7

Catholicity and Confessionalism

Responding to George Beasley-Murray on Unity and Distinctiveness[1]

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I hold it a poignant honor to be invited to participate in this series of lectures in memory of George Beasley-Murray. Firstly, and most obviously, as one of his former pupils I owe a significant debt to his teaching, his influence, and his example.[2] As a member of one of the last groups of students at Spurgeon's College to benefit from his New Testament lectures, I imbibed habits of reading and expounding Scripture which I hope I have never betrayed. Perhaps most profoundly, with all who in those years observed his example, I was challenged (if not intimidated) by his seemingly unfailing capacity for diligent effort and scholarly thoroughness: in periods of *ennui* I have been shamed by the memory of his extraordinary effort and, even in periods of sustained academic labor, I confess that I have not come close to his exacting standards. But beyond the clarity of his teaching and his tireless effort, those who were his stu-

1. This lecture was delivered at the Baptist Assembly in Blackpool on 4 May 2008. It was later published under the same title in *Baptist Quarterly* 43/1 (January, 2009). The cooperation of the editors is here acknowledged. The present chapter has undergone slight editorial changes.

2. I was a student at Spurgeon's College from 1970 until 1974, the final three years of Dr. Beasley-Murray's tenure as principal followed by a year under the leadership of Dr. Raymond Brown.

dents could not have failed to be influenced by his infectious passion for the gospel and for those distinctives that identified him as thoroughly Baptist.

Aspects of this final feature of his legacy will form the focus of this present paper—but this brings me to the second source of my sense of honor in being invited to deliver this lecture. This habit of assembly is one of the aspects of our ecclesial life that marks us as distinctively Baptist; to be invited to address even a fringe meeting of the Assembly betokens a weighty responsibility; and a memorial to the passionate commitments of George Beasley-Murray in such a context affords opportunity to focus on Baptist distinctives at a time when, for a range of reasons, those distinctives may be in jeopardy of being muted. Previous lectures in this series, fittingly and unsurprisingly, have drawn attention to George Beasley-Murray's definitive contribution to a properly theological understanding of baptism and to his evangelistic commitment. As its title suggests, it is my intention in this paper to focus, at least initially, on his seemingly lifelong commitment to ecumenism, a commitment which, to the frequent embarrassment of his friends and to the delight of some who in other respects were his detractors, was as profound and as passionate as those other commitments for which George Beasley-Murray is justly honored.

George Beasley-Murray and Ecumenism

Now having already identified a motivation for this paper as an opportunity, in the context of Assembly, to reaffirm those aspects of Christian witness and discipleship that are distinctively Baptist, this headlined focus upon ecumenicity may appear surprising or even incongruous—this, of course, ought not to be the case since it is precisely in consideration of our catholic oneness as Christ's united body that our distinctive Baptist witness, within that catholic oneness, should attain its sharpest relief rather than its more blurred and embarrassed expression.[3]

The title of Paul Beasley-Murray's fine and appropriately personal biography of his father is *Fearless for Truth* and it would be difficult to think of a more fitting headline for this life and personality.[4] Rather than

3. Here, as elsewhere, I employ the term "catholic" to refer to the Church in its connectedness and continuity, reserving the term "Catholic" as an abbreviated reference to the Roman Catholic communion.

4. Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for Truth*.

militating against ecumenical conversations, this characteristic fearlessness and passion marked George Beasley-Murray as a most appropriate advocate of Baptist distinctives within ecumenical dialogue—indeed, we should recognize that the essential unity of the Church and the commitment to bring that unity to visible expression are themselves gospel truths for which he was a fearless advocate. As witness to this, Paul Beasley-Murray records his father's advocacy of the World Council of Churches during George's first year as a tutor at Spurgeon's College.[5] He was a member of the "Commission of Christ and the Church," a group established by the Faith and Order Committee of the World Council of Churches, serving as Secretary to the Commission from 1957;[6] he was appointed as chairman of the Baptist Union's "Advisory Committee on Church Relations";[7] but it is perhaps in a booklet published in 1965 that his personal ecumenical commitments come to their most clear and full expression.[8]

