

**An Historical Perspective
of Southern Baptists, 1975–Present:
A Trust Reestablished**

By Thomas Nettles

© 2003, North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Alpharetta, Georgia

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without the prior written permission of the publisher. All inquiries should be addressed to: Editorial and Design Manager, North American Mission Board, 4200 North Point Pkwy., Alpharetta, GA 30022-4176; or fax (770) 410-6006; or e-mail permissions@namb.net.

The Broad Context

Baptists in America united their spiritual and financial energy in 1814 to support missions endeavors among the unevangelized people of the world. When Adoniram and Ann Judson along with their fellow appointee, Luther Rice, converted to Baptist views after having been sent to the field by New England Congregationalists, the providence simply was too striking to ignore. Foreign missions catalyzed the implicit tendency towards united efforts and issued in the formation of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination for Foreign Missions in order to “concentrate the energies, and direct the efforts of the whole denomination throughout the United States, in sending the gospel to the Heathen.”¹ Richard Furman, pastor of First Baptist Church in Charleston, S.C., served on the committee that proposed a constitution for this society and served as president of the convention in Philadelphia that adopted it.

Ten years later, in 1824, a number of Baptist churches and associations united to form a publishing society call the Baptist General Tract Society. Eventually, it became the American Baptist Publication Society and most recently Judson Press. Within another eight years, 1832, missionary propensities for domestic work, particularly as envisioned by John Mason Peck and Jonathan Going, gave sufficient impetus to establish the Home Mission Society that defined its object as promotion of the “preaching of the gospel in North America.”²

The early nineteenth-century tensions between North and South in the United States spilled over into the Baptist denomination. Unions that formerly were characterized by zealous love for one another and sincere efforts to “elicit combine and direct the energies” of Baptist churches for gospel extension became marked by the controversies of the larger society. Having endured a major challenge from churches that opposed the mission society for ecclesiological

reasons and cultural suspicions, a more subtle and complex challenge faced Baptists. Shadows cast by questions of abolition and the moral complexion of slavery quickly formed patterns of dissension on the historic understanding of Baptist ecclesiology. New England Baptists, greatly influenced by the arguments for abolition in that region and responsive to the English Baptist opposition to slavery, controlled the acting board responsible for approving candidates for missionary appointment. They announced, in response to a question proposed by Baptists in Alabama, that they would not appoint a slaveholder as missionary and could not do anything that implied approval of slavery. This action in principle, excluded Baptists in the South from full and equal participation in the missionary labors supported by the General Missionary Convention.

The Southern Baptist Context

In 1845, Baptists in the South separated from their like-minded Northern brethren. It is a sad fact that controversy over slavery created impassable difficulties. The substance, however, behind the conflict over slavery had far more noble and biblically valid extensions such as continued participation in foreign missions, the integrity of local church authority, and the original provisions of the constitution on which the society had been founded.

When the new Convention took form in Augusta, Georgia, May 1845, the clearly stated purposes of its existence were the extension of Messiah's kingdom and the glory of God. These dual and harmonious concerns found practical expression in the original charter of the Convention. Incorporated in the state of Georgia as the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), its purpose was stated specifically as eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the Baptist denomination of Christians for the propagation of the gospel.

Two boards immediately were instituted for this purpose: The Foreign Mission Board, located in Richmond, Va., and the Domestic Mission Board, located in Marion Ala. The former has remained in Richmond but in 1997 changed its name to the International Mission Board. The latter moved to Atlanta, Ga., in 1882, took the name of Home Mission Board and was renamed in 1997 as the North American Mission Board. Other activities related more or less closely to Southern Baptist interests were the Southern Baptist Publication Society, founded in 1847 in Charleston, the Bible Board, founded in 1851 in Nashville, and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, founded in 1859 in Greenville, S.C.

Organizational Structure

The years between 1845 and 1975 saw massive developments. The number of programs, institutions, entities, and commissions proliferated. By 1975, the Convention annual listed the following as official entities of the Southern Baptist Convention: Foreign Mission Board, Home Mission Board, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, The Christian Life Commission, the Brotherhood Commission, the Historical Commission, the Education Commission, the Southern Baptist Commission of the American Baptist Theological Seminary, the Radio and Television Commission, the Stewardship Commission, the Southern Baptist Foundation, the Committee on Public Affairs, and the Annuity Board.

One of the most sweeping changes from an organizational standpoint since 1975 involves the consolidation of services in Convention agencies. In 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention

approved a report of the Program and Structure Committee to reorganize the Convention program assignments into ministry assignments. This called for changes in nomenclature and for the absorption of some agencies into the ministry assignment of other agencies. Seven entities emerged from the report as constituting the sum of Southern Baptist mission and ministry: The International Mission Board, the North American Mission Board (assumed ministry assignments of Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission, and Radio & Television Commission), the Sunday School Board (renamed LifeWay Christian Resources), the six seminaries (represented by the Council of Seminary Presidents), the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the Executive Committee, and the Annuity Board. In this arrangement the Stewardship Commission, the Radio and Television Commission, the Historical Commission, and the Education Commission found their tasks assigned to or divided between the seven ministries listed above. All ministries were in place by June 1997, and began reporting to the Southern Baptist Convention under that arrangement.

