

**From Church Competence to Soul Competence:  
The Devolution of Baptist Ecclesiology**

John Hammett  
*Professor of Systematic Theology*  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Post Office Box 1889  
Wake Forest, NC 27588

The thesis of this paper is threefold: (1) that congregational polity in Baptist ecclesiology was undergirded, particularly in its early days, by a conviction that Christ had granted to each local church power and authority (what I call competence) to order its own affairs; (2) that over a long period of time, but particularly in the late nineteenth century, a variety of factors developed in American life that began to undermine the idea of church competence and replace it with an idea enshrined in the phrase “soul competence;” and (3) that this development should be regarded as a devolution in Baptist ecclesiology, for it seems linked to a variety of deleterious ideas and practices that have been and are continuing to weaken and trouble Baptist church life.

This threefold thesis will be developed in the three main sections of this paper, with each section devoted to one of the three aspects of the thesis. As the documentation will suggest, I am looking primarily at what has happened to Baptists in North America, particularly my own context of Southern Baptists. I do not know how applicable it will be to Baptists from other geographical contexts, but I believe it will have some relevance for most evangelical groups in the North American context, because the factors that affected Baptists were not completely unique to them.

### **Congregational Polity and Church Competence**

It is almost unquestioned that congregational polity has been a characteristic part of Baptist ecclesiology since Baptists originated. R. Stanton Norman, in his analysis of Baptist literature on Baptist identity, summarizes his findings in this statement: “Writings on Baptist distinctives all contend for Congregationalism as the most appropriate form of church government.”<sup>1</sup> This can be easily substantiated by a quick look at Baptist confessions of faith, Baptist literature on the issue of ecclesiology, and almost any Baptist church constitution and by-laws.<sup>2</sup> From time to time the issue of ruling elders has received some discussion among Baptists, but elder rule has never been widely adopted by Baptists.<sup>3</sup> Baptists may rightly be identified with congregational polity. How well they have practiced it is open to debate. Powerful pastors and dominating deacons have been all too common. But in theory and theology, Baptists affirmed congregational polity.

A more important and interesting question is, Why? What was it about congregational polity that attracted Baptists? Perhaps the most obvious answer is that it has seemed to most Baptists that the New Testament supports congregational polity. J. M. Pendleton, in a volume that went through at least thirteen editions, gives congregational polity as one of the three

---

<sup>1</sup>R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 119.

<sup>2</sup>The most complete collection of Baptist confessions of faith is the one by W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, revised ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969); the smaller, more recent and more readily available work of Timothy and Denise George collects the most historically important confessions. See Timothy and Denise George, eds., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants and Catechisms*, Library of Baptist Classics, vol. 11 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996). A good selection of the huge literature on Baptist ecclesiology is found in the bibliography in Norman, *More Than Just a Name*, 181-91.

<sup>3</sup>See the debate reflected in Samuel Jones, “Treatise of Church Discipline,” reprinted in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 145. Some early documents, such as Benjamin Griffith, “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church,” (also reprinted in *Polity*, 95-112) affirmed elders that were called ruling elders, but functioned under an

reasons behind his Baptist identity: “I am a Baptist because Baptists adopt the form of government recognized in the New Testament—that is to say, the Congregational form of government.”<sup>4</sup> Most Baptists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries believed that the New Testament had much to say about polity, and gave considerable attention to discussions of polity.<sup>5</sup>

Modern Baptists tend to take a more modest position. Millard Erickson, in his widely used systematic theology text, describes the New Testament evidence as “inconclusive,” but supports congregational polity as best fulfilling the biblical principles underlying church government, such as the priesthood of all believers and the importance of each member to the body.<sup>6</sup> Mark Dever believes that when the New Testament discusses issues of doctrine, discipline, admission of members, and settling differences between members, congregational polity seems to be implied, though he acknowledges that the portrayal of polity in Scripture is “incomplete.”<sup>7</sup> Most Baptists would not have adopted congregational polity had they not thought there was at least some Scriptural support for it, but while a biblical basis was a necessary prerequisite, I do not think it alone was decisive for Baptists.

Baptists naturally gravitated toward congregational polity because they had, since their inception, embraced the logically prior idea of the congregation as a gathered group of believers

---

overall congregational government. There is a small movement toward elder rule among some Baptist churches today, but thus far it has remained very small.

