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## The Loss of Baptist Identity: How the Loss of the Baptist Name Impacts Theological Identity

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BETHEL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
BETHEL UNIVERSITY

THE LOSS OF BAPTIST IDENTITY: HOW THE LOSS OF THE BAPTIST NAME  
IMPACTS THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY

A THESIS PROJECT REPORT  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
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ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA  
DECEMBER 2020



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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the United States, many Baptist churches have been following a recent trend of dropping “Baptist” from the church title. Research has shown that with the rise of post-denominationalism, there is a loss of identity in Baptist churches. This study explores the effects of dropping the name Baptist from a church’s title and its perceived impact on the theological identity of the church. This study includes a literature review analyzing the current body of literature on Baptist identity. Six Converge North Central Baptist churches were studied, three with a Baptist name and three without, using church surveys and interviews with church leaders to determine what theological differences exist between the two categories. The results of the study showed theological differences between the two categories; however, further research, including a quantitative analysis of Baptist churches spanning a broader region of the United States, would be helpful in determining catalysts for Baptist churches dropping the Baptist name.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM WITH THE LOSS OF A BAPTISTIC IDENTITY

### **A Hypothetical Congregation**

In a rural, small-town church located off a major highway in the farmlands of Minnesota, a Baptist congregation sits amongst a sea of Lutheran congregations. Within this pleasant country congregation lies a desire to attract those who are unsaved into a saving faith in Christ. Old Country Baptist Church has been in ministry for nearly a century. Their building and people speak of a bygone era when the congregation was booming and people in the community were coming to Christ in the Baptist congregation. The people in this community have been known for many convictions throughout the past century, some of them the congregation would like to remember, and some the congregation would rather forget. The congregation used to be known as the “bible thumpers,” the crowd that did not smoke, drink, chew, or associate with those who did. They avoided alcohol (and made sure to tell others about their convictions), bypassed going to the movie theater, and shunned any form of dancing. At one point in time, Old Country Baptist Church was known less as a Baptist congregation and more as a congregation that avoided activities altogether, as well as all the people around them that did not embrace their worldview.

During the 1990s, Old Country Baptist Church experienced radical growth. The congregation began to soften its stance on many of the formerly divisive issues. They began to acknowledge that some of the forbidden activities were disputable matters and if the Bible did not expressly forbid the activity, there was some freedom for the individual



in participating in the activity. However, in spite of the time of growth, Old Country Baptist Church began to slowly decline in the next decade. In 2019, the congregation experienced the smallest average attendance since the 1980s. Many members from the congregation had their own theories as to what caused the decline in attendance and involvement, and each generation and demographic seemed to disagree about how to solve the trending decline. As a result of this dissonance, several Old Country Baptist Church members recommended that a committee be put together to assess whether the congregation should change its name to appeal to those within the community who may be uncomfortable with exploring a “Baptist” congregation, due to the negative perception the word might conjure.

Several months later, the committee was assembled at Old Country Baptist Church as a think tank with a cross section of the congregation’s demographics represented. There were single, married, old, young, as well as upper- and middle-class representatives in what otherwise may be described as a homogenous community on the brink of diversity. Like many other small towns, theirs was experiencing an influx of immigrants and working-class urbanites who wanted to work in the local factories.

The committee meetings might have been described as lively, to put it mildly. There were those on the committee who made a plea to accommodate younger, less traditional members who were outside of a Baptist worldview. These individuals believed that names are just names; they wanted to help those who were dying without a savior. If sacrificing a name would bring someone to church, why waste time and energy defining a “Baptist?” On the other hand, there were others on the committee who were hesitant. These committee members emphasized that although Baptists have had a bad reputation

over the years for being legalistic and aggressive, there are also positive contributions by Baptists throughout history. Baptists hold certain theological beliefs that are different from the Lutherans and other congregations that surround them. These differences are at the core of their convictions and they do not see a purpose in surrendering vital theological nuances like confessional believers' baptism, the symbolism of the ordinances, or the freedom of the local congregation. These committee members question the long-term effects of eliminating "Baptist" from the name. In fifty years, will the congregation still have a Baptist worldview? Will the congregation still be unapologetically Baptist in its belief and theology? The members bring up some tough questions. Questions that this research intends to address. At the conclusion of the paper is a summary of how Old Country Baptist Church resolved this issue within their congregation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem this project addressed is the loss of baptistic identity, as indicated through church name change, in Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota and the effect it has had on congregations. Like the hypothetical "Old Country Baptist Church" scenario, this project will seek to understand loss of baptistic identity in Baptist congregations and resulting consequences in its congregations. In response to the problem, the researcher has (a) reviewed related theologically distinct baptistic biblical passages and church history material from the 20th and 21st centuries, (b) reviewed related literature assessing the causes and reasons for the loss of baptistic identity, (c) utilized surveys and interviews to assess the unintended consequences of the loss of baptistic identity in Northern Minnesotan Converge North Central churches, and based

upon the results of these consequences, (d) made suggestions to Baptist congregations based upon the study's findings.

This problem is multifaceted and complex. In a post-denominational, post-Christian world, the church has been slowly losing the power structures that it once governed through moral conformity and through social capital.<sup>1</sup> A post denominational world is one in which the power structures of the institutional church have lost their previous influence and power. This power loss began during the 20th century with the advancement of weapons of mass destruction. Additionally, a cultural shift of post-modernity occurred that was characterized by a general lack of purpose in society, which would give meaningful story to the society and individual.<sup>2</sup> The advent of the philosophy of nihilism as forecasted by Friedrich Nietzsche, prepared the way for the breaking down of previously held theistic worldviews in favor of the naturalistic.<sup>3</sup> The naturalistic is the belief that the tangible and empirical are superior forms of epistemology. The reality of a post-Christian culture is not the subject of this project. The subject of this project is the church's response to a post-Christian culture, how Baptists have responded, and specifically how Baptists in the Northern Minnesota region of Converge North Central (formerly the Minnesota Baptist Conference) have responded to this new reality. This project will address the context of naming practices related to the theological identity of Baptist congregations and the unintended consequences of those decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Wright, "Building the Casa de Cristo in Post Christendom America," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 41, no. 1 (April 2018): 78.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, 78.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1968), 187.

Two of many responses that have occurred in response to post-Christian culture by Baptists are to retain a theologically distinct identity, or to lose the theologically distinct naming practice of “Baptist” within the church’s title. A well-known example occurred in 1980. Rick Warren planted a Baptist church named Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California.<sup>4</sup> This naming practice began to be popularized as the post-denominational trend in America continued through the twenty first century culminating in a Baptist denomination, the Baptist General Conference, changing their name to a theologically non-descriptive name, “Converge.”<sup>5</sup> The trend is reflective of post-denominational Christianity in America.

Whenever an institution is faced with a crisis, the temptation is often to treat the symptoms and overlook the causes.<sup>6</sup> This temptation faces many fields, institutions, and disciplines. The church, especially the church in the post-Christian and post-modern West, has faced the difficult crisis of the loss of theologically distinct metanarratives, which provide a meaningful context and structure to guide people’s thoughts and actions. The goal of this project is not to condemn the church for the decisions made in the face of this looming crisis, but to analyze the effects and consequences of the specific decision to lose the traditional, specific theological identities associated with Baptist churches during the post-denominational era.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 310.

<sup>5</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 311.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Rutherford, *The Elements of Thinking in Systems* (U.S.A.: Kindle Direct Publishing, 2019), 110.

Every decision can potentially produce both positive and negative externalities.<sup>7</sup>

While a plethora of material encourages a non-denominational naming of churches, little addresses possible consequences of ridding the church of its descriptive theological name and identity. More specifically, any losses of theological distinctives in churches that choose to not associate in their name with a broader Baptist identity have not been studied in detail, perhaps because of its currency and, thereby, lack of historical data. If people are attracted to a church because of its non-denominational name, will this congregation bring with it a sub-set of expectations into the church community about its theological affiliation? Are pastors and leaders more apt to preach and teach more ecumenically-appealing theology rather than distinctly baptistic theology?

### **Definition of Terms**

To provide a common vocabulary, the following list includes words that can take on numerous definitions or might be ambiguous. While there may be other appropriate definitions and ways in which these words are used elsewhere, for the purposes of this project the provided terms will be used as follows.

Baptistic identity is defined as a willingness to associate with the term, “Baptist,” and other baptistic theological distinctives.<sup>8</sup> A baptistic identity can be found in someone who embraces the Baptist label. Baptistic theology is defined as the central tenets of baptistic theology including the belief in symbolic ordinances, the need for personal conversion, congregational church polity, and believer’s confessional baptism by

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<sup>7</sup> Rutherford, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 310.

immersion.<sup>9</sup> Evangelical is defined as Christians who hold to orthodox Christian theology, the inerrancy and authority of Scripture; Evangelical Christians adhere to a personal need for conversion and relationship with God through Jesus Christ. A Baptist church is a congregation whose faith statements adhere to traditional baptistic theology and practices, regardless of denominational affiliation or congregational naming practice. A church attender is distinguished from church member as someone who attends church regularly (at least monthly) without a formal declaration of membership or commitment to the congregation. A church member is defined as someone who has gone through the process of formally declaring their commitment to their local congregation and accepts the rights and responsibilities associated with membership. A non-denominational church is an individual congregation without larger denominational affiliation. An attractional church is a congregation that values relevant and attractive ministries designed to attract to their church those without a church background of belonging to the church.<sup>10</sup>

### **Delimitations of the Problem**

While the scope of this problem is prevalent across the western world, the scope of this project is localized to six Converge North Central Baptist churches in Northern Minnesota. Other researchers and observers may make inferences or apply the findings of this project to other churches, but the study is not intended to be exhaustive of all denominations, all Baptist churches, or all Converge churches.

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<sup>9</sup> Kimlyn J. Bender, "Karl Barth, Confessionalism, and the Question of Baptist Identity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 62.

<sup>10</sup> Billy Hornsby, *The Attractional Church* (New York, NY: Faith Words, 2011), 2.

The research is limited to the historical loss of Baptist identity in Baptist churches in North America. This study shows the progressive loss of baptistic identity in Baptist churches in North America throughout history and specifically from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The research is limited to theologically distinct Baptist churches. This research is not comprehensively studying all Baptist denominations, Baptist churches, or baptistic non-denominational churches. The purpose of this research is to study broad historical trends and theological distinctives of Baptist theology and Baptist churches within North America.

The field research was conducted with six Converge North Central churches in the Northern Minnesota region. The field research involves three Baptist churches with Baptist names, and three Baptist churches without Baptist names. This research is qualitative mixed-methods in design.

### **Assumptions**

The first assumption is there are always unintended consequences for decisions made considering the church. Similar to other organizations, the typical way in which an organization seeks to find a solution to any given problem is to first find a “fix” for a symptom.<sup>11</sup> The root causes of a symptom are often ignored and are seen as the symptoms, which creates a type of feedback loop of reinforcement.<sup>12</sup> This reinforcement is often supported by the system and as new symptoms emerge they are treated in isolation as the loop continues. This type of loop is fed through confirmation bias, which

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<sup>11</sup> Rutherford, 110.

<sup>12</sup> Rutherford, 113.

assimilates all new information as corroborating the previously held theory concerning the original problem.<sup>13</sup>

The second assumption is that God is supremely sovereign over the church and sustains it. Jesus says “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom”<sup>14</sup> (Matt. 16:28 [ESV]). In this statement, Jesus promises his church that there will be a remnant left when he returns. Regardless of what problems, difficulties, or issues the church encounters, it is in no danger of being eradicated.

The third assumption is the church is created and instituted by God as a divine reality.<sup>15</sup> While the church is a divine institution, it is a system similar to other sociological organizations in that it can be observed and studied with benefit toward the church.

The fourth assumption is the church is composed of all true members of the body of Christ regardless of denomination (1 Cor. 12:12). The Apostle Paul declares that Christ is the head of his body, the church (Col. 1:18). This reality shapes the focus of the church as an organic body being sustained by Christ. The Apostle Paul describes Christ as perpetually interceding for his people at the right hand of God the Father (Rom. 8:34).

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<sup>13</sup> Yoram Bar-Tal, Hanna Brycz, Barbara Dolinska, and Dariusz Dolinski, “When Saying That You are Biased Means that You are Accurate? The Moderating Effect of Cognitive Structuring on Relationship Between Metacognitive Self and Confirmation Bias Use” *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues*, (Nov 7, 2017): 1708.

<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 26.



While the church may have human divisions, it is a singular entity under Christ and is a unified whole under him. The goal of the church is to seek to grow in unity as Christ prayed that his church may be one just as he and the Father were one (John 17:20-21).

The fifth assumption is that it is acceptable for believers to come to different conclusions on disputable matters of the faith (Rom. 14:1-5). Such differing conclusions all honor God in those convictions. The church is admonished not to judge one another regarding each other's convictions (Rom. 14). Similarly, each Christ follower may be called by God with different convictions for different callings in life. God is seen calling the disciples to different callings in life (John 21:18-23). Peter was called to be crucified, and John was called to live a longer life and die of natural causes. In life, there are Christians who are called to defeat the enemy and there are those who are called to be killed by their enemies, but each one who follows Christ in these is called faithful (Heb. 11:32-40). While convictions are powerful callings from God, disputable matters demand mutual respect among believers. Christians from different denominations can work together in ways that do not compromise their beliefs.

The sixth assumption is that differing beliefs do not have to be a source of contention for Christians. There can be unity without uniformity. The Apostle Paul describes giving up his dietary freedoms to not cause offense to his brothers (1 Cor. 9). Paul describes the brother whose conscience is destroyed by another brother for eating food sacrificed to idols as the "weaker brother" (1 Cor. 8:11). It should be the desire of believers to respect each other's beliefs while simultaneously holding fast to their convictions. To allow another believer's convictions to destroy one's conscience is a sign of being a "weaker brother." Being sanctified as a Christian should result in maturity and

growing up as a Christian so that one can respect another believer's convictions that may be different than one's own (*see* 1 Pet. 2:2 and Eph. 4:11-16).

The seventh assumption is that Scripture is the inerrant Word of God. Scripture is useful for all manner of life and is the authoritative source for belief and practice (2 Tim. 3:16). Scripture is the standard for truth (John 17:17).<sup>16</sup> The Bible is the written Word of God that contains the necessary revelation of the Gospel for salvation (Rom. 10:13-17).<sup>17</sup> The Bible contains everything necessary for the believer to have faith, trust, and obedience in God.<sup>18</sup>

### **Setting of the Project**

The setting of the project is within Converge North Central churches of Northern Minnesota. The scope is a historical outline of the trending loss of baptistic identity within Converge churches. Throughout protestant history, there has been a trend and movement away from tradition as a source of authority within the church.<sup>19</sup> The Reformation cry of *Semper Reformanda* created a new source of identity for Protestant believers in that tradition itself was no longer a good enough source for a church identity.<sup>20</sup> Kimlyn Bender writes on Karl Barth's understanding of the rejection of traditionalism in the Reformed movement:

Barth's rejection of such traditionalism rests upon the acknowledgement of the uncomfortable fact that the original Reformed answer given to the question of its

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<sup>16</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan: 1994), 90.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne Grudem, 116.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne Grudem, 127.

<sup>19</sup> Bender, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Bender, 53.

identity is at its root and in its founding one that radically calls into question all simple appeals to tradition of any kind, and in principle, even its own. And it is here, at this point, that the Reformed church set the Scripture principle as the antithesis against all warm-hearted and romantic, or even dogmatic, appeals to the centrality and normativity of tradition.<sup>21</sup>

In the attempt to self-identify, protestants quickly began to sub-divide under the new ideological and theological premise of the Reformation during the modern time period.

Despite this self-identity crisis, the protestant church stood with a relative sense of identity in their particular theological distinctives. Theological splits led to greater theological specificity, not greater theological ambiguity. Within the Baptist identity, two great Baptist identities emerged: the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists.<sup>22</sup> Each group of Baptist identity represented specific theological roots and beliefs. While each group was distinct, they also were united in their common Baptist theological beliefs and their common Baptist ancestry.

The Baptist identity had been forged in the fires of suffering. In England between 1660 and 1688, Baptists underwent the Great Persecution for their beliefs.<sup>23</sup> During this same time period in America, many Baptists found themselves imprisoned or tortured for their baptistic identity.<sup>24</sup> This persecution helped to inform and solidify a common identity amongst Baptists. In spite of their persecution, Baptists retained their identity and

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<sup>21</sup> Bender, 4.

<sup>22</sup> H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>23</sup> Kirsten Thea Timmer, "English Baptist Women Under Persecution (1660-1688): A Study of Social Conformity and Dissent," *Baptist History and Heritage* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 18.

<sup>24</sup> Milton P. Ryder, "Swimming Against the Current: The Strange Therapy of Persecution; The Price Paid for Religious Liberty By Some Early Massachusetts Baptists and the First Baptist Church," *American Baptist Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 2002): 12.

grew larger within the larger framework of their Protestant identity. The Baptist identity provided a theological and community framework for theological, community, and ideological beliefs central to the human condition. It was larger than an intellectual theory. A Baptist identity provided a larger metanarrative, commitment, and source of belonging for Christians who identified with a baptistic distinct theology and church community.

Amid persecution and suffering, Baptists continued to thrive in America. Baptists achieved their first associational structure and unified sense of conformity in the Philadelphia Baptist Association of 1707.<sup>25</sup> Once a common doctrine was established, Baptists were able to unite under a common identity despite theological differences, namely Particular and General Baptists, and unique local expressions. In 1812 when missionary Adoniram Judson arrived in Burma, he was persuaded of Baptist theology while reading and studying the Greek New Testament during his voyage. He renounced his missionary support in the Congregationalist denomination and sent his traveling companion back to the United States to inform them of his situation and to seek support from Baptists in the United States. This sparked a unified Baptist missionary effort under the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Missions.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Terry Wolever, introduction to *Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith* (Asheville, NC: Revival Literature, 2007), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Nathan A. Finn, "Until All Burma Worships the Eternal God," in *Adoniram Judson*, ed. Jason G. Duesing (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 79.

Baptists were historically devoted to the cause of freedom in America. This desire for freedom was rooted in their own desire to peaceably assemble and worship in a sectarian way as they saw fit. After Thomas Jefferson's presidential term took place, the Danbury Baptists of Connecticut wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1801 seeking equality with the Congregationalists who received official state support.<sup>27</sup> As religious liberty increased, the plight of the American Baptists diminished. With the persecution and suffering of American Baptists prominent in their memory, Baptists became known as disestablishmentarian in their philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins mentioned the parallel between the freedoms the colonies were fighting for against Britain with the freedoms Baptists were advocating. "As Virginia moved toward establishing a state government independent from Britain, Baptists continued to petition for full religious liberty."<sup>29</sup> The desire for freedom in worship is the historical cause of the Baptist movement.

As Baptists entered the twentieth century, the dawn of Christendom was approaching. Baptists and Presbyterians alike entered into one of the greatest contemporary schisms in Protestantism, the debate between liberalism and fundamentalism.<sup>30</sup> The battle between fundamentalists and liberals would culminate in the 1920s, and movements to reconcile the two into a unified church (and unified

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins, *Baptists In America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 63.

<sup>29</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 63.

<sup>30</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 184.

seminaries) remained until the 1940s.<sup>31</sup> With many Baptist seminaries securely rooted in theological liberalism, the twentieth century saw the rise of the new fundamentalist Baptist seminaries and churches standing in open rejection to theological liberalism and beginning the movement of unaffiliated Baptist churches with no denominational affiliation (yet there were still associations of affiliated churches).<sup>32</sup> With new seminaries being formed with fundamentalist and conservative evangelical roots, a new form of self-identification was beginning. Two of the primary characteristics that would form and define these new associations was a high view of Scripture and the need for personal conversion.<sup>33</sup>

Presently, the western world has entered a time period described as post-Christian.<sup>34</sup> Post Christendom is characterized by an apprehension of loss in relationship between the church and the world.<sup>35</sup> Theodore J. Hopkins writing on this important loss for the Western church notes “Post-Christendom is characterized theologically by a deep apprehension about the relationship between the church and the world.”<sup>36</sup> This loss of balance between the church and the world has affected all of Christianity. However, the aim of this study is to do an in depth analysis of how the loss of Christendom has affected

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<sup>31</sup> David Beale, *Baptist History in England and America* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2018), 521.

<sup>32</sup> Beale, 532.

<sup>33</sup> McBeth, 569.

<sup>34</sup> Theodore J. Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” *Concordia Journal* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 29.

<sup>35</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 30.

<sup>36</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 30.

baptistic identity within Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota. In a time of great upheaval in the church as it loses its position of power and influence it once had, it is vital to provide a theological metanarrative for Baptist churches translating to a framework for life in a post-Christian world.

In response to a post-Christian world and the attempt to regain influence, many Baptist churches began to remove the term from their name.<sup>37</sup> The predominant theory was that by cutting ties, a more ecumenical and attractive church would become visible to outsiders.<sup>38</sup> The unintended consequences of these decisions and the costs may have been greater than originally anticipated. The setting of this study is to explore any possible unintended consequences of the loss of the Baptist theological identity, any effects on Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota, and an address to Baptist denominations based on the outcomes of the research.

### **The Importance of the Project**

#### *The Importance of the Project to the Researcher*

Throughout the life of the researcher, the researcher has been a part of four different denominations and neither felt loyalty to a specific denomination nor felt a part of a larger context or identity in theological community. This created a vacuum and a hole in the life of the researcher in search of belonging. Since the researcher became a pastor in a Converge church, the researcher has sought to understand and submit to a broader theological community and to embrace a theological identity. This pursuit has

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<sup>37</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 310.

<sup>38</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 310.

been challenging with a felt loss of baptistic identity in the researcher's congregation (having been renamed from a Baptist church), the researcher's loss of baptistic identity in the Bible camp he serves (having been renamed from a Baptist Bible camp), and also within the researcher's denomination (having been renamed from a Baptist denomination). These have led to confusion within the researcher's community as to the identity of the congregation, camp, and denomination. There have been some people within the researcher's town who are confused about the identity of the congregation. The researcher has had conversations with people who have believed the congregation has severed ties with Baptist theology and some have thought the church's name, New Journey Church, is the name of a new post-modern denomination. The absence of being "Baptist" in name has been jarring for new people to the community who were seeking to become part of a Baptist congregation. While there may have been positive outcomes for rejecting a Baptist name and identity, there are also unintended consequences that the researcher is hoping to understand.

