The Theology and Practice of Evangelism
Among Baptists: Then and Now

When the Kehukee Baptist Association gathered for their annual meeting in 1803 at Connoho Log Chapel in Martin County, North Carolina, Elder Martin Ross brought forward his famous missionary query, in which he asked:

Is not the Kehukee Association, with all her numerous and respectable friends, called on in Providence, in some way to step forward in support of that missionary spirit which the great God is so wonderfully reviving amongst the different denominations of good men in various parts of the world?

Elder Ross and other pastors in the association had been reading stirring reports from William Carey and other missionaries in Rippon’s Register. The formation of the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Heathen in 1793 (later shortened to the Baptist Missionary Society) started a wave of enthusiasm for missions among Baptists on both sides of the Atlantic.

The next year, at their 1804 gathering, the Kehukee Association joined the swelling movement and agreed “to support the missionary cause.” They appointed a committee to meet in June of 1805 with delegates from other associations in order to devise cooperative means of missionary support. Elder Ross was appointed to give the introductory sermon, which he preached from Habakkuk 3:2: “O Lord, I have heard thy speech and was afraid: O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy.” He exhorted his listeners to pray that the mission to the world, begun in the days of the apostles, might be renewed, not in some distant future, but in their time. His plea was heard as the meeting gave birth to the Baptist Philanthropic Society, which began organized mission work among North Carolina Baptists. But not everyone was so enthusiastic about the missionary spirit. Though Elder
Ross sounded the call for North Carolina Baptists to the work of missions, the Kehukee Association ultimately refused to participate, preferring instead the “good old way” over what they considered to be the “new inventions of the day.” It drew a line between the Missionary Baptists that formed the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina in 1830 and the Anti-Missionary (or Primitive) Baptists that opposed mission societies and other benevolent associations.¹

Few matters since have been more important to the identity of missionary-minded Baptists in North Carolina and elsewhere than obedience to the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). We are inspired by the stories of William Carey, Adoniram and Ann Judson, Johann Oncken, Lott Cary, and Lottie Moon. We lift our voices together in song to proclaim: “We’ve a story to tell to the nations.” We invite all followers of Jesus to enter into the baptismal waters and to support the cause of missions and evangelism at home and abroad. We do so because we believe the command to make disciples by baptizing and teaching is a gospel ordinance to be obeyed unto the end of the age, and we support those who follow the missional mandate to bring all nations under the rule of Christ.

What does theology have to do with any of this talk about missions and evangelism? If you were to ask Primitive and Missionary Baptists in 19th century North Carolina, they would tell you it has everything to do with theology. Primitives, convinced of the need to hew to the old paths, considered the newborn missionary society to be Elder Ross’ “bantling” (an archaic term for “brat”), and according to one Anti-Missionary Baptist historian, “it gave rise to contentions, heartburnings, bickerings, animosities, and strife, broke the peace of the brethren, and was a fire brand in their midst.”² When the Baptist battles of recent memory began to threaten the effectiveness of denominational missionary efforts, some voices, urging theological restraint, repeated the line: “Missions unites; doctrine divides.” But those who made such a plea for cooperation without
attention to theological underpinnings seem not just to have forgotten, but to have forgotten they
got that the missionary conviction is inherently theological. My task today, then, is to offer an
account of the theology and practice of evangelism among Baptists, then and now. And my
contention will be that if a vital evangelical practice is to be renewed for Baptists in the future it will
require clarity about the underlying theology.

Three Paradigm Shifts in Baptist Theology

Let me begin by offering a brief account of three paradigm shifts in the theology of missions
and evangelism and the impact of these shifts for Baptists. I am borrowing the term “paradigm
shift” as coined by Thomas Kuhn, in his important book *The Structures of Scientific Revolution* to
describe how the dominant way of thinking or organizing is replaced with a radically different way of
thinking or organizing. Kuhn traced the history of science, not as gradual progress and development
in scientific understanding, but as a series of revolutions that occur when the prevailing scientific
worldview encounters unexplainable anomalies. When a significant number of anomalies
accumulate, the prevailing paradigm is thrown into crisis, leading to the formulation of a new
paradigm. The competing models offer incommensurable solutions to the problems, and the
resulting struggle between adherents of the competing paradigms is eventually resolved, not by
persuasion, but by a kind of revolution in which the old paradigm dies out and the new one
prevails. 3 I want to suggest that the history of missional theology may similarly be understood as a
series of paradigm shifts: first, in a recovery of the evangelical commission; second, in the
advancement of global missions; and third, in an understanding of missional activity as participation
in the mission of God.

