

Who Are the True Baptists? The Conservative Resurgence and the Influence of Moderate Views of Baptist Identity¹

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In the inerrancy controversy that shook the Southern Baptist Convention beginning in 1979, Southern Baptists divided over what it meant to be a Baptist. When Southern Baptist leaders polarized amid the conservative effort to make belief in inerrancy a condition of denominational service, their posture toward the inerrancy initiative derived in large measure from their understanding of Baptist identity. Conservatives believed that moderates had departed from the Baptist tradition and moderates felt the same way about conservatives. Each party in the conflict claimed to be true Baptists and claimed the imprimatur of Baptist tradition.

Conservatives believed that the true Baptist tradition consisted in maintaining New Testament faith and practice. They felt that they were responsible therefore to exclude false teaching. Those teachers and denominational leaders who held liberal doctrines departed from New Testament faith and practice. By their departure from the Baptist tradition they betrayed the trust of the denomination and relinquished their claim to their position. Sincere commitment to the traditional Baptist understanding of scriptural teaching, conservatives insisted, should be a condition of service in positions of denominational service.

Moderates held, on the contrary, that

true Baptists did not exclude their fellow Baptists for divergent views of what the Bible taught. The denomination should not require seminary professors to believe some prescribed set of dogmas in order to serve the denomination, for that would infringe their freedom. When conservatives argued that seminary professors must be committed to scripture truth, moderates effectively asked, "What is truth?" Truth, they held, was a matter of individual interpretation. To exclude professors for divergent interpretations sincerely held would be un-Baptistic. The true Baptist tradition, moderates said, upheld individual freedom as the central Baptist commitment.

Conservatives and moderates thus responded differently to the question of the legitimacy of liberal professors based on sharply different views of what it meant to be a Baptist. But their views of Baptist identity had broader ramifications. It undergirded their responses to other issues of controversy in the denomination, from the ordination of women as pastors to affiliation with the Baptist World Alliance. It informed their views of the church, of the faith, and of denominationalism.

Conservatives held that being Baptist meant commitment to right doctrine and scriptural church order as the basis of

denominational unity, Baptist identity, and cooperative endeavors. They held that adherence to scriptural faith and practice was a condition of fellowship and denominational leadership. Conservatives held that this was at the center of Baptist identity. It served as a fundamental presupposition of the conservative position.

Moderate leaders argued on the contrary that the Baptist tradition consisted in individual freedom. They expressed it variously as commitment to soul competence, religious freedom, liberty of conscience, the priesthood of the believer, regenerate church membership, and no creed but the Bible. But at the bottom of each of these expressions, as moderate leaders explained it, was commitment to the sanctity of individual freedom. This was a legacy of liberalism or modernism. Modernism sought to adapt Christianity to Darwinism and the naturalistic historical criticism of the Bible. Since the adaptation would require substantial redefinition of traditional Christian beliefs, modernists argued for a view of true Christianity that included toleration of divergent interpretations of scripture. They placed the meaning of Christianity in some non-doctrinal essence and went about adjusting traditional doctrines to the new knowledge. Modernist Baptists developed their view of Baptist identity as part of this development.

During the inerrancy controversy, moderates bristled at the conservatives' premise that authentic Baptist identity included commitment to historic Baptist orthodoxy. Conservatives promoted commitment to inerrancy and the utility of confessions because they believed that scriptural faith and practice formed the basis for denominational cooperation and the boundaries of fellowship. Most

pointedly, conservatives insisted that professors in Baptist colleges and seminaries should believe and teach in accordance with the views of Bible truth held by the churches. Conservatives held that many professors held liberal or neo-orthodox views, starting from a rejection of inerrancy and culminating in such errors as the denial of the deity of Christ, the rejection of his substitutionary atonement, or opposition to salvation exclusively through faith in Christ.

Moderates responded in two ways. They first denied that there were any liberals teaching in the seminaries. In one of the most remarkable statements by a moderate leader, Roy Honeycutt, the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, stated in his 1984 convocation address that "one would be at a loss to discover a classical liberal among Southern Baptists, whether in the pulpit or classroom, college or seminary." The professors were committed to the church and held the Bible in esteem, moderates argued, and therefore were not liberals. Conservative leaders found the denials implausible. Although most professors were careful to keep their errors hidden from view, conservatives readily identified a number of liberals in the classrooms. And many rank-and-file Southern Baptists did not find Honeycutt's denials credible either. Many Baptists had sat in classrooms with these professors and had heard the liberal teaching first hand.²

Moderates argued second that even if there were liberal professors, it was un-Baptistic to deprive them of their positions on account of their beliefs. Roy Honeycutt explained the moderate view of true Baptist identity in the 1984 convocation address in which he called moderates to wage "holy war" against the

conservatives. He explained that authentic Baptists would not exclude any person of good will. (Since conservatives wanted to exclude sincere Baptists based on doctrine, they were not persons of good will.) The Baptist tradition stood on one conviction above all others: the individual is free. And commitment to individual freedom meant “commitment to authentic pluralism.” Honeycutt concluded then that “God calls us to exclude no one, but to include everyone” committed to cooperative missions. This pluralism, he claimed, was the basis of Baptist identity and “has characterized our denomination during its entire history.”³

In fact, neither progressive nor traditional Baptists had ever practiced that kind of inclusion. In the twentieth century progressive Southern Baptist leaders aspired to wide inclusion, but even the most progressive denominational seminaries and colleges operated within their own theological boundaries. They did not welcome inerrantists and at times dismissed progressives, however reluctantly. And before the twentieth century Southern Baptists generally maintained definite boundaries of faith and practice in their institutions at various levels of denominational life. Baptist churches practiced a regular church discipline that expelled unrepentant members who embraced fundamental doctrinal errors. Baptist associations similarly expelled from fellowship any churches that departed from scriptural faith and practice. This traditional commitment to truth endured in the twentieth century as Southern Baptists opposed moderate leaders who tolerated the spread of error in their denominational schools.⁴