<sup>4</sup>J. M. Pendleton, *Three Reasons Why I Am a Baptist With a Fourth Reason Added, On Communion*, 13<sup>th</sup> ed. (Nashville: Graves, Marks & Co., 1858), 148.

<sup>5</sup>As cited above in n. 3, the volume edited by Dever, *Polity*, consists largely of ten reprints of detailed discussions of polity from Baptists from 1697 to 1874. They reflect the confidence of Baptists that Scripture did speak to specific issues of polity.

<sup>6</sup>Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1094-96.

<sup>7</sup>Mark E. Dever, *A Display of God's Glory* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 33-37.

only. Leon McBeth says, aptly, I think, “Perhaps the origin of Baptists is best explained as a search for a pure church.”<sup>8</sup> The two ideas, that of a pure church of believers only (regenerate church membership) and congregational polity, grew up side by side in Baptist belief and practice, but the former is more foundational, more clearly taught in the New Testament, and logically prior in that it provides a clear rationale for the latter. Justice Anderson says, “The cardinal principle of Baptist ecclesiology, and logically, the point of departure for church polity, is the insistence on a regenerate membership in the local congregation.”<sup>9</sup> J. L. Reynolds said in 1849, “The Bible system of Church governments [sic] is suited only to a Bible constituency. If churches are composed only of such as give credible evidence of having been taught by the Spirit of God, they may safely be entrusted with the management of their own interests.”<sup>10</sup> I believe Baptists saw the New Testament as pointing toward congregational polity, at least in part, because they read the New Testament with eyes that had already seen the church as composed of believers only, who could therefore be reasonably expected to participate in the governance of the church.

But Baptists added a further element in their articulation of the basis of congregational polity. It was not just that individual believers, because regenerate and thus indwelt by the Spirit, could be expected to be competent to participate in church government; they believed Christ gave a special gift of what some early Baptists called “church-power” to churches gathered according to his instructions.

---

<sup>8</sup>Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 75.

<sup>9</sup>Justice C. Anderson, “Old Baptist Principles Reset,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 31 (Spring 1989): 5-12.

<sup>10</sup>J. L. Reynolds, “Church Polity or the Kingdom of Christ, in its Internal and External Development,” reprinted in *Polity*, 345.

*The First London Confession* says every church gathered as a company of visible saints “has power given them from Christ for their better well-being.”<sup>11</sup> *The Orthodox Creed* (1679) spells out how that power given by Christ to the church is also the basis for the authority exercised by leaders of the church: “We believe that the great king, and lawgiver, Christ, the universal and only head of his church, hath given to his visible church, a subordinate power, or authority, for the well-being, ordering, and governing of it . . . the executive part of which derivative power of discipline and government, is committed to his ministers.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the supreme authority over the church is Christ; he gives the church a “subordinate power” that is the basis for congregational government; the church delegates the “executive part” of that power to their leaders. In such a formulation, strong pastoral leadership is not antithetical to, but is derived from, overall congregational government.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the fullest statement of the doctrine of church competence comes from the extremely influential *Second London Confession*. Originally promulgated in 1677, it was reprinted several times and, with two very minor modifications, was eventually adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association. Known in America as the *Philadelphia Confession*, it became the most influential confession among Baptists in America until the latter part of the nineteenth century. It states, “To each of these Churches thus gathered, according to his mind, declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful, for their carrying on that order in worship, and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe;

---

<sup>11</sup>Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 166.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>13</sup>This seems to be the type of congregationalism advocated by Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001) and is similar to my own view. Some such type of delegated power seems especially necessary in today's larger churches where it is not possible to bring every decision to the congregation.

with commands, and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power.”<sup>14</sup> That this power is specifically given to churches and only to churches is clarified in the same confession's discussion of the power of an association. The confession acknowledges the propriety of seeking the advice of other churches in “cases of difficulties or differences,” but the assembled messengers of such an association “are not entrusted with any Church-power properly so called.”<sup>15</sup>

This distinction between the advisory power of an association and the “Church-power properly so called” adhering to a congregation was recognized in further statements coming from the first two Baptist associations in America. Benjamin Griffith’s *A Short Treatise of Church Discipline* was written in 1743 at the request of the Philadelphia Association and appended to the *Philadelphia Confession*. The Charleston Association had adopted the *Philadelphia Confession* and the work by Griffith, but chose to add a further statement, their *Summary of Church Discipline* (1774).<sup>16</sup> Both statements clearly distinguish between the important but advisory power of an association, and the proper power of a church.