Shift 1: Proclaiming the Evangelical Message: *Go Ye Therefore*

At the Northamptonshire Baptist Association ministers’ meeting in September 1785, John C.
Ryland prodded William Carey, then a young and not yet ordained pastor, to propose a question for discussion. After some hesitation, Carey offered this query: “Whether the command given to the apostles to ‘teach all nations,’ was not obligatory on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent.” Though subsequent accounts have exaggerated the response, Ryland nevertheless dismissed Carey’s question as unworthy of serious reflection. Carey’s proposal was an unusual interpretation of the Great Commission at the time, given that Protestants typically regarded the office of apostle, to whom the commission was given, to have passed with the first generation of Christians. But he was not so easily deterred. In 1792 Carey published his missionary manifesto, An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens, which took up the same question in great detail. In it he argued that the commission of Jesus to “Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature,” remains binding on all Christians, as evidenced by the fact that they continue to baptize, teach, and claim the promise of divine presence. The result was a simple and clear theological justification for missionary activity.

Yet Carey was not alone in this new theological venture. He was surrounded by a circle of evangelically minded friends that included John Sutcliff of Olney, John Ryland of Northampton, and Andrew Fuller of Kettering. Along with Carey they struggled to overcome the moribund theology of high Calvinism that was prevalent among the Particular Baptists of the time. Proponents of the doctrines of grace like John Gill, a leading pastor in London, rejected any notion of an “open offer” of the gospel, reserving the invitation of grace only to the elect. For high Calvinists, faith was warranted by an inner persuasion of interest in Christ, signifying regeneration and election. In 1785 Fuller published an influential book entitled The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation, which shifted the warrant for faith from an inner-subjective interest in Christ to an outer-objective focus on Christ and his gospel. “If,” Fuller proposed, “faith in Christ be the duty of the ungodly,” and he affirmed
that it is, then “it must of course follow that every sinner, whatever be his character, is completely warranted to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of his soul.” The corollary to this truth, Fuller continued, is that “it is the duty of ministers of Christ plainly and faithfully to preach the Gospel to all who will hear it.”

Even before the publication of Fuller’s book, there were signs of crisis in the hyper-Calvinist paradigm. On May 26, 1779, Robert Hall, Sr. preached for the Northampton Association on the text “Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way, take up the stumbling-block out of the way of my people” (Isa 57:14). Hall expanded the sermon into the volume, Help to Zion’s Travelers, in which he claimed that “the way to Jesus is graciously laid open for everyone who chooses to come to him.” Robert Hall, Jr., who by age nine had already read Jonathan Edwards, followed his father in the open way. The younger Hall, served churches in Cambridge and Bristol, and became one of the clearest voices of the new theology as well as one of the sharpest critics of the old way. On one occasion, as the Welsh preacher, Christmas Evans, was praising the exquisite expressiveness of the Welsh language, he remarked, “How I wish, Mr. Hall, that Dr. Gill’s works had been written in Welsh.” To which Hall replied, “I wish they had, Sir; I wish they had, with all my heart; for then I should never have read them. They are a continent of mud, Sir.” When a prominent church member once complained that he was not preaching frequently enough on the doctrines of grace, Hall exclaimed, “Sir, I perceive that nature predestined you to be an ass, and what is more, I see that you are determined to make your calling and election sure.”

The new understanding of the evangelical obligations of Christians provided theological justification to pray for the salvation of all the world’s people, but such a conviction further constrained those who shared this vision to do something. As William Carey exhorted readers in his Enquiry, “We must not be contented . . . with praying, without exerting ourselves in the use of means for the obtaining of those things we pray for.” “Surely it is worth while,” he concluded, “to lay ourselves
out with all our might, in promoting the cause, and kingdom of Christ.” On October 2, 1792, a group of ministers and messengers of Northamptonshire churches formed the Baptist Missionary Society for the “propagation of the gospel among the heathen.” Fuller was appointed as secretary of the Society, and Carey was sent to India as its first missionary in June 1793.