In introduction to this short essay George Beasley-Murray speaks with marked personal hope, reflecting that "[i]n our days a movement has sprung up for the healing of the divisions of God's people" and observing that "by some it is hailed as the work of the Holy Spirit, by others as the instrument of the Devil."[9] Unequivocally he identifies himself as "one of those who believe they can discern the finger of God in the ecumenical movement,"[10] and to the objection that a true spiritual unity already exists amongst the true people of God he rejoins that "spiritual realities must be given embodiment in this world if they are to count for anything."[11] With characteristic zeal for the Church's mission and echoing the statement made by Visser't Hooft at the Nottingham Faith and Order conference of 1964 he affirms that "the evangelistic task in our day is too vast and too urgent to be undertaken by the Churches in isolation,"[12] and, while admitting that "[t]he obstacles to be overcome in the reunion of the Churches of Christ are immense" (expressing impatience with

5. Ibid., 132–33.
6. Ibid., 133.
7. Ibid., 140.
8. Beasley-Murray, *Reflections on the Ecumenical Movement*.
9. Ibid., 3.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 4.
12. Ibid., 8.

unrealistic goals such as the hope adopted by that Conference to work for unity by 1980),[13] he warmly (and perhaps bravely) acknowledges that "there is no doubt that unprecedented things are happening in the Roman Catholic Church, the outcome of which is unpredictable."[14] The paper ends with the plea that we should not "allow prejudice to hinder the fresh examination of our divisions, their causes and their possible cures."[15]

The depth of that residual prejudice was notoriously exposed in the very public condemnation of George Beasley-Murray by the Protestant Truth Society in response to his sharing of a platform with Father Agnellus Andrew, a Roman Catholic priest, at a Christian Unity Meeting in Ipswich held on 24 January 1967 (Beasley-Murray's address on that occasion was subsequently published in *The Christian* and *Christianity Today*, 10 February 1967).[16] The context for this angry reaction is traced in Ian Randall's refreshingly balanced account of English Baptists in the twentieth Century: while discussions following Vatican II had issued generally in more positive and hopeful views of the Roman Catholic Church, for the Baptist Revival Fellowship and other similar groups this hopefulness engendered an even "stronger anti-ecumenical rhetoric";[17] the Baptist Union and its leadership were increasingly dismissed as "pro-ecumenical."[18]

It was in this highly confrontational context in March 1967—just two months following the Ipswich meeting—that George Beasley-Murray presented the report *Baptists and Unity* to the Union's Council.[19] The report was a considered response to the Nottingham Conference on Faith and Order that acknowledged the particular difficulties of Baptists in such negotiations and aspirations; but that nonetheless acknowledged "that God will break forth more light and truth from His word";[20] and that (among other things) concluded that

13. Ibid., 12.

14. Ibid., 11.

15. Ibid., 13.

16. Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for Truth*, 135ff.; cf. Randall, *The English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*, 341.

17. Randall, *English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*, 338.

18. Ibid., 336.

19. Baptist Union Advisory Committee for Church Relations, *Baptists and Unity*.

20. Ibid., 6.

> . . . for Baptists to weaken their links with either the British Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches would be a serious loss to themselves and would make it more difficult for Baptists to present their distinctive witness and heritage to others; to receive in return from them other insights and corrective truths.[21]

It is this concern to preserve and to present a "distinctive witness and heritage" within the context of a committed quest for unity that was personally characteristic of George Beasley-Murray and that motivates this present paper.

Two years later, during the third session of the 1969 Baptist Union Assembly, on 29 April, George Beasley-Murray presented a paper incorporating responses to *Baptists and Unity* entitled *Baptists and Unity Reviewed* (though only 635 churches had responded to the original report). To the surprise of some (and certainly to the consternation of others) the resolution to accept the report was carried (1125 voted for the motion, 356 voted against)[22] and, perhaps fittingly, the session ended with the singing of Bishop George Bell's hymn "Christ is the King! O friends rejoice," which closes with this verse:

> Let love's unconquerable might
> Your scattered companies unite
> In service to the Lord of light:
> So shall God's will on earth be done,
> New lamps be lit, new tasks begun,
> And the whole Church at last be one.

