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**BAPTISTS ARE
ANTI-ECUMENICAL**

Glenn Jonas

Admittedly, large numbers of Baptist individuals and groups have opposed any type of active cooperation or attempts at formal unity with other Christian groups.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this was the nineteenth-century Landmark Movement among Southern Baptists, which championed an unbroken succession of Baptist churches extending through Christian history to Jesus, John, and the Jordan River.

The Southern Baptist Tradition

Landmarkists believed that the only true “church” was a local body of Baptist believers. Therefore, they refused to participate in pulpit exchanges with non-Baptist pastors, championed closed communion, and rejected the validity of “alien” immersions (believer’s baptism not administered by Baptist ministers). Demonstrating his contempt for non-Baptists, J. R. Graves, one of the pioneers of the movement, often referred to Methodist churches as “societies” rather than churches. Landmarkism left a permanent legacy among Southern Baptists that, with the exception of a few individuals, has discouraged ecumenical endeavors with other Christian groups, especially Roman Catholics.

Southern Baptists, however, did not start the twentieth century completely opposed to finding common ground among all Christians. At the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1911, a committee was appointed and assigned to keep the SBC abreast of the developments in the ecumenical movement following the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, a world missionary conference that sought to find areas of cooperation among missionaries around the world. The meeting is usually considered to be the catalyst for the

ecumenical movement of the twentieth century.

This committee presented a report to the annual SBC meeting in 1914 titled “Pronouncement on Christian Union and Denominational Efficiency.” Although cautious to maintain important Baptist distinctives, the statement did hold out the possibility of optimism in the area of Christian unity:

This Convention rejoices in the many evidences of increasing interest in the subject of Christian union among Christian people everywhere. Many evils arise from the divided state of modern Christendom We rejoice that the measure of agreement [among evangelical Christians] is already so great. . . . We firmly believe that a way may be found through the maze of divided Christendom out into the open spaces of Christian union only as the people of Christ follow the golden thread of an earnest desire to know and do His will. But, meantime, we may have the rare joy of fellowship and cooperation in many forms of endeavor wherein angels might well desire to have a part.¹

The spirit expressed in the report did not ever fully take hold in the SBC, however. Although Southern Baptists have been willing to cooperate with some other Christians in areas related to ethics and morality from time to time, they have avoided formal involvement in the ecumenical movement. The SBC has never been a formal participant or supporter of the National Council of Churches (formerly the Federal Council of Churches) or the World Council of Churches, although individual Southern Baptists have occasionally served on committees and commissions of both organizations.

Nevertheless, an argument can be made on a broader scale that Baptists are ecumenical; some Baptist groups have even been involved formally in the ecumenical movement.

The Broader Baptist Tradition

While Southern Baptists have tended to resist ecumenical endeavors of a formal nature, other Baptist groups have actively participated in such efforts. British Baptists, in particular, were very active in ecumenical work throughout the twentieth century. One of the earliest advocates of ecumenical dialogue was missionary pioneer William Carey, who in 1805 called for a general meeting in Cape Town of representatives from all Christian denominations. Carey believed such a meeting consisting of Christians from all over the world would promote greater understanding and cooperation.²

Although Carey's meeting did not occur, some British Baptists did make efforts to bring all Christians into unity. They were represented at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910 and were instrumental in organizing the World Council of Churches in 1948. John H. Shakespeare, general secretary of the Baptist Union in 1898-1928, strongly advocated the organic union of all Christians. His book, *The Churches at the Crossroads: A Study in Church Unity* (1918), lamented the sectarian divisions that divided Christians. He actively sought to reunite Baptists with the Church of England.³

Ernest A. Payne was another champion of ecumenism among British Baptists. Serving as general secretary of the Baptist Union in 1951-67, he was more involved in ecumenical matters than Shakespeare. During his tenure at the helm of the Baptist Union, he ascended to prominence in the leadership of the World Council of Churches, serving a term as vice-president.⁴

In America, Northern Baptists (called "American Baptists" after 1950) represented a strong voice of

support for ecumenism. Most American history has witnessed a tradition of ecumenical cooperation between Baptists in the North and other Christian denominational groups. In colonial America, Baptists cooperated with Congregationalists and Presbyterians, especially in the area of pastoral installations. In the early twentieth century, the Northern Baptist Convention participated as a charter member in the founding of the Federal Council of Churches (1908), which later became the National Council of Churches (1950). The Northern Baptist Convention also had representation at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910 and became a charter member of the World Council of Churches in 1948. In 1966, the American Baptist Convention created the Office of Ecumenical Relations to maintain ecumenical discussions with other Christians.⁵

Baptist Theology and Practice

The Baptist theological tradition is not completely original. Baptists borrowed theological ideas and distinctive practices from other Christian traditions. Fisher Humphreys, professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University, has described the common beliefs that Baptists share with all Christians in a section of his book, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means to Us All*. Theological concepts such as belief in one God who created the world, the reality of sin in the world, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the missionary imperative, the ordinances of baptism and communion, future hope, and the authority of the Bible are all beliefs that are foundational to Baptist theology. Certainly, Baptists did not invent these beliefs. In fact, these theological

concepts had been foundational for most Christians for centuries before the Baptist denomination was ever born and were reflected in such ancient statements of faith such as the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed.⁶

In addition to these core theological convictions Baptists share with other Christians, many "Baptist distinctives" are not the exclusive property of Baptists. Believer's baptism came from the Anabaptist tradition. The Waterlander Mennonites were even practicing believer's baptism by immersion before Baptists. The concept of the priesthood of all believers, although later modified by Baptists, originally came from Martin Luther. The idea of local church autonomy came from the Separatist tradition within the Anglican Church. Anabaptists championed the concept of religious liberty almost a century before the birth of the Baptists.⁷ Baptists owe a great debt to the broader Christian tradition. So, in that sense, the very nature of what it means to be a Baptist theologically and practically is ecumenical. Baptist historian Walter Shurden advises that the time has come "for Baptists who acknowledge the authority of scripture for faith and practice to confess our oneness with and our dependency on the larger Body of Christ."⁸

Conclusion

Many Baptists have opposed the ecumenical movement. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that Baptists are not ecumenical. Baptist theology and practice, including beliefs and practices known as "distinctives," are all indebted to the broader Christian tradition. Furthermore, individual Baptists and some Baptist groups have worked diligently for the reunion of Christians. Baptists have always been a diverse people. This diversity is reflected in every contested issue of Baptist faith and practice, including

their attitudes toward ecumenical involvement. Ecumenism among Baptists simply mirrors the ever-present diversity existing among Baptists.

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1. *Annual*, SBC, 1914, pp. 73, 76, 77.

2. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 518-19.

3. *Ibid.*, 501-03.

4. *Ibid.*, 503.

5. *Ibid.*, 600-02.

6. Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means to Us All* (New York: McCracken Press, 1994), 3-22.

7. Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), 9-10.

8. *Ibid.*, 10.

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