This gift of church power was seen as having a biblical basis by virtue of its association with Christ's words in Matthew 16:19 concerning “the keys of the kingdom” and the exercise of the power of those keys in the “binding and loosing” mentioned in Matthew 18:18. The gift of power Christ gave to the church was the gift of the keys, whose power is used in the exercise of church discipline. Virtually all Baptist discussions of congregational polity refer to Matthew 18:15-20. Some early documents refer to the power to bind and loose as the “Power of the Keys,

---

<sup>14</sup>Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 286-287.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>16</sup>These two documents are among those reprinted in *Polity*. See 112 and 132 for the discussions on the power of an association.

or to receive in and shut out of the Congregation,” and specifically see that power as being given to the church in Matthew 18.<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Griffith’s *Short Treatise* states, “The Lord Jesus Christ hath committed the use and power of the keys, in matters of government, to every visible congregational church.”<sup>18</sup> He continues, “The keys are the power of Christ, which he hath given to every particular congregation;” he repeats, perhaps to emphasize, “By virtue of the charter and the power aforesaid, which Christ hath given to his church, his spiritual corporation, they are enabled to receive members in, and to exclude unworthy members as occasion may require.”<sup>19</sup> Three times in the space of less than two paragraphs Griffith emphasizes that this exercise of congregational polity is based, not on some ability in each individual member, but on a gift Christ makes to his church. They had a competence, a “Church-power properly so called,” that was based on their status as a properly gathered church of Christ’s people, a pure body of regenerate, baptized believers.

More recently, in his study of Georgia Baptists, Gregory Wills has shown that early Baptists in America combined advocacy of religious liberty and individual freedom with a zeal for congregational authority, seen especially in their practice of church discipline. “They placed discipline at the center of church life . . . . Not even preaching the gospel was more important to them than the exercise of discipline.”<sup>20</sup> Their zeal for discipline stemmed not from a mean-

---

<sup>17</sup>Benjamin Keach, “The Glory of a True Church and its Discipline Display’d,” in *Polity*, 71.

<sup>18</sup>Griffith, “A Short Treatise,” in *Polity*, 99.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8. Through detailed study of church records, Wills shows that Baptists, at least until 1850, disciplined a higher percentage of their members than non-Baptists, and Southern Baptists a higher percentage than Northern Baptists.

spiritedness, but from a concern for the purity of the church and submission to its authority.<sup>21</sup> Regenerate church membership, the foundational principle of Baptist ecclesiology, could be preserved by use of the competence Christ had given to his church, expressed in church discipline. But this conviction of the competence of the church began to be undermined by changes in the culture around Baptists, changes that eventually permeated Baptist life and thought. The story of those changes forms the second major section of this paper.

### **From Church Competence to Soul Competence**

It is widely recognized that American culture had a profound impact on theological developments in the nineteenth century. Mark Noll says that Protestant evangelical theology was “decisively shaped by its engagement with Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary America” such that “this nineteenth-century Protestant evangelicalism differed from the religion of the Protestant Reformation as much as sixteenth-century Reformation Protestantism differed from the Roman Catholic theology from which it emerged.”<sup>22</sup> And while Noll does not deal with Baptists in any depth, aside from Isaac Backus,<sup>23</sup> there are others who give general confirmation to his thesis.

William McLoughlin sees the beginnings of change among Baptists as early as the American Revolution: “something happened to the Baptist movement in America after the

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. Wills says, “Through discipline, Baptists sought to reconstitute the apostolic church . . . they required of every member . . . an acknowledgment of the church’s right to censure.”

<sup>22</sup>Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>23</sup>Noll, *America’s God*, 149, describes the history of Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a subject “scandalously neglected.”

Revolution.”<sup>24</sup> Paul Harrison sees a trend beginning a bit later: “In every decade since the beginning of the nineteenth century one can find in Baptist literature reaffirmations of the freedom and competency of the totally independent individual.”<sup>25</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, one finds conflicting evidence. On the one hand, there are important Baptist leaders like Francis Wayland, whose “individualistic proclivities resulted in an atomistic interpretation of congregational polity.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Baptists in the South were establishing a seminary in 1859, whose *Abstract of Principles* included a very traditional statement of Christ’s gift of authority to each church: “to each of these churches He [Christ] hath given needful authority for administering that order, discipline and worship which he hath appointed.” In mid-century issues of polity continued to attract the attention of Baptist writers. Six of the ten “historic Baptist documents” collected by Mark Dever on polity date from 1846-1874,<sup>27</sup> but concern also began to be expressed about a decline in church discipline following the Civil War. Among the factors contributing to this decline was the growing influence of individualism.<sup>28</sup> Discipline was not actively opposed, but simply overlooked. Other things, such as the “quest for efficiency,” were now seen as more important than the “pursuit of purity.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty: The Baptists’ Struggle in New England, 1630-1833* (Hanover and London: Brown University Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>25</sup>Paul M. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Convention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 22.