Ian Randall records that this affirmation of the Union's continued membership of the British Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches issued in ever louder voices within the Baptist Revival Fellowship calling for withdrawal from the Union—a direction which itself led to Geoffrey King and Stanley Voke resigning from the Committee of the Fellowship.[23]

Twenty years later (bar ten days), on 19th April 1989 at the Union's Assembly held in Leicester, the issue was revisited with respect to the involvement of Baptist churches in "Churches Together." For many individual Baptists and Baptist churches the issue was seriously com-

21. Ibid., 49.
22. Randall, *English Baptists of the Twentieth Century,* 342.
23. Ibid., 344.

pounded by the involvement of Roman Catholics in the Churches Together process. The Assembly voted by approximately 74 percent to approve the Union's membership of these new ecumenical bodies (Churches Together in England and the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland). By this time, of course, George Beasley-Murray was no longer a prominent prime-mover in these proposals—he had resigned the principalship of Spurgeon's College in 1973, spent seven years teaching at the Southern Baptist Theological seminary in the United States, had retired and returned to Britain in 1980, and (since 1986) had been living in Hove and attending the Holland Road Baptist church—yet he acknowledged the irony of his position as a constant advocate of unity but now a deacon in one of the sixty-five churches dissociating from the Union's decision.[24]

Continuing dissent from this ecumenical involvement led eventually to further votes concerning the Union's participation in ecumenical bodies at the Assembly held in Plymouth in 1995. On this occasion the motion for continuing participation in Churches Together in England was approved by over 90 percent and continuing membership of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland was approved by over 81 percent.[25] George Beasley-Murray died on 23 February 2000. I would like to believe the he died enormously encouraged by this now overwhelming support within the Baptist Union for ecumenical processes and inter-church engagement, yet I want to sound a note of caution qualifying any too hasty euphoria: such overwhelming approval for ecumenical involvement most certainly can be interpreted as issuing from that gospel commitment to visible unity that George Beasley-Murray so vigorously championed, but it might also be indicative of a blurring of Baptist distinctives, a blurring he would repudiate with equal vigor.

Ecumenism and Baptist Distinctives

I must confess that I retain a marked skepticism concerning the scientific merits of supposed scientific method with respect to church statistics, church surveys, and congregational questionnaires. Taking refuge, therefore, unapologetically in the merely anecdotal, few (I suspect) would dispute the rise of post-denominationalism. The prefix "post-"

24. Ibid., 344; cf. Beasley-Murray *Fearless for Truth*, 195.

25. Randall, *English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*, 495.

seems ubiquitous these days, is frequently misappropriated or misapplied, and is often employed imprecisely and with insufficient definition: by referring to post-denominationalism I am not intending to imply either the culmination or terminal demise of denominational divisions and affiliations; I am not suggesting that denominational distinctives have been abandoned entirely or superseded; but I am suggesting that those distinctives—and thereby those affiliations and distinctions—are becoming muted and relegated in significance. The consumerism and radical voluntarism of contemporary society—a radical voluntarism for which one interpretation of Free Church tradition is at least partly responsible—have infected Free Church life and, perhaps to a lesser degree, Anglicanism, more thoroughly than we might care to admit. On the one hand this consumerism and voluntarism has issued in the multiplication of independent churches (an oxymoron if ever there was such), but more pressingly these contemporary societal traits have affected the regularity of church attendance and the criteria for church affiliation: one is at least as likely to affiliate with a local church for the quality of its crèche, for the attractiveness of its youth work, or for its musical style, as for its denominational connectedness and doctrinal distinctives. Consequently, Baptist churches seem to be increasingly comprised of those who would not readily or without qualification identify themselves as Baptist; their commitment to the local church is genuine enough, but their awareness of its denominational distinctives and affiliations—and thereby their commitment to those distinctives and affiliations—is severely limited. The report *Baptists and Unity* identifies six Baptist distinctives of doctrine and practice, "points about which Baptists have naturally shown special concern":

1. Baptism
2. The authority or autonomy of the local company of believers
3. The Lord's Supper
4. The relationship of any form of episcopacy to the ministry as a whole
5. The use of Creeds and Confessions, whether in worship or as tests for membership
6. The relationship of Church and State[26]

26. Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 20–22.

The inclusion of both the Lord's Supper and the use of Creeds and Confessions as peculiarly Baptist concerns may surprise some contemporary readers (and may indicate the inevitable time-embeddedness of all such documents). I will return specifically to the Report's discussion of these later in this paper, not least in order to illustrate the difficulty of identifying distinctively Baptist doctrines and practices with any definitive finality. Notwithstanding the Report's particular discussion of the remaining distinctives—discussions to which also we shall return, most (I hope) would agree that the nature and form of baptism, the integrity of the local church (and the consequences of such for any understanding of translocal ministry and connectedness), and a tradition of dissent with respect to the relationship between Church and State, historically and definitively are distinctive of a Baptist ecclesiology. Yet it is precisely these historically defining distinctives that, anecdotally, appear increasingly muted in this post-denominational context. The last half-century has seen a welcome awakening of interest in the continental Anabaptists of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. No doubt the frequently trumpeted demise of Christendom forms the context of this renewed interest—though one suspects a more general voluntarism and romanticism fuels this fascination—yet, as a consequence of this renaissance together with the presence in many Baptist churches of former members of the Brethren, a tradition of separation has become confused with a tradition of dissent to the detriment and demise of the latter.[27] Perhaps symptomatic of this demise, the report *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity*[28] presented to the Council of the Baptist Union in March 2006 makes no explicit mention of a tradition of dissent as defining of Baptist life in its discussion of possible obstacles to unity[29]—yet it is possible to argue that this tradition of dissent is even more basic in English Baptist history, rooted in radical British Puritanism rather than continental Anabaptism, than is baptism itself.[30]

