Framing Baptist Identity

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Abstract:
This article frames the question of Baptist identity as a narratively formed construct. It qualifies this description and then tests the qualified identity framework by exploring the stories of the Baptists in Great Britain and North India, asking how we might understand these different versions as part of the same story.

Keywords:
Baptist identity; narrative theology; Baptist Union of Great Britain; Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India; Council of Baptist Churches in North India; James Wm McClendon, Jr.

Introduction

What does it mean to be a Baptist? The answer could be as simple as 'to be a member of a Baptist congregation' or 'to have been immersed upon the profession of faith in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit' or 'simply the willingness to call oneself a Baptist'.[1] Determining questions of identity, however, are never quite so simple. Identity is more than *what we believe* or *where we belong*. It is a matter of *who we are*. I will propose an approach to answering the question of what it means to be a Baptist by framing the question of Baptist identity as a narratively formed construct.[2] Next, I will offer seven qualifications for this framework. Finally, I will test my qualified framework by exploring the

[1] Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankins conclude that the three criteria distinguishing Baptist identity in America are believer baptism, congregational polity, and the willingness to call oneself a Baptist (Thomas S. Kidd, Barry Hankins, *Baptists in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 249–52). As I show in this article, even the willingness to name oneself as a Baptist may not be sufficient as a marker of identity when examined from a global perspective.

[2] I am employing a framework to the question of Baptist identity as a 'schema of interpretation' in the sense described by Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper, 1974), p. 21.

stories of the Baptists in Great Britain and North India, asking how we might understand these different versions as part of the same story.[3]

Telling the Baptist Story

Is it possible to tell the Baptist story in such a way that all Baptists might recognise and claim it as their own? Depending on which demographers you consult, there are in the neighbourhood of fifty to sixty million Baptists worldwide from every race, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.[4] Given the prominence Baptists place on liberty of governance and freedom of conscience, it is not surprising that there is more than a little reticence about producing a grand and totalising narrative for all Baptists. For example, Bill Leonard's comprehensive history signals this humility in his title *Baptist Ways*. He explains,

> The thesis of this book is relatively simple. It suggests that amid certain distinctives, Baptist identity is configured in a variety of ways by groups, subgroups, and individuals who claim the Baptist name. This identity extends across a theological spectrum from Arminian to Calvinist, from conservative to liberal, from open to closed communionist, and from denominationalist to independent.[5]

Though all Baptists share a common history and tradition, there is no consensus around an exclusive and distinct way of being Baptist.

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[3] I wish to express my gratitude to Fred Downs, Paul Fiddes, John Webster, Xi Lian, Laura Levens, and Philip Jenkins for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. I chose to explore the question of Baptist identity in areas of the world where I am very much an outsider and about which my knowledge was very limited. These readers saved me from many mistakes and missteps. Whatever faults remain are of my own making.

[4] The Baptist World Alliance describes itself as 'a fellowship of 241 conventions and unions in 126 countries and territories comprising 47 million baptized believers in 169,000 churches'. See 'Member Unions', *Baptist World Alliance* <https://www.baptistworld.org/member-unions/> [accessed 12 April 2021]. These numbers reflect the BWA records, but there are other Baptist bodies (e.g. the Southern Baptist Convention) not affiliated with the BWA, and these statistics reflect only the baptised members. They do not include children and others who may count themselves as belonging without having yet become fully members of a congregation. Other demographers count the global Baptist numbers differently. For example, one recent study counts the total Baptists worldwide to be 58 205 000. See Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds, *Atlas of Global Christianity*, *1910–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 90.

[5] Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2003), p. 11.

These polarities, however, as James Wm McClendon Jr observed, reveal too little about Baptist identity because they merely echo wider theological arguments between Calvinism–Arminianism and modernism–fundamentalism[6] to which we might add charismatic–non-charismatic, complementarianism–egalitarianism, and so forth. McClendon proposed that Baptists might examine their own convictions and practices as a resource for understanding their shared identity. Rather than trying to create a universal account, he pursued a more modest strategy that displayed rival versions of the Baptist story within a larger narrative framework. McClendon's proposal moved along similar lines as Alasdair MacIntyre, who in his seminal essay on moral philosophy *After Virtue* argued that 'I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"'[7] Playing off McIntyre's line, I might summarise McClendon's argument in this way: I can only answer the question 'What does it mean to be Baptist?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'

MacIntyre contends that this narrative inquiry requires attending to a 'historically extended, socially embodied argument […] about the goods which constitute that tradition'.[8] From a tradition-dependent standpoint one asks, 'What type of enacted narrative would be the embodiment, in actions and transactions of actual social life, of this particular theory?'[9] As a mode of enquiry, tradition is polemical and dialectical. It situates all accounts within a narrative history from a particular tradition-constituted standpoint. Following a narrative approach, McClendon described Baptists (and other free churches or baptistic communities) as a cornucopia of contested versions within a shared narrative tradition accumulated across five hundred years. This story in all its diversity, conflict, and fragmentation, he argued,

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[6] James Wm McClendon, Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, rev. edn (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012; first published 1986), pp. 24–25.

[7] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 201.