A similar version of the new evangelical theology was being picked up simultaneously by Baptists in the United States through the revivals that swept the country. When asked to describe his theological outlook, Elder John Leland, a leading figure in the evangelical transformation of Virginia, quipped that “the preaching that has been most blessed of God, and most profitable to men, is the doctrine of sovereign grace in the salvation of souls, mixed with a little of what is called Arminianism.” Though there were differences, the practical effect of the Arminianized-Calvinism in the revivals on the American frontier was very much the same as what came to be known in England as Fullerism: the good news was freely offered to all. The influence of this evangelical theology is evident in Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s characterization of Fuller as “the greatest theologian” of his century. His account of the gospel held sway among a growing number of Baptists, shifting the paradigm away from what Spurgeon described as “the misty warrants of experience” to Christ and his word, compelling them to consider both the obligation and the means of taking up the challenge of the Great Commission.

Shift 2: Utilizing Means to Advance World Evangelization: *Make Disciples of All Nations*

The first paradigm shift (from high Calvinism to Evangelicalism) concerned the nature of the evangelical message. Once Baptists settled the matter that the gospel was for all, they had to come to terms with the fact that their congregationalism afforded little hope of reaching the whole world with the good news. The second shift (from congregationalism to denominationalism) pertained to the means of carrying that message to the world. Within a decade of its founding, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) sent out nine missionaries. They were engaged in the work of
evangelism, translation, education, and printing. The work on the foreign field was sustained by Christians back home, who (as John Ryland wrote to Andrew Fuller) held the rope. Fuller as secretary took the lead in soliciting financial backing, traveling widely throughout England, Wales, and Scotland seeking contributions and subscriptions to the BMS. But his requests were met with mixed results. For example, Dr. Samuel Stennett, minister at the Little Wild Street Church in London and one of the most influential Baptist leaders of the day, called for a gathering of London Baptists to consider Fuller’s request. Stennett, however, concluded that the mission would “come to nothing” for lack of support except what was contributed in “a fit of zeal.” He consequently urged the London ministers to “stand aloof and not commit themselves.” The majority of Baptists in London heeded his advice. Others like the Baptists in the Norfolk and Suffolk Association, who were inclined toward a more strict understanding of the doctrines of grace and worried that Fuller’s theology amounted to a half-way-house to Arminianism, steadfastly refused to participate. As Brian Stanley observed, in his later years Fuller “was probably better known, and certainly better loved, in Scotland and the North of England than in London.” In the end the ties that bound the BMS to the Northamptonshire Association remained so strong that its emergence as a global mission society had to wait until the passing of the founders. After Fuller’s death, leadership was handed on to a younger generation, and in an effort to generate wider support the headquarters of the BMS was moved to London.¹³

Carey arrived in India on November 10, 1793, with the conviction that “the work is God’s.” But the relation between the gospel he was sent to proclaim and the culture that sent him were soon called into question. In Carey’s May 1792 sermon to the Northamptonshire association, he preached on Isaiah 54:2-3: “Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen the cords, and strengthen thy stakes.”¹⁴ At the time, Carey seems to have given little thought to the widely shared assumption that Christianity was connected with
western culture. In his *Enquiry*, he referenced the “divided state of Christendom,” suggesting an implicit constantinian presumption of missionary evangelization as an extension of colonialism.¹⁵ Carey had been so concerned to argue *that* something be done for the conversion of the heathen, he had not given careful thought to *how* it might be done. Once in India, his thinking about church-planting, along with his fellow British Baptist missionaries, soon shifted to the development of an indigenous Christianity. In October 1805 they argued that “native preaching” is the only “hope for the universal spread of the gospel.”¹⁶ The home committee of the BMS argued that missionaries were responsible to the board and the subscribers who supported them, and seemed less able to grasp Carey’s interest in the development of indigenous Christianity.

The founding of the BMS sent a shock wave through the Christian world. By the time William Carey died in 1834 there were fourteen distinct mission societies in England. Baptists in the United States enthusiastically joined the advance for global missions. The General Missionary Convention (also known as the Triennial convention) was formed in 1814 to support the work of Ann and Adoniram Judson and future American Baptist missionaries. Though marred by its tacit approval of slavery, the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845, in response to the missionary imperative. The National Baptist Convention established in 1895 and the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention founded in 1897 organized the work of African American Baptists for missions. In Europe, Johann Oncken called for the formation of a German Baptist Union based on the conviction that “every apostolic Christian church must be a Mission Society.”¹⁷ As the spirit of missions spread, the number of Baptists societies, conventions, and unions continued to proliferate to provide “means” for support. To the extent that the various structures Baptists developed to organize themselves might be understood as “denominational” or “ecclesiological” they existed first and foremost as a means to advance the message of missions.

