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Baptists Wary of Unity Trend

(This is an interview with leaders of the principal non-Catholic Christian churches in the United States dealing with their pursuit of Christian unity and the status of their churches in the age of religious renewal.)

By DONALD BROPHY (N.C.W.C. News Service)

Washington—One of America's most influential Baptist churchmen sees a danger in the modern trend toward religious unity, he says, that has its roots in the theological uncertainty of each denomination.

The Rev. Carl F. H. Henry, a Baptist minister and editor of the interdenominational review *Christianity Today*, gave his views on modern religious problems in an interview at his office in Washington. The traditional independence of Baptists makes it impossible for them to have one spokesman, but Dr. Henry's views reflect the attitude of a large majority of America's 23 million Baptists who compose 27 separate church bodies.

Historically, Baptists have belonged to the conservative wing of Protestantism. Firmly wedded to a personal and generally scriptural interpretation of Scriptures, many of them are alarmed with the theological speculation they find in other Protestant bodies.

"The disagreements that exist within Protestant denominations today are much larger than the issues that caused Protestants to break with the Roman Catholic Church in the Reformation," said Dr. Henry. "This is the source of deep ferment in contemporary Protestantism. One cannot heal the difficulties of ailing denominations by merging them into larger structures in which the previous ailments are compounded in a grandiose way."

What are the issues that cause such concern among conservative Protestants, including most of the Baptists? They are not denominational issues—those that make Baptists different from other Protestants or from Catholics. They are, according to Dr. Henry, issues that strike at the very heart of supernatural religion and at religious authority.

"The decisive feature of many philosophies," he said, "is their presupposition that man is not able to have a knowledge of a transcendent Being. This attitude dominates many church leaders in the vocal centers of Protestantism. So the church is reduced to a theology of ecclesiastical control. This is dangerous because it is dangerous to be..."

cause it lacks any objective norm by which the ecclesiastical assembly itself is to be judged. Since much of Protestantism has lost the Bible as an authoritative norm, and since it has articulated no alternative, it is reduced to accepting its own consensus as definitive."

"The fundamental problem," explained Dr. Henry, "is the problem of religious authority. What is the word of God? Many Protestant theologians seem no longer to know what the word of God is. Is it what the pope affirms? What the hierarchy teaches? What the Bible teaches? What the latest school of theology teaches? What the latest church assembly teaches?"

In the centuries since they emerged as an organized church movement, Baptists have had one clear answer for the question of authority: the Bible, and the Bible alone. The ultimate appeal to Scriptures, along with believers' baptism by immersion, the autonomy of local churches, the belief in religious freedom and the priesthood of all believers are the essential elements of the Baptists.

Although they trace their beginnings to pre-Reformation times, Baptists were first organized in northern Europe in the early 17th century as an outgrowth of English Puritanism. The movement gained its greatest momentum when it came to the New World. Baptists under Roger Williams founded their own colony at Providence (R.I.), and, characteristically, they opened it to persons of all faiths.

Baptism by immersion is thought by many outsiders to be the keystone of Baptist belief. It is not. For Baptists, baptism is not a "sacrament" in the Catholic sense that it gives grace. It is a sign of the inward conscious affirmation of Christ, and of the outward pledge to carry out His law. This forms the Baptist keystone.

"Baptists would say that the Holy Spirit gives faith at the time of the conscious, personal decision for Christ," said Dr. Henry. "This is an evangelical decision, so you can see the importance placed on the sermon. The Holy Spirit uses truth as a means of persuasion, not sacraments as an infusion of grace."

"If a sacrament saves, as in the case of infant baptism, then the conscious expiation of truth is not important for salvation, although it may be important for education."

Having made an inward, personal commitment to God's word, as found in the Bible, Baptists are expected to give an equally personal expression of their faith. Their religious individualism explains why few Baptists think it unusual that they should have so many branches within one denomination.

At the present time, the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Baptist group in America with more than 10 million members in the United States, with a membership of more than 10 million. Forming one of the more conservative Baptist bodies, the Southern Baptist Convention now has 10 million members in the South to every state in the union. The American Baptist Convention numbers 1.5 million. Two of the largest Baptist bodies are for Negroes. The Baptist Convention of the U.S.A. claims nearly 6 million members, and the National Baptist Convention of America has almost 2.7 million.

There are several reasons, beyond that of race, why Baptist groups are so divided. Some reasons are geographical, as in the case of the Southern Baptist or the American Baptist Convention (formerly the Northern Baptist Convention). Some groups have different national origins. The North American Baptist Convention was founded by German Americans; the General Baptist Convention by Swedish Americans. Finally, there are theological reasons. The Conservative Baptist Association broke away when they thought the latter group was comprising its doctrinal loyalties.

"Historically," said Dr. Henry, "Baptist conventions have arisen for the sake of cooperative efficiency in the fulfillment and support of missionary effort. A basic Baptist principle is the autonomy of the local church, and this belief impedes hierarchical control."

There are, he continued, some signs of a unity movement within the Baptist community. It is especially evident in the American Baptist Convention which belongs to the National and the World Councils of Churches, and among those Southern Baptists who want their convention to join the World Baptist Alliance. Many Baptists are interested in trans-denominational fellowship on specifically evangelical lines.

When they consider a larger unity movement, one that would take in the Catholic Church, Baptists are more cautious. "The evangelicals are conditioned by a heritage of repression in a lands where there is an established church," said Dr. Henry. "They recognize, with great gratitude, that the Catholic Church is changing, but there is no significant trend among Baptists to talk about real union."

For the most part, said Dr. Henry, Baptists have been af-

ected very little by the ecumenical movement engendered by the Second Vatican Council. They would be pleased, because of their own traditions, to see the council approve a strong statement on religious liberty.