27. For a discussion of the distinction between these traditions see my article, Colwell, "In Defence of Christendom," 21–29.

28. Faith and Unity Executive of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England, *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity*.

29. Reference to late sixteenth-century Separatists is made on page 8 of *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity* and the term is used again on page 81.

30. For the finest discussion of British Baptist beginnings, see White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*.

The aforementioned presence in many Baptist churches of former members of the Brethren, together with the siren voices of Restorationism (itself more influenced by Brethrenism than is often acknowledged[31]) may explain the now not uncommon flirting with more Presbyterian forms of church government and the similarly not uncommonly expressed embarrassment with traditional forms of the church meeting. That considerations of the appropriateness of the church meeting can ever focus on the merits and demerits of democracy, a vulnerability to loud voices and dominant interests, the boring nature of agendas and minutes, or even the practicalities of convenience, betokens a loss of a distinctive confidence in the promise of Christ to be present to the Church in its gathering. And if this loss of confidence manifests itself with respect to the formal meetings of the local church, might it also apply to meetings of Council and Assembly: to what degree do we recognize such as ecclesial gatherings under the promise of Christ's presence and leading; to what degree have theological notions of prayerful assembly given way to set-piece presentations?

And what of baptism itself? In this respect, at least, one would expect Baptists to remain distinctive, yet the welcome increase in the proportion of open-membership churches—a trend that surely should be welcome in ecumenical context—seems rooted all too often in a relegation of the rite of baptism as secondary to personal confession and a felt experience of regeneration rather than in a gracious (if reluctant) acceptance of the validity of infant baptism within the context of a personal journey of discipleship. As I have noted elsewhere and at far greater length, we find ourselves today enmeshed in the extraordinary contradiction of churches known distinctively for their theology and practice of baptism being among the congregations where baptism is granted the least significance, where it is possible to be a fully communicant member without having been baptized in any form or manner whatsoever.[32] If baptism really is of such marginal significance what conceivable justification can there be for our continued existence as a distinct denomination? Why do we continue to make such a fuss about its supposedly appropriate mode and practice? With baptism seeming to count for so little and with apparent embarrassment concerning

31. For a discussion of Restorationism that draws attention to this dominant Brethren influence see Kay, *Apostolic Networks in Britain*.

32. Colwell, *Promise and Presence*.

the integrity of the gathered church, in an increasingly secular society where the so-called "Established Church" finds itself inevitably in a place of dissent, and while so many amongst us would gladly be part of an Anglican church, a Presbyterian church, a Pentecostal church, or a Methodist church if their youth work was deemed superior or their musical style was more congenial, what is the point of our continued separation? Let's quit these ancient and now redundant habits and unite as a single Church of England?

All this may have the sound of the rant of a grumpy old man—I must plead guilty on all counts—and I have already admitted the anecdotal nature of these observations (though such could easily be demonstrated by supposedly scientific surveys). Without hesitation I rejoice in the friendships, co-operation, and joint projects that have issued through the Churches Together process, in the fruitfulness of so many Local Ecumenical Projects, and in the mutual trust that so remarkably has replaced the suspicion and prejudice (if not bigotry) that marked my youth. But a unity furthered by a blurring of distinctives will be a unity of impoverishment rather than a unity of enrichment; will be precisely not that unity sought through the *Baptists and Unity* report; will be precisely not that unity for which George Beasley-Murray so courageously hoped and labored. With that report and with George Beasley-Murray, I am committed to seek a visible unity enriched by the sharing of distinct traditions and perceptions rather than impoverished by their suppression or demise. The need, then, is not for a blurring but for a renewed appreciation of that which renders us distinctively Baptist. The pressing question for the remainder of this paper is that of how such distinctives might come to sharper expression; how such renewal might be brought about.

