one dreamer. Although numerous histories point to the Anglican priest John Smyth (introduced in the next chapter) as the first Baptist, in reality, he significantly influenced only one strand of the Baptist movement and remained Baptist for only a short period of time. Several of his followers rescued his early Baptist dreams and gave them organizational life through the English General Baptist denominations. Yet various other Baptist denominations have originated without any knowledge of Smyth's teachings and without any contact with or influence from descendants of his movement. Some sources make a case for the Jacob-Lathrop-Jesse church in London (also discussed in the next chapter) during the 1630s as the starting point for the mainstream of the Baptist tradition, thereby laying claims to it and its views as the source of the "true" Baptist tradition. Again, none of the original pastors of that church were Baptist – although the church itself became the source of several Particular Baptist congregations in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Still other Baptist bodies have emerged without reference to or influence from either of those sources. Something other

<sup>1</sup> Henry Jessey later embraced Baptist convictions and was baptized by Hansard Knollys in 1645, at least seven years after the first Particular Baptist church was formed.

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than a historical succession is needed to explain the essence of Baptists' traditions.

Neither can Baptists point to a single theological tradition. A large part of the Baptist movement either is a product of or is heavily influenced by the Reformed or Calvinist tradition. Yet from the beginning, many Baptists embraced other theological foundations, including Free Will or Arminian positions; Seventh-Day principles; either strict or ecumenical attitudes toward communion; an African sacred cosmos, an Anglican sacred cosmos, or a sacred cosmos that somehow blended or modified the two; in addition to numerous other sources. Contemporary Baptists also are not the product of a single cultural influence. The cultural shapers of the global Baptist movement are almost as varied as humanity itself. Consequently, when the Baptist movement is examined closely, one finds an amalgam of traditions – many totally independent of the others – that defies serious efforts genuinely to interpret them as one. Herein resides the problem of justly structuring and articulating a global history of the Baptist movement.

## BAPTISTS' TRADITIONING PROCESSES

Traditioning is a complex interplay of power and dreams. Power attempts both to arrange and maintain affairs to preserve a desired status quo; the dream hopes to change that arrangement. Frequently during their history, Baptists have experienced bitter battles over which or whose dreams, definitions, and descriptions are (or should be) the authoritative ones. Various Baptist individuals and groups have produced histories designed to highlight and give support to the qualities and characteristics that each has perceived as expressing the true version of who Baptists are, what they think, and how they practice their faith. Such interpreters usually prefer an established tradition over the dynamic visions of those who dream.

The greatest drawback with efforts to interpret the Baptist story as a single or even unified tradition has been the tendency to judge alternative traditions as somehow erroneous or defective. Such approaches are inclined either to leave out or to marginalize significant parts of the story that don't fit the singular tradition's values, priorities, and preferred doctrines and practices. Recognizing that the Baptist story is not just one tradition but a complex of traditions with an ongoing process of traditioning helps to reduce the tendency to overlook, exclude, or evoke prejudice against different traditions within the Baptist movement. This allows each part of the tradition to be examined in its own context, have value in its own right, and be viewed as contributing to the continuing process of Baptist