<sup>26</sup>Maring, “Wayland,” in *Baptist Concepts*, 153.

<sup>27</sup>See Dever, ed., *Polity*. All ten of the documents in the volume reflect the view of church competence described in the first section of this paper.

<sup>28</sup>So says Stephen Haines, “Southern Baptist Church Discipline, 1880-1939,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 20 (1985): 14-27.

<sup>29</sup>Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 9.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the picture becomes clearer. While there are still some voices giving some emphasis to the corporate dimension of the Christian life (such as A. H. Strong<sup>30</sup>), the centrality of the individual is given increasing prominence. Harrison states, “Pressed by the secular spirit of individualism current in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and proud of their religious contribution to the movement, later Baptists slipped off their theological base and cooperated in the support of an ideology grounded in the spirit of individual voluntarism.”<sup>31</sup> This movement is reflected in the continuing decline of church discipline. In a detailed survey of the records of fifteen relatively representative Southern Baptist churches from ten states over the period 1880-1939, Stephen Haines found that all fifteen churches declined in the number of members disciplined, year by year, with the most dramatic drop in the years following World War I.<sup>32</sup> Wills sees a similar pattern among Baptists in Georgia, noting some decline as early as the 1840s, but becoming more pronounced over the course of the next century. He says, “In 1850, Southern Baptists understood democracy largely in terms of ecclesiastical authority. In 1950, they understood it primarily in terms of individual freedom.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the key figure in this shift from church competence to soul competence was E. Y. Mullins. Norman sees E. Y. Mullins as inaugurating a new tradition in approaches to Baptist distinctives, one that utilizes Christian experience as an important theological source and embraces a number of Enlightenment assumptions concerning human freedom and

---

<sup>30</sup>See A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), 894-929, for a statement of Baptist ecclesiology reflecting the earlier tradition of a high view of the church.

<sup>31</sup>Harrison, *Authority and Power*, 21-22.

<sup>32</sup>Haines, “Southern Baptist Church Discipline,” 14-27.

<sup>33</sup>Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 139.

individualism.<sup>34</sup> His greatest effect on Baptist ecclesiology and Baptist identity came through his work, *The Axioms of Religion*, which, according to Fisher Humphreys, “probably has done more than any other single volume to define Baptists in the twentieth century.”<sup>35</sup> In it he sets forth his view of soul competence. He calls this idea the “sufficient statement of the historical significance of the Baptists,” “the distinctive contribution of Baptists,” and “a comprehensive truth” from which almost all the principles of Baptist ecclesiology may be derived.<sup>36</sup> In terms of congregational polity, his beginning point is the soul competence of the individual. As regenerate and indwelt by Christ, the individual is competent to act in church decisions. Thus, Mullins says, “decisions of the local congregation on ecclesiastical matters are the ‘consensus of the competent.’”<sup>37</sup> But competent is not a modifier for the church, but for the individual. For Mullins, “the church is a community of autonomous individuals under the immediate lordship of Christ held together by a social bond of common interest;” it has no delegated authority, for Christ “delegates his authority to none.”<sup>38</sup>

This importance attached to the idea of soul competence merits close examination. What exactly does Mullins mean by soul competence? He offers several descriptive phrases. First, the assumption undergirding soul competence is that humans are created in God’s image, with the capacity for communion with God. “Man has capacity for God, and God can communicate with

---

<sup>34</sup>Norman, *More Than Just a Name*, 41.

<sup>35</sup>Fisher Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” in *Baptist Theologians*, 335.