Renewing a Distinctive Contribution

In September 1987 George Beasley-Murray participated in a consultation, sponsored by "Mainstream," exploring the question of Baptist identity. The date and sponsorship locate the conversations in specific context and the consultation led to the publication of a booklet, *A Perspective on Baptist Identity*, bringing together seven contributions to the discussion.[33] George Beasley-Murray is the author of the final article in this collec-

33. Slater, *A Perspective on Baptist Identity*.

tion, "Confessing Baptist Identity,"[34] but the editor notes with gratitude his suggestions and revisions of other papers within the booklet.[35] The consultation was, at least in part, a response to Brian Haymes' reflections on Baptist identity,[36] and, accordingly, George Beasley-Murray's article concludes the complementary contributions with a call, echoing "the plea made by Brian Haymes," for "a contemporary Baptist Confession of Faith."[37]

In the light of George Beasley-Murray's participation in the report *Baptists and Unity* this call is a little surprising (perhaps the intervening twenty years had issued in a change of mind; perhaps this later article indicates a limit on Beasley-Murray's influence on the earlier report). As previously noted, the report *Baptists and Unity* lists "the use of Creeds and Confessions, whether in worship or as tests for membership" as "among the points about which Baptists have naturally shown special concern."[38] The report acknowledges that "there is no evidence that Baptists ever used a creed or confession in worship, except on some rare and special occasion," but that the seventeenth-century Baptist Confessions "followed a pattern common to most of the Protestant Churches of the period." A previous statement of the Union in response to the "Lambeth Appeal" of 1920 is cited denying that ancient Creeds, though of historic value, can be accorded "a place of authority comparable with that of the Scriptures."[39] The report goes on to acknowledge that some Baptists view "references to the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds in a number of schemes of union" as "dangerous," that "even the ancient Creeds are not in themselves fully adequate statements of the Christian faith," and that it would be "in the view of many, an unfortunate and reactionary development were they again to become tests of orthodoxy."[40] Moreover, accepting that some would seek for the Declaration of Principle to be "elaborated and made into a more comprehensive doctrinal statement," the report opines that "almost inevitably . . . what are then advanced as possible statements

34. Beasley-Murray, "Confessing Baptist Identity," 75–85.

35. Slater, *A Perspective on Baptist Identity*, 5.

36. Haymes, *A Question of Identity*.

37. Beasley-Murray, "Confessing Baptist Identity," 78.

38. Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 20–21.

39. Ibid., 30; cf. Randall, *English Baptists of the Twentieth Century*, 118: this *Reply* was adopted unanimously by the Baptist Assembly meeting at Leeds in May 1926.

40. Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 30–31.

are 'party' concerns, representing a particular theological system, or the formulation of certain doctrines in avowedly controversial or partisan scenes."[41] The report concludes that "probably the one matter on which all would say they are united is the danger of apparent agreement on statements which can be variously understood and interpreted."[42]

In sharp contrast to this rather pessimistic (if realistic) earlier conclusion, George Beasley-Murray, in this later consultation, urges the production of a contemporary Baptist Confession of Faith "for God's sake, for our sakes, for the sake of other Churches and for the sake of the world."[43] His paper "Confessing Baptist Identity" begins with the observation that is similarly central to this present essay, that

> . . . when Christians of different traditions come together for discussion or joint action of any kind, they are inevitably led to examine their own beliefs. They have to ask why they are what they are, what it is that is distinctive about themselves and whether their distinctiveness is really very important.[44]

He acknowledges that the first "complication" in such discussions is "the diversity among us,"[45] and this observation provides the impetus, following the example of the American Baptist Convention, to seek to identify those "genes" that, in combination, make "the Baptist body what it is."[46] In calling for a contemporary Baptist confession of faith "for God's sake," Beasley-Murray moves against the historical contention of the report *Baptists and Unity*[47] by proposing that such a contemporary confession could be used within worship.[48] Such a confession is needful "for our sake" in order to "transform the understanding of . . . faith which many . . . hold to be dead" and as "an excellent basis for instructing new converts."[49] For the "sake of other Christians" Baptists "have a responsibility . . . to enumerate our convictions in a clear and

41. Ibid., 31.

42. Ibid.

43. Beasley-Murray, "Confessing Baptist Identity," 78.

44. Ibid., 75.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 76.

47. See earlier reference to Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 30.

48. Beasley-Murray, "Confessing Baptist Identity," 78–79.

49. Ibid., 79.

understandable manner" since there are "surprisingly few members of other denominations who have a reasonably accurate knowledge of what Baptists believe."[50] Finally, and "for the sake of the world," Baptists need "a statement that will help Christians to bear an effective witness to the gospel among people outside the Churches."[51]