This unparalleled period of missionary activity led the noted Baptist church historian,
Kenneth Scott Latourette, to describe the 19th century as “the greatest century which Christianity had thus far known.” Yet taking the gospel to foreign lands was often as much about “civilizing the heathen” as it was about “christianizing” them. That the missionary enterprise was an extension of Christendom linked to and dependent on the cultural imperialism of colonial powers is undeniable. Too little attention, however, has been given in the narratives of decolonization to the role that churches and mission bodies played in bringing about the end of empire. Missiologist Wilbert Shenk has argued that the modern missionary movement was “both a powerful last thrust of Christendom and an important instrument in bringing about [its] dissolution.” He observes that as indigenous Christians practiced the faith taught by missionaries, particularly among the free churches, Western colonial powers were caught in a contradiction: the expansionist ideology of Christendom could be maintained only by unchristian coercion. The resulting multiplication and diversification of indigenous expressions of the faith on the mission field ultimately made colonialism untenable, and the center of world Christianity dramatically shifted from the West and North to the South and East. Thus, Shenk concludes, the so-called “great century” should be understood as a preeminently free church (i.e., baptist) effort and not merely a postcolonial footnote about the extension of Christendom. This observation, however, raises a more troubling question. If the advance of the missions movement has run its course, what will be the shape of the Christian mission of the future?

Shift 3: Participating in the Mission of God: In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

The first shift was soteriological and concerned the message of the gospel. The second was institutional and pertained to the means for supporting the missionary enterprise. The third is theological and focuses on the nature of the mission itself. Some of you may be wondering what’s wrong with the denominational model? To be sure, the denominational mission effort did get the message out, but thoughtful observers now recognize that the commitment to the promotion of
denominational interests and the dependence on a culturally established form of Christianity render the denominational mission agency render it to be no longer an effective model. Let’s be honest, the sustained growth of Baptists in the South was in large measure due to the fact that we were a de facto established church. Problem is, the Christian culture upon which we depended no longer exists. The world we now inhabit is postchristendom and postdenominational. We are struggling to come to terms with what it mean to live missionally in an age beyond Christendom. The underlying question for missions today, as historian Brian Stanley states it, is “how to recover the compelling sense of universal missionary obligation that earlier generations understood at least partially in national terms and reattach that compulsion to where, theologically, it ought to be fixed—to the Christian doctrine of the church itself.”

In his groundbreaking book, Transforming Mission, David Bosch offered a more pointed analysis of the theology of mission. Central to the emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm is an understanding of mission as missio Dei (the mission of God). Here the mission of the church begins in the nature of the Triune God. From this Trinitarian standpoint, the central question is not “What message must the church proclaim?” or “How can the mission effort be supported?” but “Where is God at work?” The locus classicus of the missio Dei is Jesus’ commission to the disciples in John 20:21: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” These words are immediately followed by the observation that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The classical formulation of the missio Dei, then, understands the mission of the church to begin with the mission of the Father sending the Son, and the Father and Son sending the Spirit, which extends to the Father, Son, and Spirit sending the church into the world. The upshot of this shift is a radically transformed understanding in which, “It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world.”

The theological shift to a missional ecclesiology can be attributed to the Swiss theologian
Karl Barth, who stood at the headwaters of the resurgence of Trinitarian theology in the 20th century. In the face of the functional unitarianism that comfortably resided in Protestant churches, Barth contended that the doctrine of the Trinity is what “basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian.” In his Trinitarian vision of the mission to the world, Barth envisioned a radically missionary church sent in the power of the Spirit to attest to the good news of Jesus Christ, the light of life and the hope of all nations. And yet in going to the ends of the earth, Barth argued, the church of Jesus Christ does not bring the light to the world. Rather wherever Christian witnesses go, there they meet the one eternal light of the world and the one true witness of the gospel, the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who has been missionally going since before the foundation of the world: The Father sending the Son, and the Father and Son sending the Spirit, and the Father, Son, and Spirit sending the church as witnesses into the world.