[8] MacIntrye, *After Virtue*, p. 207.

[9] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 80.

constituted an alternative theological vision that serves as a counterpart to the more recognised Catholic and Protestant traditions.[10]

McClendon came to this narrative dependent theological outlook early in his career in his groundbreaking work *Biography as Theology*. There he explained,

> We need to examine very carefully two related implications: the suggestion that some theology may be expressed *via* narrative, and the stronger suggestion that narrative or *story* is a means of expression uniquely suited to theology or at least to Christian theology.[11]

In the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, McClendon utilised this narrative approach to recover what he called the baptist vision as a distinctive standpoint for Christian theological reflection and to retrieve diverse and divergent baptist voices as partners for theological conversation.[12] He identified biblicism, mission, liberty, discipleship, and community as persistent marks of the shared life in Christ that all baptists have lived out, though often very differently, and he contended that the first mark was a touchstone for the others.[13]

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[10] McClendon offered a broader typology similar to Walter Klaassen, who proposed that groups descending from the radical reformation constitute a third way in *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1973). I am indebted to David Aers for helping me to imagine this way of describing the baptist tradition (Aers, *Versions of Election: From Langland & Aquinas to Calvin & Milton* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), pp. x–xi).

[11] James Wm McClendon, Jr, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 188.

[12] McClendon referred to this third way as 'baptist', using the lower case 'b' to include such diverse groups as *Täufer* and Baptists to Pietists and Pentecostals. So conceived, the baptist vision is not so much a denominational, historical, or sociological account as much as it is a theological standpoint. He could also speak of the big 'B' 'Baptist' tradition. See Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm McClendon, Jr, and C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva Ewell, *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999). This Baptist theological anthology was an attempt to provide a discrete set of texts that display the range and diversity of this tradition along the lines that Peter Lombard took in curating an Augustinian Catholic tradition in *The Sentences*, 4 vols, trans. by Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2007–2010).

[13] McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 26–31. This account of baptist identity was the subject of his graduation address for the Baptist Theological Seminary at Rüshlikon, Switzerland on 25 April 1985, posthumously published in *Baptistic Theologies*, 6, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 23–35. McClendon participated in a similar summary of Baptist practices that included Bible study, shared discipleship, common life, sacramental signs, and free witness. See 'Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity', in *Baptists Today,* 26 June 1997, pp. 8–10, and *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997), 303–10.

McClendon summarised this standpoint in a hermeneutical motto he called 'the baptist vision'. *This is that*: the church is the apostolic community, and the commands of Jesus are addressed to us. *Then is now*: we are the end time people, a new humanity anticipating the consummation of the blessed hope.[14] The five marks McClendon names are not so much a list of principles or doctrines around which to build basic agreement, rather they are more of a set of practices that give rise to the life Baptist communities have attempted to live out in the faith shared by all Christians. McClendon's account suggests that the formation of basic beliefs and convictions is the result of engaging in the active and dynamic practices of studying the Bible, engaging in mission, exercising faith freely, watching over one another, and sharing a common life. This performative/narrative account built around the shared set of practices of the baptist vision allows for diversity and divergence by locating the various versions within a single dynamic tradition.[15] Yet despite the variations and variances of performance, it is possible to observe family resemblances in the practice, and those similarities constitute Baptist identity.[16] Perhaps most importantly, McClendon's account of the Baptist vision is not an attempt to identify the distinctive marks that delineate the ways in which Baptists differ from other Christians, but rather to describe how the Baptist practice of the faith exhibits a distinctive way of being Christian. I want to frame this description by making seven qualifications of a performative/narrative approach to understanding Baptist identity.

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[14] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 30; and *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, rev. edn (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), pp. 45–46.

[15] McClendon's account is strikingly similar to the theoretical description of 'everyday practices' offered by Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). According to de Certeau, everyday practices denote 'tactical' activities beneath the social conformity of the wider culture.

[16] I am here appealing to the notion as developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who suggested that things, which may appear to be related by an essential common feature, may instead be connected by overlapping similarities (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edn, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), §67). I am also drawing from the language theory of J. L. Austin, who pointed to the performative aspect of language, namely, that the perlocutionary force of the words names the actual effect or uptake, intended or not. See John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), Lecture VIII, pp. 94–108; and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 22–26. Both notions from Wittgenstein and Austin were central to McClendon's theological project.

Qualifying the Performative/Narrative Approach

First, *Baptist identity is constructed*. The baptist vision as McClendon describes it is a hermeneutical standpoint. It is a way of seeing. It means that the stories we tell are how we see things. Our social location and place in the world shape and influence the way we frame the stories we tell. It is to be expected, then, that Baptists who inhabit different spaces and spaces differently, though they may engage in the same set of practices, tell the story with a different voice. There is no ideal account of Baptist identity. No one has the privilege of an omniscient point of view from which to look down on the world and describe the essence of what it means to be Baptist. Nor are there firm and certain foundations of self-evident facts that can ensure the story we tell corresponds to the way things really are. The stories we tell about what it means to be Baptist are of our own making.[17]