As a millennial born in the 1980s, the researcher grew up in the era in which consumerism and program-driven, event-based ministry was at its prime.<sup>39</sup> In his time in the church as both a former member of three different evangelical churches and now as a pastor of an evangelical church, the researcher has seen commitment to the local congregation waning as the promise of attractive ministries, programs, buildings, and events drew people from one congregation to another. Rather than fighting the temptation

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<sup>39</sup> Ryan J. Faust, "Recontextualizing Church" (D.Min. Thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2017), 1.



to indulge in attractional church ministry, the researcher noticed that many evangelical churches used this model as best as they could to attract people to the church.<sup>40</sup> Writing on the consumeristic attractional church in his dissertation, Ryan J. Faust writes, “This is counter to the gospel and yet many Northern American Evangelicals have tended to respond to the consumer culture by using a consumer methodology of attractional events to draw a crowd and the program-driven model to make disciples.”<sup>41</sup> This type of mentality within the church has created systems and cultures where the community may be outwardly identified as the priority, but the unspoken reality is that the resources of the church are being allocated to attractional events.

Within this context and the post-denominational context, the commitment to theological identity seems to be less important than the outcome of people coming to the church events. With success now quantified by attendance numbers, churches began to conform their philosophies and missions to the outcome of attracting people to services. As a young pastor, the researcher watched as the church began to dwindle in attendance when those in charge of ministries were not able to cater to felt needs or specific desires of some congregants. In this, the commitment to theological identity was lacking. If another church of a different theological persuasion or theological identity offered a program, music, or other attractive quality more compelling, the researcher saw congregants transition to another church. Witnessing churches changing their names, the

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<sup>40</sup> Ryan J. Faust, 1-2. See especially Faust’s contribution to the competitive nature of the attractional church and how branding (or naming) is a microcosm of the larger attractional church schema.

<sup>41</sup> Faust, 1-2.

researcher became curious as to how the perception of the ecumenical church community perceived the different churches in the community. For instance, if numerous denominationally affiliated churches changed their name to a more theologically ambiguous name, how would congregants and the community understand the distinguishing theological distinctions of each church? How would they choose a church? If the problem of commitment exists in the local church community, will downplaying denominational affiliation and theological distinctions impact and contribute to an already consumeristic and attractional church? If people in a local community are deciding which church to commit to, how will they choose if theological distinctions are not apparent? It seemed to the researcher that the more theological distinctions were removed from congregational names, the more it would contribute to a consumeristic model that the programming or attractiveness of the church community would be the method for choosing a congregation rather than theological identity. The researcher would like to understand if the loss of the Baptist name in Baptist churches has contributed to the attractional church model and if there has been a loss of theological identity in these churches.

### *The Importance of the Project to the Immediate Ministry Context*

While there are various reasons to rename a congregation, denomination, or Bible camp, there are always unintended consequences that transpire. The researcher is passionate about exploring these unintended consequences and asking the question of whether these unintended consequences are worth the trouble of losing a baptistic identity. These unintended consequences range from theological to sociological in the personal life of the researcher and the effects are seen at the local congregational level

within a Baptist church with 125 years of history. The researcher is open to the research showing positive results. If churches are experiencing robust theological engagement and understanding of a baptistic identity without a Baptist name, there seems to be little reason to maintain a Baptist name for the sake of tradition.

The researcher serves as a local church pastor within a Baptist congregation who removed the word ‘Baptist’ from their name. Within a small town of 1,500 people, this has led to some confusion as to the theological identity of the church. The researcher also serves as a chaplain in the Army National Guard and is endorsed by his congregation’s denomination who also has dropped the word ‘Baptist’ from its denominational name. Additionally, the researcher has been the chairman of his local Bible camp, which also dropped the word ‘Baptist’ from its camp name. The researcher has noticed the loss of identity within all three of these sub-systems and desires to understand the impact that it has had on the larger context (denomination) down to the smaller context (congregation and Bible camp).

The loss of the theologically identifying name of a congregation may seem trivial. However, linguists have shown that how people conceptualize things through language have an indelible impact on how they think about those things.<sup>42</sup> While there have been some situations in which churches have dropped the name “Baptist” from official congregational names, the reality is that those congregations still claim to be “Baptist” in

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<sup>42</sup> Donald Lindskoog, “What’s In A (Church) Name,” *The Christian Century* 110, no. 14 (April 28, 1993): 445.

their theological affiliation.<sup>43</sup> While many people within the immediate congregational community may know theologically where the church stands, do the new people coming into the church know where the church stands theologically? There is little research showing the effects over time of a church that drops “Baptist” from its name and how the people attracted to the church influence the theological identity and makeup of the congregation.

*Importance of the Project to the Church at Large*

This research will be an aid to the broader academic and church community in that it will seek to diagnose and propose a treatment for the loss of identity within the baptistic tradition. While this research will be limited in scope to Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota, it will be applicable to a broader ecumenical audience in that it is a microcosm of the systems that many other Protestant denominations are also undergoing with the loss of their own theological identities. This research will be valuable from a sociological perspective of Baptist congregations losing a key metanarrative and source of its identity. This research will be valuable from a systems perspective as the research will seek to show the unintended broader consequences on a larger context. The research will also be valuable from a church history vantage point in that it will seek to diagnose the impact of a shifting trend of identity that has its roots in the loss of Christendom in the West.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ken Walker, “Church Name-Dropping Pays Off,” *Christianity Today* 43, no. 7 (June 14, 1999): 15.

<sup>44</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 30-31.

## **Data and Methodology**

### *Nature of the Research*

The primary nature of the researcher's field research is qualitative. The information is gathered through the means of a case study on three Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota who do not have a distinctive Baptist name, and three Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota with a Baptist name. The researcher collected all pertinent data through the means of notes, questionnaires given to congregants of each church, and interviews with a pastor or deacon of the congregations.

### *Data Collection*

Primary data is collected through written questionnaires given to each of the six congregations. This data is compared to understand any significant theological identities among the churches. Telephone and in-person interviews with a pastor or deacon of the congregations provide key historical insights and reasons for the theological identities of each congregation. Notes are taken during each interview and data collection time. These notes provide valuable feedback and other significant systems processes valuable to the research. Secondary data is collected through written scholarly journal articles, dissertations, commentaries, books, and other scholarly sources related to the subject of theological identity and baptistic distinctives. The secondary data is primarily used in the literature review and historical study.

### *Project Overview*

The first stage of the research gathered pertinent commentaries and biblical passages related to a baptistic, theological identity. Passages such as Romans 6 (baptism), Acts 6, Titus 1, and 1 Corinthians 12 (church polity), John 6 and 1 Corinthians 11 (symbolic ordinances) were utilized in identifying distinctive baptistic theology. A broad overview of Baptist history and the two main theological baptistic camps (Particular and General) were analyzed.

The second stage of the research is to utilize scholarly literature in identifying the loss of Baptist naming practices in Baptist churches and if there has also been a loss of baptistic theology. The researcher identified historic trends in the loss of Baptist naming practices in congregations. Causes in these trends include the loss of predominance of the church in a post-enlightenment West, the end of Christendom, the rise of the attractional church movement, the rise of a therapeutic, needs centered church ideology, and the replacement of a theology of suffering with a theology of the church triumphant.<sup>45</sup> This theology of the church triumphant is rooted in historical Christianity being institutionalized in the early church.<sup>46</sup> In the early church building, the Santa Maria Maggiore, there were paintings of triumphal Old Testament wars but silently missing

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<sup>45</sup> Hopkins, "Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations," 32-33.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret R. Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth Century Mosaics: Triumphant Christianity and The Jews," in *Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 2 (April 1993): 156.

were New Testament scenes of martyrs and persecution.<sup>47</sup> The need to feel “successful” as a church can quickly be the projected vision masquerading as evangelical fervor. The need for churches to feel successful may impact the value they place on emphasizing their theological distinctives and theological identity. This type of qualitative research analysis is rooted in the methodology of content analysis.<sup>48</sup>

The third stage of the research involved conducting interviews. The researcher examines three Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota without a Baptist name, and three Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota with a Baptist name. The researcher contacted pastors in each Converge North Central church and sets up an in-person interview regarding their church, the history behind their name, the church’s identity, and other pertinent questions. The interviewee signed a consent form acknowledging the nature of the interview and the results that will be used in the research. When reported on in this paper the specific church and pastor names have been changed to protect participant and church anonymity. During each interview, the researcher took notes to aid in the process of data collection. This type of qualitative research analysis involves the methodology of grounded theory study.<sup>49</sup> The goal is to remain impartial and allow the results to lead the researcher to uncover authentic truths.

The fourth stage of the research involves congregational surveys. Each church being researched received surveys (either electronic or paper) to be completed and mailed

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<sup>47</sup> Miles, 157.

<sup>48</sup> Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 10th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2013), 148.

<sup>49</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 146.

back to the researcher. These surveys asked questions regarding their own understanding of their church and denominational identity and theology. Each congregant was asked the reason why they chose to belong to that congregation, and if their understanding of baptistic theology influenced their decision. The researcher's goal was to collect surveys from at least ten percent of the average attendance of each congregation. This quantitative collection of surveys roots the research in a mixed methods research. The primary research is rooted in Grounded Theory with both qualitative and quantitative components.

The fifth stage of the research contains data analysis and synthesis. Once the data has been collected, a process of comparison and analysis of the data commences. The researcher paid special attention to any unintended consequences that have occurred in Baptist churches that have removed the name 'Baptist' as part of their identity.

The final stage of the research made an ecumenical appeal to Baptists (Baptists are included interdenominationally; other denominations and churches will be able to glean the ecumenical principles of the post-denominational era and the effect it has had on the church universal) in general to retain a theologically distinct identity. The researcher allowed the results of the study to determine the course of the final stage of research, even if those results are contrary to the original starting point of the researcher. The researcher paid close attention to both positive and negative unintended consequences in the final appeal. The appeal has application in both the researcher's immediate context and a broader context. Further applications for study are recommended at the end of this stage of research.



## CHAPTER TWO: BIBLICAL NEED FOR THEOLOGICAL CONVICTION IN CONGREGATIONS

### **Biblical and Theological Basis**

#### *Biblical Models of Unity Without Uniformity*

The church, the body of Christ, is a diverse body composed of all true believers in Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:4-5 and 1 Cor. 12:12-14). The church is diverse in its ethnicities, cultures, countries, and denominations. For example, while the church is a diverse entity, it is often referred to as a denomination or certain theological persuasion. For instance, there is the Roman Catholic Church, Lutherans, or Baptists. These naming practices date back to the Reformation in that early expressions of the church mutually excommunicated each other and persecuted each other.<sup>50</sup> Each individual denomination initially believed that they were the true expression of the church and that other expressions were heretical and condemned. These naming attachments to local congregations of the word “church” unnecessarily contributed to the Reformation-era belief that the only true universal church is the denominational affiliation. To attach “church” to the end of a denominational name may convey the combative element that the church is in disunity by fellowshiping in different theological persuasions.<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, the church today is participating in an opposite shift. By the mid 1950s, sociologists and religious experts noticed that Protestant denominations in

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<sup>50</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010), 69.

<sup>51</sup> Lindskoog, 446.

America were beginning to shift from dynamic individualistic theological expressions to more amorphous theological generalizations.<sup>52</sup> The experience-driven church culture values experience over articulated, rational, theological precision resulting in a move toward what has been termed today as the post-denominational era in the church.<sup>53</sup> Mark G. Toulouse wrote about the American tendency to value the emotive over the rational,

In early American life, the voluntary principle of denominationalism combined with the revivalistic impulses of pietism, and together they produced a tendency in American religion that could only be described as anti-intellectual and anti-theological. Mission defined the denominations more than belief. Pietism was much more interested in fostering personal experience of the faith, the religion of the heart, than it was interested in pursuing the religion of the mind. Rationalism, after the revolution, fell into disfavor in America, largely due to the excesses of the French Revolution. For many American denominations, revelation was established over against reason. The rationalists were derisively called "infidels," a term sharing the same derision then as the current term "secular humanist" has attached to it in some circles today.<sup>54</sup>

This movement may partially explain the trend of churches downplaying their denominational and theological affiliations in favor of more attractive and theologically ambiguous church names.

The premise of this project is that churches can maintain a healthy balance of individualistic theological beliefs, nuances, polity, and expression while simultaneously experiencing unity with other different denominations and affiliations. Christ “is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:17-18). Since Christ is the head of the church, all

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<sup>52</sup> Mark G. Toulouse, “What is the Role of a Denomination in a Post-Denominational Age,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 208.

<sup>53</sup> Toulouse, 208.

<sup>54</sup> Toulouse, 207.

participants in the universal church are part of his body and of the same organization regardless of denominational or other affiliations. This thesis asserts that unity is possible without the necessity of uniformity. Individual denominations can coexist with their individual theological names and distinctions while simultaneously co-laboring in their respective communities for the full expression of the Gospel.

Not only is it helpful to have diversity within the church, it is biblical. It is necessary to have diversity of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). This necessity was not allowed out of God's permissive will, but it was God himself who was the author of the diverse nature of the church. "But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (1 Cor. 12:18). God chose the very nature of the body by approving and authoring its diverse nature. It was not human sin that sparked the need for the creativity of God in authoring the diverse nature of the church. God is the creative one, the only one who creates. Humans participate in imitating God's creativity by their own creative work.<sup>55</sup> It was not man's sin that led to the unique expressions of the church in theologically diverse patterns, but the imitation of God's creative character by the purpose of God in his own arrangement.<sup>56</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 there is a crescendo of diversity fostering unity. God did not create the body with self-sustaining hands, feet, or other body parts. The diversity is necessary for the body's survival. There is a diversity of gifts, a diversity of activities,

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<sup>55</sup> Grudem, 272.

<sup>56</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr., *Holman New Testament Commentary*, vol. 7, I & II Corinthians, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2000), 219.

and a diversity of services (1 Cor. 12:4-6).<sup>57</sup> Each time Paul references diversity, he makes a parallel to it with unity. With diversity of gifts there is the same Spirit, with diversity of activities there is the same God, and with diversity of services there is the same Lord.<sup>58</sup> George E. Gardiner wrote on this in his exposition of Corinthians:

First he pictures diversity in unity. “*Diversities* of charismata,” (verse 4), “*diversities* of operations,” (verse 6), “*differences* of administration,” (verse 5). Then he pictures unity in diversity: *same* Spirit...*same* Lord...*same* God.” This unity is in relationship to the Trinity. The Holy Spirit gives the gifts, Christ assigns the place of ministry of the gift and God the Father provides the energy. The whole Godhead is involved in my gifts and the place of service for those gifts. When I use my gift as God intended, it promotes *unity* among Believers, not division. Here is the answer to one of the Corinthians problems—division. True spiritual gifts used as God designs brings Christians together, they do not drive them apart!<sup>59</sup>

Paul goes to great lengths to highlight the necessity of diversity for the body by referencing the diversity of the Trinity.

Weaker parts of the body are indispensable (1 Cor. 12:22). Some parts of the body may seem to be lacking in their contribution but to God they are necessary.<sup>60</sup> This passage can be illustrated by the Christian church and its hundreds of denominations, divisions, and affiliations. It is unsettling for many Christians to think about the divisions within and across denominations and to long for a time when there will be no distinct differences. The 16th century reformers were aware of the divisions they were instigating

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<sup>57</sup> George E. Gardiner, *The Corinthian Catastrophe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1974), 28.

<sup>58</sup> Gardiner, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Gardiner, 28.

<sup>60</sup> Robert G. Gromacki, *Called to Be Saints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 156.

and came up with theological arguments for their necessity, proclaiming the evils and vileness of those they were separating from to justify their division.<sup>61</sup> However, some of these arguments were necessary. For the sake of conscience, it is permissible for Christians to disagree with one another. In the paradigmatic shift of the twentieth century, the church has now swung to an unprecedented shift toward non-denominationalism.<sup>62</sup> This ecumenism has transcended many historically entrenched denominations and affiliations. At Vatican II in the early 1960s, there was an ecumenical council of Roman Catholicism that extended communication to both Protestants and Eastern Orthodox.<sup>63</sup> With this pendulum shift, the church moved toward a homogenous centrality and away from theological distinctives.

That said, denominations and unique expressions of the church have the potential of showing the character of God in individual ways: “For the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Cor. 12:14). Each distinctive expression of the church not only displays the characteristic creativity of God, but it is also a divine reality. No individual person or denomination can fully express the completeness of the character of God.<sup>64</sup> The higher church denominations, the style of worship known as liturgy, employs a call and response, mimicking the biblical concept that God has called to his people and

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<sup>61</sup> John W. Smith V., “Holiness and Unity,” in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 10 (Spring 1975): 25.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, 26.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, 26.

<sup>64</sup> W. Wilbert Welch, *Conduct Becoming Saints* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1978), 73.

the people have the opportunity to respond.<sup>65</sup> This type of responsive theology gives credence to the idea of a state of humanity incapable of saving themselves. Humanity is dead in its sin before being made alive in Christ (Col. 2:13). The liturgy is highly structured and ordered. This reflects the nature of God in that he exhibits order and not chaos (1 Cor. 14:33).

In some church expressions, there is significance to the physical “space” where the church meets and the message that space conveys. In church communities of buildings with beautiful architecture and symbolic art, it can convey the seriousness of the holiness of God. When God met with Moses in Exodus 3, he did so not through existential means but he met him through the physical environment and communicated his holiness through the physical.<sup>66</sup> The physical displays the creatureliness of Moses and the architectural significance of the sanctuary can display the holiness of God. Writing about the experience of Moses interacting with God through the burning bush, R.C. Sproul writes, “The composition of the earth at this spot was no different from the earth on the rest of the desert floor. The sacred character of this spot was not intrinsic but extrinsic. That is, it was *made* sacred by a super added presence. The event that occurred there loaned an extraordinary dimension to the ordinary.”<sup>67</sup> The physical and the tangible can be an aid in worship. As evidenced in the great cathedrals of Europe, a profound

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<sup>65</sup> James P. Tiefel, “Liturgical Worship for Evangelism and Outreach,” *Logia* 21, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2012): 74.

<sup>66</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998), 250.

<sup>67</sup> Sproul, 251.

sense of the holiness of God and his transcendent magnificence can be sensed through the artistic display of architecture.

Conversely, the pietist movement was a movement of sincere spiritual disciplines and Christian conviction toward holiness.<sup>68</sup> This movement emphasized behavior rather than the physical space devoted to worship. The pietist movement sought to make the life of Christian orthopraxy the main means of expressing the faith.<sup>69</sup> Rather than pursuing mere intellectual gain, pietism sought to make the Christian life experiential. This kind of fervor inspired movements within multiple church movements to include Baptists, the Evangelical Free Church, and Lutherans.

There are many more ecumenical movements that have shaped and inspired the church toward a diverse and stronger whole. Even the movements that have led to schism often have side effects of reform. During the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church experienced its own counter reformation. During this time period, Pope Paul III instituted a more pastoral identity among the bishops and a reform of many of the tools of the inquisition.<sup>70</sup> God uses all things for his glory and the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28-29). Experiencing schism does not need to define the church but can be a means for promoting theological health and challenge to both sides.

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<sup>68</sup> Thomas P. Williamsen, "Praying with the Pietists," *Lutheran Forum* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 24.

<sup>69</sup> Williamsen, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Timothy Schmeling, "Roman Catholicism Then and Now: From Catholic Reformation and Counter-Reformation to Ressourcement and Aggiornamento," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 115, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 145-146.

Paul encourages each believer to be fully convinced in his own mind (Rom. 14:5). There is room for theological interpretation and room for healthy disagreement over theological convictions. While Paul stresses unity (Phil. 1:27), he never stresses uniformity. There is a great diversity amongst the body of Christ. Paul stresses the need for this diverse body (1 Cor. 12). He exhorts the church that there are many parts, but there is only one body (1 Cor. 12:20). To distinctively identify as a unique theological community with theological distinctives does not have to necessitate a rejection of the rest of the body of Christ. Paul states, “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions” (Rom. 14:1). The original context of this passage addresses believers debating and battling over legalistic rules dealing with the Sabbath and meat sacrificed to idols.<sup>71</sup> While the context of what Paul was writing to the church in Rome about was legalism, there is an application to the study of ecumenism. Paul exhorts to his audience not to debate and quarrel about opinions, referring to extrabiblical convictions. In other words, Paul admonishes that convictions are good, but they should never supplant Scripture.<sup>72</sup> A quote commonly attributed to St. Augustine puts it well: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”<sup>73</sup>

These extrabiblical convictions are applicable to the study of ecumenism and as differences between denominations are often framed from disputable matters of doctrine in Scripture. “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his

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<sup>71</sup> W.W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 558.

<sup>72</sup> Wiersbe, 558.

<sup>73</sup> Wiersbe, 558.



own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Rom. 14:4). The church has the freedom to organize itself in ways in which those who are convicted and convinced on similar doctrines can gather separately from others. However, there is clear teaching not to judge them. The judgement referred to here, from the Greek word *krino*, is the type of judgement that is reserved for God alone (Rom. 2:3).<sup>74</sup> Passages of Scripture address judging those within the church who are deviant (see Matt. 18:15-20 and 1 Cor. 5), but when the issue of disputable matters is present, the church should not judge one another (see Matt. 7:5).

Scripture can reveal which denominational affiliation and church expression most closely matches to the person’s understanding of Scripture. The Berean Jews were considered noble for comparing the teaching of Paul to the Scriptures (Acts 17:10-15). This form of “judging” could be described as being wise or prudent. If a person is studying Scripture and comes to a new understanding that would be best understood within a different denominational affiliation, the individual should seek out the local faith community whose doctrinal teaching and understanding most closely aligns with such beliefs.

General systems theory describes an anxious system as tending to value conformity and homeostasis over and above creativity and uniqueness. This anxious system can take root within a congregational system. The tendency within systems, and specifically within congregations, is to over function by creating homogenous patterns of

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<sup>74</sup> J.D. Barry, D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, M.S. Heiser, M. Custis, E. Ritzema, and D. Bomar, *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), (Ro 14:3).

conformity and to desire similarity rather than uniqueness. This kind of conformity, or herd mentality, leads to a cyclical pattern of emotional fusion where (in systems theory) the further one group goes to self-differentiate from others, the more pressure is put on that group from the majority to conform and on the cycle goes.<sup>75</sup> This relates to the biblical model of unity without uniformity in denominations. Denominations choose to self-differentiate from one another theologically and the tendency in systems is to put pressure on the differentiated group to conform to the larger group.