When progressive theology spread on the faculties of Baptist colleges and semi-

naries, many Baptists voiced objections. Even before the Second World War many Southern Baptist colleges experienced controversy over professors suspected of modernism, some of whom they dismissed after pastors and lay members demanded their removal. W. L. Poteat, president of Wake Forest College and the most prominent liberal among Southern Baptists, overcame two efforts to oust him. Others similarly survived the campaigns against them. Baylor, Furman, William Jewell, Mercer, Limestone all dismissed professors, as did the New Orleans Baptist Bible Institute (now the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary).⁵

The progressive trend continued after the war. By the 1950s most Southern Baptists were convinced of the spread of liberalism in the colleges and seminaries and became increasingly vocal when denominational leaders responded to their demands for the expulsion of liberal professors with denials and temporizing. In 1960 Southern Baptist Convention president Ramsey Pollard represented the views of most Baptists when from the platform of the annual meeting he insisted that the denomination’s colleges and seminaries should purge themselves of all liberal professors. Herschel Hobbs, who succeeded Pollard as convention president, felt assured that the “vast majority” of Southern Baptists supported Pollard’s demand. Hobbs spoke for them when he stated that “any man who aspires to teach either in our Christian colleges or seminaries should either stay within the ‘pasture’ of what Southern Baptist[s] believe and teach or else he should hire his own hall. I am not for furnishing him a place to spout out his own views.”⁶

Southern Baptists did everything they knew to do to persuade denominational

leaders to exclude such professors. Sometimes they succeeded. The trustees of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary fired Ralph Elliott from his position as professor of Old Testament in 1962 after Elliott's *Message of Genesis* ignited one of the most heated controversies in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention. Other professors came under fire in subsequent years and a few lost their positions.⁷

Liberalism persisted nevertheless. Most Southern Baptists found the situation reprehensible and felt betrayed by denominational leaders who did not act to oppose liberalism except when the constituency compelled them. Rank-and-file Southern Baptists agreed with conservative leaders that orthodox faith and practice should be prerequisite to service as a denominational officer, missionary, or professor.

Throughout their history Southern Baptists have insisted that scriptural faith and practice formed the basis of their unity and identity. The shared commitment to that faith and practice also established boundaries of fellowship. Those who taught error departed from authentic Baptist identity and had no right to teach in the denomination's schools or hold positions of denominational service.

In the twentieth century the moderate view of Baptist identity coexisted with this conservative view. Theological progressives dominated denominational leadership in the twentieth century and they promoted the notion that being Baptist meant freedom. But the moderate version of Baptist tradition was essentially an invention of the twentieth century. Before the twentieth century, few Baptists urged that freedom was the essence of the Baptist tradition. But after about 1900,

progressive Baptist leaders urged this view increasingly.

Baptist Identity before the Twentieth Century

For most Baptists prior to the twentieth century, Baptist identity derived almost entirely from the shared belief and practice of their churches. Eighteenth and nineteenth century Baptists held that their common theology and church polity made their churches Baptist. They expressed this in a number of ways.

In the first place, long before they formed any denomination-wide organizations, Baptists recognized that their churches formed a single fellowship united by their commitment to a common understanding of New Testament faith and practice. John Asplund, who traveled the nation gathering Baptist statistics in the 1790s, wrote that in order to be qualified to administer baptism a minister "must have been baptized by a qualified minister of our *denomination*" (italics mine). Thus before there was a Cooperative Program, before there were mission boards, before there were any conventions at all, Baptists held that their churches constituted one denomination.⁸

The chief institutional expression of their denominational unity was their membership in the local association. The association required agreement in faith and practice as a condition of membership and enforced denominational boundaries based on that agreement. Associational membership was an essential part of Southern Baptist identity.

Indeed, long after Baptists in the South organized the Southern Baptist Convention, large numbers of churches did not participate in the convention or contribute to convention agencies, but they were still

Southern Baptist churches. In 1882, for example, 55 percent of Virginia's Southern Baptist churches gave nothing to any of the denomination's boards. But Virginia was a picture of cooperative participation compared with much of the South. In 1903 the editor of Missouri's *Central Baptist* estimated that less than one-third of Southern Baptist churches contributed to the mission boards. But they were Southern Baptist churches nevertheless. They maintained the same faith and practice, and expressed it in associational fellowship.⁹

This sense of denominational identity appeared in other ways. When Baptists discussed religious groups, they identified them by their faith and practice. Many groups were Baptist in the sense of practicing believer's baptism, but they did not all belong to the orthodox or regular Baptist denomination. The main body of Baptists in the United States did not recognize the Seventh Day Baptists, General Baptists, Free Will Baptists, Tunkers, Mennonites, and Brethren, as having authentic Baptist identity. They did not hold fellowship with them because they differed in significant ways from the faith and practice of the regular Baptists.

Thus John Leland, the revered Baptist evangelist and defender of religious freedom, declared in 1790 that the Tunkers and Mennonites, although they practiced believer's baptism, were distinct sects from the Baptists. He held that the Anabaptists generally were not orthodox or regular Baptists. The practice of immersion was one essential of Baptist identity. The Anabaptists practiced baptism by pouring. They differed at other important points also. They were not Baptists. Leland concluded finally that Baptists and Anabaptists were as different as

Presbyterians and Roman Catholics. But the many regular Baptists, Leland said, were "united in their sentiments," for they interpreted the New Testament the same way. This union of faith and practice was the basis for the "free correspondence and communion" that circulated among them. They were one denomination united by their common faith and practice.¹⁰

T. P. Tustin, editor of South Carolina's *Southern Baptist*, argued similarly in 1856 that orthodox Baptists had no fellowship with other groups just because they had a Baptist label. Although Primitive Baptists, Advent Baptists, and Mennonites practiced believer's baptism, Tustin wrote, they embraced errors in other important areas. Regular Baptists could not therefore hold them in fellowship. There could be no denominational identity with them.¹¹