<sup>36</sup>E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1908), 53, 54, 57.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 129, 128.

man.”<sup>39</sup> That capacity for relationship is exercised in a direct, personal, and individual way.<sup>40</sup>

Soul competence is linked to the priesthood of all believers in that the latter “is but the expression of the soul’s competency on the Godward . . . side of its religious life.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, soul competence includes the “right of private judgment as to the meaning of the Bible.”<sup>42</sup> Of these ideas, interpreters of Mullins usually focus on the ideas of individual freedom and the ability and responsibility for a personal relationship with God as the central elements in the idea of soul competence.<sup>43</sup>

At one point, Mullins includes a disclaimer that soul competence is “competence under God, not a competence in the sense of human self-sufficiency. There is no reference here to the question of sin and human ability in the moral and theological sense.”<sup>44</sup> Timothy George picks up on this disclaimer in his paraphrase of Mullins’ description of soul competence: “all persons created in the image of God stand in a unique and inviolable relation to their Creator and, when quickened by divine grace, are fully ‘competent’ or capable of responding to God directly.”<sup>45</sup> George thinks such a limitation is important, for in the realm of soteriology “we should speak

---

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 54, 212.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>See Norman, *More Than Just a Name*, 21; Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” 335; Reggie McNeal, “The Priesthood of All Believers,” in *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845*, ed. Paul Basden (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 215.

<sup>44</sup>Mullins, *Axioms*, 53.

<sup>45</sup>Timothy George, “The Priesthood of all Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (1989): 283-94. Emphasis added.

more accurately of ‘soul incompetence.’”<sup>46</sup> However, it should be noted that phrases limiting the reach of soul competence rarely appear in Mullins’ own elaborations of soul competence; indeed, Mullins seems intent on emphasizing the all inclusive nature of this principle. This lack of precision may be partially responsible for some of the confusion that developed between the ideas of soul competence and the priesthood of all believers, and obscured the strongly corporate nature of the latter phrase.<sup>47</sup>

E. Y. Mullins was by no means the creator of individualism. There is certainly an element of it in the Bible, it had been a rising tide in Western culture throughout the Enlightenment, and it began to enter Baptist life as early as the First Great Awakening, with its emphasis on individual, personal conversion. But until the early years of the twentieth century, Baptists accepted individual faith and personal responsibility without accepting “the privatizing trend of democratic individualism,” because they retained a high view of the competence of the church.<sup>48</sup>

Mullins marks an important point of change. He reoriented Baptist thought around the idea of soul competence, which, according to Winthrop Hudson, “was derived from the general cultural and religious climate of the nineteenth century rather than from any serious study of the

---

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 285.

<sup>47</sup>Such confusion is reflected in the article by Thomas H. Graves, “Baptist Identity in the Twentieth Century,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 35 (2000): 7-23, in which he repeatedly uses soul competence and priesthood of the believer as synonymous phrases. George claims that they are distinct. Soul competence is an anthropological belief true of all humans and having to do with their individual responsibility before God; the priesthood of all believers is true only of believers and is a corporate concept dealing with responsibilities in the church (George, “Priesthood,” 285). Reggie McNeal says that the radical individualism in Mullins’ idea of soul competence led to an “individualistic interpretation” of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers that was not completely consistent with earlier understandings, but became “well entrenched in Southern Baptist thought” by the middle of the twentieth century. McNeal, “The Priesthood of all Believers,” 217.

<sup>48</sup>Wills, *Democratic Religion*, viii.

Bible.”<sup>49</sup> Rather than representing the “historical significance” of Baptists, soul competence is something of a novelty in Baptist life, both as a term and as an emphasis. I have been able to find no Baptist theologian prior to Mullins who uses the phrase “soul competence,” and it does not appear in any Baptist confession of faith, save in the preface to the *Baptist Faith and Message* 2000.<sup>50</sup> Further, there is no listing for soul competence in either of two recent dictionaries of Baptists.<sup>51</sup> Finally, I think it important that the subtitle to *The Axioms of Religion*, in which Mullins proclaimed his view of soul competence, was *A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (emphasis of underlining added). Soul competence, as Mullins formulated and emphasized it, may better be termed original than historical. Fisher Humphreys contrasts *The Axioms of Religion* with other works of Mullins like *Baptist Beliefs*.<sup>52</sup> In the latter “he interpreted for the general reader the beliefs which Baptists regularly confess” while in the former he sought to give his own view of the “hidden assumptions underlying Baptist life” and in so doing produced “what may have been the most original book Mullins wrote.”<sup>53</sup>

I believe we may see in Mullins both the culmination of the privatizing, individualistic trends of the nineteenth century and an important innovation in the articulation of soul competence as the central and crucial principle of Baptist life. In terms of ecclesiology, Mullins marks a decisive turning point from the corporate concept of church competence to the

---

<sup>49</sup>Winthrop Hudson, “Shifting Patterns of Church Order,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church*, ed. Winthrop Hudson (Philadelphia, PA: Judson Press, 1959), 215.