To distinctively identify with a specific biblical modality and thought process is also to specify what one is not. In a differentiated system, one theological sub-group does not need to be threatened by the existence of a differing theological sub-group. When one successful Baptist church takes Baptist out of its name, the tendency for other churches is for conformity. One of the reasons why baptistic denominations are being led to create churches without a denominationally-affiliated name is to reach a broader audience that might be offended by a theologically distinct name implying in-group and out-group affiliations. This fear is not biblically necessary as baptistic theology (and the Baptist name by which it implies) is generally ecumenical in that it shares most protestant doctrines. Baptists share more theological virtues with other protestants than the number they disagree upon.<sup>76</sup> It is on the finer specificities where Baptists retain theological distinctives. To be a Baptist is to share much in common with many other protestant and

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<sup>75</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Failure of Nerve* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2007), 68.

<sup>76</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2012), 69.

confessional (such as the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed) Christian denominations. Therefore, retaining the Baptist name honors such unity.

The Apostle Paul spells out a compelling vision for the church to attain to unity of the faith (Eph. 4:13). This vision of Paul is unity without uniformity. This same person is the one who wrote that each one should be "fully convinced" (Rom. 14:5). The goal of unity without uniformity is for the church to be able to be distinctively different, convinced, and convicted (differentiated) in their individual denominations and affiliations while simultaneously working together in ways that are uncompromising to their distinctives. This requires a well-reasoned ecclesiology and a healthy sense of differentiation in approaching this sensitive matter of disagreeing without quarreling. Within Scripture there are examples of disagreements that did not result in disunity.

The Jerusalem Council was a church council set up to settle the dispute surrounding circumcision as a necessity for gentile inclusion within the church (Acts 15). This issue was not just a small grievance, this was an issue large enough to be on display for the world.<sup>77</sup> This issue had the potential to disrupt the entire life situation of the Jewish believers as the issue at stake struck right to the very core of Judaism. The result was a contextualizing of the Gospel. Gentile believers would no longer be required to submit to circumcision as the sign of the covenant. This contextualizing that took place at the Jerusalem Council would be seen throughout church history and especially in modern missionary movements dedicated to contextualizing the Gospel in uncompromising ways.

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<sup>77</sup> Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 415.

After this early Christian church period ended and the Roman Catholic period of Christianity began, an inflexible and characteristically unchanging rigidity took over the church culminating in the Protestant Reformation as a reaction to the rigidity of Roman Catholicism.<sup>78</sup>

What is intriguing is the unseen example of unity within disagreement (Acts 15). The disciple James declared “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20 [ESV]). This directive by James did not end there. The council decided to send leaders to bring this message to other believers. Two of the men that were to lead this procession were Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas brought the letter to Antioch and made sure that its contents were given to the church (Acts 15:22-35). This is the same Paul who refers to those that are not able to eat meat sacrificed to idols as “weak” (1 Cor. 8). Paul states, “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8). While Paul’s convictions were unclear at the time when the Jerusalem Council sent him to deliver the message of abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols, it is certain that Paul became diametrically opposed to this teaching by the time he wrote 1 Corinthians 8.

Paul did not fight the Jerusalem Council on this issue. While he taught a completely different message in Corinthians, he was able to partner with the Jerusalem

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<sup>78</sup> Charles H. Kraft, “Culture, Worldview and Contextualization,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 384.

Council in uncompromising ways. He did not have to personally hold the conviction that meat sacrificed to idols was a pollution to the body. In many ways, this situation is relevant to a local congregation. Within a local congregation gathered around certain theological distinctives, there will still be nuances (potentially more than just nuances!) of theological beliefs and understandings of Scripture where people will disagree with one another and still need to live in peace with one another. To some extent, the local congregation is a microcosm of denominationalism. Many Christian Protestant churches can unite around such common creeds as the Heidelberg Catechism that attests to the Scriptures being the Word of God, Jesus Christ being the Savior of the church, and justification being by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ.<sup>79</sup> Yet within congregations and denominations there are many gray areas where individuals may agree on overarching themes, creeds, and faith statements, yet respectfully disagree on some minutiae in theology.

Another biblical example of disagreement without compromise is found in Acts 15:36-41. In this pericope, Paul and Barnabas experienced conflict in what is written as a “sharp disagreement” (Acts 15:39). This sharp disagreement is enough to separate the parties when disagreement over the usefulness of John Mark arises. Paul takes Silas and Barnabas takes John Mark in separate directions to preach the Gospel. The biblical narrative does not end there. This separation is used by God to bring the same Gospel to

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<sup>79</sup> Fred H. Klooster, “The Heidelberg Catechism—An Ecumenical Creed?” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1965): 28-29.

different regions. Their conflict does not mean the end of their relationship. Paul describes John Mark as “useful to me” in his final writings (2 Tim. 4:11).

What this story communicates is the reality of disagreements when living in a fallen world. It also shows us a template or an archetype of solutions when disagreements arise. The nature of the disagreement in Scripture is silent. Whether the disagreement is theological or not is not made clear. What one can surmise from the text is that the church community was involved (Acts 15:40, “they were commended by the brothers.”). One can also see in the text that the work of the Gospel is prioritized, in that both parties come to the decision to separate and proclaim the Gospel in their respective missions.<sup>80</sup> This kind of mutual decision is a form of unity within diversity. God uses both men mightily and both missions bear fruit.

### **Baptistic Distinctives**

#### *The Lord’s Supper*

To specify that one is a Baptist in identity does not need to be a rejection of the rest of the body of Christ. To retain theological distinctives and the identity found in them, as ordinances over sacraments, creates a necessary discussion within the larger body of Christ. Jesus refers to his body and blood as true food and true drink (John 6:52-59). Baptists have traditionally defined this through the lens of symbolic interaction meaning that the food and drink Jesus is referring to is a symbolic food and drink, symbolically relating to participating with Christ in his life, death, and eventual resurrection of the body. To identify as a Baptist is to understand this interaction as

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<sup>80</sup> Fernando, 431.

symbolic of the Christian's life in Christ. A Baptist does not believe that there is a presence of Christ in the elements themselves (as in transubstantiation or consubstantiation) but instead deems transubstantiation and consubstantiation to be unnecessary in its interpretation, and the significance of participating with Christ remains significant in the powerful symbolism of the ordinance as in the sacrament.<sup>81</sup>

John 6:1-15 describes the pericopae of Jesus feeding the five thousand. This pericopae is literarily significant for the next teaching in John 6 that Jesus teaches about his body being the bread and his blood being the wine. "Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal'" (John 6:26-27 [ESV]). At this point in the narrative, Jesus downplays the physical food that he used to feed the people, emphasizing instead the spiritual reality that the food he spiritually offers works in the lives of his followers perpetually.

However, the spiritual reality of Jesus' statements in John 6 do not negate the physical necessities of human beings. Jesus did feed 5,000 people earlier in John 6, which met a tangible need in the peoples' lives. Early church fathers would struggle to maintain this balance of the necessity of the physical realm while maintaining the spiritual significance and symbolic significance in Scripture. The early church father Origen born circa A.D. 185, held a Neoplatonist worldview that juxtaposed the material world from

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<sup>81</sup> Hippolyto Tshimanga, "Communion as Missional Ordinance," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 92.

the spiritual in that the physical world was a limited and imperfect version of the spiritual.<sup>82</sup> Origen was guilty of a non-biblical false dichotomy: making an improper either/or argument pitting the physical against the spiritual. God created all things good (Gen. 1:31). The physical needs of people are not evil or something to be conquered; they are part of the created order of God.

Jesus compares believing in him to the bread of eternal life. Jesus uses the analogy of bread to make a spiritual point about the reality of eternal life being in him alone (John 6:47-48). Jesus does not provide any physical food during this analogy (the people had just eaten earlier in chapter six). Jesus is clearly using food and wine as an analogy to the spiritual and eternal life that he offers through belief and faith in him. John was not discounting the significance and the power of symbols. Jesus celebrates Passover with his disciples (John 13). Yet, John does something uniquely different from the synoptic Gospels: John does not recount the institution of the Lord's Supper, but instead reflects upon what Jesus accomplishes for his disciples (John 13:4-15).<sup>83</sup> Through this experience, John communicates how the meal represents greater significance than the food itself. Hippolyto Tshimanga, a former Roman Catholic priest, described the emphasis on symbolic meaning in the Gospel of John's interpretation of the Lord's Supper, "John did not intend to ignore the whole of the Supper. To the contrary, by telling the incident of washing the feet, he intended to point to a reality beyond the mere symbols of the broken bread and the sharing of the cup. He wanted to lead his readers to

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<sup>82</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 134.

<sup>83</sup> Tshimanga, 80.



the core of what Jesus wanted to convey when celebrating this meal with his disciples.”<sup>84</sup> The symbolic interpretation of Jesus’ emphatic statements that this is his blood and body must be taken into context with other analogies that Jesus uses.<sup>85</sup> For instance, Jesus refers to himself as “the door” (John 10:9). If the church consistently interpreted all these statements as literal, there would be absurd conclusions.

Jesus focuses on one’s relationship with God over and above the immediate physical reality. In response to Satan’s temptation to make food, Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). In this example, Jesus spoke how a relationship with God is always to be considered superior to physical needs. The Bible records events in which God had supernaturally sustained people during a time of physical need. Elijah is commanded by God to hide by a brook for protection from King Ahab (1 Kings 17:1-7). During his hiding, God sustains Elijah by bringing ravens to him with food in their mouths and water to drink from the brook. God’s sustaining power is greater than the physical needs of his people.

The Lord’s Supper is symbolic and reflective of the presence of Christ with his people. Communion as physical elements are not necessary to have Christ’s significant presence within the body of Christ; whenever two or more are present, Christ is there (Matt. 18:20). In reference to the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Wayne Grudem wrote, “And if he is especially present in a special way in the Lord’s Supper: We

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<sup>84</sup> Tshimanga, 81.

<sup>85</sup> Grudem, 992.

meet him at *his* table, to which he comes to give himself to us. As we receive the elements of bread and wine in the presence of Christ, so we partake of him and all his benefits.”<sup>86</sup> The Apostle Paul sets up the narrative of the Lord’s Supper by first explaining how the Corinthians were going about it in a wrong manner (1 Cor. 11). Paul describes the church as eating a meal in which some went hungry and some went home full, with others having had nothing to drink and some having gotten drunk (1 Cor. 11:17-22). This passage shows that the way the early church was celebrating the Lord’s Supper was drastically different than the way modern congregations celebrate the Lord’s Supper. The early church was engaging in meals (Acts 2:46) as an excuse for gathering.<sup>87</sup> These feasts were known as “love feasts.”<sup>88</sup> The context of these love feasts suggests that the feast itself was only representative of the gathered body. The food met a tangible need and provided a natural context for gathering. People in first century Judea lived in a poverty-stricken, subsistence driven context and need for food was great.<sup>89</sup> In these passages, food provides a necessity for the gathering while the overarching framework is the gathering of believers for the purpose of worshipping God.

The food in the Lord’s Supper was reflective of the Old Testament ritual meals foreshadowing a greater meal in Christ.<sup>90</sup> In the Old Testament meals, the meat was often used from a sacrifice that had taken place. These sacrifices were continual and showed

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<sup>86</sup> Grudem, 995.

<sup>87</sup> Pratt, 197.

<sup>88</sup> Pratt, 197.

<sup>89</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 157.

<sup>90</sup> Grudem, 989.

the need for a final atoning sacrifice.<sup>91</sup> The Lord's Supper replaced these ritualistic meals in that the Lord's people now partake with rejoicing that the final atoning sacrifice has come and the need to sacrifice is no longer present (Heb. 10:1-4). In Baptist theology, the importance of the symbolism of the Lord's Supper is stressed over the sacramental interpretation of the Lord's Supper. In sacramental theology, the emphasis on the elements of the bread and the wine is on the external sign of the inward grace being worked through the "visible word" as Augustine defined it.<sup>92</sup> Within Roman Catholicism, the belief about the Lord's Supper is that it is not only an external sign, but it is an actual sacrifice of Christ that occurs within the elements and the participants within the Mass receive grace.<sup>93</sup> For Baptists and other Protestants, this view ignores the supreme finality and completeness of Christ's atonement and propitiation on the cross.<sup>94</sup>

Within the theological beliefs regarding the Lord's Supper, Baptists have made significant contributions in contributing a distinctive theological perspective. While some Baptists would affirm most of the general theological principles of other Protestants, Baptists have uniquely differed with other Protestants over the issue of allowing church tradition to define the biblical role of the Lord's Supper in the life of the congregation.<sup>95</sup> Baptists' rejection of sacramental theology in favor of symbolic ordinances is a unique

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<sup>91</sup> Grudem, 989.

<sup>92</sup> R.S. Wallace, "Sacrament," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 1047.

<sup>93</sup> Grudem, 992.

<sup>94</sup> Grudem, 993.

<sup>95</sup> Mikael N. Broadway, "Is It Not the Communion of the Body of Christ?" *Review & Expositor* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 403.

position that demands a biblical justification for anything more than symbolic interaction. The Baptist theological distinctive regarding the Lord's Supper also democratizes who may participate and who may administer this ordinance. In high-church contexts, only those ordained may administer this process. Baptist theology acknowledges that as the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Pet. 2:9 and Heb. 10:19-22) any follower of Christ may administer the ordinance to one another. Baptists have contributed a unique theological praxis and theology that has spanned the centuries. On the other hand, Baptists are also suffering from a lack of understanding their own history and the significance of the theological positions that were reasoned.<sup>96</sup> Early on, Baptists refrained from developing unique baptistic confessions of faith and borrowed other Protestant confessions. On this subject Mikael Broadway wrote (in reference to the Baptist *Second London Confession*), "The Baptists dropped the term "sacrament" and sometimes entire phrases containing it wherever it had been used in *Westminster*, in every case substituting "ordinance," or in the case of "sacramentally," they rephrased the text to include the key term "figuratively."<sup>97</sup>

### *Congregational Polity*

Retaining a theologically distinct congregational polity creates a diversity within the body of Christ that reflects a unique biblical understanding of congregational autonomy and local leadership. A congregational system of polity democratizes the

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<sup>96</sup> Broadway, 405.

<sup>97</sup> Broadway, 409.

church and acknowledges the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Pet. 2:5).<sup>98</sup> The priesthood of all believers is the reality that all believers are now God’s priests to the world. Within congregational polity, power, control, and influence is vested in the hands of the laity. This type of influence among the laity breaks down the hierarchical congregational polity found among higher church systems of government. This theological praxis for the church recovers a central reformation theme of the powerful nature of the church. The early church exercises this authority granted by the Holy Spirit in making democratic decisions among a group of believers (Acts 6:2-6). This passage, focusing on the complaint of Hellenist widows not receiving their daily allowance of food, shows the first time that the Holy Spirit is not directly or explicitly mentioned in the process of the Apostles delegating leadership into a new role within the church. While the men picked were full of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles’ discretion was permitted by God. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer was the new typology of authority for the local church. The church now had no need for a more formal type of hierarchical authority since its members were filled with the Holy Spirit. There were no spiritual giants, as the Holy Spirit influenced and directed both the deacons and the Apostles.<sup>99</sup> This reality impacted the baptistic rationale of the integration of the sacred and secular. This type of authority in the church reflects the congregational polity of baptistic theology.<sup>100</sup> The Apostle Paul uses two different Greek words for church leaders

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<sup>98</sup> Grudem, 993.

<sup>99</sup> Fernando, 229.

<sup>100</sup> Ezra P. Gould, “The Congregational Polity,” *Andover Review* (Boston, Mass.) 12, no. 69 (September 1889): 248.

interchangeably within the same passage (Titus 1:5-7). This type of interchangeable nature of words for the leaders suggests anything but a strict sense of static church leadership and affirms the necessity for local churches to have authority in how they structure themselves among congregants in terms of leadership.

From an organizational standpoint, baptistic polity and identity have brought a uniquely important contribution to the entire ecumenical church. By allowing local leadership, the church can adapt itself to its regional environment. Within many congregations and denominations, the ability to shape the organization of the congregation to its context is nearly impossible with many of the bureaucratic tendencies and broad general church practices that are not useful in all locations.<sup>101</sup> As the early church developed, locally contextualized leadership practices grew out of the needs of the local populace and congregation. Craig Van Gelder wrote about this early church practice of contextualizing polity and leadership,

As the church in the New Testament spread into the world, it encountered a variety of different contexts and cultures. Quite naturally, the congregations that emerged in these contexts developed a variety of leadership and organizational approaches. The reality of this diversity is now evident in the different polities that make claims to alternate views regarding how the church is to be structured. In the face of these competing claims about what is the *right* form of church government is to be, it is evident that it is hard to argue successfully for a normative pattern for leadership and organization from the biblical materials.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 122.

<sup>102</sup> Van Gelder, 123.

As other denominations practice differing polities, each denominational distinctive contributes to the unity of the body of Christ by applying their own diverse polities based on their cultural or political contexts.

The early church devoted itself to the fellowship (Acts 2:42). This fellowship (*koinonia*) is used to refer to the special nature of fellowship, friendship, and intimacy experienced in the life of the church.<sup>103</sup> Within a congregational polity system, the church is seen more as an organic system than as a structured, layered hierarchy. Baptist churches desire this *koinonia* with a model of church polity that reflects such a community-natured organization. The baptistic model of polity acknowledges that each member of the *koinonia* is on equal status, with submission to one another being mutual (Eph. 5:21). The congregational polity necessary of Baptists asserts that Christ is the ultimate head of the body (Col. 1:18), while the human authority and leadership is penultimate.

The Baptist identity of congregational polity has transcended Baptists and has left an indelible impression on Christianity. Some of the other benefactors of congregational polity have been Mennonites, Puritans, Hutterites, Brethren, Wesleyan, and Congregationalists, to name a few.<sup>104</sup> The roots of baptistic theology employ *sola scriptura*, meaning Scripture alone is the sole rule of faith. This philosophy dethroned the papal authoritarianism that at times made its way into other Protestant denominations

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<sup>103</sup> Jeremy M. Kimble, "The Steward of God: Exploring the Role and Function of Elders," *Southeastern Theological Review* 6, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 90.

<sup>104</sup> Franklin H. Littell, "The Claims of the Free Churches," *The Christian Century* 78, no. 14 (April 05, 1961): 417.

through the priestly line of authority.<sup>105</sup> Tradition and hierarchical human authority would no longer be on equal footing with Scripture. The early Anabaptist leader Balthasar Hubmaier once stated at a church conference that “in all disputes concerning faith and religion, the Scripture alone, proceeding from the mouth of God, ought to be our level and rule.”<sup>106</sup> Since Scripture is the sole rule and test of faith within the Baptist identity, it keeps in check human beings’ fallen desire to acquire power and control. The Baptist identity firmly vested in congregational polity has given positive externalities to multiple denominations that have sought to maintain congregational polity at the local level with the sole rule of faith being Scripture alone.

### *Believer’s Confessional Baptism*

The mode of believer’s confessional baptism and the symbolism found in Romans 6:1-14 of immersion creates an important tension in theological discussions over the viability of baptism by immersion. Since the Second London Confession of 1677, one of the most demonstrative elements of Baptist distinctives has been baptism by full immersion of a confessing believer.<sup>107</sup> This early belief in believers’ confessional baptism, while not as controversial in today’s tolerant world, became a cause of extreme persecution for early Baptist believers by other Christians.<sup>108</sup> While the word *baptism* remains transliterated from the Greek *baptizo*, its most consistent New Testament

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<sup>105</sup> Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1963), 517.

<sup>106</sup> Henry C. Vedder, *Balthasar Hubmaier, the Leader of the Anabaptists* (New York, NY: The Knickerbocker Press, 1905), 59.

<sup>107</sup> Tull, 188.

<sup>108</sup> Ryder, 12.



meaning is *immersion*.<sup>109</sup> This theologically rich discussion is important regarding the full weight of the symbolism found in Romans 6 and the reality of the life, death, and resurrection being in Christ and the symbolism of believer's confessional baptism by full immersion. This theological argument is more than just intellectual trivia. Such viable theological arguments inspired men like Adoniram Judson to an orientation of conviction based upon God's Word that inspired the first church in Burma.<sup>110</sup>

The call of Christ is made explicit in the life of one who believes and is baptized (Mark 16:16). The entire Baptist movement hinged on the necessary component that Christianity was not something that someone was born into, but was naturally a participatory act of the freedom of the conscience and the will of the individual participating.<sup>111</sup> The voluntary act of the individual now superseded birth rights and other ritualistic forms of communal belonging. Baptism as a confessional believer's baptism eroded the core of the socio-political system of belonging to the church, which led to unprecedented persecution of these early "Anabaptists" (re-baptizers), a pejorative term given to them by their early tormentors.<sup>112</sup>

While the early Anabaptists were convinced by Scripture that baptism and the voluntary acceptance into the wider body of Christ by confessing believers (in contrast to infants) was a New Testament practice, the early Anabaptists did not initially include in

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<sup>109</sup> Benjamin J. Snyder, "Technical Term or Technical Foul? Baptizo and the Problem of Transliteration as Translation," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 106.

<sup>110</sup> Gregory A. Wills, "From Congregationalist to Baptist," *Adoniram Judson*, ed. Jason G. Duesing (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012): 153.

<sup>111</sup> Littell, 418.

<sup>112</sup> Gonzalez, 69.

this practice baptism by full immersion.<sup>113</sup> Wes Harrison, writing about the initial Anabaptist practice of baptism stated “The first ‘Baptists,’ that is, Anabaptists, located in Germanic Europe, did initiate the practice of believer's baptism, but they baptized by sprinkling or pouring and consciously rejected immersion.”<sup>114</sup> It was not until later that Baptists as a whole would universally accept believer's confessional baptism by immersion as the consistent and only practice. The practice of immersion did not end after the New Testament era. Baptism by immersion was common practice in the early church through the 16th century and is still the common practice by Eastern Orthodox church to this day.<sup>115</sup> In the early church manual, the *Didache* (A.D. 120), the imperative was for baptism to be done by immersion if at all possible with exceptions made for pouring in circumstances where water to immerse was not available.<sup>116</sup>

Paul states in Romans 6:3-5, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” The analogy of the text is valid in immersion baptism. Pouring or sprinkling water on the

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<sup>113</sup> Wes Harrison, “The Renewal of the Practice of Adult Baptism by Immersion During the Reformation Era, 1525-1700,” *Restoration Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2001): 95.