Initially, perhaps, such a call for a contemporary Baptist confession may seem attractive. In the first place we have the historical precedent of the seventeenth-century Baptist Confessions—few surely would dispute that amongst Baptist congregations today they are barely known and that their language at least would benefit from contemporary revision. But in the second place—and for some among us far more pressingly—there is the perceived inadequacy of our present Declaration of Principle. Dissatisfaction with the present basis of our Union is expressed by more than one of the contributors to the Mainstream consultation, but maybe most sharply by Barrie White in response to its first article:

> That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws.

Expressing a long standing "unease" with the article White comments, "That statement about liberty sounds to me all too much like an assertion of unbridled independency. It is a virtually absolute independence which has led to many of our troubles over the years."[52]

I would resolutely argue that this first article is woefully inadequate, if not ecclesiologically erroneous, as a matter of principle, but, as Barrie White continues, it is similarly lamentable "as a statement of unfortunate fact":

> Across three and a half centuries, if Baptists have had to choose between the independence of the local church and cooperation in fellowship with an association, they have chosen independence. This does not mean that most Baptists have been opposed to inter-denominational structures, but rather that they have

50. Ibid., 79–80.

51. Ibid., 80–81; for a similar summary of this article see Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for Truth*, 204.

52. White, "The Practice of Association," 19.

> tended to put their independence first and their cooperation, in any practical or theological sense, a long way second.[53]

In its favor, of course, it must be noted that, in our present context of radical individualism, the article identifies the interpretation of Scripture as the prerogative of the Church, albeit implicitly the local church, rather than the individual Christian in solipsistic isolation. Similarly it confesses Christ as revealed in Scripture as our sole authority rather than Scripture itself in any indeterminate or unfocused sense. Certainly, as Barrie White proceeds to admit, much depends here on how we understand the phrase "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,"[54] but the phrase is vulnerable to notions of unmediated immediacy and, without some explicit qualification, would seem to be a blatant denial of catholicity (of the Church's essential oneness, connectedness, and continuity) for the sake of a radical autonomy that is itself a denial of a church's essential identity. To affirm the integrity of the local church is not necessarily to deny its connectedness and catholicity: any authentic integrity of a local church is rather an outcome and consequence of its connectedness and catholicity and is nullified without such. Independency ought properly to be understood as a rejection of external domination by State or by supposed ecclesiastical authority rather than as an independency of ecclesiastical disconnectedness; a local church simply does not have the liberty—without denying its true integrity as a local church—to interpret Scripture without respect to this catholic connectedness; the continuity and connectedness of the Church across the ages and across the continents is precisely a means through which the Holy Spirit guides the local church in its interpretation of Scripture. As Barrie White seems to urge, at very least there should be some explicit reference to associating here (and, while we're on the subject, can we please drop this reference to the administering of 'His Laws' which only reinforces naïve notions of Scripture as a book of rules rather than as a transformative narrative). Nor are the difficulties of the Declaration of Principle limited to its first article: the statement on baptism appears to determine the form of baptism (immersion) to be as definitive as the faith and repentance of its proper participants, and surely we can find more appropriate language than that of duty to express the missional

53. Ibid., 20.

54. Ibid., 25ff.

identity and calling of the Church, and thereby of every Christian disciple—we are constrained by love before we are constrained by obligation. A relatively recent trend in ordinations and inductions has been to invite the candidate to express assent to our Declaration of Principle—I suspect that I am not alone amongst my peers in being grateful that this never used to be the case.

Yet, since this Declaration of Principle is quite properly the basis of our Union, the basis of a covenantal relationship between churches, associations, and colleges, the basis of a covenantal commitment of accredited ministers, ought we not belatedly to heed the call of George Beasley-Murray and others at least to the point of revising the wording of this most basic statement? If our covenanting together is to be meaningful, then the basis of that covenanting should be more persuasive and precise. Moreover, if the distinctiveness of our being as Baptists is not to become blurred in a context of post-denominationalism, and if we are to enrich rather than to impoverish ecumenical dialogue, surely this brief and simple statement of distinctives merits revision.