But the Separate Baptists and Regular Baptists in the South pursued a different course. They relinquished their separate identities because they believed the same things in all essential areas. And by 1801 they declared their mutual fellowship and identity throughout the South. When Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall began establishing Separate Baptist churches throughout the South in the eighteenth century, they differed in some ways from the Regular Baptist churches that already occupied the South. The Separates had withdrawn from the legally established churches of New England and had become Baptists. Their heritage was distinct from that of the Regular Baptists. But when preachers of the two movements met, they recognized one another as holding the same interpretation of New Testament faith and practice. They were agreed in all essentials and should constitute one denomination. Separate Baptist John Taylor, whose preaching ignited revival

in Kentucky, united in fellowship with Regular Baptist preachers because, he said, “we found no difference as to doctrinal opinions.” They worked out their minor differences, dropped their different names, and formally declared their union based on a common confession of faith and practice.¹²

Baptist churches expressed their commitment to unity of faith and practice as the source of Baptist identity also by insisting that those who departed from Baptist doctrine disqualified themselves as Baptists and could no longer remain members in their churches. Baptist churches sought to correct and reclaim those who strayed, but they excluded from fellowship those who refused to repent. Baptist churches excluded members who embraced doctrinal or ecclesiastical aberrations of all sorts: Deists, annihilationists, universalists, unitarians, certain Arminians, open communionists, and the like. Persons excluded from the church were no longer true Baptists.¹³

The motto for Baptist identity came from Amos 3:3: “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” Since Baptist identity was rooted in believing and practicing the same things, Baptist churches held that members who introduced false doctrine divided the denomination and relinquished any valid claim to being Baptist. Baptist churches expelled them from membership as schismatics and errorists. Texas leader B. A. Copass summed up the Baptist position: “To withdraw fellowship from one who differs in matters of faith is not an attempt to stifle freedom, but only getting rid of one who does not belong to that body. Why should the body tolerate in its fellowship one who is teaching heresy? Such a thing would be moral suicide.”¹⁴

When modernism began to spread

among Baptists in the late nineteenth century, most Baptists asserted that those who embraced modernist beliefs were no longer legitimate Baptists. When J. E. Roberts, pastor of Kansas City, Missouri, First Baptist Church, for example, began preaching modernist views in the 1880s, even Virginia’s *Religious Herald*, which at times gave progressive Baptists space in its columns, declared that he was no longer a Baptist. The editors spoke for the denomination: “Baptists rather stoutly insist that those who wear the Baptist name shall maintain the Baptist doctrines.”¹⁵

In the twentieth century likewise, a majority of Baptists insisted repeatedly that the rejection of certain doctrines was a rejection of Baptist identity. James B. Gambrell, who with E. Y. Mullins was the most influential leader of his era, taught that Baptist identity derived from unity of faith and practice. Denominationalism, he said, represented the fellowship that existed “among churches of the same faith and order, leading to cooperation in building up interests common to all.” As long as Baptists agreed on matters of faith and practice, Missouri editor J. C. Armstrong wrote in 1903, there was little danger of a division of fellowship. He held that the denomination’s Baptist identity was remarkably strong because “in the main, there is perfect uniformity in doctrine and practice among the churches.”¹⁶

Because Baptist identity derived from orthodox faith and practice, Baptist leaders argued that persons who departed from that faith and practice should have the integrity to seek fellowship with the denomination with which they most agreed. To the consternation and confusion of orthodox Baptists, liberal Baptists generally sought to remain in the South-

ern Baptist fellowship. The editors of the *Religious Herald* tried to explain the behavior of modernist Baptist preachers:

As soon as he found that he was not a Baptist, the thing for him to do was to hand in his credentials, wish his brethren well and quietly walk out of their ranks. . . . But not so. About the last thing that one of these unhinged and noisy men who have an attack of omniscient liberalism will do is to quit us. He holds on to his place, draws his salary, and makes a brilliant effort to "reform" the Baptists. So long as he can find a few shallow and blustering supporters, he will cling to his position. He goes only when it becomes impossible for him to stay. His staying may upheave and disrupt the church or school which employed him under the mistaken notion that he was a Baptist; but what cares he for that?¹⁷

Liberal Baptists rejected this logic. They sought to remain in the denomination because they developed a different view of Baptist identity. For them, being Baptist was not about doctrines. It was about commitment to a formal principle inherent in religious experience, the principle of individual freedom. In their new understanding of Baptist identity, they could reject the inerrancy of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, and much more, and still be authentic Baptists.

Baptist Identity in the Twentieth Century

This new understanding of Baptist identity bloomed in the twentieth century as progressive leaders and cultural trends promoted the redefinition. Progressive Baptists subordinated doctrine and practice to some spiritual principle or eternal essence which they generally called the "Baptist idea" or the "Baptist principle."

They embraced the historical idealism that undergirded the thought of Hegel and German philosophy generally. Many German religious leaders embraced historical idealism as a way to rescue Christianity from the assaults of scientific empiricism. The new religion they constructed became known as liberal Christianity. The essence of Christianity, the liberals from F. D. E. Schleiermacher to Adolf von Harnack argued, was not in its doctrines and practices, but in its lived experience. Underneath its various historical forms was an abiding essence which was the life and experience of religion. Doctrines were only temporary expressions of religious experience. Doctrine was extrinsic.

Baptist progressives embraced the liberals' historical idealism and defined Baptist identity in terms of an abiding essence or genius. This Baptist principle, they argued, was the source of all the various doctrines and practices of the Baptists, but the doctrines and practices were temporary expressions suited to specific historical needs. Different historical needs required the development of different doctrines. The abiding essence could therefore adapt its faith and practice to every age in order to be relevant. For Baptist progressives, this meant adapting their traditional beliefs to accommodate the new learning represented by the new historical criticism of the Bible and especially by Darwinism. True Baptists, the progressives said, altered their doctrine to keep up with the times. Thus Baptist modernists could modify their beliefs without ever losing their Baptist identity.