<sup>114</sup> Harrison, 95.

<sup>115</sup> Harrison, 97.

<sup>116</sup> Lars Hartman, “Obligatory Baptism-But Why? On Baptism in the *Didache* and in the *Shepherd of Hermas*,” *Svensk exegetisk årsbok* 59 (1994): 128.

head does not adequately describe the analogy of being buried (immersed in water) and springing forth (coming out of the water) into new life.

While Baptists have continued this New Testament practice of baptism by immersion with its symbolic necessities, baptism has a dual meaning: it is both literal and figurative. G.W. Bromiley, commenting on the symbolic significance of baptism being completed through believers' baptism wrote,

Theologically, the insistence upon believers' baptism in all cases seems better calculated to serve the true significance and benefit of baptism and to avoid the errors that so easily threaten it. Only when there is personal confession before baptism can it be seen that personal repentance and faith are necessary to salvation through Christ, and that these do not come magically but through hearing the Word of God. With believers' baptism the ordinance achieves its significance as the mark of a step from darkness and death to light and life.<sup>117</sup>

The Apostle Paul applies baptism figuratively to the entire nation of Israel when he writes “and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor. 10:2). The baptism of Israel in this way is figurative. Baptism in Christ has two different components. There is a baptism by the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). This is the spiritual baptism that instantaneously incorporates new believers into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).<sup>118</sup> Baptists do not believe that baptism is a means of grace unto salvation; they believe that baptism as a practice is reserved for those that have already received the spiritual baptism of Christ through the Holy Spirit.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> G. W. Bromiley, “Believer’s Baptism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 132.

<sup>118</sup> Hartman, 137.

<sup>119</sup> Bromiley, 131.

In Jesus' Great Commission, he commands his disciples to make disciples and then baptize them (Matt. 28:19).<sup>120</sup> This coincides with symbolic ordinance theology that Baptists practice which does not necessitate sacraments as being instrumental in the conversion of someone to Christianity. It is by the Word alone that people come unto salvation. As a direction of Peter to repent and then be baptized, Peter is speaking directly to an audience that is old enough to comprehend the message and be convicted of the necessity for baptism (Acts 2:38).<sup>121</sup> Baptism is not seen in Scripture as being a sacrament for infants. There are no statements directly against infant baptism, but arguments from silence are not strong enough to comply a universal practice for the church.<sup>122</sup> While there are household baptisms that take place in Acts, there is no evidence that infants were present or took part in baptisms.<sup>123</sup>

Baptism in the New Testament can best be described from the vantage point of an ordinance rather than sacrament. As a symbolic expression of an internal event, baptism is an external symbol of the internal event of salvation. Baptism by immersion is not a pre-requisite for salvation. When Jesus is on the cross, the thief next to him presses Jesus to remember him when he enters his kingdom (Luke 23:42-43). Jesus assures the thief that he will be with him that day in paradise. The thief on the cross had most likely never been baptized and most assuredly was not baptized while on the cross. Yet, Jesus assures

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<sup>120</sup> Bromiley, 131.

<sup>121</sup> Bromiley, 131.

<sup>122</sup> Bromiley, 131.

<sup>123</sup> Bromiley, 131.

the thief that he would be with him in paradise. While baptism by immersion is commanded in Scripture, it is not commanded as a pre-requisite for salvation.

Baptists offer the theological expression of baptism by immersion from the theological understanding of an ordinance in the life of a confessional believer in Christ. Baptism as an identifying characteristic and metanarrative in the life of a Baptist dates back over 400 years.<sup>124</sup> When a group of English Separatists searched God's Word and were convicted of baptism by immersion by confessional believers, the English Pastor John Smyth convicted of the necessity of baptism by immersion baptized himself and his congregation in 1609 and the modern Baptist identity and theological distinctive was born.<sup>125</sup> Believer's confessional baptism adds a unique contribution to the global church and remains a necessary tension in seeking out the Scriptures to discover the practices and biblical reality of baptism.

### *The Importance of Theological Identity*

Two primary theological identities from Baptists have originated: the General Baptists and the Particular Baptists. The General Baptists find their roots within the English Separatist tradition.<sup>126</sup> The first English Baptist, John Smyth, differed from many of his Calvinist contemporaries in the Separatist movement and believed in the general theory of atonement, that through Jesus Christ, God offered salvation to all people and

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<sup>124</sup> Holmes, 11.

<sup>125</sup> Holmes, 15.

<sup>126</sup> Beale, 25.

each person either accepts or rejects that offer.<sup>127</sup> This general theory of atonement, for which the General Baptists were named, were theologically distinct in that they followed the teachings of Jacobus Arminius and rejected the Calvinistic interpretation of atonement.<sup>128</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19 states, “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” This reconciliation of Christ was extended to all through his death, but only those who would receive and repent would be called his elect. The elect are referred to as God’s “chosen ones” (Col. 3:12). This does not necessarily mean that the elect have no voluntary voice in the process; instead, the chosen ones are securely being sustained by Christ.

The first Particular Baptists arose not long after the General Baptists. Started by Pastor John Spilsbury in 1638, his English Separatist congregation followed the Calvinist tradition and theory of atonement.<sup>129</sup> They were known as “particular” in that they believed that Christ died to save only the elect; a particular people. These two groups of early Baptists, the General and the Particular, were the two main branches from which modern Baptists were derived. These two groups would be the main theological differentiation between Baptists and their beliefs until the early twentieth century.

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<sup>127</sup> Holmes, 16.

<sup>128</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 19.

<sup>129</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 22.

The greatest schism for Baptists would occur in the early twentieth century.<sup>130</sup> This greatest source of contention among Baptists in the twentieth century would be the fundamentalist and modernist debate that still drives reaction from both sides.<sup>131</sup> The debate and schism is sometimes credited as beginning with Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist from birth who became a modernist Presbyterian preacher.<sup>132</sup> Fosdick preached the sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in May of 1922, escalating the already tenuous relationships between the fundamentalists and the modernists and prompting a national reaction from the two groups.<sup>133</sup> About this historic event, Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankins wrote, “Fundamentalists and modernists had been at odds for years, but after Fosdick’s sermon, tensions escalated into open warfare, and the fundamentalist-modernist controversy became a national event.”<sup>134</sup> The modernists were known for their rejection of biblical inerrancy in contrast with the fundamentalists who ascribed to the fundamentals of the faith including a staunch belief in the inerrancy of the Bible.

After the American Civil War, the Darwinian theory of evolution began to influence many protestant denominations. The Darwinian theory of evolution began to erode trust in the historicity of the Bible and created new modern values about the Bible as a fluid document with untrue but historically meaningful stories. New criticisms of the Bible emerged focusing on reductionist theories about the life of Christ and distrust in the

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<sup>130</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 183.

<sup>131</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 183.

<sup>132</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 183.

<sup>133</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 183.

<sup>134</sup> Kidd and Hankins, 183.

authorship of individual biblical books. Because of this, many conservative and traditionally-held Scriptural beliefs, such as the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture, the atonement, and exclusive nature of salvation in Christ, were coming under attack by Protestants who embraced these new modern values.<sup>135</sup> Many colleges began to embrace these new modern values and a war of ideas was born.<sup>136</sup>

The Fundamentalists received their name from the fundamentals of the faith. In regard to the origin of the term “fundamentalists,” Anthony Chute, Michael Haykin, and Nathan A. Finn wrote “It was popular at the time to refer to basic evangelical doctrines as the fundamentals of the faith, as evidenced by the five-volume series *The Fundamentals* (1910-15).”<sup>137</sup> Denominations and theological institutions sprung up during this tumultuous time period. Many conservative Bible colleges were formed in response to the overwhelming liberal educational institutions.<sup>138</sup>

It is important for believers to know what they believe and why. The Berean Jews were commended as noble for not blindly accepting the teaching of Paul and Silas but instead investigating the biblical evidence for their teaching (Acts 17:10-15). The biblical and theological importance of this work is a call to churches to understand what they believe and why they believe. While removing the title “Baptist” from a church’s identity does not necessarily entail a church losing its biblical and theological roots, it is part of a

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<sup>135</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 240.

<sup>136</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 240.

<sup>137</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 243.

<sup>138</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 245.



larger trend of post-denominationalism that at its root is affected by the desire to market to those outside of the Baptist tradition.<sup>139</sup> This research is a call for Baptist churches to clearly present themselves honestly for who they are as opposed to creating ambiguity by not clearly defining themselves. The researcher's goal in establishing the importance of theological identity is an uncovering of any effects churches who have eliminated "Baptist" from their title have experienced and the potential theological slippery slope that could potentially develop over time.

*Being Uniquely Baptist and Ecumenical*

Though being Baptist carries important weight in and of itself, the unique baptistic theological distinctives coexist within the larger identity of being an ecumenical Christian or, how to be distinctly Baptist and ecumenical simultaneously. It is no secret that American denominationalism, or the specificity of American denominations, have been increasingly simplifying to their basic core elements in order to attract new adherents.<sup>140</sup> Toulouse stated that according to church historian Sidney Mead, this devolution of denominationalism in the United States has been a systemic shift since the 19th century, culminating in the radically fragmented Protestantism of the 1960s.<sup>141</sup>

Two main biblical passages guide the discussion on being distinctly Baptist and simultaneously ecumenical Christians for a holistic Baptist identity. These passages are Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 12. Romans 14 presents the ecumenical perspective for

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<sup>139</sup> Kent Blevins, "Faith, Baptist Identity, and the NABPR," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 327-328.

<sup>140</sup> Toulouse, 208.

<sup>141</sup> Toulouse, 208.

Christians of maintaining unity within the body of Christ without uniformity and 1 Corinthians 12 dictates the necessity of the entire body of Christ and the corporate and individual components of the body.

“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). In this passage, the Apostle Paul is emphasizing that Christians ought to be focusing their attention on relationship with God and not judging the sincere convictions of other Christians.<sup>142</sup> Paul is not claiming that Christians cannot have broader ecumenical doctrines that must be adhered to; he is describing nuanced opinions. Earlier Paul states “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions” (Rom. 14:1). There are times for debating the core and ecumenically central doctrines and teachings of the faith, but in situations where “disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1) are being discussed, there should be liberty rather than conformity.

While America today is a society with a post-truth mindset, that is not the emphasis of Romans 14.<sup>143</sup> Scripture consistently points to the destructive consequences of a subjective morally relative society, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). Jesus taught on the unchanging nature of truth, “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth

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<sup>142</sup> Wiersbe, 559.

<sup>143</sup> Stewart Douglas Clem, “Post-Truth and Vices Opposed to Truth,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37, no. 2 (Fall - Winter 2017): 98.

will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Jesus points to the clear path to salvation, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). There is a clear and compelling biblical teaching consistently pointing to absolute moral truth as revealed through relationship with God.

In Romans 14, Paul is not stating that Christian doctrine is relativistic or subjective, he comments that there is a party in these differences of opinion that are “weak in faith” (Rom. 14:1). Scripture cannot contradict itself and be true at the same time. This fallacy, that a contradictory message can be simultaneously contradictory and true, violates the law of non-contradiction.<sup>144</sup> To be an evangelical committed to the belief of the inerrancy of God’s Word is to believe that the Bible does not contradict itself.<sup>145</sup> This weakness that Paul refers to is not related to Christian doctrine, but rather a weakness of faith (Rom. 14:1).<sup>146</sup> Yet in this weakness, Paul is not condemning this group, but encouraging them to be “fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). This teaching reflects a great area of freedom for the conscience of the individual Christian to come to differing conclusions on disputable matters. Christians can experience unity without uniformity. There does not need to be forced uniformity on trivial matters. The individual’s faith in God is a guiding light for each individual Christian. This individual and corporate faith in God will not contradict the indisputable truth of God’s Word.

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<sup>144</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 54.

<sup>145</sup> Grudem, 90.

<sup>146</sup> M.R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 166-167.

If followers of God accept the biblical nature of unity in Christ, they must next consider to what extent they will engage in fellowship with other denominations and congregations. Within the Baptist factions that developed in the early 20th century between the conservative fundamentalists and the evangelicals, there are primarily two different positions.<sup>147</sup> The fundamentalist Baptist identity developed along separatist ideologies and the evangelical Baptist ideology developed along an ideology of partnership and fellowship in ways that are uncompromising to their faith.<sup>148</sup> The evangelical ideology is one of partnership, fellowship, and unity in ways that are uncompromising to evangelical doctrine and faith. This is not the same as religious pluralism, which seeks to amalgamate all faiths and propositional truth claims into an amorphous, relativistic *reductio ad absurdum*; rather, the aim of evangelical theological practice is to partner with other Christian congregations in uncompromising ways.<sup>149</sup>

Paul states “For the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Cor. 12:14). In this statement, Paul admonishes this congregation, expressing that the church does not consist of a part, but a whole. Paul uses the body analogy to emphasize to the church that its members cannot survive apart from each other.<sup>150</sup> The body cannot exist with its parts separate from each other. Conversely, if the right hand may disagree with the left hand on disputable issues, they can still be secure in each of their own identities

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<sup>147</sup> Scott Stoll, “Who Then Is My Brother?” (D.Min. Thesis, Providence Theological Seminary, 2012), 59.

<sup>148</sup> Stoll, 59.

<sup>149</sup> Nash, 22.

<sup>150</sup> Pratt Jr., 218.

and faith in God while partnering in ways that benefit the whole body without unnecessarily compromising their own unique aspect of faith (Rom. 14).

1 Corinthians 12:19-20 states “If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.” God arranged the members of the body according to his own design.<sup>151</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulated this spiritual reality, “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal but a divine reality.”<sup>152</sup> When a Christian is discontent with the church that God has provided, the Christian sets themselves up in opposition to God and in judgement of the gift that God has provided. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote on the dangers of judging the church when he stated “God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God himself accordingly.”<sup>153</sup> The proper response of a Christian when entering into this divine reality that God has provided is one of thankfulness and contentment in what God has provided; not in a state of judgment and discontentedness.<sup>154</sup>

Paul continues “and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty”

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<sup>151</sup> Pratt Jr., 219.

<sup>152</sup> Bonhoeffer, 26.

<sup>153</sup> Bonhoeffer, 27.

<sup>154</sup> Bonhoeffer, 28.

(1 Cor. 12:23). Here Paul is writing about the natural, human, fleshly response to conflict, disagreements, and differences. Throughout church history separation has been a consistent reality and church debates and disputes have continued. Each part of the church that is tempted to allow their individual disputable matter to separate them from fellowship is in danger of violating the principle that Paul teaches, namely that those parts of the body that are weaker are particularly indispensable (1 Cor. 12).<sup>155</sup> The body was designed by God to be interdependent.<sup>156</sup>

The church is comprised of humans who continue to wrestle with sin. The Apostle Paul recounts how the things that he wanted to do he did not do, and the things he did not want to do, he did (Rom. 7:15). In order to understand the reactive nature of congregations and the church toward each other in matters of differences, it is helpful to look at the sociological dimension of humanity. Humans are by nature drawn together in a “togetherness” or a herd like mentality.<sup>157</sup> This undifferentiated and co-dependent default of human behavior tends to shift humans into mindsets of false dichotomies, or black and white, or all or nothing polar thinking.<sup>158</sup> This kind of model is helpful in understanding why congregations and denominations react so violently over disputable matters or why congregations and denominations desire to abandon denominational affiliation to attract outsiders.

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<sup>155</sup> Pratt, 219.

<sup>156</sup> Pratt, 219.

<sup>157</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 67.

<sup>158</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 67.

The Apostle Paul wrote that the hope of this interdependence would result in mutual unity with “no division in the body” (1 Cor. 12:25).<sup>159</sup> This interdependence is an example of Christian and church maturity. A helpful model of this Christian maturity in the body of Christ is the imagery of a human being’s growth and physical and relational development. A human being begins life dependent on others. Paul told the church of Corinth that they were still spiritual infants needing milk from him (1 Cor. 3:2). They were in a state of dependence. This is not spiritual maturity. In the next stage of maturity, a human learns the process of becoming independent. Paul wrote admonishing the church of Thessalonica that they would grow in their maturity by not needing to be dependent upon anyone (1 Thess. 4:12). The final stage of maturity for a human being and for the church is mutual interdependence. Stephen Covey wrote on this subject, “As we continue to grow and mature, we become increasingly aware that all of nature is *interdependent*, that there is an ecological system that governs nature, including society. We further discover that the highest reaches of our nature have to do with our relationships with others—that human life also is interdependent.”<sup>160</sup> Interdependence is a paradigm shift in thinking whereby the individual moves from codependency to independence to interdependence whereby the individual discovers the synergistic principle that together with others someone can accomplish something greater than individuals are capable of on their own.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Pratt, 219.

<sup>160</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 57.

<sup>161</sup> Covey, 57.

Paul admonishes the church, reminding them that the goal of the church leaders is to move the saints into this progression from consumers to contributors in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). Paul's leadership aims for the body, "from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:16). For the Baptist, this vision of maturity and unity in the body should be in the forefront of their minds. A Baptist can retain theological distinctives and maintain a healthy sense of differentiation while simultaneously achieving unity in the body of Christ. Baptist theology begins with many shared doctrines with other protestants.<sup>162</sup>

Defining this Baptist reality of unity is the term, "Bapto-Catholic."<sup>163</sup> To be a Bapto-Catholic is to acknowledge the unity of the church and to retain a distinctly Baptist identity simultaneously. Dr. Cameron Jorgenson writing on the significance of the usage of the term Bapto-Catholic wrote:

Not only is the compound word grammatically flexible, but its awkwardness captures the unusual nature of the project, constructing a Baptist identity that is influenced by the whole of the Christian tradition by way of the ancient creeds, liturgical practices (e.g., the church calendar), and theological concepts (e.g., the sacraments). These theologians profess a strong allegiance to the Baptist heritage, but criticize prevailing interpretations of the Baptist identity as unduly influenced by corrosive aspects of Enlightenment philosophy rather than solid biblical or theological reasoning.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Holmes, 69.

<sup>163</sup> Cameron H. Jorgenson, "Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity" (Ph.D Diss., Baylor University, 2008), 3.

<sup>164</sup> Jorgenson, 3.



While Baptists have been known to be separationist in practice, Baptists can in good conscience recite the Nicene Creed with the rest of the church.<sup>165</sup> Through this Baptist-Catholic vision of unity, Baptists have been enabled and equipped to retain a theologically distinct Baptist identity and participate in reconciliation and unity in the body of Christ while maintaining an uncompromising stance in the theologically distinct doctrines that identify the Baptist denominations and congregations.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Jorgenson, 3.

<sup>166</sup> Jorgenson, 4.

## CHAPTER THREE: BAPTISTIC IDENTITY IN EXISTING LITERATURE

### **The Loss of Theological Identity**

The first task of a leader is to define reality.<sup>167</sup> The scope of this first subproblem is to explore the literature exposing the loss of theological identity during the 20th century and into the 21st century. This first subproblem is related to the second subproblem of defining the unintended consequences in the literature on the loss of theological identity, and the final subproblem is an appeal to retain theological identities in the church through specific theological naming of congregations, churches, and denominations.

Mark G. Toulouse in his work, “What Is the Role of a Denomination in a Post-Denominational Age,” explored the historical values in American culture that have contributed to a loss of theological identity in individual congregational distinctives.<sup>168</sup> Toulouse showed that in the pietistic fervor of the early American life, the desire for mission became a higher value and priority to the church than the intellectual or theological reasoning behind a denomination.<sup>169</sup> The early American church environment tended to favor those congregations and denominations whose identity did not create distinctions.<sup>170</sup> The common approach to theology in 19th century denominations was to

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<sup>167</sup> John C. Maxwell, *Leader Shift* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Leadership, 2019), 63.

<sup>168</sup> Toulouse, 209.

<sup>169</sup> Toulouse, 222.

<sup>170</sup> Toulouse, 210.

appeal to generalities in theology that would not drive away potential adherents.<sup>171</sup> This kind of generalizing in theology sets the stage for the slippery slope of minimizing theology in denominations. Denominations and individual congregations cutting ties with theological names may be explained in part by this early American impulse of mission and attractional worship over theological identity.

Justo L. Gonzalez in *The Story of Christianity*, showed the historical impact of world wars in the 20th century on how the church responded to a bitter and disillusioned public.<sup>172</sup> Gonzalez stated the church's response to a disillusioned public as highly pragmatic and offering a solution-focused therapeutic Christianity that responded to needs without the layers of theology.<sup>173</sup> Gonzalez, writing about religious author Norman Vincent Peale, said "One of the most popular religious authors of the time was Norman Vincent Peale, who promoted faith and 'positive thinking' as a route to mental health and happiness."<sup>174</sup> This kind of historical atmosphere created the conditions suitable for a rejection of substantive theology in favor of a more palatable theology based on self-help and therapeutic necessity. The historical circumstances of a society worn down by warfare gives context as to why the church would want to reframe its practical way of relating to society.

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<sup>171</sup> Toulouse, 208.

<sup>172</sup> Gonzalez, 484.

<sup>173</sup> Gonzalez, 484.

<sup>174</sup> Gonzalez, 484.

Theodore Hopkins in his work, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” explored the effects of the loss of influence in a post-Christian western context.<sup>175</sup> Hopkins suggested that there are three primary aspects of a post-Christian world that have impacted the church: the problems of identity, instrumentality, and purpose.<sup>176</sup> Hopkins showed that the loss of influence for Christians has resulted in a painful acknowledgement by the church and a reactive stance of attempting to regain influence by promoting a therapeutic need-based Christianity.<sup>177</sup>

Hopkins’s response to this new reality of a post-Christian society is that the church needs a robust storied identity. Hopkins wrote “Three criteria for ecclesiology are necessary: storied identity, doctrinal substance, and visible concreteness.”<sup>178</sup> This identity must be rooted in Scripture and theology. Hopkins identified this identity as not a man-made therapeutic model, but instead is a divinely appointed identity securely rooted in biblical theology.<sup>179</sup> A biblical theology provides a metanarrative desperately needed in a post-Christian West to provide a larger context and identity for Christians. Hopkins

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<sup>175</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 29.

