




THE BAPTISTS
 KEY PEOPLE INVOLVED IN FORMING A BAPTIST IDENTITY

VOLUME THREE
 THE MODERN ERA

TOMNETTLES




MENTOR





Dedication

To the churches with whom Baptists share a common orthodoxy, a vibrant evangelicalism, and a conscientious commitment to confessionalism that have been instrumental by God's grace in shaping the Baptist witness to the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Copyright © Thomas J. Nettles 2007

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-1-84550-211-9



Published in 2007
in the
Mentor imprint
by



Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House,
Fearn, Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Scotland.

www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Daniel Van Straaten

Printed and bound by
WS Bookwell, Finland

Copyright © Artwork by Robert Nettles

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or a license permitting restricted copying. In the U.K. such licenses are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.





Acknowledgments

In the two previous volumes of this study of Baptist identity, I have thanked my publisher Christian Focus Publications for this venture in publishing, my editor Malcolm Maclean for his friendly persistence, my son Robert Nettles for his sketches, my wife Margaret Nettles for her patience and encouragement, my students for their candor and inquisitiveness, my colleagues in several theological seminaries, and my employer The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary under the superb guidance of President R. Albert Mohler, Jr. I reiterate my indebtedness to each and can only intensify the words of appreciation expressed before.







Preface

This concluding volume discusses the currents of thought that challenged historic Baptist identity from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the present. In keeping with the generally biographical approach, the dynamics of mutation will emerge in discussing relevant aspects of the life stories of those who expressed and embraced them as well as those that sought to hold back the onrushing tide of change. In the end, even among those who sought to conserve the past, observable changes in historic Baptist identity had accumulated.

These volumes of *The Baptists* have presented Baptist identity as consisting of four tightly interwoven elements: orthodoxy, evangelicalism, conscientious confessionalism (both individual and corporate), and a separatistic, theologically-integrated ecclesiology. Each of these ideas conforms to the most fundamental principle of Baptist identity, the Scripture principle – that is, Scripture not only is inerrant but is sufficient and functions as the sole rule for faith and practice. I have not described this Baptist vision as a simple historical phenomenon, but have viewed these interlocking spheres of doctrine as a standard by which the wide variety of continually developing thoughts and thinkers should be evaluated. Some ideas are consistent with and contribute to Baptist identity, and some do not.

Along with every other denomination of orthodox confessional Christianity, Baptists found themselves involved in an internal struggle for adherence to supernatural revelation and the doctrines built on it. The liberal tumult challenged each element of this paradigm of identity as optional at best and unnecessary finally. Modernistic efforts to find continuity with developments in modern thought – geology, biology, sociology, psychology, historical idealism and relativism, critical biblical studies, and restatements of truth in terms of experience rather than proposition – led to truly revolutionary concepts of the meaning of ‘Baptist’ as well as ‘Christian’. Conservative attempts to salvage the fundamental necessity of divine revelation and conversion of the lost gave a narrower scope of emphasis to Baptist defenses of truth. Consequently, some prominent elements of Baptist concerns of the past nestled into obscurity.

For this reason, this book does not view the theological persuasions of John Clifford, Shailer Mathews, William Newton Clarke, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Ralph Elliott, and others as helpful to Baptist life. Though some observers of Baptist history may celebrate the freshness of thought, the contention for academic freedom, and the courage exhibited by some of these as central to the universal Baptist witness, I do not. I see them as corrupting influences – they corrupted both the Baptist idea of freedom as well as the rich confessional doctrine that nourished the Baptist fellowship. Whether positive or negative, our evaluations have relevance only to the degree that they destroy or build up the church. An infinitely more sobering time will come when ‘every man’s work shall be made manifest’, and ‘those that defile the temple of God shall God destroy’ (1 Cor. 3:13, 17).

We start with the shock of seeing the Baptist Union gasping for life while being systematically choked by liberalism. Spurgeon attempted to reverse this rapid and near fatal ‘Downgrade’ while John Clifford greased the Spurgeonic skids. The breakdown among American Baptists happened right under the nose of A. H. Strong and took firm root through the influence of pastors and theologians like Fosdick, Mathews and Clarke. E. Y. Mullins had a Strong-like effect on Southern Baptists, allowing a broadness of theological strategy to develop under his watch while disarming those who might have given substantial challenge to the decline. A variety of resistance movements developed to this decline both in England and America, but the strongest and most successful occurred among Southern Baptists. That story is told here.

The amount of damage inflicted on the Baptist body during such decline and turmoil cannot be healed quickly. Several areas in which recovery still languishes are exposed to the strong medicine of historical precedent in the penultimate chapter. Sections on confessional identity, denominational unity, preaching, world view, missions, evangelism, and, intermittently, relations to other denominations provide material for continued recovery of Baptist identity. Finally the implications of the theological decline for the way historians deal with Baptist identity, including a final defense for the model proposed here, close this study of Baptist history and identity.