Progressive Baptist leaders discovered the essence of Baptist identity using liberalism's idealist method. Schleiermacher described the method: "The only pertinent way of discovering the pecu-

liar essence of any particular faith and reducing it as far as possible to a formula is by showing the element that remains constant throughout the most diverse religious affections within this same communion, while it is absent from analogous affections within other communions." When Baptist liberals sought the essence of Baptist identity this way, they discovered that it was individualism. Baptists, they said, had developed the truth of the sovereign individual. Individualism meant freedom from extrinsic authority in all matters of the heart and mind, especially religion.¹⁸

George A. Lofton, a prominent Southern Baptist pastor in Atlanta, Memphis, and St. Louis, argued for example that "the Baptist idea" was "personal freedom in all matters of religion."¹⁹ A. J. S. Thomas, editor of South Carolina's Baptist paper, held similarly that freedom is "the very soul of the Baptist faith." This was Baptists' gift to the world. This was their genius. Commitment to this was what it meant to be Baptist.²⁰

Progressive Baptists recognized that the Baptist heritage was nevertheless thick with doctrine. But the theological heritage posed little threat to their new approach to Baptist identity, because theology was merely a historically conditioned by-product of religious experience. J. W. Bailey, editor of North Carolina's *Biblical Recorder*, argued that although Baptists do have some definite beliefs, these beliefs are subordinate to the true Baptist idea. "The Baptist Principle, is, therefore, in its root—Individualism," Bailey said. "Their Principle, not their doctrine, marks them."²¹

Charles S. Gardner, professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued similarly that "Liberty is of the

very essence of Baptist polity and life." Gardner acknowledged that Baptist identity must entail some definite beliefs. "There clearly must be a limit beyond which a man cannot go and retain any just claim to denominational fellowship," Gardner claimed, though his principles did not seem to support this contention. He in fact advocated preserving a "Baptist type or expression of Christianity which is easily felt," but he insisted that "hard and fast lines can not be drawn" and no one could "mark out the limits of our fellowship."²²

The essence of the Baptist faith, as Baptist liberals viewed it, was not in its doctrines, but in its life, its spirit. And that spirit, most progressive Baptists felt, was individual freedom. The unique mission of the Baptists is to inculcate individualism, which, as Bailey put it, is the "very secret of all progress" and the "great motive for the rise of the race." This meant that no person or institution had a right to encroach upon the conscientious beliefs of any individual. Although Bailey held that each local church is perfectly sovereign, he held also that not even the church could reproach an individual on account of doctrine.²³

Ironically Bailey held that Baptists should constrain any individual who reproached another for erroneous beliefs. He inconsistently called upon Baptists to be vigilant against the "slightest trenching" upon the Baptist principle of individualism. There was no room among the Baptists for persons who held that right doctrine was essential to Baptist identity. The least encroachment of individual freedom, he urged, should be "ended forthwith."²⁴ They were not true Baptists, in his view, if they insisted that a common faith and practice was essential to Baptist

identity.

The Emergence of Southern Baptist Ethnicity

This new understanding of Baptist identity fit well with an additional source of identity that emerged largely after the Second World War. Postwar Southern Baptist leaders successfully enlisted Southern Baptist churches to establish and maintain uniform Baptist programs. The proliferation of these programs and the rapid growth of Southern Baptist churches in the postwar period together produced a powerful Baptist subculture in the South. The wide participation in these programs coincided with efforts to subordinate doctrine to experience and fostered an ethnic or tribal source of identity. Participation made one Baptist.

Participation in the cooperative endeavors and programs of the Southern Baptist Convention played an important role in supporting the new approach to Baptist identity that emerged in the twentieth century. W. O. Carver, widely influential professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, connected Baptist identity to participation in convention programs. He argued that cooperative missionary efforts created Baptist denominationalism and formed the foundation of Baptist unity. "Before the beginning of the missionary movement among us, there were Baptist churches, but there was hardly a Baptist denomination." Participation in the Southern Baptist Convention's missionary program created the denomination's identity. "It took missions to give us a sense of oneness." Missions also, Carver said, drove Baptist progress in doctrine, education, culture, and Christian piety. Without the cooperative endeavors, Carver seemed to say, there

could be no authentic Baptist identity, no unity, no denomination. Participation created Baptist identity.²⁵

But Carver's interpretation was historically inaccurate. Mission boards added a new dimension to Baptist denominational identity, that of voluntary agreement to cooperate broadly to send preachers of the gospel to the four corners of the earth. But Baptists conceived of themselves as a denomination before mission boards. They established their unity on the foundation of a common faith and practice and maintained membership in the local association as the chief institutional expression of identity. But participation in a mission board did not make them one denomination. Mission boards were important and as more churches recognized that they could accomplish the Great Commission more effectively through them, they joined the effort. But even the cooperation with boards depended on their commitment to a stronger and older view of Baptist denominationalism, in which Baptist unity and identity consisted in their common faith and practice. Under the influence of liberalism and its historical idealism, Carver abandoned the traditional basis of Baptist identity and sought to attach the principle of freedom to that of participation in cooperative missions as the sole bases of Baptist denominational identity.

Carver's views found wide acceptance, especially among the denomination's progressive leadership. By attaching the principle of individual freedom to cooperative missions, the progressive view gained considerable influence. In the twentieth century, denominational leaders initiated a wide array of programs in addition to cooperative missions to bolster further this source of Baptist

identity. And for about two generations, the approach seemed to work, as participation in denominational programs dominated local church experience and forged a Southern Baptist identity based on participation and belonging.

It worked in large part because in the postwar period Southern Baptist programs proliferated widely and established deep roots in most churches. These programs produced a powerful Southern Baptist subculture that fostered tribal identity. Churches made Southern Baptists by careful nurture. They were born into the group, nurtured in the rituals and practices of the group, and completed the certified rites of passage. Belief became subordinate to belonging and participation.