<sup>176</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 29.

<sup>177</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 31.

<sup>178</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 32.

<sup>179</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 33.

pointed out that for this storied metanarrative to provide identity for Christians it must be intrinsically ecclesiological.<sup>180</sup> In order for the church to enter into God's story and not a therapeutic model, there must be a profound doctrinal element taking place within the church that acknowledges the specifics of the faith and is capable of identifying itself.<sup>181</sup> The response from the church to a post-Christian world does not need to be cutting ties with theological names and identity. The church needs to promote a deeply rooted theology that provides a consistent source of identity in an era prone to cut ties with previous sources of identity and past heritage.

Theodore Hopkins in, "Theology in a Post-Christian Context," explored the historical and cultural milieu creating the context for a post-Christian world.<sup>182</sup> While institutionalized Christianity had been declining before and after, Hopkins credited 1963 as a paradigm shift with the opening of a movie theater on a Sunday in South Carolina. Hopkins wrote, "Looking back at their own experience, Hauerwas and Willimon name 1963 as the date when the walls of Christendom fell down since the first theater opened on Sunday in South Carolina—and one of them chose the theater over church."<sup>183</sup> This symbolic act began to characterize the growing American ambivalence toward church and the growing secularization of culture. Church no longer held a place of prominence

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<sup>180</sup> Hopkins, "Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations," 33.

<sup>181</sup> Hopkins, "Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations," 36.

<sup>182</sup> Theodore J. Hopkins, "Theology in a Post-Christian Context: Two Stories, Two Tasks," in *Concordia Theological Journal* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 44.

<sup>183</sup> Hopkins, "Theology in a Post-Christian Context: Two Stories, Two Tasks," 43.

over the culture. The church's formerly privileged position in culture and society was quickly fading. The Bible and theological language began to slowly fade from the vocabulary of American society.<sup>184</sup> The church in America began to experience a shift from a position of power to a position of powerlessness. This shift may provide a reason for why the American church began to drift toward a diminished focus on theological specifics and identity to a more seeker sensitive model where the church has downplayed theological affiliation and focused on attracting people to the local congregation.

Margaret R. Miles in her work, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews," discussed the rise of institutionalized Christianity in the West beginning with Constantine and the change from Christianity being a marginalized segment of society to becoming a powerful and triumphant institution. On this subject Margaret R. Miles stated:

In the later Roman Empire, effective power was visible power. In 313 CE, Christianity had emerged from persecuted sect to authorized and imperially funded religion almost overnight. Formerly without trace in the landscape of Roman cities, the building of Christian churches under Constantine altered the appearance of ancient cities. The fourth-century historian Eusebius, an admirer of Constantine, eulogized Constantine's church buildings because they made Christianity's dramatic change in status visible. Just as the incarnation of Christ had made God visible, Eusebius said, the triumph of Christianity was visible, incarnated in the magnificent new cathedrals that were springing up in the empire's major cities during the fourth century. These buildings witnessed silently to the power of the God who had given the victory at the Milvean Bridge to an outnumbered and outmaneuvered Constantine.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Hopkins, "Theology in a Post-Christian Context: Two Stories, Two Tasks," 44.

<sup>185</sup> Miles, 156.

Miles wrote about the mosaics on the walls of the old church building, Santa Maria Maggiore, and its suspiciously triumphant and victorious themes running throughout the mosaics.<sup>186</sup> Throughout these mosaics there are no hints of martyrs or New Testament saints dying gruesome deaths for Christ.<sup>187</sup> Power and control in the institutionalized triumphal church is demonstrated in the narratives and interpretation of Scripture demonstrated through these fifth century mosaics. This kind of power institutionalized in the church would be present in the western church up until the twentieth century. The modern church is just beginning to understand this loss of power that had been held since Constantine. This provides an historical rationale for why churches may begin to downplay specific theological identities in favor of preserving as many adherents as possible.

How does the church respond to the loss of a predominant power dynamic held since A.D. 313? The church responds to this loss of power in both overt and subtle ways. One of the ways the church responds is through the process of responding to culture by devaluing theology and promoting the therapeutic and pragmatic elements of Christianity and reducing Christianity to a system. Edwin H. Friedman in his work on family systems and processes *Generation to Generation*, showed that the result of systems that feed off one another in mutually dependent ways works to create a new homeostasis.<sup>188</sup> This new balance that develops is difficult to break and can result in a difficult web of

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<sup>186</sup> Miles, 160.

<sup>187</sup> Miles, 157.

<sup>188</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1985), 198.

interdependency.<sup>189</sup> Friedman suggested that the way in which a system can break through the bonds of this emotional dependency that is created in systems is through the differentiation of individuals within the system.<sup>190</sup> In a systems model of church denominations, an example of a differentiated church system would be to retain a distinct theological identity despite the trend of churches to discard distinct theological identities and to be prepared for the system to attempt to conform the independent actor through subtle or overt means.<sup>191</sup> This kind of systems model provides an antidote to the anxious leader who may be considering changing the name of their church to fit the emerging homogenous trend away from denominational and theological identity.

In Edwin Friedman's work *A Failure of Nerve*, Friedman explored further the homeostasis principle in family and group systems. The desire for safety and togetherness creates a "herd" mentality in family systems.<sup>192</sup> As a system reacts to a perceived threat there is a tendency of conformity in order to protect.<sup>193</sup> The more "herding" takes place, the greater the loss of autonomy and self-efficacy there is in the individuals within the system.<sup>194</sup> As churches respond to the loss of predominance in a post-Christian west, the

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<sup>189</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 231.

<sup>190</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 231.

<sup>191</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 231. While Friedman addresses congregational systems and individuals, these same principles apply in a larger systems level of Evangelical denominations and individual congregations within those systems.

<sup>192</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 68.

<sup>193</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 68.

<sup>194</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 68.



system's response of reactivity through herding and the loss of individual identity takes place.

### **The Loss of Baptistic Identity**

The next exploration in this study is how this loss of theological identity has impacted baptistic identity specifically. Curtis W. Freeman wrote on the impact of modern thought on Baptist theology in, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something." He began by identifying that the task of theology is to speak prescriptively and descriptively to all Christians.<sup>195</sup> Freeman mentioned the theologian James McClendon as Freeman wrote that theology by definition is a reference to highly specific beliefs and affirmations of a specific faith community.<sup>196</sup> Theology is not a general set of religious content, but is borne from the particular discoveries of a distinct community.<sup>197</sup> Theological identity cannot be divorced from its presuppositions, propositions, and discoveries of its adherents. To identify as a Baptist is to specify what kind of beliefs and propositions make up the world view of the individual.

It is no secret that Baptists have a varied history and the ability to agree on baptistic identity and its theological heritage is challenging. Cameron Jorgenson in his work *Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity*, noted that Baptists have a harder time than most in finding a history that all can agree

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<sup>195</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty Something," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 21.

<sup>196</sup> Freeman, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty Something," 22.

<sup>197</sup> Freeman, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty Something," 22.

on.<sup>198</sup> The intense freedom of free church polity and the value of *semper reformanda* has led to splits and copious expressions of Baptist identity. Jorgenson argued that despite these challenges, Baptists do have an identity. Jorgenson wrote “The preface to one Baptist theology reader begins by saying ‘This book grew out of an attempt to answer a single question. Do Baptists have a theological heritage?’ Of course, the answer was affirmative, as attested by the thick volume that followed; however, the question the editors pose is instructive.”<sup>199</sup> Despite the challenges, to be a Baptist is to identify with a group of Christians with similar beliefs.

In, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” Walter Shurden pointed out that while other denominations and theological identities may have clear and concise definitions that make them a precise theological expression, Baptists are unified around a set of principles rather than one singular and defining identity.<sup>200</sup> Some of the uniquely Baptist expressions of identity include the Baptist doctrines of soteriology, Christology, believers baptism by immersion, spiritual individualism, and the Baptist doctrine of the church.<sup>201</sup> These kinds of similarities build cohesion and identity to those congregations that choose to associate with the Baptist name.

Baptists have always been independent and individualistic in their stance toward faith. Edwin Gaustad in his work, “Toward a Baptist Identity in the 21st Century,”

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<sup>198</sup> Jorgenson, 14.

<sup>199</sup> Jorgenson, 14.

<sup>200</sup> Walter B. Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 322.

<sup>201</sup> Shurden, 322.

chronicled the fierce independence that developed under intense persecution suffered at the hands of other Christian denominations.<sup>202</sup> It was this context of persecution and suffering that the Baptist movement was shaped and formed. Gaustad commented that it was persecution that provided Baptists with the greatest sense of identity. Referencing the persecution of Baptists in New England he wrote, “Baptists in New England suffered many things, but no crisis of identity haunted them. They always had plenty of enemies to let them know who they were.”<sup>203</sup> Gaustad commented on the reality of persecution being the greatest reminder to Baptists that they were not in the accepted majority of Christians.<sup>204</sup> The church historian and writer Justo L. Gonzalez wrote about the early persecution of Baptists in *The Story of Christianity*. The early Baptists were first dubbed Anabaptists by their tormentors as a pejorative term.<sup>205</sup> This early term with negative connotations meant “re-baptizers”.<sup>206</sup> This kind of persecution refined the Baptists in their identity. Early Baptists were willing to have self-definition in the face of persecution and accept their minority biblical views at a great cost. This historical lesson may provide a basis for modern Baptists to proudly embrace their baptistic heritage.

Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin in their book *The Baptist Story*, described some of the more recent trends in the late 20th century where

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<sup>202</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, “Toward a Baptist Identity in the 21st Century,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2008), 361.

<sup>203</sup> Gaustad, 363.

<sup>204</sup> Gaustad, 364.

<sup>205</sup> Gonzalez, 69.

<sup>206</sup> Gonzalez, 69.

they begin to see the loss of the Baptist name in churches coinciding with the value placed in the “seeker sensitive” movement.<sup>207</sup> The seeker sensitive model was a response to a western culture that was reflecting a post-Christian value system and rejecting the influence of the church. In response to this emerging system, the seeker-sensitive model of church ecclesiology sought to use its worship services and gatherings to reach out to unbelievers and to reintroduce former believers into the church system.<sup>208</sup>

This new seeker sensitive model became more widely publicized when Baptist Rick Warren planted Saddleback Church in California in 1980 without the word “Baptist” in its name and with a strategy of downplaying their denominational affiliation.<sup>209</sup> As time went on, this strategy of downplaying denominational and theological association among Baptist churches with a seeker sensitive ecclesiological model became a trend in churches as many churches into the twenty-first century began to drop the word “Baptist” from their official church name.<sup>210</sup> In 2008, the Baptist General Conference adopted this strategy by changing their name to Converge reflecting the larger trend of post-denominationalism.<sup>211</sup> On Converge’s website, the reason stated for this change was a desire to differentiate from the theological ambiguity emerging in the culture between differing baptistic denominations and the fear of persecution toward

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<sup>207</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 310.

<sup>208</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 310.

<sup>209</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 310.

<sup>210</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 310.

<sup>211</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 311.

the denomination's missionaries serving in hostile locations.<sup>212</sup> A denomination and theological/ecclesiological community historically used to embracing persecution began to make identity decisions in light of avoiding persecution.

In the book *More Than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity*, R. Albert Mohler explored further the erosion of Baptist identity. Mohler argued that the identity of Baptists has eroded due to the neglect of Baptists and not from outside opposition.<sup>213</sup> While the persecution of Baptists in their early history served to identify Baptists, the comfort and safety of the modern era has led to the erosion of Baptist identity. Mohler argued that this erosion of identity has been primarily doctrinal.<sup>214</sup> Mohler suggested that there are central baptistic identities that have been eroded while much is subjective.<sup>215</sup> The central points of baptistic identity that have eroded are confessionalism, biblical authority, soul competency, religious experience, and congregational polity.<sup>216</sup> Teaching Baptist history in Baptist congregations may bring about a sober mindset to the decision to change a theological name with substantive history and beliefs attached.

In his book *Baptist Theology*, James Garrett identified that early Baptists did not have a need to distinctively identify themselves because they were clearly known for being dissenters. Garrett wrote, "English Baptists since the seventeenth century had

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<sup>212</sup> "Converge," *Converge* <https://converge.org/about/history> (accessed 12/17/2018).

<sup>213</sup> R. Albert Mohler, foreword to *More Than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity*, by R. Stanton Norman (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2001), vii.

<sup>214</sup> Mohler, vii.

<sup>215</sup> Mohler, ix.

<sup>216</sup> Mohler, ix.

produced controversial writings, especially works on baptism against Pedobaptists, but the general exposition of Baptist distinctives had been a rarity.”<sup>217</sup> The plethora of literature produced by early Baptists against Pedobaptists served to sufficiently distinguish them from those with which they disagreed. Baptists had no need to write systematic theological volumes during their infancy because the point of the early Baptists was not to start an entirely new Christian expression of faith; it was a matter of biblical understanding and personal conviction regarding certain biblical and theological principles. Garrett commented on the argument that early Baptists were not trying to recreate the church, they were exposing the need for freedom of conscience for Christians, the need to clarify authority in the church, the refutation of other Christian denominations, and a robust ecclesiology.<sup>218</sup> Baptists today can benefit from understanding the distinctives of their expression of the faith. While early Baptists did not need to self-identify due to their marginalization, modern Baptists must work more diligently to understand their uniqueness.

It should be noted that despite their desire for freedom of conscience and opposition to systems of power in the established denominations of the time, Baptists have a history of unity with other denominations without uniformity. In his work *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology*, Pascal Denault recognized that early Baptists were peace loving and desired unity with their Pedobaptist brothers and

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<sup>217</sup> Garrett, 531.

<sup>218</sup> Garrett, 532.

sisters.<sup>219</sup> While early Baptists were courageous enough to differentiate themselves from their Pedobaptist brothers and sisters, they were also willing to associate with them regardless of their belief about baptism.<sup>220</sup> This kind of unity through diversity is a value modern Baptists can employ by partnering with other churches and denominations in uncompromising ways. Intentionally partnering with other Christian churches can provide Baptists afraid of appearing set apart from other churches a means to actualize unity.

In *Our Times and Our Stories*, Truett M. Lawson outlined the cooperative and unifying attitude that pervaded the early Converge movement. While the movement began with Baptists leaving Sweden to obtain religious freedom in the United States, the early movement did not impose the same kind of discrimination they had suffered to differing denominations in their new Minnesota home.<sup>221</sup> While many Lutherans in the Isanti County region of Minnesota denied their members communion if they attended a Baptist church service, the Baptists welcomed local Lutherans in a more hospitable manner.<sup>222</sup> The Lutheran leader Eric Norelius who founded the Lutheran Social Services and Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran College was invited to preach at the Scandia Baptist Church.<sup>223</sup> Lawson, writing about the Lutheran leader Norelius stated, “He notes that the

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<sup>219</sup> Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013), 63.

<sup>220</sup> Denault, 63.

<sup>221</sup> Truett M. Lawson, *Our Times and Our Stories* (St. Paul, MN: Bethel University, 2014), 6-7.

<sup>222</sup> Lawson, 7.

<sup>223</sup> Lawson, 7.

church was strongly discussing the doctrine of election and mentions visiting one of the Baptist members, a farmer named George Madson, who studied the Bible in the original Greek.”<sup>224</sup> The more educated and aware Baptists were, the more capable they were of accepting their identity and engaging in inter-denominational discussion while loving and appreciating the contributions of their brothers and sisters in Christ from other denominations. Baptists today can benefit from this kind of interdenominational curiosity to understand what differentiates Baptists from other denominations, and where there are points of unity in beliefs.

### **Theological Consequences**

Thus far this paper has looked at the loss of theological identity facing the American church and specifically the reality of the loss of baptistic identity within Baptist churches in the United States. The reality of a post-Christian west and a post-denominational landscape of American Christianity has been examined. A loss of influence in the church and its desire to maintain homeostasis by responding with the megachurch movement along with the rise of church marketing within the therapeutic and pragmatic church philosophy has been explored. This section will examine what effects have occurred within the church during this time of loss of influence for the church.

In George Barna’s book *The Second Coming of the Church*, he asserted that the church has stagnated because it has not changed to a state reflective of the way in which

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<sup>224</sup> Lawson, 8.



the culture operates.<sup>225</sup> The types of surface changes like programs, name changes, and strategic church marketing have not influenced the rising trend of church decline and loss of influence.<sup>226</sup> Barna does not leave the church with this scathing criticism; his observation is that people are desperate for the truth and they are longing for robust theology.<sup>227</sup> While people are being invited to attend church events and encouraged to make a decision to follow Christ, they are not being effectively disciplined and assimilated into the body of Christ.<sup>228</sup> This missing component of discipleship and being brought into a grander metanarrative is missing from the modern western church.

In an interview titled, “Francis Chan: The Book of Acts Isn’t Hyperbole,” interviewer Rachael Starke noted that author and former megachurch pastor Francis Chan commented on the discrepancy between the megachurch technological revolution and the simplicity of the church in Acts 2.<sup>229</sup> Chan argued that the church has bought into the cultural desire of technological speed when discipleship relationships need time and space to mature.<sup>230</sup> The early church’s practice did not seem to revolve around attractional events but centered on extended prayer, radical love, service, and intimate fellowship.<sup>231</sup> These root practices are what defines the church, not clever marketing or

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<sup>225</sup> George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 2.

<sup>226</sup> Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, 2.

<sup>227</sup> Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, 2.

<sup>228</sup> Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, 2.

<sup>229</sup> Rachael Horner Starke, “Francis Chan: The Book of Acts Isn’t Hyperbole,” *Christianity Today* 62, no. 8 (October 2018): 72.

<sup>230</sup> Starke, 72.

<sup>231</sup> Starke, 72.

branding. The stability of the biblical church must depend upon these basic biblical church practices.

The impact of the loss of influence has invaded the value system of a church losing its influence. In the book *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches*, George Barna listed the marks that many Christians believe to be indicative of an effective church: having 1,000 or more attendees at a service, raising a million dollars for ministry, adding buildings with 100,000 square feet or more, broadcasting services, having a high name recognition in the community, and adding 100 or more new members in a year.<sup>232</sup> The problem with all of these triumphal marks of success is that none of them can speak to Christlikeness or corporate and individual spiritual health.<sup>233</sup> The triumphal church reaction to the loss of influence in a post Christian world has infiltrated the value system of a church bent on regaining ground.

In the article, “Rehabilitating Willow Creek: Megachurches, De Certeau, and the Tactics of Navigating Consumer Culture,” Aaron B. James spoke to how consumer culture has infiltrated the world view of the church and turned everything into a commodity. James wrote “Believers are trained by consumer culture to approach their religious tradition with the interpretive habits and skills with which they approach commodities. Consumer culture changes the relationship to religious traditions. Christians continue to practice them, but they lose their ability to form Christian lives substantively. Hence, consumer culture neuters the formative power of religious tradition

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<sup>232</sup> George Barna, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999), 16.

<sup>233</sup> Barna, *The Habits of Highly Effective Churches*, 16.

over the lives of its followers.”<sup>234</sup> In a consumeristic church atmosphere, the church anxiously caters to the person who is being marketed: the consumer.<sup>235</sup> James noted the creative ways in which the mega church model works within a consumeristic environment and makes some contributions to the system, yet the underlying value system must be acknowledged for its consumeristic emphasis.<sup>236</sup> While consumeristic mega churches use the gospel to get a return on investment, it must be acknowledged that they are utilizing consumerism as a tool.<sup>237</sup> James noted that megachurches are inextricably tied to the church growth movement and cannot be separated from that philosophy.<sup>238</sup> The first acknowledgement for Baptist churches or baptistic evangelical churches is to recognize the effect that consumeristic culture may be contributing to a loss of theological tradition and substantive belief system.

In Curtis Freeman’s pivotal article, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” he criticized the growing movement to erode a Baptist identity from its traditional roots.<sup>239</sup> Freeman critiqued the revisionist response to Baptist ecclesiology being libertarian and a complete autonomy as a modern notion imposed on a historical faith expression.<sup>240</sup> The

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<sup>234</sup> Aaron James, “Rehabilitating Willow Creek: Megachurches, De Certeau, and the Tactics of Navigating Consumer Culture,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 43, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 27.

<sup>235</sup> James, 27.

<sup>236</sup> James, 24-25.

<sup>237</sup> James, 28.

<sup>238</sup> James, 26.

<sup>239</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 284.

<sup>240</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 283.

desire to “re-create” a baptistic identity is a post-modern desire that creates a false-dichotomy between the historical expression of identity and the modern notion of cosmetic appeal.<sup>241</sup> Freeman explored the reality that Baptist principles transcend external disputable matters and are part of the core identity of what it means to be Baptist.<sup>242</sup> Being a Baptist must be seen for the unique entity it entails. For Baptist churches to dissociate with the Baptist name and identity is to ignore a core part of their unique Christian identity.

Freeman continued his historical analysis of Baptists by contrasting them with the growing need for modern Baptists to justify their theological convictions. Freeman wrote “Although early Baptists seemed to find it unnecessary to provide any warrant other than the gospel for Christian liberty and liberty of conscience, subsequent generations increasingly turned to philosophical and political theories to justify these convictions.”<sup>243</sup> Early Baptists in persecution offered nothing other than the Gospel as the means by which they had Christian liberty and liberty of conscience.<sup>244</sup> As early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Baptist theologians like Isaac Backus and John Leland became ardent defenders of baptistic theology while using enlightenment philosophical ideals to defend their theology and heritage.<sup>245</sup> It was Leland who developed a rugged individualistic interpretation of historic Baptist principles and imposed them on the

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<sup>241</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 286.

<sup>242</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 290.

<sup>243</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 281.

<sup>244</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 281.

<sup>245</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 281-282.

historic expression of faith. On Leland, Freeman wrote “John Leland (1754-1841), a pivotal figure among colonial Baptists, staunchly defended the historic Baptist convictions of the liberty of conscience and the disestablishment of the church from the state.”<sup>246</sup> Over time, other ideologies based on individualism would leave their mark on the Baptist expression to include populism and revivalism.<sup>247</sup> Freeman’s assertion of Baptist identity was that it does not need to be re-envisioned, but needs to be correctly envisioned and correctly stated.<sup>248</sup> For the modern Baptist congregation wrestling with changing its name, a helpful place to begin is to understand and correctly communicate the essence of being a Baptist.