Second, *Baptist identity is contested*. General and Particular, Regular and Separate, Sabbatarian and Millenarian, Six-Principle and Two-Seeds-in-the-Spirit, Open and Close Communion, Free Will and Hard Shell, Fundamentalist and Modernist, National and Progressive, Evangelical and Ecumenical, Traditional and Contemporary, No-Hellers and Oh-Hellers, Southern and Othern. The list of adjectives used to qualify the Baptist story seems almost endless. The real problem, however, is not the adjective. It is the noun. 'Baptist' is hard to define because it is a contested concept. It recurs in the history of discussion, but the meaning is subject to chronic dispute. The significance of the word 'Baptist' constitutes and is constituted by its use.[18] Baptist identity

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[17] James Wm McClendon, Jr, and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, rev. edn (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1994), pp. 7–10. McClendon's theological outlook was non-foundational, as Nancey Murphy noted, 'We at least have the example of James William McClendon to guide our way, for it was the baptist McClendon, stripped of Constantinian pretensions, but clothed with the courage and wisdom of the Gospel, who has led us into this wonderful new land of theology without foundations.' (Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation, eds, *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 31) McClendon and Murphy mapped the distinguishing criteria of modern vs. postmodern theologies in 'Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies', *Modern Theology*, 5, no. 3 (April 1989), 191–214.

[18] W. B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concept', in *The Importance of Language*, ed. by Max Black (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 121–46; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 389.

is defined in and by the contestation. It is never fixed, and it is always evolving. There is no essential way to identify what it means to be a real Baptist. All accounts are contested.

Third, *Baptist identity is convictional*. This practical and narrative account of Baptist identity is rooted in an understanding of convictions, which McClendon defined as persistent beliefs that will not, and indeed cannot, be relinquished without becoming a significantly different person or community.[19] Convictions are not just beliefs or opinions. They are core beliefs that define identity. To put it simply, we are our convictions, and our convictions inform the way we practise the faith. It is remarkable that the diversity of Baptist groups seems to share a basic set of convictions that include simple biblicism, believer baptism, regenerate membership, gathered church, shared discipleship, believer priesthood, congregational polity, evangelical mission, and religious liberty. Yet, as Paul Fiddes has noted, there seems to be 'something distinctive about the way that Baptists have *held these convictions together*' so that 'the combination or constellation is more distinctive than the single items'.[20] Not all Baptists hold these convictions in an identical way or accord them the same weight. Some convictions are more salient for certain groups than for others, but there is an amazing overlap and crisscross that suggests all Baptists share a basic set of beliefs. The result is that the shared identity of Baptists is 'more about identification than about being identical'.[21]

Fourth, *Baptist identity is characterised*. Telling the Baptist story is not simply rehearsing seminal events, significant dates, demographic data, or basic beliefs. It is about telling a story of characters who embody exemplary qualities. It is about showing what the story means, not in abstract terms, but in concrete lives. What this means is that Baptist identity can be grasped only by observing the lives of the saints. Baptist identity is not universal. It is particular, and only by presenting the biographies of people who display it in exemplary ways are we able to

[19] McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, p. 7; McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 23; and McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 29.
[20] Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2003), p. 12.
[21] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 16.

gain insight into the larger narrative that connects what might seem to be discrete and disconnected data. These stories need not be about the famous or the infamous. Indeed, the stories we tell may seem quite ordinary, but telling these personal life stories sheds light on a wider shared story. Understanding Baptist identity, then, is as much hagiography as historiography. Here again McClendon is instructive. His *Biography as Theology* explores the life stories of saints by showing how they display the 'dominant images' of a larger story. That identity gets conveyed not through propositions, but in the lived experience of its practitioners.[22]

Fifth, *Baptist identity is communal*. Identity is something that belongs to a group, and identification is about belonging in a group. It is somewhat misleading, then, to say, 'I identify as a Baptist'. Such a statement may suggest personal commitment and investment, but identification is more than affinity. It is about a sense of shared-ness. To claim an identity is for an 'I' to find a home in a 'We'. Identity is more a symphony than a solo. It is corporate, never simply individual.[23] Baptist identity is about belonging in and to a community of the living and the dead, by engaging with one another in ongoing practices and invoking the memory of a shared tradition. Identity is not simply claiming a set of personal beliefs and commitments. Identity emerges within the social matrix of a common language about the convictions and practices of the community (or communities) in which we participate. McClendon criticises previous accounts that frame Baptist identity 'in terms of the rugged American individualism', which does not 'do justice to the shared discipleship baptist life requires'.[24] Telling the

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[22] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, p. 110.

[23] Notions of collective identity have two foci of identification with shared features and recognition of shared opportunities and constraints. For a helpful summary of theoretical accounts of collective identity, see Timothy J. Owens, Dawn T. Robinson, and Lynn Smith-Lovin, 'Three Faces of Identity', *Annual Review of Sociology* (2010), 489–90.