Many contemporary moderate leaders have reflected on this source of Baptist identity in recent years. Their experience has been remarkably consistent. Cecil Sherman, the founding executive officer of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the moderates' alternative denomination, said that he was Baptist because his parents were. Donna Forrester, who refused to leave Southern Baptists despite opposition to her ordination, considered her Baptist identity a birthright similar to nationality: "I could no more be a Methodist than I could be from Wisconsin." She was born a Baptist in the same way she was born an American and a southerner. Molly Marshall, a prominent moderate theologian and former professor at the The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said that she had always been a Baptist, for it was her heritage and was the same as being alive. Gary Parker, former Coordinator of Baptist Principles at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, concluded that many are Baptists because they were born and

nurtured in it: "We breathe Baptist air and drink Baptist water and eat Baptist chicken." Nancy Sehested, a leading moderate pastor, recognized the ethnic or tribal character of her Baptist identity: "I was born into the tribe of Baptists. . . . My siblings and I were all schooled in the tribal ways from the Texas branch of the house of Southern Baptists." Moderate scholar and publisher Cecil Staton Jr. summarized the experience of so many postwar Southern Baptists: "I am Baptist born and Baptist bred . . . it would be almost impossible for me to be anything other than a Baptist."²⁶

When postwar Baptists said that they were "born" Southern Baptist, they meant that they were nurtured in a distinct Southern Baptist vision of life, values, and society. The elements that shaped this identity included such experiences as walking the aisle and receiving baptism by immersion, attending Baptist youth camps, participating in the Baptist Young People's Union or its successor, the Baptist Training Union, attending a Baptist college or seminary, and receiving a weekly dose of ethnic indoctrination in Sunday School classes that taught the curricula sent down from Nashville's Baptist Sunday School Board. Perhaps more than any other program, however, the Woman's Missionary Union contributed to this Baptist identity. The organization enrolled the youth of each church in such weekly training programs as the Girls-in-Action (formerly the Girls' Auxiliary) and the Royal Ambassadors. Here they trained children in the Bible, discipleship, world missions, history, and culture. They required them to memorize the structure and workings of the Southern Baptist Convention. Here above all they created Baptists.

The educational program of the Wom-

an's Missionary Union was indispensable. Baptist girls advanced through the stages of the Girls-in-Action missions education program: maiden, lady-in-waiting, princess, queen, queen-with-a-sceptre, and queen regent. Baptist boys did the same in the Royal Ambassadors: page, squire, knight, ambassador, ambassador extraordinary, and ambassador plenipotentiary. The annual coronation ceremony traded somewhat on the pageantry of the southern cotillion, the queens and attendants appearing in formal finery. Conversion, walking the aisle, saying the sinner's prayer, receiving baptism, and believing a few Baptist-like ideas, were important, but authentic Baptists had to advance through the other Baptist rites of passage. Queens regent and ambassadors plenipotentiary were as authentic as one could get.

Adult converts can scarcely achieve Baptist identity in this sense. But those who had completed its rituals of conversion and rites of passage achieved authentic Baptist identity. And it was hard to shake off. Those who joined other denominations could not avoid taking their Southern Baptist ethnicity with them. Former Southern Baptist Sam Hill, noted historian of southern religion, recognized that although he had defected from the Southern Baptist Convention, he had become a Southern Baptist Episcopalian. And those who went on to graduate from a Baptist college or seminary and attained the highest levels in the tribe, assumed the responsibility of protecting the boundaries of Baptist identity.²⁷

On my ordination council sat a man who had served many years as a denominational official. He knew what it meant to be a Baptist and he doubted that I was one. He probably felt that I was too conservative on inspiration and inerrancy and

atonement, but this probably represented a deeper problem. I clearly believed that commitment to traditional Baptist views of New Testament faith and practice would qualify someone as a Baptist. I did not realize that I could never really be Baptist. Although I had belonged to Southern Baptist churches for about six years at the time, I was not ethnically Southern Baptist. I was not born Baptist. I was not nurtured in the ways of the tribe. When Baptist boys were attending Royal Ambassador meetings, I was taking ceramics class with liberal Methodists. When good Baptists matriculated at Baptist colleges, I went to Methodist ones. Baptists who anticipated vocations in the church went to one of Southern Baptists' six theological seminaries; after my conversion I went to a northern evangelical seminary. I had learned about the Cooperative Program and Lottie Moon through books instead of through the Woman's Missionary Union's educational programs. Ethnicity is nurtured within the group. I came from outside the tribe and my misguided belief that I could be Baptist by joining a regular Baptist church and agreeing with orthodox Baptist doctrine corroborated my outsider status.

This tribal source of identity was not intrinsically harmful to theological sources of identity. Postwar conservatives advanced through the same programs and felt the same influences. But they drew on the older tradition and kept commitment to New Testament truth at the center of Baptist identity. But when progressives tied the programs to their vision of a Baptist identity that substituted commitment to individual freedom for commitment to the same faith and practice, it caused harm. But it produced good as well. Many conservatives, who might otherwise have

left the denomination over the refusal of its leaders to preserve orthodox faith and practice, remained in the denomination in large measure because they too had been nurtured into the tribe.

For much of the twentieth century this Southern Baptist ethnicity was the glue that held the denomination together while growing theological diversity pushed it apart. Like the strong nuclear force that overcomes a molecule's natural repulsions, ethnicity held Southern Baptists with divergent beliefs and identities together. There were some defections. Some conservative churches withdrew and became independent or identified with one or another fundamentalist movement. Some modernists withdrew and joined the Episcopal church or some other denomination. But most remained. Whether conservative or moderate, they felt in their bones that they were authentic Southern Baptists and could not conceive of any other identity. Their identity was not chosen, it was given. They were born Baptist.

The one besetting problem for many progressive Southern Baptist leaders in the twentieth century was that this identity retained a thoroughly provincial cast. To be Southern Baptist meant being southern. Although some educated Baptists rejected their southern heritage outright, most felt a strong ambivalence toward it. Their identity was southern at its very center—they could not help it. But they felt that the South's provincial character—its heritage of fundamentalism, racism, and social backwardness—was an embarrassment.

Conservatives tended to be less embarrassed by these aspects of southern identity and felt less ambivalence about their attachment to the South. But since their

Baptist identity had more to do with belief than with breeding, the South's shortcomings did not necessarily challenge their comfort with their Baptist identity.