Baptist leaders have become involved in the field of social action, such as race relations and urban housing, but there is "widely spread doctrinal criticism" of such activities. This is partly because Baptists shy away from activities that might seem to violate church-state separation. Primarily it is because they feel these efforts divert them from the church's one great task of preaching the Gospel of Christ. In fact Dr. Henry believes too many clergymen are devoting more time to the social and economic spheres than to the church's primary task.

"The church's main forfeiture has not been in the area of social involvement," he said. "Its record in relation to the great commission (to preach the Gospel) has been even less meritorious."

Referring to what he considers the excessive attention given by some clergymen to population control, he said: "Unfortunately, the concerns of the 20th century churches are more socio-economic than evangelistic. The church is more concerned that multitudes may not have enough of this world's bread than it is that more people are passing into a Christless eternity in our time than in all the previous generations of human history combined."

"The church," he added, "does have a weighty responsibility in the social arena, but that is ideally fulfilled by a dedicated laity more than by the institutional church's in-

volvement in the political arena."

Dr. Henry noted that the process of renewal is particularly difficult in Baptist communities which retain so much local authority.

"In the American Baptist Convention there has been no conspicuous theological renewal or evangelistic awakening," said Dr. Henry. "The Southern Baptist Convention has been characterized more conspicuously by evangelistic and missionary outreach, but it has not evidenced great theological vitality. The tensions in the South have centered mainly over a bolder effort to confront the racial situation in a constructive way."

"As to doctrinal development," he continued, "Baptists historically have taken the position of no creed but the New Testament in order to distinguish between an authoritative revelation and philosophical formulations, however devout, of the content of New Testament faith."

"With the rise of liberal theology, however, Baptist institutions, like others, were invaded by speculative theology. In the American Baptist Convention it is debatable whether evangelistic or non-evangelical theology has the greatest weight in denominational seminars today. The classroom emphasis ranges all the way from a conservative theology to the death of God' view. Theological conferences are 'balanced' to reflect diverse viewpoints, and the denominational department of evangelism for some years has reflected a neo-orthodox (Barthian) notion of universalism."

"Although Southern Baptist Convention seminars are more conservative on the whole, in recent years some faculties

have included neo-orthodox and even existentialist (Bultmannian) scholars."

Baptists, like other Christian denominations, are beginning to reflect a wide range of theological speculation. This, however, does not mean they now are willing to embrace a visible or structural unity of churches, Dr. Henry explained. Such a notion goes against the grain of Baptist tradition.

Besides, most Baptists would agree with Dr. Henry that the message of the Gospel is more important than church unity, and that "the besetting sin of contemporary Christianity is not divisiveness, but the failure to take the Christian message seriously."

If Christian unity is to be achieved, it will be done from "above"—through the Holy Spirit's renewal and by a mutual fidelity to Christ's message. "When I think of unity," Dr. Henry said, "I think the unity from above is likely to endure longer than a process of horizontal merger. I don't believe that horizontal unity would necessarily mean real unity."

Baptists do not share the Catholic idea of church unity because they do not share the Catholic idea of a structured church. This, however, does not mean they are unwilling to discuss common problems with Catholics or other Christian groups.

"There is a growing conviction that there is everything to be gained by dialogue," said Dr. Henry. "Too much has been lost by a lack of understanding. The Baptists don't look for union with the Roman Catholic Church in terms of the lines cast at present any more than the Roman Catholic Church is looking for unity in accordance with the lines of existing Protestantism. Baptists historically have been established independently of the established institutional church, and they tend

to look at it as a monolithic power structure."

The Baptist communities in the United States are far from being monolithic or structured, but as the second largest Christian denomination (next to the Catholic Church) in this country, they are bound to have a powerful impact on areas of church cooperation in future years.

Relics Given To Orthodox

Venice (NC)—A delegation of Greek Orthodox leaders attended solemn ceremonies in the Venetian church containing relics of St. Sabbas, which were returned to an Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem after centuries in this city.

The ceremonies included the formal recognition of the relics and examining the documents, seals and actual remains to assure authenticity. Then the relics were carried to the basilica of St. Mark where they were to remain for veneration for five days.

An Orthodox liturgy (Mass) was celebrated by representatives of Orthodox patriarch Beneditos I of Jerusalem in the Orthodox church in Venice. The liturgy was attended by Catholic officials.

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Guild's Goal is New Addressograph

BROTHER WILLIAM REISER is demonstrating the new addressograph machine at Cardinal Mooney High School to members of the Mooney Women's Guild. Proceeds from the Guild's card party on Saturday, Nov. 6 will be used to pay for the new machine. Shown in the picture are, from left, Mrs. Eugene Najder, Mrs. Sardius Virgil and Mrs. Frank Gottry chairman. A "Pirate" theme will feature the party which starts at 8 p.m.

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There's no way of knowing how many souls will be released from Purgatory this November by the Masses of thousands of priests in the Pope's Near East missions. (The offerings support them in spreading the Gospel, serving the poor.) Possibly your own Purgatory will be shortened by just one such remembrance of a parent or relative. Someday, a long neglected friend may welcome you all the way Home with that kindest greeting: "You remembered!"

At the United States Air Force Academy, a "dooly" is a freshman, esteemed by upper classmen as the lowest possible rank of human life. Recently at a cadet mass, after talking of the Pope's Near East missions, Monsignor Ryan was approached by a dooly who snapped to rigid attention, presented an envelope, aboufaced and marched away. "You might wonder about the odd amount of my gift," the note read. "We doolies only get \$15 a month, and this is all I have left." Somewhere in the Near East today, a dooly's \$2.15 is helping a poor family who esteem the lowly dooly as the servant of a provident God—about as high a rank as any human can hope for.

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