[24] McClendon, *Ethics*, rev. edn, p. 29. McClendon's critique reflects a longstanding contestation about individualism in the Baptist story. See my articles 'Can Baptist Theology Be Revisioned?' *Perspectives in Religious Studies,* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997), 273–310; and 'E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity', *Review and Expositor,* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1999), 23–42, and a revised and expanded version in *Through a Glass Darkly: Contested Notions of Baptist Identity*, ed. by Keith Harper (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), pp. 84–111. One of the more influential accounts of Baptist identity in recent memory is Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four*

Baptist story is a matter of attending to a narrative that is bigger than 'me and my experience'. It is about telling the story of the people called Baptists with whom we belong.

Sixth, *Baptist identity is contextual*. There can be no generic or abstract account of Baptist identity, nor is there a view from no place in particular. All versions are local. Just as Baptist identity must attend to the convictions and practices of the people, it must also reflect the complex, interconnected ecosystem of the place where people live out their faith. The importance of contextuality was a lesson McClendon learned from Robert Schreiter's influential book *Constructing Local Theologies*.[25] It is a commitment that lived on among his students, especially those associated with the International Baptist Theological Seminary.[26] This contextual qualification means that all accounts of Baptist identity, either explicitly or implicitly, have adjectives. Though Baptists have a widely shared set of convictions and practices, they hold them in distinctive ways that vary from place to place. It may be as simple as whether the congregational potluck meal is comprised of sweet tea and fried chicken, fufu and goat soup, or khar and pitha. But the truth is that there may be significant differences among various racial, ethnic, and sub-denominational groups even in the same geographical region. What this means is that accounts of Baptist identity, to borrow a line from Alexander Pope, must 'consult the genius of the place'.[27]

Fragile Freedoms (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993). A group of Baptist theologians, who thought that Shurden's account gave too much emphasis to individual freedom, offered an alternative version: Mikael Broadway, Curtis Freeman, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClendon, Elizabeth Newman, Philip Thompson, 'Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America', *Baptists Today*, 26 June 1997, <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/faculty-freeman/reenvisioning-baptist-identity.pdf> [accessed 24 March 2021] (pp. 8–10).

[25] Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

[26] Parush R. Parushev, 'Towards a "Baptistic" Contextual Theology', in *Towards an Understanding of European Baptist Identity: Listening to the Churches in Armenia, Bulgaria, Central Asia, Moldova, North Caucasus, Omsk and Poland*, ed. by Rollin G. Grams and Parush R. Parushev (Prague: IBTS, 2006), pp. 36–55. The seminary, in 2014, became the International Baptist Theological Study Centre based in Amsterdam.

[27] Alexander Pope, 'Epistle IV, To Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington', line 57, in *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. by Robert Carruthers, 4 vols (London: Nathaniel Cook), 4, 85.

Seventh, *Baptist identity is complex*. No one is ever just a Baptist. Everyone has multiple identities, named and unnamed. I may be a Baptist, but to be more precise I am a white and cisgender male, husband and father, theologian and teacher, biker and gardener, US citizen and expatriated Texan, cooperative and ecumenical Baptist. These identities intersect with one another and shape who I am and how I inhabit the world. The complex nature of identity makes it a complicated notion. According to one major identity theory, the multifaceted nature of the self is comprised of multiple identities hierarchically arranged in a framework of organisation according to their salience. The more salient an identity, the higher the probability of invoking that identity as the source of an action.[28] These sometimes complementary but often competing commitments constitute who we are, and this complex constellation of interweaving identities begs to be ordered toward a goal — toward a coherent sense of the self.[29] We can only hope that the power of the stories we tell might inform our moral vision in a way that might guide our action toward a *telos* that might bring the world closer to the beloved community that Jesus envisioned.[30]

Recognising Baptist Identity

I want to test out this performative/narrative framework for displaying Baptist identity by placing two groups of Baptists in conversation with each other: The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) and The Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India (CBCNEI). Although both the BUGB and the CBCNEI are member bodies of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), the ways they perform their Baptist identity are very different from each other. The BUGB, which was formed in 1813,

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[28] Sheldon Stryker and Richard T. Serpe, 'Commitment, Identity Salience, and Role Behavior: Theory and Research Example', in *Personality, Roles, and Social Behavior*, ed. by William Ickes and Eric S. Knowles (New York: Springer, 1982), pp. 199–218; and Stryker and Peter J. Burke, 'The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63, no. 4 (2000), 284–97.

[29] Ryan Andrew Newson, *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018), pp. 51–75.

[30] My colleague Stanley Hauerwas has a way of putting this: 'You can only act in the world you can see, and you can only come to see what you can say' (Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 26–29).

is the historic successor of the earliest Baptists that emerged in England in the seventeenth century out of the Protestant Separatist movement.[31] The formation of the CBCNEI in 1950 united into one body a highly diverse group of Christians missionised by American Baptist Churches USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[32]

British Baptist identity was born alongside other groups of protestant dissenters in the crucible of non-conformity to the established Church of England.[33] British Baptists subsequently re-identified themselves as part of a religiously inclusive and socially powerful evangelical movement of Methodists, Independents, and Low Church Anglicans.[34] Since 1873, the Declaration of Principle has served as a consensus statement for the BUGB. The Declaration roots Baptist identity in the absolute authority of Jesus Christ, baptism in the triune name of God, and commitment to God's mission in the world.[35] However, by the mid-twentieth century this broad statement no longer seemed to be a sufficiently robust statement of Baptist identity. By the 1980s, two streams of thought about a renewal emerged in the union. These two modes of renewal gained strength in the 1990s.[36]

The first mode emphasised renewal of the denomination by construing the relationship between member churches as a 'strategic alliance'. The second vision of renewal stressed the recovery of the historic Baptist ecclesial understanding of the connection in the union

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[31] Peter Shepherd, *The Making of a Modern Denomination: John Howard Shakespeare and the English Baptists, 1898–1924* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2001).