But the recovery of Trinitarian missional theology can more directly be traced to Lesslie Newbigin. When he returned to the West after a career as a foreign missionary in India, Newbigin did not find himself at home in a Christian civilization. He discovered instead that he was in the midst of a pagan culture that was “born out of the rejection of Christianity [and] is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar.” To reach the post-Christendom culture Newbigin challenged churches to practice the fundamental belief of Christianity, which “is embodied in the affirmation that God has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Spirit.” The task of Christian mission, then, is simply understood “as proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, as sharing the life of the Son, and as bearing the witness of the Spirit.” Newbigin’s assessment of the West has been followed by observers who are specifically interested in reaching the post-Christendom culture of North America. One of those who responded to the promise of Newbigin’s ecumenical missional ecclesiology is Baptist theologian, James Wm. McClendon, Jr. Encouraged by Newbigin’s vision of the church as the community of
the Holy Spirit, McClendon envisioned missional baptistic communities as the means of reaching a
lost culture in a way that neither orthodoxy in doctrine (the Protestant strategy) or impeccability of
succession (the Catholic approach) could even do.  

Within the last half of the 20th century, the established mainline Protestant denominations in
the United States have become a cultural sideline. The most conspicuous evidence of the
disestablishment of mainline Protestantism are such indicators as the decline of church membership,
the loss of financial prosperity, and the lack of influence in high places. The waning of Christendom
may be even more pervasive than religious pundits have been ready to admit. For example, in the
last 35 years, Protestant affiliation has dropped from 62 percent to 52 percent of the U.S.
population, and those affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations dropped from 24 percent to
14 percent. During the same time reported weekly church attendance declined from 43 percent to 38
percent. The number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990,
rising from 8 to 15 percent. Although some establishmentarian vestiges of the past still survive, the
gradual disestablishment of Christendom in America is now in full swing. But the current declension
is not limited to the mainline denominations. Baptists, and Southern Baptists especially, continued to
increase in membership from the 1920s to the present during which the membership of mainline
Protestants, and Methodists in particular, decreased. But now even that counter-trend seems to have
changed. After several years of plateau, the SBC has also become a denomination in decline. Still,
explaining how the cultural disestablishment of Christianity in America occurred presents a puzzle.
The more fundamental crisis, however, is the one created by the Christendom consciousness of the
old dominant order. Is it possible to purge these old habits of mind and imagine a way of being in
the world without the privileges of Christendom? Such theology for a disestablished church includes
a thoroughgoing restatement of our understanding of Jesus, Christian discipleship, and the mission
of the church.
In his book *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Douglas John Hall envisions the possibility of a significant future for the church, but in order to live into that future, Hall argues, “Christians must stop trying to have the kind of future that nearly sixteen centuries of official Christianity in the Western world have conditioned us to covet.” That coveted future, Hall continues, is “Christendom—which means literally the dominion or sovereignty of the Christian religion.” But Christendom is dying, and the question that remains is “whether we can get over regarding this as a catastrophe and begin to experience it as a doorway—albeit a narrow one—into a future that is more in keeping with what our Lord first had in mind when he called disciples to accompany him on his mission to redeem the world through love, not power.”

Hall’s analysis of the crisis of Christendom and future of Christianity may be helpful for understanding the contemporary crisis and identifying a possible future for Baptists who ought to know better than to covet establishment. With the future of a post-Christendom era now all but certain, the question that remains is whether Christians can learn anew to practice the faith without privilege? Such an ecclesiological transformation, as Baptist theologian Nigel Wright argues, requires the disavowal of Constantinianism with its presumptions of power that obstructs rather than extends the mission of the church. The mission of the church is not dependent on what Christians do. It is something God is already doing. It is not a mission that Christ commands and the church performs. It is a divine mission in which disciples participate.

**Living Missionally After Christendom**

How, then, does the church of Jesus Christ live missionally in an age beyond Christendom? There is little time to answer such an important question, so let me offer three affirmations, returning to the biblical text with which we began: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them
to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

1. Practice the Faith: As You Go … Make Disciples.

The disciples went to the mountain where Jesus had told them to meet him. Then Jesus spoke: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:19). In the resurrection, Jesus was declared to be Lord, not just the Lord of the disciple community huddled on the mountain or even of the believing community scattered throughout Palestine. He is Lord of heaven and earth. Greater is he than the powers and authorities that put him to death. To him alone belongs the title “Lord.” And before his authority one day all will submit, every knee bending and every tongue confessing, “Jesus Christ the Lord of all” (Phil 2:11). And on this authority he issues his commission to the disciple community: “As you go therefore make disciples of all nations.” The imperative verb is “make disciples,” but the participle with which the commission begins might well be translated “as you go.” His command is to “make disciples,” and he commends to his church the practice of disciple-making “as we go.”