<sup>50</sup>The phrase appears in the following sentence: “We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers, affirming together both our liberty in Christ and our accountability to each other under the Word of God.” *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Lifeway Christian Resources, 2000), 5.

<sup>51</sup>See William H. Brackney, *Historical Dictionary of Baptists*, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies and Movements, no. 25 (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1999) and Bill J. Leonard, ed., *Dictionary of Baptists in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

<sup>52</sup>E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Louisville, KY: Baptist World Publishing, 1912).

individualistic principle of soul competence as determinative in Baptist church life. The last major section of this paper will briefly trace the adoption of Mullins' view and its impact on Baptist ecclesiology.

### **Soul Competence and Baptist Ecclesiology**

By all accounts, E. Y. Mullins was the most influential Southern Baptist of the twentieth century. Harold Bloom calls him “the Calvin or Luther or Wesley of the Southern Baptists.”<sup>54</sup> Under his leadership, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary became, at that time, the largest seminary in the world. In the larger Baptist world, he was instrumental in the formation of the Baptist World Alliance and served as its president from 1923 to 1928.<sup>55</sup> As R. Albert Mohler says, “He was a man incredibly fitted for his times.”<sup>56</sup> But he was also a man whose theology was fatefully shaped by his times, particularly his doctrine of soul competence.

Mullins' reorientation of Baptist thought around the concept of soul competence led to a new strand of Baptist ecclesiology. In contrast to the voluntary connectional ecclesiology characteristic of the Philadelphia Tradition, or the local church ecclesiology of Landmark Baptists, twentieth century Baptists adopted what LeRoy Moore calls an individualist ecclesiology, led by the theologian of individualism par excellence, E. Y. Mullins.<sup>57</sup> Mohler sees

---

<sup>53</sup>Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” 337. Emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup>Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 199.

<sup>55</sup>See R. A. Mohler, “Introduction,” in *The Axioms of Religion/E.Y. Mullins*, eds. Timothy and Denise George, Library of Baptist Classics, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 5-23 for a synopsis of Mullins' accomplishments.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>57</sup>LeRoy Moore, “Crazy Quilt: Southern Baptist Patterns of the Church,” *Foundations* 20 (1977): 12-35. Moore sees some evidence of individualist ecclesiology prior to Mullins, but notes the completeness of Mullins' focus on the individual, and the importance of his influence.

soul competence acting as an acid dissolving congregationalism, along with several other aspects of Baptist life.<sup>58</sup> Within a relatively short time, earlier ideas, though enshrined in confessions of faith and embodied in traditional practices, seemed to be forgotten. By 1935, William R. McNutt could say in a widely used book on polity, “It is the doctrine of soul competency that produced the Baptist doctrine of church.”<sup>59</sup> Perhaps the classic statement of Mullins’ impact is given by Winthrop Hudson: “The practical effect of the stress upon ‘soul competency’ as the cardinal doctrine of Baptists was to make every man’s hat his own church.”<sup>60</sup>

How has the movement from an ecclesiology based on church competence to an ecclesiology based on soul competence affected Baptist church life? Here we must acknowledge some difficulty in demonstrating cause and effect. We can trace some troubling practices that have developed in Baptist life in America in the last century, and show some correlation with the rise of soul competence ecclesiology. We may also show that the change we have shown in ecclesiology is a consistent, cogent and plausible explanation for these problematic trends. But since churches most often act without giving any explanation as to their reasons, and would be hard pressed to articulate any ecclesiological reason, there is no clearly demonstrable cause and effect connection. There are, however, three areas of significant correlation.

The first is the correlation that can be made between the decline in church discipline, one of the major manifestations of the competence of the church, according to Baptist confessions of faith, and the increasing emphasis on soul competence. It is not that those supporting soul competence openly attacked church discipline. As Wills observes, “No one publicly advocated

---

<sup>58</sup>Mohler, “Introduction,” 26.

<sup>59</sup>William R. McNutt, *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1935), 22.