[32] F. S. Downs, *The Mighty Works of God: A Brief History of the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India, The Mission Period 1836–1950* (Panbazar, Assam: Christian Literature Centre, 1971), pp. 184–224; and Milton S. Sangma, *History of American Baptist Mission in North-east India, 1836-1950*, 2 vols ([n.p.]: Mittal Publications 1987). The CBCNEI comprises the Assam Baptist Convention, Arunachal Baptist Church Council, Garo Baptist Convention, Karbi Anglong Baptist Convention, Manipur Baptist Convention, and Nagaland Baptist Church Council.

[33] Curtis W. Freeman, *Undomesticated Dissent: Democracy and the Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), pp. 1–37.

[34] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), pp. 20–34.

[35] 'Declaration of Principle', *The Baptist Union of Great Britain:* <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=216696> [accessed 7 April 2021].

[36] Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination: A Study of Baptist Institutional Life in the 1990s* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), p. 1. My summary of the conversations about renewal of Baptist identity in the BUGB are drawn from Goodliff's account.

as a 'covenant' between churches.[37] The upshot of the decade long attention to renewal was that the BUGB reclaimed the language of both strategic alliance and covenant. Although, as Andy Goodliff observes, 'the goal to develop a distinctive Baptist identity was not reached in any coherent and shared way'.[38] Goodliff notes that the concept of covenant offered a possible theological account of the interdependent 'ties that bind' in the union but instead the union chose to organise around a vague and pragmatic notion of mission. The result is that the BUGB moved in different and competing directions: one that pursued mission in affinity with other evangelical Christian groups and another that followed an ecclesial vision toward an ecumenical connection with the whole church.[39]

These observations about competing visions of renewal for the BUGB might be taken simply as confirmation of Bill Leonard's thesis that 'Baptist identity is configured in a variety of ways by groups, subgroups, and individuals who claim the Baptist name'.[40] However, when placed in a performative/narrative framework, as Goodliff does remarkably well in his account, the contested nature of Baptist identity in the BUGB makes sense. Despite the variations and variances, advocates of the strategic alliance and covenantal versions recognise the family resemblances in their divergent performance and practice. Their argument about Baptist identity extended over time is part of a common narrative tradition. To put it simply, notwithstanding their differences and disagreements they identify one another as members of the Baptist family. Let me move to my second and more challenging case, the question of Baptist identity in North India.

In his history of the CBCNEI, Frederick Downs suggests that the sense of common identity among the Baptists of Northeast India was grounded in their common relationship to the American Baptist

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[37] Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, p. 125. I am indebted to Paul Fiddes for clarifying this distinction between the two trends or movements as 'covenant or strategic alliance', not 'theology or denomination-building' (Fiddes' response to Goodliff's book for a book launch at Regent's Park College Oxford, co-sponsored by the Centre for Baptist Studies and the Baptist Historical Society, 26 February 2021).

[38] Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, p. 132.

[39] Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, pp. 195–98.

[40] Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, p. 11.

Mission.[41] Downs notes that although Baptist identity is very important to members of the CBCNEI, it does not seem to derive from distinctive baptistic matters of faith and order. Unlike Baptists in the United States and Europe, when asked to give an account of Baptist identity, Northeast Indians do not point to distinctive Baptist practices such as believer baptism, congregational polity, religious liberty, or the separation of church and state.[42] He explains that Baptist distinctives seem less important than the ecumenical-evangelical consensus shared more widely among Christians of Northeast India.

Downs proposes that Baptist identity in Northeast India is related more to tribal connection than denominational association.[43] This conclusion draws from his more general theorisation about the relation of Christianity with tribal identity in Northeast India. The Downs thesis asserts that 'the tribes found in Christianity a means of preserving their identity in the midst of change'.[44] Downs explains that the imposition and extension of British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had a disintegrating effect on the clan, family, and village structure of the people of Northeast India, which previously had provided a sense of identity. He argues that the introduction of Christianity strengthened tribal solidarity and tribal identities, which prior to British colonialisation were weak. Christian missionaries fostered this new sense of identity by creating a standard language, establishing a network of schools, offering an appealing belief system, and providing an ecclesial association, resulting in an integrative socio-cultural effect. Downs proposes that because tribal solidarity is the most salient identity for Christians in Northeast India it provides an integrative principle for historiography in understanding their religious

[41] Downs, *The Mighty Works of God*, p. 185.

[42] Frederick Downs, 'Baptist and Tribal Identity in North East India', *American Baptist Quarterly*, 21, no. 1 (March 2001), 60–61.

[43] Downs, 'Baptist and Tribal Identity in North East India', p. 63.