Many moderates, and especially the more progressive among them, felt that they had transcended the provincial aspect of the Baptist identity in which the churches had nurtured them. When they left home for college they were fundamentalists who believed in inerrancy, dispensationalism, Landmarkism, and the general superiority of Southern Baptists and southern society. In college or seminary, or through other experiences, they learned to view many of their theological and social beliefs as the outmoded dogmas of southern anti-intellectualism and cultural backwardness. There was a broader, nobler tradition of which Baptist fundamentalism was ignorant. It was the scholarship of Protestant and Catholic liberalism.²⁸

They remained in Baptist churches but they adopted a cosmopolitanism that identified with the broad mainstream Protestant tradition of Western Europe and the United States. They expressed this identification by rejecting their region's cultural and theological orthodoxy. They generally sympathized with the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the Equal Rights Amendment, the *Roe v. Wade* decision, and the ordination of women to pastoral office. In politics they rejected their region's post-Carter preference for the Republican party. In theology they embraced evolution and the historical criticism of the Bible that allowed them to revere the Bible without claiming its inerrancy or plenary inspiration, to revere Christ without having to endorse a substitutionary atonement, God-ordained killing in the Old Testa-

ment, or fabulous legends. They emphasized experience over doctrine and sought closer connection with other religious traditions.

Moderates rejected the more-scriptural-than-thou boosterism in which they felt they had been raised. Their cosmopolitan outlook meant that they viewed conservative Baptist identity as a combination of parochialism (Baptists alone are faithful to the New Testament and have the biggest of everything and were the first in everything) and anti-intellectualism ("Don't let college ruin you," the conservative pastors warned their youth). Moderates had outgrown this. The problem with conservative Baptist identity, they felt, was that it was parochial in its Southern Baptist boosterism and anti-intellectual in its insistence on inerrancy and its rejection of historical criticism. But being Baptist, moderates felt, had to be "more than arrogance and ignorance."²⁹

The progressive redefinition of Baptist identity in the twentieth century afforded moderates with a way to remain Baptist and to reject the southern provincialism in which they were raised, including especially its theological fundamentalism. Since they taught that Baptist identity consisted in commitment to freedom, they could be Baptist without being fundamentalist. Their progressive college and seminary professors introduced them to this tradition that established Baptist identity on freedom and tolerance, and they embraced it. They valued religious liberty, individual freedom, and church autonomy as the essence of being Baptist. Walter Shurden summarized the moderate view: "The core value of the Baptist vision of Christianity is voluntarism. Freedom. Choice." Authentic Baptists privileged

individual freedom above all.³⁰

But they remained in the tribe. Indeed, the strong contribution of Southern Baptist ethnicity made the transition easier. They embedded the new version of Baptist identity into their native Baptist tribalism.

This powerful strand of Southern Baptist identity that developed in the twentieth century was not therefore mere ethnicity. For moderates, the ethnicity had a meaning, a purpose. Being Baptist meant supporting and perpetuating the "Baptist idea" of individual freedom. Since progressive moderates held that Baptist identity inhered primarily in individual freedom, they concluded that conservatives who placed doctrinal limits on denominational service were "not true Southern Baptists."³¹

The Burden of Baptist Identity

Although the progressives made extraordinary progress, they found it tough sledding. Most rank-and-file Baptists rejected the naturalistic historical criticism that seemed to deny much that the Bible taught. They rejected Darwinism. And they did not embrace the rather subtle historical idealism by which progressives claimed to reconcile the Bible with the criticism and evolution. Progressive leaders generally recognized that most Southern Baptists rejected the new progressive view of Baptist identity. Liberal editor Josiah Bailey, for example, concluded that "not one Baptist in a thousand conceives the genius of the Baptist position."³²

Conservative Southern Baptists came under many of the same powerful influences and were likewise nurtured into Baptist ethnicity. They too read the books and heard the Sunday school lessons that

advanced commitment to freedom as the highest Baptist ideal. But they felt that being Baptist must also include commitment to certain fundamental doctrines like the inerrancy of the Bible, substitutionary atonement, and salvation only by personal faith in Christ. For conservatives, being Baptist was first and foremost about faithfulness to Christ as revealed in his inspired and inerrant word. And if necessary, conservatives were prepared to leave the tribe in order to remain Baptists. They advanced commitment to New Testament faith and practice as the highest Baptist ideal. Conservatives made it a fighting point that neither tribal credentials nor commitment to freedom could suffice for Baptist identity.

The progressive trends of the denomination in the twentieth century nevertheless shaped the identity of conservatives in various ways. Moderates controlled what was taught in the college and seminary classrooms and in the Sunday school. They wrote the books that told Baptists their history, their doctrine, and their identity. They taught Baptists how to function as churches, associations, and conventions. Conservatives recognized readily the unscriptural character of some of that heritage, but much of that influence remains unrecognized. In some areas conservatives continue in the thoughts and ways that progressive leaders taught them.

Moderate leadership received assistance from another source. Trends in modern western culture aided and abetted moderate views of Baptist identity on the one hand, and constituted an independent source of influence that eroded traditional sources of identity on the other. Americans embraced a more expansive view of individual freedom as the twentieth

century progressed and conservatives have not escaped its influence.

Conservatives have pitched their tent on the ground of the traditional view of what it means to be a Baptist, the view that orthodox doctrine is central to Baptist identity. But Southern Baptists still labor under the burden of the moderate view of Baptist identity. Insistence on the full inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the necessity of the new birth for salvation, and the reality of miracles is essential, but if the resurgence stops there, it is incomplete. Authentic Baptist identity stands or falls on the commitment to maintain the faith and practice of the New Testament.

Perhaps the most obvious area in which the recovery is incomplete relates to the Bible's teaching on the church. Baptists once insisted that to be a true Baptist one had to embrace the New Testament's teachings about the governance and ordinances of the church. This is what they meant by the term "practice" in the phrase "New Testament faith and practice." The extensive and enduring influence of the moderate view of Baptist identity appears clearly in this area of Southern Baptist life.

Our churches have in practice attenuated the New Testament standard of regenerate church membership. We are uncertain whether we should expect evidence of regeneration beyond consent to be led in a prayer of faith. Baptists once looked for the New Testament signs of repentance, humility, and a changed life. They judged in charity, but they accepted the responsibility to judge. We tend to think it uncharitable to look for such evidence. One result is that in our churches there are many professed Christians who give no other evidence of regeneration. We

have diminished the standard of evidence to repeating a prayer and expressing a wish to join the church. Our volume is increased but the value is reduced.³³ On average less than one-third of our membership gathers together for the Lord's Day worship service. And judging by the decreasing ages at which we baptize children, we seem to practice what we do not preach—we are making Baptists by birth, not by faith. And our membership rolls, with their extensive lists of inactive members, testify against us in this area. On the last day we will give an accounting for many whose false hopes of salvation we endorsed and sustained.