A sophisticated and effective system of financial support and denominational accountability developed through much struggle, distress, amendment, perseverance, and apparent providential blessing. The ingenious financial plan behind these manifold Christian ministries is called the Cooperative Program. Begun in 1925, its formation constituted the main success of a coordinated fund drive called the “75 Million Campaign,” a five-year program that provided greatly increased support for all Baptist missionary, educational, and benevolent work both at the state level and at the national level. Cooperative Program funds, given at the church level and designated for that purpose by each local church, go first to the respective state conventions. The state convention, by vote of the churches, sends a percentage of those funds to the national Convention. In this way, all state and national entities receive funding through the

Cooperative Program. Those funds that come to the national Convention are divided between the seven different ministries now supported through this funding program.

With such a plethora of causes, it is remarkable that 50 percent (2000-2001 allocation) of the Cooperative Program budget is earmarked for foreign missions, supporting over 4,900 international missionaries in more than 150 nations, providing for all the various needs connected with their particular fields of service. The dollar amount for 2001 was close to \$84 million. Other types of work bring the number of countries in which work is done to around 200. Another 5,000 plus home missionaries work in an incredible variety of situations and often perform highly specialized ministries, plant churches among upwards of 50 ethnic groups, and minister in close to 100 languages. A 22.79 percent of the Cooperative Program budget goes to support varied and impressive North American missions. The dollar amount for 2001 was over \$38 million. Both the International Missions and North American Missions efforts have special offerings taken each year. The Lottie Moon Christmas Offering® for International Missions collected \$115 million in 2002. The Annie Armstrong Easter Offering® for North American Missions for the same year was over \$49 million.

Ad hoc programs develop from particular needs from time to time in Southern Baptist culture. In 1976, promotion of an evangelistic and missions initiative called “Bold Mission Thrust” began as the result of a report of a three-year study by an appointed committee called the Missions Challenge Committee. Their challenge was that Southern Baptists would give, pray, and work in view of a goal that “every person in the world shall have the opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ by the year 2000.” In 1987, following on this challenge, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a Bold Mission Thrust Denominational Emphasis Plan to be executed from 1990-2000. Fourteen priority concerns were identified as urgent; from these 13 quantifiable

goals were adopted. The 14 priority concerns were:

- ❖ Reaching lost persons with the gospel of Christ.
- ❖ Accepting and teaching the Bible as the authority for faith and life.
- ❖ Engaging in worship that magnifies and honors God.
- ❖ Helping disciples grow toward Christian maturity.
- ❖ Strengthening love and harmony within the fellowship of the church.
- ❖ Demonstrating commitment to missions through personal involvement.
- ❖ Ministering to families, including singles and senior adults.
- ❖ Establishing and growing new congregations and other forms of new work among all people.
- ❖ Penetrating diverse urban cultures and attitudes with the gospel.
- ❖ Following Christ's servant pattern in Christian service
- ❖ Understanding and sharing Baptist doctrine, heritage, history and polity.
- ❖ Supporting the church's mission by sacrificial, joyful giving.
- ❖ Ministering to persons in need, such as the alienated, homeless, hungry, displaced, and abused.
- ❖ Demonstrating commitment to intercessory prayer through a convention-wide network of intercessory prayer.

A final report of the quantifiable goals was given at the 2001 Convention. In some respects, the report served to reveal areas in which substantial effort for growth, understanding, and theological reflection should be addressed. Each five-year period had separate goals established. For the second five-year period a goal of 2.5 million baptisms was established; the five-year total was 2,032,634. The goal of 50,000 churches and missions by 2000 reached

46,831. Seeking to reach 60 percent of resident membership for Sunday morning worship attendance gained an average of 5,544,439. No percentage was given in the report, but the fact that SBC churches reported about 16 million membership reveals that only about one-third of the membership, probably less since the total includes many visitors, attend corporate worship each Sunday. The ideal of a regenerate church membership seems severely compromised by such a statistic. A 13 million-enrollment goal for Sunday School saw just a bit over 8 million while Discipleship Training garnered 2.2 million of a goal of 3 million. The goal of mission education fell a million short, trying for 2.3 and enrolling 1.3. A \$20 billion goal of undesignated church receipts was far surpassed with over \$27 billion in gifts received. North American mission personnel goal of 5,000 career missionaries was surpassed by 81 while the international mission goal of 5,600 reached just short at 4,946. A combined goal for these two mission agencies of involving 400,000 volunteers during the five year span fell short at 280,000. A total of \$2,231,472,997 five-year total giving for missions fell just short of the goal of \$2.5 billion.