[44] Frederick Downs, *Christianity in North East India: Historical Perspectives* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1983), p. viii. Downs first explored 'identity' as an integrative principle in the midst the forces of detribalisation in Northeast India, in 'Administrators, Missionaries and a World Turned Upside Down: Christianity as a Tribal Response to Change in North East India', *Essays on Christianity in North-East India*, ed. by Milton S. Sangma and David R. Syiemlieh, NEHU History Series No. 4 (New Delhi: Indus Publication Co. 1994), pp. 169–83 (p. 174).

life.[45] He suggests that Baptist identity in Northeast India is not a matter of conformity to the faith and practice of earlier generations of Baptists in Europe or America, but is more missional and contextual than confessional.[46]

Downs points to the Baptist Church of Mizoram as an example of his thesis. Though not a member of the CBCNEI, Mizoram is contiguous to the states that are, and the Mizo are ethnically related to people in those states. For much of their history, Mizo in the North and Mizo in the South used the same hymnals and educational literature, organised their churches in the same pattern, and freely exchanged members between their churches without stickling over modes of baptism. Mizo did not even use the names 'Presbyterian' and 'Baptist' to identify themselves.[47] Denominational boundaries in Mizoram were determined by mission comity agreements not by congregational deliberation. Because the missionaries in the North were Presbyterian, the Mizo in the North were Presbyterian, and because the missionaries in the South were Baptist, the Mizo in the South were Baptist. Downs contends that their shared tribal identity as Mizo with its common language is their most salient identity and serves as an integrative principle for understanding their faith and practice.

There is much to commend this account, but it is not beyond critique. Downs tells the story of Baptists in Northeast India by drawing from both mission and non-mission indigenous Christian sources.[48] Yet his narrative still represents a perspective of an American Baptist historian and missiologist. It raises the question of how the story might differ if subaltern voices tell it in their own words.[49] The *American Baptist*

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[45] Frederick Downs, 'Identity: The Integrative Principle', *Bangalore Theological Forum*, 24, nos. 1–2 (March–June 1992), 1–14. This essay was subsequently published in *Essays on Christianity in North-East India*, ed. by Sangma and Syiemlieh, pp. 22–36. Downs offers his tribal-identity historiography as an integrative principle in contrast to the Marxist economic-class and postcolonial imperialist-political theories.

[46] Downs, 'Baptist and Tribal Identity in North East India', p. 70.

[47] Downs, 'Baptist and Tribal Identity in North East India', p. 61.

[48] Downs, 'Identity: The Integrative Principle', pp. 4–5.

[49] Since the 1970s, the Church History Association of India has shifted its historiographical methodology to focus on the subaltern perspective, which attends to the life and experiences of local Indians. George Oommen, 'Historiography of Indian Christianity and Challenges of Subaltern Methodology', *Journal of Dharma,* 28, no. 2 (April–June 2003), 212–31. One of the most

Quarterly recently published an issue on 'Baptists in Independent India', in which Telegu, Mizo, and Naga scholars offered their versions of what a self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating Baptist life in postcolonial India looks like.[50] What emerges is a complex and granular set of narratives resulting in a more complicated and contextual account of Baptist identity.

Naga church historian Kaholi Zhimoni describes how for seven decades the Baptist churches of Nagaland have participated in the insurgency movement against the government of India in New Delhi, which they view as an alien power. Their resistance is no small matter given that by the year 2000 Nagaland had become 90 percent Christian — the largest denomination by far being Baptist. As historian Philip Jenkins recently opined, Nagaland is 'more Baptist than Mississippi'.[51] Zhimoni tells a very similar story to Downs, describing the mass conversion to Christianity after independence, and characterising Naga Baptists as broadly evangelical. The story she tells, however, is not simply one of an identity rooted in evangelisation. It also narrates the unfolding struggle for liberty and the witness to peace.[52] Her account of Naga Baptists bears a striking resonance with seventeenth-century English Baptist dissenters, who resisted subjugation to 'the powers that be' (Rom 13:1, KJV). Could it be that the subversive spirit among Naga Baptists arose from a historic baptistic way of reading the Bible — a

influential and controversial articles from the perspective of postcolonial subaltern theory is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

[50] *American Baptist Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (Summer 2019). The Three Self formula is attributed to Henry Venn, the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society from 1841 to 1873. See Henry Venn and Max Warren, *To Apply the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Henry Venn* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

[51] Philip Jenkins, 'More Baptist Than Mississippi', *Christian Century*, 10 March 2021, pp. 44–45. For recent history of Christianity in Nagaland see John Thomas, *Evangelising the Nation: Religion and the Formation of Naga Political Identity* (Milton Park and New York: Routledge, 2016). Thomas offers a postcolonial account of the shaping of Naga political identity that resulted from the reception of Christianity.