In our administration of the Lord's Supper we show how much we have come under the influence of progressive views of Baptist identity and modern subjectivist views of morality. We are often disorderly in our administration of the ordinance and seem to reject the scripture's teaching regarding it. In the New Testament baptism is the first command of Christian discipleship and is therefore prerequisite to participating in the Lord's Supper. Those who count their infant sprinkling as baptism have not yet obeyed the Lord they profess. They are ineligible. This is what our Baptist forbears held and what our confessions teach. But in many churches we invite unbaptized professing believers to take and eat. In so doing we are endorsing their disobedience of Christ's command and we will share the guilt. Indeed, in some churches, we invite all persons, making no distinction and uttering no warning to those who do not even profess regeneration. In both of these circumstances, we invite persons to eat and drink judgment on themselves (1 Cor 11:27-30).

Under the influence of moderate views

of Baptist identity, many of our churches have abandoned or want to distance themselves from congregational church government. We have forgotten why Baptists established congregational government in the churches. Moderates taught us that we are congregational because it is the natural church expression of our commitment to individual freedom. Baptists once believed that congregationalism was scriptural and could readily point out passages that supported it.³⁴

And our churches have generally abandoned scriptural church discipline. We practice a thin discipline—church staff who sin are given paid leave, Christian counseling, a generous severance package, and are declared cured. We then commend them to another church where they repeat the same crimes. This is an area where most conservative pastors are aware of our disobedience as churches. The influence of moderate views of Baptist identity and of our individualist culture has convinced us that scriptural church discipline ought not and can not be done. But Baptists once thought otherwise. They believed that if Christ commanded it that settled it.

In other ways we show that we still labor under progressive views of Baptist identity. We are uncertain about the boundaries of our fellowship, because in some ways we have embraced the moderate belief that being Baptist means freedom. And so we continue to hold the hands of Baptist churches that endorse heresy and tolerate immorality. Baptist associations traditionally expelled member churches that departed from the beliefs and practices that the churches of the association professed as the foundation of their fellowship together. In recent years some Southern Baptist associations

have successfully moved to expel churches that departed from a New Testament belief or practice. But the offenses that attract attention are limited. Associations have expelled churches that have endorsed homosexuality, ordained a woman to the pastoral office, embraced Pentecostalism, or admitted members without believer's baptism. In many cases the expulsions overcame appeals to freedom only with great difficulty.

In other instances, aberrant churches have remained members in good standing in their association. One Southern Baptist church has tolerated in its membership persons who unashamedly and publicly paraded their serial adultery. And yet the church remains a member in good standing in its Southern Baptist association. To permit such churches to remain in the association constitutes an endorsement of their errors as consistent with orthodoxy. The other member churches that remain in fellowship with them thus participate in their sins. Most of the churches repudiate such errors, but have no heart for expelling churches that have embraced heresy, immorality, or unscriptural forms of church order. It seems churlish and unkind because of modern sensibilities that privilege civility as the highest virtue. More important, even many conservatives, influenced by the moderate tradition that being Baptist means freedom, fear that such action would violate the autonomy and independence of the churches. Associations that expel aberrant congregations do not interfere with that church's autonomy. They only

insist that the association is likewise autonomous and is free to expel from its membership any church that departs from New Testament faith and practice.

Let us say, once and for all, that true Baptist churches will not walk together with churches that discount the authority of the Holy Scriptures or deny the deity of Jesus Christ or give false hope of salvation apart from faith in Christ or tolerate immorality. Let us insist on unity based on sound denominational principles, that is, on our commitment to the same faith and practice. And let us determine that our faith and practice shall be based on scripture, not on modern sensibilities, not on misguided progressive interpretations of Baptist tradition, not even on the beliefs and practices of some ostensible golden age of Baptist orthodoxy.

Participation in denominational programs and cooperative endeavors should contribute to our denominational identity, but it should be subordinate and complementary to the role of our common faith and practice. So let us stand on the traditional ground denominational unity and remember that "on fundamental principles, agreement is necessary to fellowship."³⁵ Let us recover authentic Baptist identity in whole and not merely in part. Let us recover, that is, a fully Biblical identity, for true Baptist principles are Bible principles. And this is the only solid foundation for faithful and effective cooperation in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

ENDNOTES

¹I want to thank Union University for inviting me to present an earlier draft of this article in April, 2004.

²Roy Honeycutt, "Roy Honeycutt's 'Holy War' Convocation Address at Southern Seminary," in *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War*, ed. Walter Shurden and Randy Shepley (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 130. For some discussion of the spread of liberal (and neo-orthodox) ideas among Southern Baptists, see David Stricklin, *Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999); Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998); Wayne Flynt, "A Pilgrim's Progress through Southern Christianity," in *Autobiographical Reflections on Southern Religious History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 73-88; Gregory A. Wills, "Progressive Theology and Southern Baptist Controversies of the 1950s and 1960s," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7, no. 1 (2003): 12-31.

³Honeycutt, "Convocation Address," 131.

⁴For a discussion of church discipline and associational fellowship among nineteenth-century Southern Baptists, see Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵Shailer Mathews, *New Faith for Old: An Autobiography* (New York: Mac-

millan, 1936), 80; Randall L. Hall, *William Louis Poteat*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 130-155; Barry Hankins, *God's Rascal: J. Frank Norris and the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 28; James J. Thompson Jr., *Tried As by Fire: Southern Baptists and the Religious Controversies of the 1920s* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1982), 99, 79; unsigned, "The Action of the Board of Trustees," *Baptist Courier*, 18 December 1902, 4; Alfred S. Reid, *Furman University: Toward a New Identity, 1925-1975* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1976), 95; Z. T. Cody, "Can It Be Justified," *Baptist Courier*, 11 January 1923, 2-3; Trustees of Limestone College, "Resolutions Adopted by the Trustees of Limestone College," *Baptist Courier*, 5 July 1934, 2-3; Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists*, 386.