In the article, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty Something,” Curtis Freeman asserted that each denominational expression of Christianity is asserting a unique characteristic of faith.<sup>249</sup> He defended a unique baptistic identity and heritage as being necessary to articulate a theologically unique expression of faith.<sup>250</sup> He noted that the two greatest dividers of Baptists in America and Britain over the last 200 years has been the Calvinist and Arminian debate and the modernist-fundamentalist controversy.<sup>251</sup> Freeman, quoting from theologian James McClendon, advocated that the greatest common uniting for Baptists is their radical common

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<sup>246</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 281.

<sup>247</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 283.

<sup>248</sup> Freeman, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” 273.

<sup>249</sup> Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” 22.

<sup>250</sup> Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” 23.

<sup>251</sup> Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” 22.

heritage.<sup>252</sup> While the great debates of Calvinism and Arminianism and the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy may continue to be a source of theological conversation for Baptists, their radical history provides the greatest distinctive and opportunity for unity and theological dialogue among Baptist denominations.<sup>253</sup>

In, “Baptist Theology Since 1950,” Fisher Humphreys chronicled the historical trend of Baptist theology over the past 60 years. He discussed the trend away from Baptist identity in the 1990s manifesting in a document written by American theologians titled, “Re-envisioning the Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America.”<sup>254</sup> Humphreys noted Curtis Freeman’s response to this document in questioning the Baptist appeal to modernity and the desire to justify their existence in Enlightenment rationality.<sup>255</sup> Baptists have attempted to justify themselves to the knowledge of the day by using modern arguments and philosophies to justify an historical expression of the faith.<sup>256</sup> In this, Freeman believed that both conservative and liberal baptistic theologians are utilizing similar arguments from similar trains of philosophical thought.<sup>257</sup> Humphreys claimed that the role of doctrine in the church is not to defend the Bible or a distinctive theological set of principles, but to edify and

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<sup>252</sup> Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” 22-23.

<sup>253</sup> Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” 22.

<sup>254</sup> Fisher Humphreys, “Baptist Theology Since 1950,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 29.

<sup>255</sup> Humphreys, 29-30.

<sup>256</sup> Humphreys, 30.

<sup>257</sup> Humphreys, 30.

enculturate the ecclesiological life of the church.<sup>258</sup> These principles are to be used to provide a context for identity in the life of the church.

The loss of theological acuity in Baptist circles can be traced back to the 1950s, according to David S. Dockery. In his article, “Southern Baptist Theology in the Twentieth Century: A Denomination Coming of Age,” Dockery traced the loss of theological distinctives in favor of pragmatic and programmatic philosophies in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1950s.<sup>259</sup> Dockery contended that the most crucial theological issue of the inerrancy of God’s Word came under scrutiny in the 1960s and 1970s in the Southern Baptist Convention but many of the pastors, lay ministers, and denominational leaders did not have the theological acumen to defend even the most critical of doctrinal necessities.<sup>260</sup>

In the article, “Karl Barth, Confessionalism, and the Question of Baptist Identity,” Kimlyn Bender analyzed Karl Barth’s assessment of the Reformed church and drew parallels to Baptist identity.<sup>261</sup> Bender, borrowing from Barth, discussed the tribal identity that comes from belonging to a specific theological persuasion. Drawing from Barth’s assessment of the Reformed tradition Bender wrote “The first answer to the question of Reformed identity that Barth considers is one of inheritance and tribal belonging. In sum, one is Reformed, and loves the Reformed church and its tradition, precisely because that

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<sup>258</sup> Humphreys, 30.

<sup>259</sup> David S. Dockery, “Southern Baptist Theology in the Twentieth Century: A Denomination Coming of Age,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 129.

<sup>260</sup> Dockery, 129.

<sup>261</sup> Kimlyn J. Bender, “Karl Barth, Confessionalism, and the Question of Baptist Identity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 61.

is the inheritance one has received by one's birth and upbringing."<sup>262</sup> A theological context provides more than just an intellectual framework for living life, it provides a sense of belonging that transcends intellect and provides a necessary personalized church and homeland.<sup>263</sup> Barth contended that all theology must provide a person with a distinct embodiment of a particular time and place, a theological framework from which to call home.<sup>264</sup> Bender drew a parallel with Barth in baptistic distinctives providing a type of cultural identity and historical heritage for its adherents.<sup>265</sup> Bender argued that to be a Baptist is much larger than a simplistic list of theological ideas, it is also emotional, and a set of "principles, axioms, tenets, and convictions."<sup>266</sup> For Bender, being a Baptist must consist of something broader than denominational affiliation. It must begin with a conviction from a confessional belief and identity.<sup>267</sup> The name Baptist can convey to a group of people a sense of tribal identity. It gives an emotional and intellectual framework for approaching life and faith.

Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin wrote about the loss of theological identity for Baptists in *The Baptist Story*. These authors discussed the theological results of post-denominationalism on Baptist distinctives and baptistic identity. In the post-modern milieu of options for church expressions, these authors

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<sup>262</sup> Bender, 52.

<sup>263</sup> Bender, 52.

<sup>264</sup> Bender, 52.

<sup>265</sup> Bender, 61.

<sup>266</sup> Bender, 61.

<sup>267</sup> Bender, 63.



asserted that there are three major reasons why someone identifies or associates in Baptist congregations.<sup>268</sup> These three reasons are conditioning, convenience, and conviction.<sup>269</sup> People who were inculcated into baptistic congregations often associate with the conditioning model, those who attend a Baptist congregation out of personal preference tend to be Baptists for convenience, and those who have a set of theological guiding principles are Baptists out of conviction.<sup>270</sup>

With the advent of post-denominationalism and the attractional church movement, the rise in Baptists out of convenience model has begun to shape many Baptist expressions.<sup>271</sup> This type of movement does not promote a well-founded sense of identity and purpose for the congregant. The authors are promoting a baptistic identity borne out of conviction.<sup>272</sup> This kind of baptistic identity not only transcends convenience and heritage, it also promotes the reality that what someone believes about God, the Bible, and salvation are more important matters than how one was raised, or stylistic preferences.<sup>273</sup> The authors suggested that Baptists should learn their history and promote confessional baptistic creeds to inculcate new believers into their faith.<sup>274</sup> One of their

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<sup>268</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 326.

<sup>269</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 326.

<sup>270</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 326.

<sup>271</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 326.

<sup>272</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 326.

<sup>273</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 326.

<sup>274</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 327.

suggestions was London Pastor Hercules Collins' 1680 "An Orthodox Catechism."<sup>275</sup>

This kind of theological articulation can provide a sense of context and belonging for baptistic believers. The authors go on to point out that creedalism can be a normative part of baptistic history and should not be marginalized by Baptists.<sup>276</sup>

While there are clear confessions and creeds that can unite Baptists, there is a healthy and wide array of diversity within Baptist denominations and congregations. Cameron Jorgenson in the dissertation, "Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity," asserted that Baptists have traditionally been diverse in their historical make up.<sup>277</sup> Regardless of whether Baptists will associate with the name "Baptist," Baptists should know about their history as it is what gives definition and distinction to who they are as a unique expression of the Christian faith.<sup>278</sup>

Jorgenson interpreted Baptist historian Bill Leonard's writing about baptistic identity and expression during diversity. He revealed Leonard's understanding of the great diversity experienced between the General Baptists who lean more toward the Arminianism position and the Particular Baptists who lean more toward the Calvinist tradition as still being both equally Baptist.<sup>279</sup> Such hotly debated issues as the ordination and calling of women to serve as pastors and the issue of inerrancy of Scripture are all

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<sup>275</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 327.

<sup>276</sup> Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 327.

<sup>277</sup> Jorgenson, 55.

<sup>278</sup> Jorgenson, 55.

<sup>279</sup> Jorgenson, 57.

within the framework of a Baptist identity.<sup>280</sup> Jorgenson noted that the reality of tension and conflict throughout the history of the Baptist movement has been part and parcel to her identity.<sup>281</sup> Since Baptists are not a hierarchical organization with authoritative figureheads, robust discussion and debate over these issues is healthy and a must for Baptist denominations and congregations.

### **The Value of Retaining a Baptist Name**

Chapter three looked at the reality of the loss of theological identity, the loss of baptistic identity, and the theological results on Baptist congregations and denominations. This section explored the value of retaining a theologically distinct name. Mark G. Toulouse in his article, “What is the Role of a Denomination in a Post-Denominational Age,” has shown the staggering results of the loss of church membership, denominational affiliation, and religious identity on the western church over the past century.<sup>282</sup> The role of a denomination in providing a tribal identity has lessened as Toulouse noted that, according to a Gallup poll, 33 percent of Americans have switched from one denomination to another.<sup>283</sup> The reality is that much of the denominational switching has been in leaving denominations for non-denominational affiliations.<sup>284</sup>

Toulouse described the most influential megachurch in the non-denominational movement, Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, as being a

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<sup>280</sup> Jorgenson, 57.

<sup>281</sup> Jorgenson, 61.

<sup>282</sup> Toulouse, 209.

<sup>283</sup> Toulouse, 211.

<sup>284</sup> Toulouse, 213.

church that targets a highly specific demographic of 25-45-year-old white-collar professionals.<sup>285</sup> This kind of church format creates a less diverse church environment in the cause of highly specified demographic targeting. This kind of church marketing technique does not lend well to the Acts 2 model of a diverse congregation. While the intent of discarding the Baptist name may be to appear more open to a diverse group, many mega-churches and seeker sensitive models are attracting a homogenous group of people.

The desire to change distinctive denominational names is appealing from a marketing driven perspective because according to research, seekers are avoiding denominationally distinctive names.<sup>286</sup> The fastest growing Evangelical Lutheran Church of America is named “Community Church of Joy,” and the Shepherd (of the Hills) Church from Chatsworth, California is a Southern Baptist Church.<sup>287</sup> In recent years, many congregations are leaving the name “church” out of their official congregational name.<sup>288</sup> While retaining a theologically distinct name may not seem to have any value in and of itself, losing a theologically distinct name may be a microcosm of a shift in the value system of American Christians that has a set of accompanying unintended consequences.

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<sup>285</sup> Toulouse, 213.

<sup>286</sup> Toulouse, 215.

<sup>287</sup> Toulouse, 215.

<sup>288</sup> Toulouse, 215.

In the book *The Worship Mall*, Bryan Spinks showed the effects of post-denominationalism, marketing Christianity, and consumeristic models of church growth. Spinks claimed that the post-denominational mega-church has become a self-autonomous unit without denominational (in name or otherwise) ties.<sup>289</sup> Spinks cautioned this movement with the cautionary reality that the tendency in creating a consumeristic atmosphere is that the worship becomes driven by the consumer, not by a theological need to praise God.<sup>290</sup> Spinks also highlighted that this issue is not just a megachurch movement, smaller congregations and denominations have begun to copy the prevailing worldviews and values of megachurches by changing their names and ridding themselves of doctrinal language in favor of a more needs based therapeutic language driven by self-fulfillment.<sup>291</sup>

As shown through this review of applicable literature, there are numerous reasons why Baptists choose to dissociate with the Baptist name. The historical prioritization of missional living rather than theological reasoning began an historical precedent of devaluing theology. The western church became disillusioned by two world wars and desired a therapeutic Christianity rather than a robust theologically centered church. The church responded to a post-Christian culture by trying to regain influence while devaluing distinctive theologies. The literature review also purported several responses to these concerns. The church needs a robust theology with differentiated denominations

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<sup>289</sup> Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 64.

<sup>290</sup> Spinks, 64.

<sup>291</sup> Spinks, 65.

and theologies. Within these theologies, Baptists can acknowledge their unique contributions to Christianity including their individualism borne out of their persecution, free church polity, biblicism, and symbolic ordinances. For Baptists to regain their doctrinal distinctives and identity they must accept their culpability in devaluing doctrine. Rejecting the Baptist name and identity is a rejection of a unique and core part of their historical and storied identity. The Baptist name and theology provide a source of meaningful identity for its adherents. The question that will be addressed through research in chapters four and five is concerned with the practical result of removing the Baptist name from Converge North Central congregations in Northern Minnesota.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY IN THE CHURCH

### **The Type of Research to Be Conducted**

The type of research to be used in this study is qualitative research. Qualitative research seeks to use interpretation of observations and social constructs and phenomenon to facilitate understanding of real-world events.<sup>292</sup> This type of research methodology is helpful when studying a phenomenon with little established research. As seen from the literature review, there is a large body of literature interacting with baptistic identity, but very little specifically dealing with the loss of baptistic identity with the recent phenomenon of Baptist congregations dropping the name “Baptist” from their congregation’s name and identity. Qualitative analysis is subjective. There is an interpretive nature to the analysis. Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ormrod wrote about the subjective nature of qualitative research. “Although objective methods may be appropriate for studying events in the physical world, these researchers say, an objective approach to studying human events—interpersonal relationships, social structures, creative products, and so on—is neither desirable nor, perhaps, even possible.”<sup>293</sup> Qualitative research as a methodology recognizes the need for interpretation of phenomenon in human social environments.

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<sup>292</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 139.

<sup>293</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 139.

The specific type of qualitative research this project will use is the grounded theory study. Grounded theory study will be utilized due to the emphasis in grounded theory study on the field data rather than the theoretical collection from the literature.<sup>294</sup> Within this framework, the researcher's original hypothesis may be proven incorrect. Within grounded theory, the analysis and results of the field research drive the results and future theoretical research. Authors John Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth described several main features of grounded theory including the need for a visual model, causal conditions, and theoretical propositions.<sup>295</sup> This type of research necessitates detailed analysis of the results including finding meaningful and significant connections throughout the data.

Grounded theory research utilizes several features of the data analysis and collection. Leedy and Ormrod defined these basic data analysis features as open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and theory development.<sup>296</sup> Open coding is a process of categorizing data into subsets.<sup>297</sup> These subsets produce helpful themes for discovering meaning within the data. Axial coding focuses on making connections amongst open coding. As these themes become interrelated, the coding becomes more sophisticated. As the axial coding becomes more sophisticated, selective coding seeks to describe a narrative of the phenomenon. Leedy and Ormrod described this narrative feature as the

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<sup>294</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 146.

<sup>295</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018), 306.

<sup>296</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 147.

<sup>297</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 147.



emerging story line.<sup>298</sup> The final part of data analysis is the theory development. This theory development provides the theoretical framework for further research.

In this study there were six interviews with a church leader (pastor or elder) each from six different Converge North Central congregations in Northern Minnesota. Of the six churches chosen, three were chosen that have the “Baptist” descriptor within their church name and three were chosen that do not have the “Baptist” descriptor within their name. The churches within the Northern Minnesota region were chosen at random, contacted and included in this study based on the church leader’s consent to participate in this study. The church leader interviews consisted of eight different questions. These questions were asked by the researcher with notes taken from the leader responses. A consent form was issued and signed giving the researcher permission to use the results in qualitative research analysis and thesis report. In addition to interviews with a church leader, surveys were given to each congregation to assess multiple aspects of their baptistic identity. The church survey questions consist of nine questions. Participants had the opportunity to complete the survey electronically or on paper. Each participant was given a consent form to sign for the researcher to use the results in qualitative research and analysis and thesis report. Results from the surveys were not able to be linked back to any individual members of the congregations, the names of both the churches and pastors have been changed when reported on in this paper.

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<sup>298</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 147.

### **Interviews and Their Necessity**

A pastor or church leader (elder, deacon) was chosen from each congregation to be interviewed. These interviewees were intentionally chosen for their meaningful commentary on the identity of the congregation and their leadership regarding the theological identity for the congregation. The pastor or church leader chosen was interviewed for their ability to articulate the theological framework for the name of the congregation and the direction the congregation is moving in connection to the congregational name. Each pastor or church leader that was chosen represents a variety of theological contexts and frameworks for their decisions and support (or change) of their congregational name. Six Converge North Central churches were chosen within the region of Northern Minnesota. This subset was chosen intentionally to contribute to a grounded theory study of a limited population to propose a theory for further study.

An important feature of interviews in a qualitative study is the open-ended nature of the questions.<sup>299</sup> The structure of the questions is designed to achieve unintended information that comes from the open-ended, non-judgmental feature of the question. Grounded theory by design is intended to develop theories based on the research and not the bias of the researcher. To minimize bias, intentional question wording was thought out and asked as prescribed in the wording. For example, one of the interview questions is: “How does the name of your congregation contribute to your identity as a congregation?” This question seeks to remain impartial and neutral, not skewing the

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<sup>299</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 154.

results by projecting the researcher's desired outcome. Objectivity in allowing the interview participants to speak honestly was rigorously pursued.

Notes were recorded on paper during the interviews to retain accurate source data. Brief pauses were taken during the interview process to write down critical thoughts, statements, and beliefs associated with the question. Interviewees received active listening and mirroring in order to receive accurate feedback. The questions were the basis for the interview and formed the framework of the interview. Space was allowed for further reflection and spontaneous commentary to add to the qualitative data. The researcher minimized bias by refraining from challenging or making comments about the validity of actions or beliefs of each church leader. The point of this research was not to challenge or to debate the validity of church leaders' beliefs in connection to baptistic identity but to understand the impact that the loss of the Baptist name has on the church. Researchers Leedy and Ormrod advised to "keep your reactions to yourself."<sup>300</sup> Clarifying questions were asked to understand and accurately convey the thoughts of the interviewee.

### **Notes**

Each interview was conducted via telephone. The six interviews took place at a time and location convenient for the participant. With the medium of a telephone, the interviews were done discreetly to maintain accurate information and noise control. Great care was taken to convey each interviewee accurately. The goal for the interview process was not to get the "right answer" from the interviewee, rather to accurately record the

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<sup>300</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 157.

perception of the participant.<sup>301</sup> Each participant signed a waiver understanding the results of the interview will be used for research. The analysis of each interview included such aspects as bias and misunderstanding of the questions. The goal is not to prove a participant wrong, but to use the information to accurately understand each church leader's beliefs and understanding of their baptistic identity and the identity of their congregation.

### **Surveys and Their Usefulness**

Surveys can be a useful tool to collect large swaths of data quickly and relatively easily. William R. Myers described this type of data collection as “a quick quantitative assessment.”<sup>302</sup> This type of data collection method was employed to aid in a high return rate. With the need to assess a significant number of congregants in each congregation, the survey method was used to draw meaningful conclusions from the data. If too small of a sampling or subgroup completes the survey, the results could be skewed thereby limiting the meaningful theory development that must take place. To achieve a high rate of return, the surveys are short (nine questions) and contain unbiased language in the questions. For example, one of the survey questions, “Do you belong to your congregation because of theological convictions?” does not contain semantic language insinuating there is a “right” answer to the question. Much freedom is given in the survey to encourage honest answers.

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<sup>301</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 157.

<sup>302</sup> William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry* (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2000), 55.

A distinguishing feature of the survey is the question about which congregation the survey applicant attends. This preserves anonymity for the applicant and the freedom to answer honestly without any distinguishing features being preserved. No attempt in the research was made to link results to any congregant or specific group of people. This type of research design is intentional to preserving the integrity of the data, the freedom of response for the individual congregant by preserving their anonymity, and to achieve accurate results. Congregants may have differing understanding of the language used in the survey. One statement in the survey, I have a good understanding of Baptist distinctives, may elicit different responses based on the comprehension of what Baptist distinctives are from the congregant. The data is limited to the understanding of the congregant.

### **The Reasoning for the Type of Research**

Qualitative research in a grounded theory study was chosen for this study because of its unique nature. Researchers Leedy and Ormrod defined a grounded theory study as “the one *least* likely to begin from a particular theoretical framework. On the contrary, the major purpose of a grounded theory approach is to begin with the data and use them to develop a theory.”<sup>303</sup> This study is researching a new and unique phenomenon. The loss of baptistic identity is relatively new, and the available literature does not reflect this unique type of analysis of the loss of baptistic identity as evidenced by the loss of the Baptist name. There are no studies, research, or literature available that research the correlation between the loss of Baptist identity and the recent phenomenon of churches

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<sup>303</sup> Myers, 146.

dropping Baptist from their name. A grounded theory study was undertaken to begin the process of formulating a theory. This study was conducted to begin this work of discovering whether there is a link between churches losing their Baptist name and if it contributes to a loss of identity in baptistic theology for the congregation.

A grounded theory study clarifies the recent phenomenon of re-naming Baptist churches in the post-denominational culture. Leedy and Ormrod in describing this process wrote “Typically, a grounded theory study focuses on *process* related to a particular topic—including people’s actions and interactions—with the ultimate goal of developing a theory about that process.”<sup>304</sup> This study is the beginning of a theoretical approach to understanding the issue. The researcher’s bias and opinions can be proven wrong in a grounded theory study. The goal of the researcher is to understand the issue and not to defend his position on the subject. A grounded theory study fits the design of this project because of the social nature of the project. This project uses the qualitative analysis of understanding the social causes, not just theological, behind the naming conventions of churches.

### **The Method of Data Analysis**

Grounded theory research seeks to discover themes in the data. Leedy and Ormrod gave steps that are used in discovering those themes: open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and development of a theory as the culminating thesis.<sup>305</sup> In analyzing the participant interviews and congregation surveys, themes were explored using these

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<sup>304</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 146.

<sup>305</sup> Leedy and Ormrod, 147.

varied methods. Grounded theory research is holistic, themes must emerge by analyzing causes, conditions, and systems. Understanding the changing of the Baptist name involves human motivations, aspirations, goals, and beliefs. These subjective and intangible sociological phenomena are best understood from the human perspective, a perspective that is the basis in grounded theory studies.

A grounded theory must contain both subjective research and a testable theory. In chapter five the results of the research were analyzed and in chapter six the emerging theory is advocated. The goal of a testable and empirical theory is that it can be repeated and have application beyond its context. With this grounded theory research taking place in a limited geographical location, its results must be acknowledged in their setting.