In the widely acclaimed book Practicing Our Faith, Dorothy Bass described practices as “those shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life,” or as she later states, “a life-giving way of life.” In their book Resident Aliens, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon stressed that Christianity is a communal tradition that gives Christians a set of countercultural practices that enable them to live truthfully and subversively in the world. These subversive practices equip Christian disciples to resist the powers that would otherwise determine their lives. Even though Willimon recently came out in The Christian Century as confessing that he now has “grave doubts about describing Christian spirituality as a practice,” I still think it offers a coherent account of how the church can be the church after Christendom. Willimon and Hauerwas drew their inspiration from the Danish Christian philosopher, Søren
Kierkegaard, who challenged the prevailing cultural assumptions of Christendom by asserting that Christianity is not a way of knowing but rather a way of living. Though they did not, they might well have appealed to the work of Michel de Certeau, who offered an account of everyday practices like cooking food and eating meals. Such tactical practices, Certeau argued, enable communities to resist being determined by, and even subvert, the powers of the dominant culture. Can the church be a countercultural community that demonstrates through its life together that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not? It is a question worth asking.

2. Follow the Plan: *Baptize and Teach.*

Jesus commanded the disciple community to make disciples, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything” he commanded them (Mt 28:19). The great commission is not just to evangelize. It is also to baptize and catechize. The early church reversed the order, requiring candidates for baptism to undergo a period of catechetical instruction in the faith. Tertullian, a second century North African Christian, wrote: “It follows that deferment of baptism is more profitable, in accordance with each person’s character and attitude, and even age: and especially so as regards children. . . . So let them come when they are growing up, when they are learning, when they are being taught what they are coming to: let them be made Christians when they have become competent to know Christ.”

By the third century the office of the catechumenate was a well developed institution. The church in Rome, for example, required three years of catechetical instruction before baptism for moral and doctrinal formation, though they were careful to note that “it is not the time that is judged, but the conduct.”

The forty days before Easter were an especially intense time of preparation given to prayer, fasting, confession, and instruction, culminating with baptism on Easter dawn. In order to renew evangelism in the 21st century, churches might seriously consider retrieving the ancient Christian practice of baptismal *catechesis.*
But some may be wondering: Is not that what Sunday School is all about? The answer in a word, is “No!” To be sure, the Sunday School movement from Robert Raikes to Arthur Flake played a crucial role in the growth and development of Baptist churches. When I was in seminary, the required Christian education course had a section on evangelizing through the Sunday School. While I am not quite prepared to call for the abolition of Sunday Schools, I do have deep suspicions about the underlying assumptions of Christian education as it is currently practiced in our churches. I am afraid that the guiding philosophy of Christian education often has more to do with Erikson, Kohlberg, and Piaget than it does with Jesus or the gospel. If the Sunday School is to be of use for evangelizing and catechizing Christians in the 21st century it is in dire need of theological reimagination. Churches committed to renewing the practice of evangelism in a postchristendom culture would do well to consider how they might implement the ancient-future practice of catechetical instruction, which has as its aim Christian formation, not age-appropriate information. Such an approach is not an entirely new thing. Baptists from John Bunyan to John Broadus utilized catechetical instruction. Charles Spurgeon put the matter pointedly,

I am more and more persuaded that the study of a good Scriptural catechism is of infinite value to our children. Even if the youngsters do not understand all the questions and answers . . . yet, abiding in their memories, it will be infinite service when the time of understanding comes, to have known these very excellent, wise and judicious definitions of the things of God.

Catechetical instruction is followed by baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—an apostolic practice of the earliest Christian communities. An early Christian manual called *The Didache*, dating from the late first or early second century, contains these instructions about baptism: “Baptize as follows: after first explaining all these points, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if you have no running water, baptize in other water; and if you cannot in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” From its
inception the church of Jesus Christ has not uniformly practiced Christian baptism. Note well the reference to various means: still and running, cold and warm, immersion and affusion. (We do well to remember that Baptists from the beginning had a diversity of baptismal practices: Neither John Smyth nor Roger Williams, the first Baptists in Europe and North America, were baptized by immersion.) But while baptism from the days of the early church has not been uniformly practiced, it has been universally observed in the name of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