The call of George Beasley-Murray and others was, of course, for something far more comprehensive and robust, something resembling the Confessions of our Baptist forebears—but here, I think, we encounter a series of significant difficulties (not least, the sheer length of those confessions would militate against their use in worship or in the instruction of new Christians). Returning for a moment to the report *Baptists and Unity*, we should firstly heed the warning concerning "partisan" tendencies. That report notes the adherence of some to the Evangelical Alliance statement of faith of 1846 but this particular example is instructively problematic.[55] Firstly, the Evangelical Alliance statement of faith has itself undergone a series of not insignificant revisions over the years, demonstrating again the inevitable time-bounded nature of all such statements and confessions.[56] Secondly, recent and very public debates concerning whether or not a penal and substitutionary notion of the atonement was "implicit" in the version of the statement immediately preceding the current version demonstrates the similarly inevitable vulnerability of all such statements to a range of interpretations and the all too common and presumptuous confusion of an im-

55. Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 31.

56. For an account of these revisions and their possible significance see Randall and Hilborn, *One Body in Christ*.

plication and an inference. But finally and most disturbingly, this most recent controversy concerning the significance of the statement in this specific respect demonstrates the tendency (if not the intention) for such statements to become tests of supposed orthodoxy,[57] thereby promoting such statements to an authoritative status without respect to their lack of catholicity, their confessedly partisan nature and purpose, and their blatant inadequacies. Local churches (and colleges) may wish to adopt such statements as a means of affirming their evangelical identity, but the temptation to partisan witch-hunts is ever lurking and with respect to peculiarly Baptist distinctives—which is our present concern—such statements help us not at all.

Note was taken previously of the surprising inclusion of the Lord's Supper within the *Baptists and Unity* report as one of the issues of "special concern" and here we encounter further illustrations of the difficulty in identifying definitive Baptist distinctives beyond our present Declaration of Principle.[58] Questions raised by that report include that of the freedom for "lay presidency" at the Supper, the freedom for a memorialist understanding of the Supper, and the assumption that it would "be generally agreed that it is not satisfactory for there to be participation by any who are not ready to make a Christian profession and publicly to assume the responsibilities of church membership."[59]

Again merely anecdotally, "lay presidency" seems commonplace amongst contemporary Baptist churches but I doubt that this was as universally the case when that report was written and there is evidence that it was not a common practice for our seventeenth and eighteenth-century forebears;[60] there may be few Baptists who have maintained a notion of any transformation of the identity of the elements or held a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharistic rite, but earlier generations of both General and Particular Baptists were seldom merely memorialist in their interpretations of the Supper; and contemporary debates concerning children and communion rightly or misguidedly challenge the

57. Note, for instance, the tone and explicit assumptions of Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach in *Pierced for Our Transgressions*.

58. Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 20.

59. Ibid., 26–27.

60. See, for instance, White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 29, 62, 117ff.; Walker, *Baptists at the Table*, 121ff.; and Winter, "Who May Administer the Lord's Supper?," 129–30.

general assumption of this older report—all which serve to show that, if we move beyond those distinctives identified in our Declaration of Principle, we quickly encounter significant difference and dispute, both historically and contemporarily.

The focus for the Mainstream consultation in which George Beasley-Murray participated was in the call for a contemporary Baptist confession of faith, the plea to "pluck up courage and do for our day what our Baptist forefathers did for theirs."[61] This appeal to historical precedence may be instructive in several respects. In the first place (and to state the blindingly obvious), there was not one but there were several Baptist confessions of the seventeenth century sometimes emanating from local associations or connexions, sometimes reflecting the distinctions between General Baptists and Particular Baptists—but beyond the distinctives of baptism, dissent, and the integrity of the local church (and perhaps even with respect to these distinctives, at least in terms of emphasis and specific understanding) Baptists then would have found it as hard to agree a single confession as would now most certainly be the case.[62] In the second place and as noted both in the *Baptists and Unity* report and in Barrie White's history of *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*,[63] the Baptist confessions were not themselves independent, they incorporated or elaborated upon other Protestant confessions, the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration in particular, and sometimes explicitly acknowledged and affirmed the older catholic creeds—that is to say, in seeking to affirm something distinctive they were also and perhaps primarily concerned to say something catholic, something connected and continuous. Thirdly, as also noted in the *Baptists and Unity* report and as perhaps deriving from the previous point,[64] these Confessions were rarely used in worship. It is with respect to this final point, and inferentially with respect to the second point that I find myself in profound disagreement with George Beasley-Murray concerning the possibility of any such confession ever finding its proper place in corporate worship.

