

A REVIEW OF R. STANTON NORMAN'S *THE BAPTIST WAY*

A Book Report

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Casey Benjamin Hough

B.A., Louisiana Tech University, 2006

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Norman, R. Stanton. *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005.

Written by R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* provides a concise treatise on the distinct beliefs that serve as identity markers for true Baptist churches. Norman is the author of multiple books and currently serves as the Provost and Executive Vice President of Campus Life at Oklahoma Baptist University.

The Baptist Way was written out of the conviction that “a great need exists for a contemporary restatement of those doctrines that constitute the distinctive theological identity of Baptist” (1). This conviction, which drives the writing of the book, is very evident throughout the work. Norman begins with an introduction that surveys the current condition of the world wherein the Baptist church exists, and then proceeds to show how the Baptist church must react to these conditions without giving up their distinctives.

The first distinctive addressed is Biblical Authority. Contrary to Roman Catholics and Rationalist, Baptist have historically looked to the Word of God as the final and absolute authority on all matters of faith and practice (17). This distinctive, though shared by other non-Baptist, is an absolute essential mark of true Baptist doctrine.

The second distinctive mentioned is the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Norman writes that this distinctive, like the first, is not an exclusive Baptist distinctive, but is nonetheless an essential mark of true Baptist doctrine. Norman spends a fair amount of time discussing the different usages and understandings of the term “Lord” throughout Scripture. Norman contends that belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ is both an objective and subjective truth that encompasses the entirety of the person and work of Jesus Christ both past and present.

Moving forward, Norman presents the Baptist belief in a Regenerate Church Membership. This belief is simply that Baptists have historically believed that only those who have been “born-again” are truly members of the church of Jesus Christ. This belief in a

“regenerate church membership” is an ecclesiological matter that has set Baptist apart from many other Protestant churches for hundreds of years.

After discussing the Baptist conviction of a regenerate church membership, Norman moves on to discuss the not-so popular, but very essential Baptist conviction of Church Discipline. Norman writes, “One of the most glaring omissions in modern Baptist church life is the regular practice of biblical church discipline” (64). Norman’s treatment of this distinctive is thorough and commendable considering how neglected it is in most Baptist writing regarding the Baptist distinctives.

Moving from discipline to government, Norman addresses the Baptist distinctive of Congregational Polity. Norman explains congregational polity as, “that form of church government in which final human authority rest with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making” (86). This explanation is helpful when coupled with the insight found later in the chapter entitled, Congregational Polity and Pastoral Leadership. In this section, Norman gives a balanced explanation of the place of strong, pastoral leadership in the context of Baptist congregational polity. He concludes saying, “We strive to implement a church polity that is based on the New Testament, and we are convinced that congregationalism is the most faithful to scripture” (109).

The next chapter, Norman deals with a plethora of matters regarding the functioning of the church that are not necessarily “distinctives” of Baptist churches. In this chapter, he looks at the nature of the church, the covenant concept in relationship to the church, the offices within the church, and the mission of the church. Though ill placed in the book, this chapter provides a “brief” overview of these key doctrines and discusses their implications in Baptist church life.

Staying in a similar realm, Norman goes on to discuss the “Ordinances of the Church” in chapter seven. The two ordinances that are addressed in this chapter are Believer’s

Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Norman prefers the language of "ordinance" as opposed to "sacrament" because he understands "sacrament" to refer to a means by which grace is received (131). This chapter lays out the distinctly "Baptist" understanding of these two ordinances by discussing them in both their historical and theological context.

Chapter eight concludes Norman's discussion of Baptist distinctives with Religious Freedom. Here the reader finds Norman once again placing a distinctive in its historical context for the sake of better understanding how the distinctives came to play itself out in the Baptist life. Religious Freedom, which includes the concept of Soul Competency, relates to the fact that man is created in God's image and is entitled to worship God according to the scriptures without coercion. This distinctive is one of the keys to understanding the origins of the Baptist heritage.

In closing, Norman lays the charge at the feet of the readers to remain faithful to these Biblically based and historically attested Baptist distinctives. The motivation for this is given by the fact that loyalty to these Baptist distinctives is, in fact, loyalty to the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. His closing sentences echoes this sentiment: "Our Baptist distinctives are sufficient to enable us to live effectively as obedient followers of Christ in an era of uncertainty" (193).

Moving from summary to assessment, it is profitable to start with a look at the positive aspects of this book. First, Norman begins with a wonderful premise: "a great need exist for the restatement of the doctrinal distinctives of the Baptist faith." It is clear that Norman's purpose is to provide the Christian with a succinct "re-statement" of the Baptist faith in the form of propositional truth statements. The lack of propositional truth in present-day evangelicalism makes Norman's work a very important and timely one, especially in Baptist faith and practice.

Secondly, Norman deals with the distinctives from both a historical and theological perspective. In dealing with each distinctives, he provides enough historical context to place the particular doctrine's development in the history of Christianity without bogging the reader down with needless and speculative ideas. It is good that Norman does not spend a lot of time developing the historical background of each doctrine since the key distinctive that drives all the other distinctives is the authority of scripture, not history. His style of direct writing is very helpful and makes the work much more accessible to the layman in the pews, yet there are times when the concise nature of the book leaves a lot to be desired.

The most disappointing aspect of the book is the doctrinal depth of the book. Depth, in this case, is sacrificed on the altar of breadth. Though it is understandable that this work was not intended to be a scholarly discourse on the Baptist distinctive, it is nonetheless disappointing to see so many wonderful doctrines comprised in one book and yet be passed over so quickly. To be fair, there are some distinctives that are dealt with in a thorough matter. An example of this is found in his discussion on Church Discipline. Given the sometimes thorough, sometimes brief examples that are found throughout the book, it may be that Norman felt the need to cover the more neglected elements of the Baptist distinctives in greater depth rather than to build upon other's works on the more agreeable Baptist distinctives.

In the future, it would do writers on these topics well to take the extra time to compile a thoroughly Biblical presentation of each Baptist distinctive. Other than this, the book is one that I will certainly recommend along side of a good, Baptist systematic theology book.