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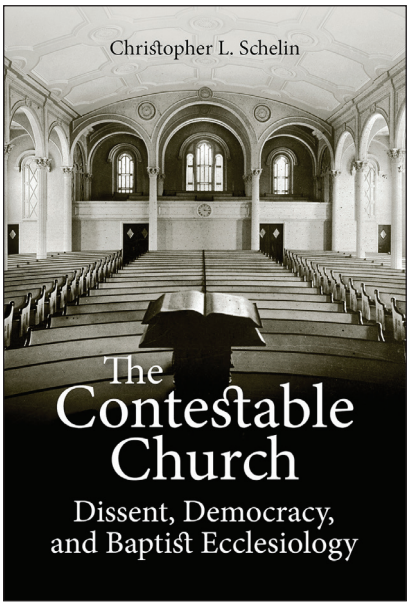
For the contestable church, conflict spurs Christians to be ever receptive to difference and always reforming

PERSPECTIVES
ON BAPTIST IDENTITIES



The Contestable Church

Dissent, Democracy, and Baptist Ecclesiology

by *Christopher L. Schelin*

May 2024 — Baptist History/Ecclesiology

9780881469271 • $35.00 • Paperback • MUP/P694 • 258 pages • 6 x 9
Bibliography • Index • *Perspectives on Baptist Identities Series*

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Macon, Georgia—"This well-researched study explores Baptist identity as expressed in multiple theological and cultural approaches to congregational polity," says Bill J. Leonard, founding dean and professor of Divinity emeritus at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. "As such, it provides an insightful history of Baptist ecclesiastical faith and practice, unity and disunity, and individual and collective expressions. Schelin's conclusions offer creative options for a Baptist congregational future, and none too soon."

Baptists have a well-earned reputation as a contentious people. Lacking a centralized authority to settle disputes, and defending the conscience of each believer, they have excelled at conflict and division. But perhaps the resolution of this scandal is not for Baptists to stop fighting, but to learn to fight better.

In The Contestable Church, Christopher L. Schelin reconsiders Baptist ecclesiology from the perspective that conflict is not merely inevitable but is essentially constructive for the church's discernment of the mind of Christ. Enlisting the support of radical democratic political theory, as exemplified in the work of Romand Coles, the author argues that it is precisely through hospitable encounters with difference and disagreement that new possibilities emerge. Schelin invites Baptists not to shy away from conflict, employing convergences with radical democracy to reimagine key doctrinal themes such as soul competency, the priesthood of believers, and pastoral authority. By adopting insights from radical democracy, Baptists may avoid the competing dangers of excessive individualism and conformist authoritarianism.

The Contestable Church offers a positive witness to the peace of God that is the horizon for conflict and invites Baptists to the practice of vigorous dissent for the sake of living faithfully. Instead of revealing a dissolution into chaos, dissent is an expression of hope that Christians are a pilgrim people for whom a vulnerable and challenging intimacy leads the way home.

Christopher L. Schelin is dean of students at Starr King School for the Ministry in California and a senior research fellow at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in the Netherlands. He holds an MDiv from Duke University and a PhD from Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His research interests include Baptist history and theology as well as the interactions between religious traditions, political liberalism, and democracy.

The **Perspectives on Baptist Identities Series** explores the rapidly evolving questions of identity that press upon theose who call themselves Baptist in the twenty-first century: What does it mean to be Baptist? What does the future hold for Baptists? How does the Baptist tradition relate to the global Church and other ecclesial traditions? How does Baptist identity impact Scripture reading and Christian practice? The series seeks to generate significant scholarly research and engender fruitful and lively conversation among various types of Baptists and non-Baptists. Kate Hanch and João B. Chaves serve as series editors.

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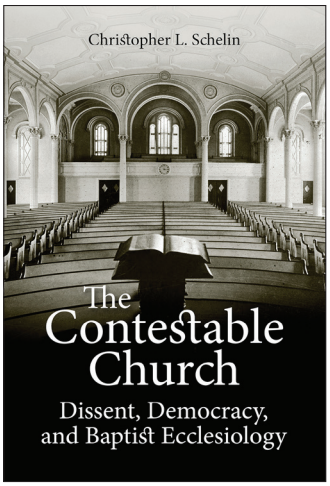

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Advance Praise

"Taking seriously Baptists' fondness for dissent and democratic practice, Christopher Schelin transforms both into forces for cultivating a deeper sense of the church. In doing so, this book has shown Baptists one of the ways that they can witness to the kingdom of God in an ever-changing world."
—Derek C. Hatch, endowed chair of Baptist Studies, Georgetown College

"Baptistic Free Church ecclesiology most simply described is the gathered community following the rule of Christ in a congregational way. Some may wonder if such an approach tends to be more sociological and political than theological, subjecting the church to competing interests and democratic processes. Christopher Schelin makes a compelling case for a congregational ecclesiology that he aptly describes as a contestable church, where the way of the gospel is not subjected to the most influential voices or adjudicated by intricate procedural guidelines, but is discerned together in community as a matter of shared discipleship through the practices of cooperative reasoning. It is a most welcome contribution to current conversations about congregational ecclesiology in ecumenical perspective."
—Curtis W. Freeman, research professor of theology and director of the Baptist House of Studies, Duke Divinity School; and author of Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists

"In a time and place in which democracy appears to be imperiled, the value of diversity to a pluralistic society is questioned along with the very idea of such a society, the place of religion in public life is hotly contested, and the possibility of constructive dissent seems unimaginable in both society and church, The Contestable Church explores the ecclesiology of Baptist dissenters and discovers there a way of being a community of followers of Jesus Christ that can help Christian communities today envision a more faithful common life, as church and as participants in the civil order."
—Steven R. Harmon, professor of Historical Theology, Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity; and coeditor of Sources of Light: Resources for Baptist Churches Practicing Theology