## CHAPTER 5: THE RESULTS OF RESEARCH

### **Findings and Trends Introduction**

This chapter is looking at the results of the field research. Field research in this study consisted of interviewing six pastors or elders of Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota and surveying individuals who attend those churches. The churches were intentionally chosen to be able to analyze and compare the results between churches with Baptist in their church name, and those that had either removed the name Baptist or were planted without the title Baptist in their name. Each pastor was interviewed from the same list of eight questions. The ages of the pastors/elder ranged from mid-fifties to early seventies. Two pastors were in their mid to late fifties, two were in their mid-sixties, one in their late sixties, and one in their early seventies. The pastors are all male and the elder a female. The congregations were issued surveys consisting of nine total questions: eight yes or no questions and one multiple choice. The total number of congregants who completed surveys was 76 with 33 participants identified as coming from Baptist-named churches and 43 participants from “non-Baptist” named churches. All 76 surveys had all 9 questions answered in their entirety.

The results from the field research were surprising. The researcher’s initial hypothesis was that the impetus for changing the name of a congregation is related to an individual leader’s desire to attract people to church services and other programs while ensuring a non-descript and unoffensive name. The research from pastor and church leader interviews showed a different theme. The theme that emerged from the data



showed an intentional process of naming that is reflective of thoughtful theological reflection. The literature review described the recent phenomenon of Baptist churches losing their baptistic identity in their name, while the field research showed the human psycho-social and theological reasoning for this loss.

There were significant sociological concerns that were addressed in the pastoral interviews. Concerns about denominational freedom and support structures were addressed as a common theme among the pastor and church leader interviews. The field research displayed the human motivations for a church's name, not just theological but also social and institutional. There are many more similarities between those churches with Baptist in their name and those without Baptist in their name. Two pastors identified as "Baptist" in both groups of interviews while one pastor in each group did not identify as Baptist. Similarly, there were different answers to the question of whether baptistic distinctives impact the congregation in both groups of pastors. To bring about a cohesive framework for this grounded theory research, this chapter will introduce three key themes from the pastoral interviews and the congregational surveys. Each theme will address a broad scope of the grounded theory field research and how this relates to the loss of the Baptist name in Baptist churches. The themes addressed in this chapter are elusive (in reference to the difficulty in defining) Baptists, denominational loyalty, and naming identity. Elusive Baptists deals with the degree to which pastors and congregants understand and identify with Baptist distinctives. Denominational loyalty looks at the similarities and dissimilarities in congregants and pastors' affiliation with the Converge denomination, and naming identity contrasts the results of congregants and pastors in how they view themselves relative to the Baptist identity.

### **Elusive Baptists**

The modernist versus fundamentalist controversy was evident in the field research. This controversy moves Baptists from identifying primarily as a Baptist to a primary identity as an evangelical. Baptistic distinctives were not as important as fundamental evangelical principles. When the pastor of Faith Baptist Church was asked how the name of his congregation contributed to their identity as a congregation he said, “The word Baptist does not mean a lot to people, it’s just a name of the church.”<sup>306</sup> The pastor of Grace Base was asked the same question and he responded by saying, “People know we are not mainline.”<sup>307</sup> The field research confirmed that both churches with a Baptist name and without a Baptist name are primarily moving from an identity of “Baptist” to “Evangelical.”

Nearly all the respondents in the surveys of six churches identified that they belong to a Converge or Baptist General Conference church, and nearly all the survey respondents identified as having been a part of a Baptist congregation. The elusiveness of the Baptist name did not seem to impact the congregation from knowing what denomination and to what theological strain they belong. Five out of the six pastors interviewed asserted that there is some value to retaining baptistic identity in the church. The pastor of Ebenezer Community Church described reformed theology as being more important than baptistic identity to his congregation.<sup>308</sup> The lead elder from Lamppost

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<sup>306</sup> Pastor Lance Goehring, interviewed by author, phone interview, December 9, 2019.

<sup>307</sup> Pastor Tom Halbur, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 14, 2020.

<sup>308</sup> Pastor Jim O’Houle, interviewed by author, phone interview, December 16, 2019.

Community Church described subscribing to the core beliefs of Converge but not wanting Baptist in the name of the church because of its association with being rigid and judgmental.<sup>309</sup> There is still some allegiance to the denomination but that allegiance is growing thin as the association with a broader set of conservative evangelical principles becomes more pronounced.

Some of these churches are beginning to question belonging to the Converge denomination. In two of the interviews with pastors there was sentiment expressed about moving away from Converge as a denomination. The reasons given were related to feeling unsupported by the denomination. Without a deep sense of theological commitment to a denomination, it is not surprising that Baptist churches are moving away from baptistic distinctives to a broader sense of evangelical or fundamentalist convictions. Losing the Baptist name results in some tangible differences in baptistic identity in the congregants of churches. In the congregant surveys comparing the churches with Baptist in their name with those that have dropped the name Baptist, 94 percent of congregants in Baptist named churches belong to their church out of theological convictions in comparison to 80 percent from those without the name Baptist.

The research showed that baptistic identity is ambiguous to those that support the Baptist name and identity. In the interview with Pastor Simon Smith from Hill Baptist church, he expressed concern about the movement away from having Baptist in the name of churches. He described himself as “very baptistic.”<sup>310</sup> When asked if he incorporates

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<sup>309</sup> Elder Sarah Shogren, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 7, 2020.

<sup>310</sup> Pastor Dr. Simon Smith, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 6, 2020.

baptistic distinctives into preaching, teaching, and pastoral counseling he responded that he has not incorporated baptistic distinctives. He said that it would be a good time to begin incorporating baptistic distinctives explicitly, although he sees them as coming through subtly in the pulpit. Pastor Lance Goehring from Faith Baptist described not having explicitly incorporated baptistic distinctives in preaching. He does teach baptistic identity, denominationalism, and church history in other settings, but not explicitly in sermons. The research shows that it is challenging for pastors to clearly articulate and differentiate what is a Baptist.

Pastor Ephraim Tower of the Freedom Baptist described himself as incorporating Baptist distinctives in the church. He specified that he preaches on salvation and that this relates to the symbolism of baptism into Christ's body found in 1 Corinthians 12:13.<sup>311</sup> He went on to describe teaching the doctrines in the church. Pastor Tom Halbur from Grace Base finds value in incorporating baptistic distinctives in the preaching context. He defined his preaching style as expository. One difference between these two churches is that Tom Halbur described many people who come to his church as those that do not know they are Baptist. Incorporating Baptist distinctives is seen as important by both of these pastors, yet the name aids in creating a sense of shared identity for the church.

### **Denominational Loyalty**

A point of contrast between those churches with Baptist in their name and those without is the issue of denominational loyalty and identity. A clear difference emerged from the data in both congregant surveys and pastoral interviews. One question from the

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<sup>311</sup> Pastor Ephraim Tower, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 21, 2020.

congregant survey is: do you belong to your congregation because of theological convictions? In the Baptist named churches the result was 94 percent belong to the church for theological convictions whereas 80 percent of non-Baptist named church congregants belong to their church for theological convictions. This point of contrast signifies a difference in why people belong to their congregation. There are numerous reasons why someone might belong to their congregation, but a larger number of congregants surveyed from churches with the name Baptist identified as belonging due to theological reasons.

A slightly higher number of congregants surveyed in Baptist named churches self-identified as having a good understanding of Baptist distinctives: 94 percent of Baptist named churches identified as having a good understanding of Baptist distinctives in contrast to 86.7 percent of those surveyed from churches without a Baptist name. These results match with the self-definition of their pastors. In the interview with Pastor Jim O'Houle of Ebenezer Community Church, he described his personal conviction to reformed theology as being more impactful to his congregation than Baptist distinctives. He described his tenure during the last 21 years serving as their pastor as a time of exploring systematic theology from reformed theological convictions and the Westminster Confession. Elder Sarah Shogren of Lamppost Community Church described herself as not having any Baptist convictions. She shared that her church has changed membership requirements of believer's baptism by immersion to incorporate other modes of believer's baptism. The anchor of the Baptist name carries with it a greater loyalty to Baptist distinctives.

In the interviews with pastors of three Converge churches with Baptist in their name, all three either preach, teach, or affirm baptistic distinctives in some way within their congregation. The loyalty to Baptist distinctives is not directly linked to belonging to the Converge denomination. Of the three pastors interviewed, none of them had attended or pastored a Converge church previously. Two pastors have previous Baptist church experience, but from Baptist churches of other denominations. Interestingly, all three pastors from Converge churches without a Baptist name have training at Bethel University or Bethel Seminary, the college and seminary associated with Converge. The Baptist name influences the loyalty of both the pastors and congregants.

Pastor Lance Goehring described the tenuous and challenging relationship of his church with the Converge denomination. The main issues he described are relational, not theological. When asked about the Baptist name of his church and if they were considering taking the name out, he responded, “A lot of churches take ‘Baptist’ out to draw more people in. I don’t think that feeling exists in this church.”<sup>312</sup> In relational challenges with the denomination, the Baptist name continues to be a grounding point of theology. Pastor Goehring described in the interview how the Baptist name does not mean much to most people in the congregation. Pastor Goehring also described how the Baptist name differentiates the church from other denominational and theological churches in the area; Baptist differentiates from Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Catholic. In a post-denominational era, there is still recognition that Baptists have some different theological distinctives than other denominations.

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<sup>312</sup> Pastor Lance Goehring, interviewed by author, phone interview, December 9, 2019.

### **Naming Identity**

The name of a church has the power to communicate identity. Five out of the six pastors interviewed believe that the name of the church has the power to communicate something. The one pastor who does not believe the name is important admitted that the Baptist name has the ability to differentiate the church from other denominations. The name differentiates between what someone is or is not. Pastor Tom Halbur described the community as not knowing they are Baptist, but the community also recognizes them as not being a mainline denomination. A foreseeable issue with this naming convention in a post-denominational era will be when other denominations follow suit. Denominational names represent theological convictions that can be helpful for distinguishing and differentiating identity.

Elder Sarah Shogren described the reason for dropping Baptist from the church name as, “Making it easier for people to come to the church without Baptist in the name. Baptist was exclusive, you had to subscribe to everything Baptist.”<sup>313</sup> The name of the church was changed to reflect identity. In the interview with Pastor Jim O’Houle, he described the name change from “Baptist” to community church as intentional in communicating that, “We are a church in a community for the community.” Regardless of the reasoning for a name change from Baptist, names have the power to convey meaning. A question that arises in these situations is what kind of meaning is most powerfully conveyed in the name. Names can convey theological, doctrinal, emotional,

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<sup>313</sup> Elder Sarah Shogren, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 7, 2020.

and relational attachments. Elder Sarah Shogren described having thought that Baptists were rigid and judgmental. The name of a church is significant in self-definition.

Nearly all congregants surveyed identified as belonging to a Baptist or Converge Church. Five out of the six churches had Baptist in their title at one point. The study of the loss of the Baptist name is still in its infancy. The Converge denomination removed Baptist from its title in 2008, just over 10 years ago from when this thesis was written. The researcher is surprised by how many congregants surveyed acknowledge an affiliation to Converge and being part of a Baptist church.



## CHAPTER SIX: THE EVALUATION OF BAPTISTIC IDENTITIES

### **Findings in Context to the Larger Body of Work**

The literature engaged with the loss of theological distinctives in American Christianity. Mark G. Toulouse was referenced regarding his literature discussing the work of theology in a post denominational age. The loss of theological distinction he argued is in part due to the evangelical desire of mission which overshadows the work of intellectual theological engagement.<sup>314</sup> Toulouse discussed the generalizing tendency in American Christianity that waters down substantive theological issues. When interviewing pastors from six different Converge churches in Northern Minnesota, it became apparent that there are theologically coherent reasons for keeping or changing the name Baptist from the title of the church. Pastor Jim O’Houle utilized thoughtful theological contemplation for changing the “Baptist” name of the church to Ebenezer Community Church. He said “We changed our name to reflect who we are in our community. We want to name ourselves something that reflects we are a church in a community for the community.”<sup>315</sup> He described how the church gradually developed a passion for reformed theology and the Westminster Confessions that became more important than their Baptist heritage. He describes a systematic theology that has been developing over the past ten years. This church and its pastor are not among the

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<sup>314</sup> Toulouse, 207.

<sup>315</sup> Pastor Jim O’Houle, interviewed by author, phone interview, December 16, 2019.

American trend of theological loss. The reasons for changing the name of his church have a strong theological component. This is contrasted with the initial hypothesis of this thesis that attractional church methodology is a factor in church name changes.

While interviewing Elder Sarah Shogren, it became apparent that Lamppost Community Church did not change their name due to flippant theological engagement. She discussed the deep theological churchwide discussion on the issue of the mode of baptism. After wrestling over the mode of baptism, the church concluded that baptism by immersion was too rigid a requirement for membership. They decided to accept other modes of adult confessional baptisms including baptism by pouring on of water. Elder Sarah went on to discuss how congregational polity may not be the most conducive form of church governance in this type of context. Congregational polity is not helpful for a church with 80 people in attendance with 30-40 official members. The reasons for changing their church name reflect a theological shift in beliefs away from baptistic theology.

Theodore Hopkins' work on theology in a post-Christian context is apparent in the pastors interviewed and the congregants surveyed. Hopkins engaged with the loss of predominance in the church and how the church responds in ways to regain what was lost.<sup>316</sup> During the pastoral interviews, four out of the six pastors interviewed described their church as engaging in attractional ministry. Clarifying words were used to describe attractional ministry as some pastors were not familiar with the term. The term "seeker

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<sup>316</sup> Hopkins, "Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations," 32.

sensitive” was also used as a descriptor to aid in understanding attractional church ministry. The researcher’s hypothesis was the idea that changing a name from Baptist may be part of an attractional concept, however this was not supported in the findings. There were two churches interviewed that had changed their name from Baptist to a non-Baptist name, Lamppost Community Church and Ebenezer Community Church. Both pastors described their church ministries as not engaging in attractional church ministry. Both Elder Sarah Shogren and Pastor Jim O’Houle described attractional ministry as not helpful and that authentic ministry happens through engaging in relationships. This brought to light the nuances in reasoning for changing a church’s name. There is evidence that churches respond to loss of predominance with attractional church ministries, but this research shows that it is not a predominant factor for why these churches changed their names.<sup>317</sup>

Walter Shurden pointed out in, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” that Baptists are unified around a set of principles rather than a specific theology.<sup>318</sup> This kind of ambiguity is reflected in the pastoral interviews and in the congregational surveys. In six pastoral interviews with Converge North Central churches in Northern Minnesota, there were vastly different answers given to the questions: do you incorporate baptistic distinctives in your preaching/teaching/pastoral counseling and how does the name of your congregation contribute to your identity as a congregation? To the latter

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<sup>317</sup> Hopkins, “Narrating the Church at the Dusk of Christendom: How the Loss of Predominance Affects Congregations,” 31.

<sup>318</sup> Shurden, 322.

question the answers varied as much as: the name does not contribute, it makes it easier to come to our church, people know we are not a mainline church, to signifying that the church is for the community. This kind of elusive nature of the Baptist movement is typified in the varied approaches to naming congregations in these Baptist churches.

R. Albert Mohler engaged with the issue of preserving Baptist identity in the book, *More than Just a Name: Preserving our Baptist Identity*. It is discussed in the literature review how the erosion of identity breaks down doctrinal beliefs.<sup>319</sup> The data obtained in the congregational surveys reflected this erosion of beliefs. In the surveys from Baptist named churches, 94 percent report having a good understanding of Baptist distinctives while 86.7 percent report the same level of confidence in churches without a Baptist name. A similar piece of data is 78.1 percent of congregants at Baptist named churches report they would join a church of the same denomination if they moved locations while 66.7 percent of those at churches without a Baptist name would do the same. In Baptist named churches, 94 percent of congregants reported belonging to their church because of theological convictions compared to 80 percent of the congregants from churches without the Baptist name. This kind of data confirms the importance of a name in solidifying theological identity in the life of congregants. The Baptist name is not superfluous to the identity of those in attendance.

A spirit of ecumenism and unity is apparent in the pastoral interviews. Pascal Denault's work, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* engaged with the

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<sup>319</sup> Mohler, vii.

history of Baptists desiring unity with their non-Baptist fellow Christians.<sup>320</sup> When asked how the name of the congregation contributes to the identity of the congregation, Elder Sarah Shogren described that the former Baptist name alienated many of the Christians in the community who wanted to attend the church. There is a clear desire to create a space for Christians to gather regardless of their theological identity. Pastor Tom Halbur referenced the distinct role that hospitality plays in the life of his congregation. He described attempting “to make them feel at home,” (in reference to those visiting the church).<sup>321</sup> This attitude of hospitality and loving fellow believers goes back to the beginning of Converge. Former district executive minister of the Minnesota Baptist Conference Truett Lawson examined this subject of unity in the early Swedish Baptist movement in Minnesota. The literature review considered Lawson’s description of the Baptists inviting Eric Norelius, the founder of the Lutheran College Gustavus Adolphus, to speak at Scandia Baptist Church.<sup>322</sup> Many Lutheran churches of the time denied members communion if they attended a Baptist church and the Baptists invited Eric Norelius to come and teach them. This kind of gracious mentality of unity is still present in the Northern Minnesota churches of Converge North Central.

This thesis engages in the loss of theological identity facing the American church. Pastor Jim O’Houle reflected during the interview about the need for a systematic theology within his congregation. Pastor Jim O’Houle commented “In 2027 we will be a

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<sup>320</sup> Denault, 63.

<sup>321</sup> Pastor Tom Halbur, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 14, 2020.

<sup>322</sup> Lawson, 6-7.

100-year-old congregation. In just the last 21 years we have begun to explore a systematic theology.”<sup>323</sup> Pastor Ephraim Tower described the pain of his congregation splitting some years ago. The church split and formed a non-denominational church with a different theological structure. The literature review examined Curtis Freeman’s article, “Can Baptist Theology be Revisioned,” where Freeman described the post-modern desire to “re-create” a baptistic identity with external changes. This kind of revisionist desire tends to downplay theological consistencies that are taken for granted. Pastor O’Houle and Pastor Tower presented a dissatisfaction with this trend toward theological reductionism.

The modernist-fundamentalist debate became apparent in both the literature review and the pastoral interview questions. This question is one that would have been more important to explore than the attractional church movement. The interviewees discussed their church’s evangelical identities as a distinct contrast to mainline denominations but did not see themselves as identifying with the attractional or seeker sensitive church movement. Pastor Simon Smith pointed out during the interview that the Baptist name keeps Baptist churches differentiated from mainline churches. Pastor Tom Halbur made the similar comment that people do not know his church is Baptist, but they know they are not mainline. These sentiments are consistent with Curtis Freeman’s article, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty Something,” where he discussed the two greatest sources of debate in Baptist churches in the last 200

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<sup>323</sup> Pastor Jim O’Houle, interviewed by author, phone interview, December 16, 2019.

years as the Calvinist and Arminian and Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies.<sup>324</sup> The commonality that exists in the churches with a Baptist name and those without is their willingness to not be associated with the Modernists. The mainline churches represent a fundamental theological and philosophical difference. Freeman discussed in his article how Baptists have a radical commonality that unites them despite these differences.<sup>325</sup>

The literature did not match the qualitative data when considering the motivation behind changing a church name. Mark G. Toulouse, in his article “What is the Role of a Denomination in a Post-Denominational Age,” discussed the desire to change a church name from a marketing perspective.<sup>326</sup> He considered how churches will change their church name to accommodate the trend of church seekers looking for churches without denominationally distinct names. The qualitative data from the author’s field research does not confirm this motivation. Pastor Jim O’Houle described the church changing the Baptist name because of a deeply reflective process of the church self-identifying as a church in the community and for the community. Pastor O’Houle continued by stating that his church is not attractional. He said “The real work of ministry is done through relationships we already have...let’s train each other to be secure in our identity as a congregation.”<sup>327</sup> Elder Sarah Shogren described her church’s movement away from attractional ministry. She described the church’s philosophy of moving away from

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<sup>324</sup> Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” 22.

<sup>325</sup> Freeman, “The ‘Coming of Age’ of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something,” 22.

<sup>326</sup> Toulouse, 215.

<sup>327</sup> Pastor Jim O’Houle, interviewed by author, phone interview, December 16, 2019.

attractational worship to God centered worship. She said “The worship is for God, not to bring people to church.”<sup>328</sup> The qualitative data shows a more theologically robust decision-making process for changing a church name than attractational reasoning.

### **Helpful Reasons to Change a Baptist Name**

There may come a time in the life of a Baptist church to change their name. This research has looked at some of the consequences of these decisions, both intended and unintended through the data of field research. In interviewing Pastor Jim O’Houle, there is value in changing the name of the congregation when it is more reflective of the community where it is located. Pastor O’Houle described the process of Bethel Baptist Church planting the Baptist Church in 1927, which he now pastors. Despite this distinctly Baptist church planted nearly 100 years ago, Pastor O’Houle described the theology of the church as having been formulated within the last 21 years. A church’s name should be reflective of the community that composes it and the community where it resides.

Elder Sarah Shogren described the challenges of moving from the Twin Cities to Northern Minnesota and not being able to find an Evangelical Covenant Church in her community. The theologically closest church in the community was the Baptist church. She described the name change from a “Baptist Church” to Lamppost Community Church as making it easier for people to come to church without Baptist in the name. She said “Baptist was exclusive, you had to subscribe to everything Baptist.”<sup>329</sup> What she described is the identity shift. The church still maintains a distinct theological stance and

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<sup>328</sup> Elder Sarah Shogren, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 7, 2020.

<sup>329</sup> Elder Sarah Shogren, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 7, 2020.



conviction. The theological epicenter has shifted from Baptist to a more evangelical stance. On reflection, it would have been more helpful to this study to identify how evangelicalism contributes to the theological identity rather than attractional church. A church with a more evangelical identity provides for a broader group of likeminded Christians that will be able to unify and have common theology. Pastor Tom Halbur described this phenomenon with his church. His church was planted without a Baptist name. Despite people not knowing the church's baptistic identity and roots, Pastor Halbur said "The majority of people who come to our church...they know we're not mainline."<sup>330</sup> There is a consistent theme of churches changing their Baptist name but wanting to retain a theological identity that is more central to their beliefs than being a Baptist.