In order for missional churches to have a vital baptismal practice for the future, they would do well to reconsider the minimalist criteria of administering baptism immediately to anyone who will admit that he or she is a sinner and that Jesus is the savior. Conversion, as a preacher once observed, is the end of the Christian life—the front end. It is an important first step, but as old Tertullian reminds us, “let them be made Christians when they have become competent to know Christ.” We Baptists have been very critical of the practice of infant baptism because, as we have argued, it does not make disciples. Fair enough. But perhaps it is time for us to be honest about the brokenness of our own baptismal practice, which more often than we would care to admit does not do a good job of making disciples either. If the church is to have a vital evangelical mission in the future, baptism can no longer be viewed simply as a rite of membership. Retrieving the rich catechetical and baptismal practice of the Christian tradition would help the church better understand what it means to participate through baptism in the life of the triune God, and so to be formed into a community that is sent out to extend God’s mission to the world.


We can hardly imagine what those eleven disciples must have thought when Jesus commanded them to teach the nations and bring them under the rule of Christ. They were to go, not as a conquering army, but as a community of instruction. Eleven people for the whole world! It must have seemed ludicrous to think about their impossible mission. Yet Jesus did not ask for a
feasibility study. He just sent them out into the world, and the last words he spoke to them were these: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). The one who fulfilled the prophetic promise of Emmanuel, God with us (Mt 1:23), and who promised that when two or three are gathered in his name that he will be among them (Mt 18:20), now promises to be with any and all who take up his commission unto the ages (Mt 28:20). You do not have to have it all figured out. Practice the faith, follow the plan, and then rest assured that the One who commanded you to go will be with you every step of the way.

I want to conclude this afternoon where I began by posing a question. But this time, I ask you to reflect, not on what constrained William Carey or Martin Ross to press our Baptist forebears to support the missionary movement in their day. I ask you to consider what it might take to compel fellowship Baptists to commit ourselves to participate extravagantly in the mission of God that is going on in our state and in our world. Here is my missionary query for the new millennium: Are not Fellowship Baptists of North Carolina, with all our many friends and partners, called on in Providence, to step forward and participate in the mission of God, wherever and with whomever, whenever we see God at work in our world? Jesus is calling his church today to join him on mission. We do not have to have it all figured out. We just have to practice the faith, follow the plan, and go with God, because we can rest assured that if you go, God will be with us every step of the way.


2 Cushing Biggs Hassell, revised and completed by Sylvester Hassell, History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including Especialy the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association (Middletown: G. Beebe, 1886), 721; and Paschal, History of North Carolina Baptists, 1:546-47.


7 Robert Hall, Help to Zion’s Travelers (Bristol: William Pine, 1781), 117.


10 Carey, An Enquiry, 81, 87.


12 For example, Charles Hadden Spurgeon described Fuller as “the greatest theologian” of his century. In his sermon, “None But Jesus,” Spurgeon followed Fuller, arguing that “the warrant of faith” is the simple summons of the gospel, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31), in Curtis W. Freeman, and others, Baptist Roots (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), 212-13.


15 Carey, An Enquiry, 84.


21 Stanley, “Christianity and the End of Empire,” in Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire, 6.


24 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 301.

25 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/3.1, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961). Barth begins his account of “Jesus Christ, The True Witness,” §69, with a reference to William Carey as key to understanding of the radically missionary church that proclaims the good news of God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ, Church Dogmatics, IV/3.1, p. 25.


31 Fisher and Hout, 197; and the 2008 Southern Baptist Convention’s Annual Church Profile, “2008 Southern...

32 Robert Wuthnow provides one of the most complete accounts of just how much has changed in the social arrangements between church and state in The Restructuring of American Religion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).


38 William H. Willimon, “Too Much Practice: Second Thoughts on a Theological Movement,” Christian Century (9 March 2010), 22-25. It has appeared to some that the good bishop may simply be covering his bases, so he is now able to claim that he was for practice before he was against it. But in truth he has a point. The fascination with Christian spirituality as practice can exude an almost Pelagian confidence.


43 For an excellent collection of articles on catechetical practice in the among Baptists see Catechism in Christian Reflection, published by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University (2007).

44 Charles H. Spurgeon, quoted in Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms, eds. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996)), 17. See also the collection of Baptist catechetical texts by Tom J. Nettles, Baptist Catechisms (Tom J. Nettles, 1982).