⁶Herschel H. Hobbs, letter to Ramsey Pollard, 23 May 1960, box 21, f. 5, Herschel H. Hobbs Papers, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee; Hobbs, letter to Ramsey Pollard, 6 June 1960, box 21, f. 5, Hobbs Papers.

⁷For a detailed narrative of the controversy, see Ralph H. Elliott, *The "Genesis Controversy" and Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1992).

⁸John Asplund, *The Universal Register of the Baptist Denomination in North America* (Boston: John Folson, 1794), 5.

⁹A. Chiel, "Studies of the Minutes, Per

Capita Income," *Religious Herald*, 16 November 1882, 1; J. C. Armstrong, "Baptist Affairs in the South," *Central Baptist*, 21 May 1903, 1.

¹⁰John Leland, "Virginia Chronicle," in *The Writings of the Late Elder John Leland*, ed. L. F. Greene (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 121; Leland, "Circular Letter of the Shaftsbury Association, 1793," *ibid.*, 196.

¹¹T. P. Tustin, "Schismatics—Hard-Shell Baptists," *Southern Baptist*, 1 July 1856, 2.

¹²John Taylor, *A History of Ten Baptist Churches*, 2nd ed. (Bloomfield, Kentucky: W. H. Holmes, 1827), 30.

¹³Wills, *Democratic Religion*, 90-91. This is not to say that the standard of discipline was Baptist identity, but rather that they held that Baptist faith and practice instantiated New Testament principles. So departures from Baptist identity were in fact departures from Christian discipleship. Those who rejected scripture truth or morality sinned against Christ, jeopardized their souls, and endangered the church.

¹⁴B. A. Copass, "Concerning Our Confession or Declaration of Faith," *Baptist Standard*, 4 June 1914, 2.

¹⁵Unsigned, "One More of the Same," *Religious Herald*, 27 November 1884, 1.

¹⁶James B. Gambrell, "The Growth of the Denominational Idea," *Biblical Recorder*, 15 April 1903, 2; J. C. Armstrong, "Baptist Affairs in the South," *Central Baptist*, 21 May 1903, 1.

¹⁷Unsigned, "One More of the Same," 1.

¹⁸F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and

J. S. Stewart (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 52.

¹⁹George A. Lofton, "Baptist Position Stated and Contrasted—The Purely Personal Idea," *Christian Index*, 20 August 1896, 2.

²⁰A. J. S. Thomas, "Are Baptists Calvinists?" *Baptist Courier*, 16 February 1911, 4.

²¹J. W. Bailey, "The Baptist Principle," *Biblical Recorder*, 12 November 1902, 8.

²²Charles S. Gardner, "Southern Baptists and Theological Liberty," *Biblical Recorder*, 18 February 1903, 2.

²³Bailey was inconsistent on this point. When arguing against the right of the mission board to evaluate orthodoxy, he stated that "only the church can challenge a Baptist's faith" ("The Right of Challenge in Matters of Faith," *Biblical Recorder*, 26 November 1902, 8), but elsewhere argued that the church could not challenge individual conscience: "The ordinary Protestant conception of Religious Liberty is freedom of the church from interference by the State. The Baptist conception is freedom of the believer from interference by State or church or anything else whatsoever touching conscience." ("The Baptist Principle," 8.) To vary from Baptist beliefs, Bailey conceded, was "to cease to be a Baptist." But only baptism is "the creed of the Baptists." And baptism is just a form of individualism. "It is in baptism that the Individual and the Democracy meet and plight their faith." ("The Creed of the Baptists," *Biblical Recorder*, 10 December 1902, 8.)

²⁴J. W. Bailey, "Some Fruits of the

Baptist Principle," *Biblical Recorder*, 19 November 1902, 8.

²⁵W. O. Carver, "Why Baptists Grow: The Importance of Missions in Relation to Baptist Progress," *Baptist Argus*, 25 June 1903, 6.

²⁶Cecil Sherman, "Hard Times Make for Hard Thinking," in *Why I Am a Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century*, ed. Cecil P. Staton Jr. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1999), 135; Donna Forrester quoted in "Women Leave Baptists to Minister," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, 21 October 2002; Molly Marshall, "A Baptist by Conscience: A Baptist in Hope," in *Why I Am a Baptist*, 89; Gary Parker, "The Four 'C's of Being Baptist," in *ibid.*, 103; Nancy Sehested, "This Is My Story, This Is My Song," in *ibid.*, 131; Cecil P. Staton, Jr. "A Personal Journey to England and Back Again," in *ibid.*, 157.

²⁷Samuel S. Hill, "Southern Religion and the Southern Religious," in *Autobiographical Reflections*, 15.

²⁸See, e.g., Staton, "A Personal Journey to England and Back Again," 158-160; Wayne Ward, "Wayne Ward," in *How I Have Changed My Mind: Essays by Retired Professors of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (Louisville: Review and Expositor, 1993), 88-96; J. Estill Jones, "J. Estill Jones," *ibid.*, 98-104.

²⁹Staton, "A Personal Journey to England and Back Again," 163.

³⁰Walter Shurden, "Second Baptist Church, Greenville, Mississippi," in *Why I Am a Baptist*, 150.

³¹Cecil Sherman, quoted in "Denominational Loyalists Meet," *Baptist Courier*, 13 November 1980, 16.

³²Josiah Bailey, "The Baptists and

Periods of Transition," *Biblical Recorder*, 6 May 1903, 1.

³³See H. H. Tucker's more extensive comments on the decline of commitment to truth in "Has the Time Come?," *Christian Index*, 9 July 1885, 8.

³⁴For an example of the moderate approach, see, e.g., Robert C. Ballance Jr., "Baptist Born, Baptist Bred," in *Why I Am a Baptist*, 10-11. On traditional Baptist arguments for congregationalism, as well as for other aspects of church government, see the documents collected in Mark Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life, A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001). Just a few of the verses teaching congregationalism are Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:5, 12-13; and 2 Cor 2:6.

³⁵Jesse Mercer, "Address to the Baptists of Georgia," *Christian Index*, 15 December 1836, 774.