Changing a Baptist name is reflective of the diversity, congregational freedom and polity of the Baptist movement. Cameron Jorgenson explored this theme of identity and expression through diversity.<sup>331</sup> As discussed in the literature review, Jorgenson debated the great variety of beliefs and expressions composed within the Baptist identity. The ability to change a church name lies within the power of the congregation. The ability and freedom to rid the church of the Baptist name is ironically a unique form of Baptist expression. Regardless of reasoning or unintended consequences, the ability to change a church's Baptist name to a theologically non-descript name speaks to the diversity and congregational polity of Baptist theology. The debate over changing the

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<sup>330</sup> Pastor Tom Halbur, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 14, 2020.

<sup>331</sup> Jorgenson, 55.

Baptist name is a healthy form of self-examination and internal discussion that has been part of Baptist history since its beginnings.

### **Helpful Reasons to Keep a Baptist Identity**

The data shows reasons why preserving the Baptist name is helpful to preserving theological identity. In congregant surveys, all congregants responded they are committed to their local congregation regardless of Baptist in their church name or not. Differences develop when analyzing commitment to the theological convictions of the church. In Baptist named churches, 94 percent of respondents self-reported belonging to their church because of theological convictions. In churches without the Baptist name, 80 percent self-reported belonging to their church because of theological convictions. This discrepancy is significant. Baptist named churches had 14 percent more respondents self-reporting their agreement with the theological convictions of the church. One of the limitations of the survey is that it does not ask what the other reasons are for belonging to a congregation. Regardless, the Baptist named churches have a larger percentage of people belonging because of theological convictions.

The pastoral interviews revealed a significant desire for retaining theological identity. Pastors from churches with a Baptist name and churches without all had sophisticated reasons for their theological nuances and the name of their congregation. A theme that emerged in the churches without the Baptist name is that their theological nuances do not have baptistic theology as a central core to their focus. As discussed in the biblical and theological rationale in chapter two, Baptists share much in common with other Protestants and Trinitarian Christians. Stephen R. Holmes discussed in his work on Baptist theology that Baptists share more virtues with other Christians than they

disagree.<sup>332</sup> Baptists adhere to most of the ecumenical creeds and confessions shared by Christians (such as the Apostle's Creed and Nicene Creed). Holmes argued that to be Baptist is to generally agree on most ecumenical doctrines; it is only exclusive when it comes to issues of polity, symbolic ordinances, and biblical emphasis. Elder Sarah Shogren described ridding the Baptist name as making it easier for people to come to her church. She said in reference to the previous name of the church, "Baptist was exclusive, you had to subscribe to everything Baptist."<sup>333</sup> Elder Shogren was able to articulate a thoughtful theological integration of her church, but the one problem is ascribing the name Baptist to the church and specific baptistic doctrine.

Pastor Jim O'Houle described the intentional desire of his church to move toward a reformed theology. This theology is concentrated on the Westminster Confession of faith. He explained how the theology of the sovereignty of God was impacting their interactions with people around them and his congregation shifting from asking people to ask Jesus into their heart to describing to people who God is. This results in a shift toward less of a commitment to the Baptist name and more of a community focus. The literature review in chapter three connected with Curtis Freeman's article, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist theology in Generation Twenty Something." Freeman pointed out in the article the radical common heritage of all Baptists.<sup>334</sup> A point missing from the theological framework of the interviews with both Elder Sarah Shogren and Pastor Jim O'Houle is

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<sup>332</sup> Holmes, 69.

<sup>333</sup> Elder Sarah Shogren, interviewed by author, phone interview, January 7, 2020.

<sup>334</sup> Freeman, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation Twenty-Something," 22.

the theological inclusiveness of Baptists that can include both of their distinctive theological perspectives. Elder Shogren pointed out that their congregation wants to be inclusive of confessional baptism by pouring water. This is historically a strain of Baptists, particularly in the Anabaptist movement. Pastor O'Houle pointed to a strong conviction of reformed theology. This ongoing Baptist discussion finds its historical trend in the Calvinist-Arminian debate within Baptist churches. The movement toward idiosyncrasies within congregations is a healthy nuance of the congregational structure of Baptist churches. There is great freedom of nuance within congregational polity.

The research shows a greater lack of denominational affiliation and commitment in congregants of churches without the Baptist name. In congregants surveyed in churches with a Baptist name, 78.1 percent reported they would join a church of the same denomination if they moved to a new geographic location. In churches without a Baptist name, 66.7 surveyed would join a church of the same denomination. There is a distinguishing feature that those going to Baptist churches with the Baptist name identify with the denomination more than those at a church without the Baptist name. The literature review in chapter three confirmed the importance of tribal identity for the human need of belonging. Chapter three examined Kimlyn Bender's, "Karl Barth, Confessionalism, and the Question of Baptist Identity." In Bender's work, she interacted with Karl Barth's assessment of tribal identity that he sees in the Reformed Church.<sup>335</sup> A tribal identity provides a theological framework from which to approach life. A theological tribal identity provides an intellectual paradigm, but it also provides a lived

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<sup>335</sup> Bender, 52.

experience from which the church experiences belonging. Bender described the importance to the Reformed movement of inheritance that children inculcate by reason of their birth and growing up in a Reformed church.<sup>336</sup> Bender argued that a Baptist identity must be deeper than a set of propositional truths and beliefs, but must incorporate “principles, axioms, tenets, and convictions.”<sup>337</sup> This type of identity discussion can be helpful long before a conversation to remove a Baptist name from a church.

Congregant survey results showed congregants in churches with a Baptist name self-report having a better understanding of Baptist distinctives than congregants in churches without the Baptist name. In churches with a Baptist name, 94 percent report having a good understanding of Baptist distinctives in comparison to 86.7 percent of congregants from churches without the Baptist name. This confirms results obtained from pastoral interviews. Elder Sarah Shogren portrayed the churches desire to move away from a congregational polity to a more Presbyterian model of church governance. Pastor Jim O’Houle described a deeper appreciation of Reformed theology than baptistic theology. Pastor Tom Halbur expressed a Baptist identity that is conveyed through his preaching and teaching in his congregation. Despite his incorporating baptistic distinctives into his preaching, teaching, and pastoral counseling, he assumed most people in his community do not know that his church is Baptist.

In interviewing Pastor Simon Smith about how the name of the congregation contributes to the congregation’s identity, he described the Baptist name as influencing

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<sup>336</sup> Bender, 52.

<sup>337</sup> Bender, 61.

the congregation without the congregation realizing it. In interviewing Pastor Ephraim Tower, he ambiguously described the name as contributing in some ways. Both responses are tied to the general way in which systems have unintended consequences on participants within the system. The literature review in chapter three engaged with author Edwin Friedman's work *Generation to Generation*. Friedman discusses the tendency within systems to feed off one another to create a new web of interdependency.<sup>338</sup> These systems function at the subconscious level to create a new paradigm in a family system. Applied to church systems, the field research on congregations with the Baptist name shows that there is a tendency in congregants to associate with the denomination and the distinctive theologies of that denomination. The Baptist name contributes to a unique tribal identity for the individual.

### **The State of Theological Identity and Hope for the Future**

As discussed in chapter three, there is a movement of post-denominationalism occurring within western Christianity. This phenomenon is shown through the literature as an historic movement connected with the loss of status that the church has experienced over the past century. With the rise of post-denominationalism and the trend of churches dropping theological affiliations, it is important to analyze the movement objectively and to see what positive affiliations are occurring. One unforeseen discovery in the field research is the depth of theological insight and conversation contributing to name changes. This rigorous theological thought process is characteristic of the historic Baptist movement. The fierce non-conformist attitude to the Baptist movement has led to the

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<sup>338</sup> Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 231.

ability of congregational polity and the ability of local churches to make these decisions regarding their identity. This democratizing congregational polity is a hallmark of distinct baptistic theology.

There is reason to believe that the Baptist name will continue to bring meaningful value to churches in the future. There was fear historically that the Calvinist versus Arminian debate and the Modernist versus Fundamentalist debate would destroy the Baptist movement but Baptists are still here. Trends and movements have come and gone throughout history. Regardless of whether the Baptist name survives the next century, its indelible impression is noted in the congregational polity system, the ecumenical expressions of unity extended to other Christians, the love for biblical theology and piety, confessional believers' baptism, and the use of symbolic ordinances. Some have associated the name Baptist with a rigid set of legalistic rules. This association is unfortunate. The more that Baptists can identify with their history of biblical confessionalism, ecumenical extensions, and non-conformist suffering, the greater the possibility of Baptists embracing their identity while recognizing the great open plane for theological diversity.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTION AND PERSONAL GROWTH

### **Personal Insights**

This study has impacted the researcher's perspective on changing the name of a congregation. Ridding congregations of the Baptist name was tied to this researcher's hypothesis regarding the attractional church movement and the desire for churches to be seeker sensitive in attracting more unassociated unbelievers into church services. This study is transforming the complexity from which this researcher now considers the issue. As Baptists are historically known as non-conformists, changing the name of a church away from the Baptist name is a "Baptist" decision. The democratizing force of the congregational polity system makes room for churches to individually decide what is best for them in their community. This study shows the unintended consequences of these decisions, but not all the unintended consequences are negative.

The importance of theological conviction is brought to light through this study. Baptist is the name of a movement away from other theological movements. Individual congregations see themselves as a movement within a community. This identity can be powerful and may be more powerful to the community than identifying with baptistic distinctives. This researcher's understanding of how retaining baptistic identity is tied to the name of a congregation has been enhanced through these study results. This researcher can now comprehend that churches identifying with a different name find a new identity with which to form associations. The long-term consequences of these decisions are still unknown.



A list of questions is listed in Appendix F that the researcher concluded are helpful to discerning a name change for a congregation. These questions are meant to help the congregation or church leaders as they discern a holistic set of considerations including the theological and practical reasons for changing the name. The questions can be used as a thought-provoking exercise that a leadership team may choose to explore to consider the unintended consequences of naming or renaming a congregation. As a congregation explores a name change, there are issues of unity and theology for the congregation and the broader church community to consider.

Conversing with other pastors wrestling through the issue of name and identity is helpful. These are not flippant issues to those in decision making positions. Hearing the complexity and theological uncertainty is insightful and reassuring. Changing a name is an important decision and should not be made lightly. This decision should be reflective of the community and not a charismatic leader. When a name, identity, or brand is associated with a popular leader rather than a community, that identity will be as long lived as the leader. When a community embraces an identity, the results are longer lasting and become part of the ethos of the community.

### **Personal Growth**

This study empowers this researcher to recognize his own need for tribal identity in the loss of theological identity. Recognizing that something is missing, this researcher has a desire for belonging to something larger than himself. Growth has occurred through this process in recognizing that this need is not inherent in everyone who is part of the church. Some find loyalty and commitment to their local congregation without the need for a larger storied identity. An alternate title for this thesis could be *The Exchange of*

*Baptist Identity.* While there is loss of Baptist identity shown in the field research and data, the loss is not evaluated in what is exchanged. A church receives a new theological identity when it shifts from the Baptist name to a new name, which can be theologically profound and testimonies the Baptist heritage. The Reformation cry, always reforming, is part of the heritage of all Protestants. This Reformation axiom is an important source of growth as the researcher has come to recognize that this research opens the door to evaluating what new theological exchanges are made.

Through this research, the researcher is enlightened to the human perspective. The field research is done with other pastors who have been in similar situations. Hearing their rationale for theology, identity, church naming and the personal relationships they have with the denomination are insightful. Hearing other pastors' frustrations and hesitancy as they move forward in understanding theologically identity is humbling. A pastor has numerous responsibilities. A pastor as theologian is an important and challenging part of the pastoral role. Personal growth through this project is to find ways of encouraging pastors and the church to discover creative ways of engaging in their Baptist history and making meaningful connections to their identity. As individuals have unique callings in their lives to communicate the Gospel, churches have unique callings to communicate the Gospel in their communities. The tension that the researcher recognizes in this study and through interviews with pastors is the tension between loyalty to the church's identity and the unique mission that calls that congregation in their community. The decision over which identity is more powerful is challenging and the unintended consequences are potentially worth the risk.

### **Recommendation for Further Research**

The loss of Baptist identity is studied within the context of entire congregations. Future research that will be beneficial to the church is the loss of Baptist identity contrasting generations. The literature begins to expose the nuance of differences between generations and their needs related to identity, but there are no comprehensive studies examining the differences between generations (for example Baby Boomers, Generation X and, Millennials) in the loss of Baptist identity. This loss can compare the general trends in western culture to remove identity from a variety of organizations and the church.

Baptists are not the only denominations to be affected by this loss of naming identity. Other denominations are beginning to experience similar losses. A comprehensive study can be made studying the loss of identity in other denominations and how this trend affects the universal church. Some of these nuances are the tendency for people to switch denominational affiliations, the non-denominational movement, and how independent congregations function in comparison to denominational congregations. An historical study could accompany this research to show the historical movement behind the loss of identity in western churches and denominations.

A helpful companion study to the loss of identity in Baptist churches could be an examination into what new identities are forming. In the loss or void of one identity, a new identity emerges. Understanding the exchange of identities can be helpful in recognizing what kind of externalities develop in the individual lives of congregants. This study shows the loss that occurs in the lives of the congregants, but this study is limited in viewing what new theological identities are formed. Some pastors gave direction to

theologies that are shaping the lives of the congregation (e.g. Pastor Jim O'Houle focusing on Reformed theology) but a comprehensive assessment of the new hybrid identities that emerge may be helpful to the church in assessing the value of changing their name.

A longitudinal study of the loss of Baptist identity could be of great value to the church. This study is limited in scope due to how historically recent the shift (the Baptist General Conference became Converge in 2008). Over the next ensuing decades, the effects of losing the Baptist name will be clearer and a more historically comprehensive study can take place. Likewise, a longitudinal study can follow the life of an individual congregation using a case study and qualitative data analysis.

A discrepancy may exist between older congregations that change the Baptist name and new congregations that begin without the Baptist name. A comparison between the theological results of these two phenomena may produce insightful considerations for the church. For church leaders considering planting a church and for a church leader considering re-naming an existing church, a comparison study of these two situations may be helpful. Similarly, this study could benefit from comparing changing the name of a church that is over a century old, and one comparatively younger that is considering changing its name.

### **The Hypothetical Congregation's Conclusion**

Old Country Baptist Church looked at the research regarding the reasons for and against changing the name of the congregation. As they engage with the field research and data regarding churches in similar situations, they can come to an informed approach to the idea of changing their church's name. The advisory council assembled to make a

recommendation to the church realizes the important purpose that theology plays in the purpose of the church name. The data shows that people will still associate the church as a Baptist church for years to come. Changing the name must have a thoughtful theological conviction regarding the purpose of Old Country Baptist Church in their community. Old Country Baptist Church decided to conduct congregational meetings, surveys, and qualitative data collection to glean a broader perspective on what the church believes about its purpose in the community. There are times of fasting and prayer.

The advisory board of Old Country Baptist Church recognized the need to present an accurate picture of Baptist history and theology. Negative stereotypes about Baptists may be tied to an uninformed picture of the non-conformist Baptist history rooted in confessional believer's baptism and the conviction of the individual's ability to read and understand the Bible. The advisory board recognized the importance of slowing the decision down by ensuring the congregation is aware of Baptist history and the commonality that Baptists share with most of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ from other denominations. Many of the congregants are surprised to hear about the ecumenical and theological diversity within the Baptist movement, including the Calvinist versus Arminian and Modernist versus Fundamentalist debates taking place within the Baptist identity. They are surprised that neither viewpoint is mutually exclusive to Baptists.

The advisory board weighed the data on the possibility of congregants having less commitment to the denomination and the specific theological identity of their church over time. The broader storied identity that lies in a named theological persuasion must be weighed against a specific theological persuasion that is guiding the church in its unique

community. One of these decisions to weigh is whether there is a strong anti-Baptist sentiment in the community and if this is preventing the church from being missional in their community. The church must decide if they can be genuinely Baptist in their convictions and have a church name without Baptist in the title. The advisory board decided to poll the community and seek to understand what the broader community thinks of Baptists.

The advisory board conducted a final church-wide discussion where the church engaged in exercises to discover the primary theological persuasion where the church is heading. In this discussion they drew figures on whiteboards of concentric circles showing their theological identity as a community. The advisory board knows they will need the church community to take ownership of whichever church name the congregation decides. After an afternoon of discussion, the official vote took place. The church decided to keep their Baptist name, for now. They recognized that the name is important and signifies who they are as a community. The church holds the tension that the name may need to change in the future and the name change is within the freedom and possibility of being distinctly Baptist. A new and fresh expression of the meaning of the Baptist identity is emerging in Old Country Baptist Church. With powerful stories of past Baptist leaders, teachings on baptistic doctrines, ecumenical diversity and unity of Baptists with other Christians, and a desire to partner in uncompromising ways with other churches, the church has experienced a new paradigm and powerful re-birth.

## APPENDIX A: PASTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### APPENDIX A: PASTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you identify as a Baptist? Do you have any Baptist education or experience outside of being a pastor at a Converge church?
2. Is this the first Converge church you have pastored? Did you pastor in other denominations?
3. Do you incorporate baptistic distinctives in your preaching/teaching/pastoral counseling? If so, how?
4. Do baptistic distinctives and history impact the life of your congregation?
5. Is there value to retaining a baptistic identity? Has the name of the congregation contributed to a baptistic identity in your congregation?
6. How does the name of your congregation contribute to your identity as a congregation?
7. Would you describe the ministry of your congregation as “attractional?” Has this philosophy impacted your congregation?
8. What is the size of your congregation? Is your congregation intentionally trying to grow numerically?



## APPENDIX B: CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY QUESTIONS

## APPENDIX B: CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. The name of my church is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. To which denomination is your congregation affiliated? If unsure, answer "I don't know."  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. I have been a part of a Baptist congregation.
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
4. I am committed to my congregation.
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
5. Do you belong to your congregation because of theological convictions?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
6. I am part of my congregation because the church building is geographically close to my home, not just because of their beliefs.
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
7. If I moved, I would join a congregation of the same denomination as the one I am currently a part of.
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
8. I am part of my congregation because I enjoy the programs and they meet my needs.
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
9. I have a good understanding of Baptist distinctives.
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
10. I attend church functions 2 or more times per month.
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No

## APPENDIX C: PASTORAL INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

### APPENDIX C: PASTORAL INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled THE LOSS OF BAPTIST IDENTITY: HOW THE LOSS OF THE BAPTIST NAME IMPACTS THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY designed to analyze the loss of baptistic identity in Northern Minnesota Converge churches and the effect it has had on congregations. The interview portion of this study is being conducted by Josiah Hoagland from Bethel University. This research is being conducted as part of the dissertation requirements for Josiah Hoagland.

This interview will be centered around eight total questions and should take no more than 45 minutes. Your names and replies throughout the interview may be quoted in the doctoral thesis this study is servicing which will be available to the public at its completion. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is completely voluntary and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose to not participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate you may decline the interview invitation. You may choose to not answer any question. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Josiah Hoagland at 218-368-7090 or joh38774@bethel.edu.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant you may contact Dr. Justin Irving at j-irving@bethel.edu.

By completing this survey and returning it you are also confirming that you are **18** years of age or older.

Please keep the top portion of the page for your records.

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Your signature is requested below as consent to the above terms of the interview and use of your answers in the doctoral research entitled: THE LOSS OF BAPTIST IDENTITY: HOW THE LOSS OF THE BAPTIST NAME IMPACTS THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY.

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Printed Name/Signature

## APPENDIX D: SURVEY CONSENT FORM

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You are invited to participate in a research project entitled THE LOSS OF BAPTIST IDENTITY: HOW THE LOSS OF THE BAPTIST NAME IMPACTS THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY designed to analyze the loss of baptistic identity in Northern Minnesota Converge churches and the effect it has had on congregations. The study is being conducted by Josiah Hoagland from Bethel University. This research is being conducted as part of the dissertation requirements for Josiah Hoagland.

This survey is comprised of ten total questions and should take no more than 10 minutes. Your replies will be anonymous, so do not put your name anywhere on the form. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is completely voluntary and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose to not participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate you may either return the blank survey or you may discard it. You may choose to not answer any question by simply leaving it blank. Returning the paper survey by handing it in to your pastor or pressing “submit” at the end of the electronic version indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply. If you have any questions about the study you may contact Josiah Hoagland at 218-368-7090 or [joh38774@bethel.edu](mailto:joh38774@bethel.edu).

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant you may contact Dr. Justin Irving at [j-irving@bethel.edu](mailto:j-irving@bethel.edu).

By completing this survey and returning it you are also confirming that you are **18** years of age or older.

Please keep this page for your records.

## APPENDIX E: CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY QUESTION RESULTS

## APPENDIX E: CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY QUESTION RESULTS

Questions	% yes responses from Baptist named churches	% yes responses from churches not Baptist in name
1. The name of my church is_____.	100% correctly identified name	100% correctly identified name
2. To which denomination is your congregation affiliated? If unsure, answer "I don't know."	94% correctly identified denomination	100% correctly identified denomination
3. I have been a part of a Baptist congregation.	100%	93.3%
4. I am committed to my congregation.	100%	100%
5. Do you belong to your congregation because of theological convictions?	94%	80%
6. I am part of my congregation because the church building is geographically close to my home; not just because of their beliefs.	42.2%	35.6%
7. If I moved, I would join a congregation of the same denomination as the one I am currently a part of.	78.1%	66.7%
8. I am part of my congregation because I enjoy the programs and they meet my needs.	94%	75.6%
9. I have a good understanding of Baptist distinctives.	94%	86.7%
10. I attend church functions 2 or more times per month.	100%	97.8%



## APPENDIX F: CONSIDERATIONS WHEN NAMING A CONGREGATION

#### APPENDIX F: CONSIDERATIONS WHEN NAMING A CONGREGATION

1. What theological identity is primary for the life of the congregation?
2. How does the name of the congregation support its theological beliefs?
3. If the denominational affiliation is not present in the church name, what are other ways the theological identity of the church will be inculcated in its members?
4. How does the name of the church contribute to the identity of the congregation?
5. Does the congregation participate in naming or re-naming the church?
6. What process of discernment and research is in place to decide the name of the church?
7. Is connection to the larger denomination important for the life of the church and the support of its leaders?
8. If the church retains Baptist in its name, how will the church convey unity without uniformity with the other congregations in the same community?
9. What are the motivations for changing the name of the church?
10. What are the possible conflicts and unintended consequences for re-naming the church?

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