61. Beasley-Murray, "Confessing Baptist Identity," 78.

62. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*.

63. Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 29; cf. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 61, 117ff.

64. Baptist Union Advisory Committee, *Baptists and Unity*, 29.

I recognize that I am unrepresentative in this respect, both historically and contemporarily, but I welcome the use of the catholic creeds in our worship: the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed may have been formulated in the context of controversy but several of its individual affirmations arose in the context of worship and the Church's worship remains its proper context. The roots of the Apostles' Creed are lost to us but the assumption that it emerged as a baptismal confession is not without merit and again locates the creed in the context of worship. Certainly the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, together with its accompanying list of anathemas, was formulated specifically to exclude, but its common place in catholic worship (albeit in slightly different forms in the East and the West) tends to a more inclusive outcome—here we can affirm again that which we are called to hold in common through all our distinctions. We do not confess ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord: confession is appropriate to that which unites rather than that which divides; confession is an expression of confidence in the gospel, not an expression of distinctives, no matter how rooted in the gospel those distinctives may be. If it is the case that we learn by indwelling then it is appropriate that these catholic affirmations should regularly find their place in our worship, as recognition of our unity rather than our distinctiveness. But if it is the case that we learn by indwelling then maybe our Baptist distinctiveness should be demonstrated not in different or non-catholic confession but in confessing differently; a liturgical distinction of manner rather than content.

Most obviously, it should be our practice of baptism, rather than our confession of baptism, that identifies our distinctiveness to all those participating in our life and worship, whatever their ecclesial roots. Similarly, it should be our practice of being Church, our manner of expressing the Church's holiness and catholic unity, that identifies our distinct manner of being Church, whether demonstrated in our manner of celebrating the Lord's Supper or in the manner of decision making, of our corporate discerning of the mind of Christ. And in the manner of our praying for our society, for government, for the world, we should demonstrate neither our subservience nor our separation but our radical and prophetic dissent. If these distinctives are in our Baptist genes they will be demonstrated in our life and worship. Conversely, if these distinctives are demonstrated in our life and worship they will inevitably become part of our genetic identity and of the genetic identity of those who gather with us, whatever their denominational origins. We do not

need a distinctive confession to mark our points of difference—confession is an opportunity to celebrate our catholic unity. We rather need the renewal of a distinctive manner of confessing, of worshiping, of being the people of God that demonstrates our distinctiveness within that unity, an enriching rather than a qualifying of catholicity.

Conclusions

It would be naïve to expect a revision of our Declaration of Principle alone to issue in such a renewal of distinctive practice—and the use of any Declaration of Principle in worship or as a test of membership should be resisted—but the mere process (and pain) of conducting such a revision might awaken us to that which renders us distinctive. Were this revision to be undertaken through our representative gatherings in Council and Assembly this in itself would necessitate a refreshing theological rigor that has not always characterized these bodies, and the mere process of pursuing this end in this manner would not only bring these distinctives to the foreground of our collective consciousness; it would itself be a demonstration of a distinct means of ecclesial discernment. In a context when, for whatever reasons, our Baptist distinctives may be threatened, the troublesome process of reviewing our Declaration of Principle may compel us again to reflect on our distinctive understanding of baptism and of the Church, this might prompt a more general awakening of historical and theological consciousness and this, in turn, might issue in a deep and tangible renewal of practice that enriches rather than undermines a true catholic unity. It is fitting to conclude this paper on this positive note and by allowing its subject, George Beasley-Murray, the last word. Commenting on the prayer of Jesus in John 17 he writes,

> In the light of the divisions that have arisen between Christian churches through the centuries, it was inevitable that a movement should arise to call the churches to reverse the trends of the centuries and to seek to experience and express anew their unity in Christ. It was equally natural that this movement should begin within the missionary agencies of the churches (as at Edinburgh, 1910), since the divisions were hindering the carrying out of the missionary task; the nations frequently saw the reconciling power of the Gospel less clearly than its divisive power. . . . reflection on the prayer of necessity leads to urgent consideration how the unity which embraces all Christians within one Body can be expressed within their mutual relations, and how it should be-

come a principle of action in the churches' mission to the world. Perhaps then reflection on the fact that the unity of the Church was the subject of Jesus' prayer to God rather than exhortation to disciples may drive us to our knees in prayer for grace that his prayer may be answered in us, and in our own churches, that the world may be able to perceive in us the reconciling power of God in Christ.[65]

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65. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 307.

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