<sup>60</sup>Hudson, “Shifting Patterns,” 216. This statement is cited by Mohler and George in their assessments of Mullins’ legacy.

the demise of discipline. . . . No theologians argued that discipline was unsound in principle or practice. . . . It simply faded away, as if Baptists had grown weary of holding one another accountable.”<sup>61</sup> But the timing of the decline is provocative. It began in the late nineteenth century, then increased in speed in the post-World War I era,<sup>62</sup> the era when Mullins’ ideas began to take hold. It is hard to imagine that the pervasive presence of the individualistic doctrine of soul competence, and the absence of an idea of church competence, did not play a significant role in prompting individual church members to think and ask themselves, “Who am I to call another person to be disciplined?” rather than “What must we do as the *church* to restore this brother and protect the church?”

We would expect that as there was a growing unwillingness to discipline members after they joined, there would also be an unwillingness to ask of prospective members serious commitment before allowing them to join. Here too the evidence is suggestive of a significant correlation, consistent with the thesis of this paper. One clue lies in the declining use of church covenants among Baptists. Charles Deweese states that while church covenants were a basic feature of Baptist life throughout most of the nineteenth century, seen as essential to the very nature of Baptist churches and expressive of the commitment entailed in church membership, they entered a period of decline beginning near the end of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century.<sup>63</sup> This decline coincides with “mounting trends toward an

---

<sup>61</sup>Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 9.

<sup>62</sup>Haines, “Southern Baptist Church Discipline,” 24.

<sup>63</sup>Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 97. There is a hopeful sign in the small but growing number of churches that have recently been returning to the use of a covenant, which spells out the expectations of new church members, and which individuals must sign to become a member. For more information on this trend, see John Hammett, “Reclaiming Meaningful Membership: A Modest Proposal,” *Faith & Mission* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 3-14.

uncommitted membership.”<sup>64</sup> Such trends are easily observable in most Baptist churches today. The vote on whether or not to receive a new member into the church is a formality; no one would think of voting no. Most churches require very little of new members in terms of commitment, and quite often that is what they get. The failure to maintain standards for members is also reflected in the fact that only 35.9 % of Southern Baptist church members attend worship on an average Sunday.<sup>65</sup> Certainly some on any Sunday are sick or traveling, but many are resident and well, but chronically absent for years at a time, and yet remain members in good standing. The state of the heart of such individuals God only knows, but they are not living like regenerate church members.

Finally, while evidence here is even more anecdotal, there is the beginning of a movement toward elder rule in a small number of Baptist churches. While there are multiple factors involved in this trend, a basic one is that responsible congregational government presupposes a regenerate church membership, and an ecclesiology based on soul competence leaves a church with little basis to act to protect regenerate church membership. With less than half the members even attending their worship services, it is hard for Southern Baptists to maintain the claim of regenerate church membership. Moreover, the actions of many congregations during Baptist church business meetings are hardly the picture of regenerate people seeking God’s will. It is easy to see how a pastor could tire of battling with such congregations and find elder rule appealing. As Theron Price said nearly half a century ago, the Southern Baptist Convention can no longer realistically claim to be “a group of ‘gathered and

---

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., VII.

<sup>65</sup> Data from Strategic Information and Planning Section, Lifeway Christian Resources.

disciplined churches” because we no longer “sense the dignity and authority of the church.”<sup>66</sup>

Under a soul competence ecclesiology, there is no dignity and authority in the church; only in individuals.

### Conclusion

How have Baptists arrived at a point where they no longer seem able or willing to assume the responsibilities assigned in their confessions of faith to congregations to set standards for membership and to discipline erring members? How has regenerate church membership, once the cardinal principle of Baptist ecclesiology, become no longer the ideal earnestly sought, but a forgotten fiction, far from reality? While no doubt there are numerous factors, it seems hard to avoid acknowledging that one of the prime factors is the individualistic mindset of soul competence and the questions it prompts in the mind of a sensitive believer, such as, “Who am I to question the reality of this person’s profession of faith? Who am I to object to her desire to join this church? Who am I to vote to discipline a brother in Christ?” Such questions will continue to hinder and undermine effective congregational church government among Baptists unless they regain a robust view of the authority and competence Christ gives to his people, not as isolated individuals, but as members of his gathered people. Such a view was common among Baptists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it was reflected in their confessions of faith, and the practices in their churches. Such a view, however, is precluded by an ecclesiology generated around soul competence.

---

<sup>66</sup>Theron D. Price, “Discipline in the Church,” in *What Is The Church? A Symposium of Baptist Thought*, ed. Duke K. McCall (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), 184.