[52] Kaholi Zhimoni, 'Seven Decades of the Naga People's Resistance under the Indian Democratic Union and the Peace Attempts by the Nagaland Baptist Church Council (NBCC)', *American Baptist Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (Summer 2019), pp. 161–87 (p. 180).

hermeneutical vision that fosters an apocalyptic imagination and strengthens the conviction to resist the forces of domestication?[53]

Vanlalpeka, a Mizo church historian, provides an account of Baptist identity in Mizoram, which he displays in terms of difference, specifically, the 'sibling rivalry' between Presbyterians and Baptists. From the outset of the Christian mission in the nineteenth century, though the South was Baptist and the North was Presbyterian, the two groups essentially functioned as one church. The insurgency movement against the Indian National Government that began in 1966 complicated this functional union as Mizo from the South were forced to seek refuge in northern towns and villages. When displaced Baptists from the South settled in the North, they united with Presbyterian congregations.[54] The two denominations shared an evangelical and ecumenical theology, and they participated in a common tribal culture. They also used the same hymnal and translation of the Bible; they studied the same Sunday School literature and followed the same form of worship. Yet southern Mizo in northern congregations were unable to receive believer baptism by immersion according to their practice. Compelled by conviction, they made long journeys to Baptist communities in the South in order to observe believer baptism. By the mid-1980s, the denominational distinction grew more pronounced as Baptists gathered congregations in the North, and Presbyterians formed congregations in the South.[55]

Vanlalpeka struggles to name the difference between Baptists and Presbyterians.[56] Their shared history, the sense of a common church life, and their tribal solidarity were salient identity markers. Yet the struggle around baptism that arose during the period of political insurgency indicated there was a distinction in the way they practised the faith. The approach of the Gospel Centenary commemorating the

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[53] Freeman, *Undomesticated Dissent*, pp. 1–37. My argument in the book is that the reception history of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Jerusalem* demonstrates that receptive readers embraced the hermeneutical imagination of dissent and carried on the tradition of undomesticated dissent.

[54] Vanlalpeka, 'Who is the Greatest? An Appraisal of the Narratives of Denominational Origins in Mizoram', *American Baptist Quarterly,* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2019), pp. 188–201 (p. 193).

[55] Vanlalpeka, 'Who is the Greatest?', p. 194.

[56] Vanlalpeka, 'Who is the Greatest?', p. 190.

one-hundred-year anniversary of the arrival of Christianity to Mizoram provided an occasion to tell the story of their unity and diversity. Vanlalpeka highlights the 'Baptist ways' and traditions that are distinctively Mizo by telling the story of their missionary origins, which is intertwined with but also distinct from Presbyterians.[57] He notes that Mizo Christianity is more inclined to orthopraxy than orthodoxy.[58] He concurs with Downs that members of the Baptist Church of Mizoram do not articulate their identity in terms of faith and order distinctives. However, he does not yield to the Downs thesis that reduces Baptist identity to tribal connection.

The confusion is understandable because in so many ways the churches and lifestyles of Mizo Baptists and Presbyterians look very much alike, but as Vanlalpeka suggests, the distinction lies in the common narrative that has shaped the way they understand their place in the world. Mizo Baptists stand within a tradition shared with Mizo Presbyterians. Their interconnected stories are a 'historically extended, socially embodied argument […] about the goods which constitute that tradition'.[59] That tradition is constituted as much by *who* handed it on as by *what* was handed on. It makes sense, then, for Mizo Baptists to think of their identity as bound up with the stories that make up their shared life. That narrative tradition goes back to the first English Baptist missionaries J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge, who arrived in Mizoram on 11 January 1894, as well as to the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionary William Williams, who began his work in 1891.[60] The extent to which Mizo Baptists claim a baptistic identity is because they are the social embodiment of the faith that has been handed on to them. As Vanlalpeka notes, the challenge going forward lies with Mizo Baptists who must learn to tell their story in their own voices, from the

[57] Vanlalpeka, 'Who is the Greatest?', p. 188.
[58] Vanlalpeka, 'Who is the Greatest?', p. 192.
[59] MacIntrye, *After Virtue*, p. 207.
[60] Vanlalpeka, 'Who is the Greatest?', p. 197. Rowan Williams argued for a similar kind of Christian identity in the earliest communities among the connection of Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine churches, that is, 'networks of churches with epistolary links running through an apostolic coordinator' (Rowan Williams, 'Does it Make Sense to Speak of pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?', in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. by Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1–23 (p. 11).

standpoint of those who received the faith, not just of those who passed it on.[61]

As historian and missiologist John Webster observes in his assessment of Christian and denominational identity in Mizoram,

> Identity is negotiated all the time in varying contexts between us and relevant others who may not see us as we see ourselves. Consequently, identity is never fixed, but is constantly being redefined during the process of living and interacting with others. In addition and as a result, identity is a relational concept: identity is defined in relation to something or someone else.[62]

The stories of Baptists and Presbyterians in Mizoram overlap at many points, and their shared evangelical-ecumenical past is part of their identity. Yet it also makes sense for Mizo Baptists to understand their identity as Baptists, not by trying to point to distinctive beliefs and practices that distinguish themselves from the Presbyterians, but by seeking to understand the story or stories of which they find themselves a part.[63] The story that has surely shaped their identity in salient ways extends back to the Baptist missionaries. It is also the case that by tracing their sense of identity to these English Baptist missionaries, Mizo Baptists can only know who they are by exploring how their story is bound to the stories of the Baptist Missionary Society of Great Britain and to the stories of the wider fellowship of British Baptists that includes the BUGB.

One final example helps to illustrate this narratively shaped framing of Baptist identity. The Council of Baptist Churches in Northern India (CBCNI) was constituted in 1958.[64] It united the four

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[61] Downs argues that as historians tell the story of Christianity in India they must draw from both mission and non-mission indigenous Christian sources, 'Identity: The Integrative Principle', pp. 4–5.

[62] John C. B. Webster, 'History, Identity, and missiology: A Case Study Concerning Mizoram', *Witnessing to Christ in North-East India*, ed. by Marina Ngursangzeli and Michael Biehl, Volume 31, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series <https://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/re2010series/35> [accessed 7 April 2021] (page 416).

[63] Borrowing the phrase from MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 201.

[64] In his history of the CNI, Baptist minister and CNI bishop Dhirendra Kumar Sahu narratively frames his account of ecumenical ecclesiology, stating that 'to exist as a church means to have a collective memory and story bears the corporate memory'. See Dhirendra Kumar Sahu, *The Church of North India: A Historical and Systematic Theological Enquiry into an Ecumenical Ecclesiology*

provincial unions that traced their origins to the English Baptist Missionary Society: The Bengal Baptist Union, The Baptist Union of North India, The Utkal Christian Church Central Council, and The Baptist Church of Mizo District.[65] Half of the churches in the CBCNI participated in the formation of the Church of North India (CNI) in 1970. Unlike other churches that formed the CNI, which joined as denominational or regional bodies, Baptists united with the CBCNI on a congregational basis. Other CNI churches recognised Baptist ordinations, and former Baptist ministers were eligible to serve as CNI bishops.[66] The Baptists declared their participation in the CNI to be an 'exercise of the liberty that they have always claimed […] to interpret and administer the laws of Christ'.[67] Rather than denying their Baptist identity by entering into this ecumenical church body, they understood their participation to be consistent with the congregational dimension of Baptist polity that grants liberty to each local church to discern the implications of the Lordship of Christ.[68]

The practice of baptism presented a peculiar ecumenical challenge for Baptists within the CNI, which regards infant and believer's baptism as 'equivalent alternatives'. This policy did not initially address the potential dilemma posed if a person baptised in infancy should desire to receive baptism as a believer. To approve of rebaptism would seem to render the earlier baptism invalid, and to deny the request would appear to be a violation of the freedom of conscience. The problem was ultimately resolved by accommodating to the Baptist practice by discouraging but allowing for the exceptional possibility of rebaptism, even at the risk of anomaly. The new policy recognised that the liturgical event of baptism was not a completed act but part of the

(Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 227; for the full account of the narrative identity of the CNI, see pp. 227–51.

65 Sahu, *The Church of North India*, p. 127. The Baptist Church of Mizo District subsequently withdrew from the CBCNI to seek unity with the CBCNEI.

66 Sahu, *The Church of North India*, pp. 167–76.

67 Baptist Declaration of Principle, in *The Constitution of the Church of North India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), p. 15.

68 Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 225–226. Sahu notes that 'the Baptist churches in India had their local autonomy much modified to the central authority' (*The Church of North India*, p. 168).

process of Christian initiation.[69] It is a reminder that local adaptation of Baptist identity in a new social context may not look the same as in other settings, though the basis for the innovation may be thoroughly baptistic.

Conclusion

By examining the British and North Indian Baptists, I have shown that Baptist identity is not a matter of adhering to a set of unchanging principles or historic beliefs without bearing on social context. Nor is it reducible to an array of social and cultural factors that results in a pluralistic diversity of accounts without a clear sense of unity about what Baptists share in common. Baptist identity as I have argued is a complex constellation of convictions and practices that create a socially constructed and essentially contested embodiment of exemplary characterisations in communal relationships and cultural contexts. The good news is that this framing indicates that a diversity of versions of Baptist identity can find a place within a shared story. The differences are to be expected given the variety of performance. More specifically, it suggests that in order to give our own stories a proper telling we must give other stories a proper hearing. Attending closely to the narrative framework can enable us to detect in each version of Baptist identity an account that is both attendant to the convictions and practices of particular communities as well as resonant with the wider baptistic heritage. As I have already noted, the shared identity of Baptists is 'more

[69] Sahu, *The Church of North India*, pp. 161–65. This language of infant and believer baptism as alternative patterns of participation in a common process of Christian initiation has been used effectively in Baptist ecumenical bilateral dialogues. See *Conversations Around the World 2000–2005: The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2005) <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/101713/conversations_around_the_world.pdf > [accessed 20 April 2021] (pp. 42–45); *The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006-2010* (Falls Church, VA: BWA 2013), §101, also available in *American Baptist Quarterly*, 31, no. 1 (2012), 28–122 (p.69); and *Faith Working Through Love: Report of the International Dialogue Between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council* (2014–2018), <https://o7e.4a3.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Final-Report-of-the-International-Dialogue-between-BWA-and-WMC.pdf> [accessed 20 April 2021] (§§ 70–80).

about identification than about being identical'.[70] Let us then seek to recognise the family resemblances in our diverse performance and practice.

[70] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 16.