Most of the goals were very aggressive and the shortfall does not represent regression in zeal for those actually active in Southern Baptist life. Membership statistics, however, are misleading and should be brought more into line with historic Baptist views of a disciplined membership in the local church.

In 2002, the Convention adopted an initiative designed to keep the priorities of the kingdom of God before individuals, families, and churches. Entitled *Empowering Kingdom Growth* (EKG), it is not defined as an additional denominational program but as “an appeal to spiritual renewal in individuals and churches.” Unlike Bold Mission Thrust, no quantifiable goals were set, although eventual production of such results should flow naturally from such renewed spirituality and kingdom living. The main concern is that there will be “an outbreak of kingdom

consciousness among our members and churches.” Tests of being kingdom-centered, or kingdom-conscious, are six in number, according to the report of the Empowering Kingdom Growth (EKG) Task Force. These arose from a recognition that programmatic success means nothing and statistics engender destructive vanity if the motive behind them is not consciously focused on spiritual truth and life. All progress as a convention depends on the spiritual reality of individuals, families, and churches and their “yearning for spiritual renewal and Christ-centered living.”

Ken Hemphill, who had served as president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for nine years, was selected to lead this EKG emphasis in 2003.

A Doctrinal Profile in Decline

At the beginning of the SBC in 1845, a strong theological unity characterized Baptist life in the South. First, classic orthodoxy undergirded their whole doctrinal system. A belief in biblical infallibility supported a comprehensively orthodox theology on matters of the person of Christ as the God/man, a Trinitarian view of God, and the graciousness of God as a revealing and redemptive being.

Second, historic Protestant evangelicalism settled firmly on the bedrock of orthodoxy. A clearly articulated view of salvation, emphasizing the necessity of conversion as mediated through a consciously evangelical Calvinistic view of God’s grace constituted their understanding of gospel preaching.

Third, their view of the church was solidly separatistic, distinctively Baptist. Regenerated persons, baptized by immersion upon profession of their faith in Christ as their only hope constituted the material for church membership. Forgiveness, righteousness, holiness, and eternal

life issued from Christ's perfect obedience. Members expected to be disciplined by the body to which they belonged.

Fourth, though there was no convention-wide confession of faith in the beginning, each local church had its own confession of faith and belonged to an association that had a confession of faith and took it seriously.

Theological unity, however, gradually gave way to denominational prosperity and organizational unity so that for about 50 years, from 1925-1975, increasing theological diversity was protected and even promoted as a natural and desirable outgrowth of a distinctive Baptist way of doing church. Several controversies had revealed this growing gap between the proverbial "grassroots" and the outside fringes of denominational leaders, particularly those involved in seminary education.

These earlier controversies involving Professor Ralph Elliott at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (1959-1963) and the Broadman Commentary (1970-1972) never terminated in a satisfactory settlement. In both of these cases, many conservatives felt that the real problem, a severe and destructive theological problem, smoldered deep within the Convention structure. Vested interests in power, prestige, position, and personal relations conspired to frustrate attempts to address systemic issues. Instead, the aftermath of each confrontation left the theological issue of authority poorly defined and even more poorly defended.

By 1975, in spite of several vigorous attempts to challenge and change the tendency toward increasing diversity, the divergence in doctrinal and even moral commitment was striking. The ability of the Convention structure to suppress the concerns of the discontent had been stylized to a fine art. Consequently, the frustration level, as well as determination not to be

denied, was on the rise exponentially.

The Convention minutes of 1975 reflect this frustration of the conservatives. The issue of the inspiration of the Bible as a matter of Convention affirmation grew ever larger. In that year, M.O. Owen, a North Carolina Baptist pastor, moved “that this convention . . . request the chairman [Herschel Hobbs] of the 1962-63 committee, which drafted the 1963 “Baptist Faith and Message “ statement to clarify for us . . . his understanding of the committee’s intent and meaning in the phrase . . . ‘truth without mixture of error.’” Owens wanted a slippery and manipulative interpretation of the phrase exposed and refuted, so he continued to specify in his motion, “Does this refer to the entire Bible as ‘truth without mixture of error’ or merely that truth is without error?” The repetition of this phrase was actually used by some to avoid affirming the inerrancy of the Bible. The motion was dropped when Owens had to leave the meeting early.

Owens had been active on this issue for several years. In 1973, he, Bill Powell of the Home Mission Board, and others had formed the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship as a rallying point for men of conservative thought and to defend the theological positions stated in “The Baptist Faith and Message.” In 1971, in response to two articles that appeared in *the Baptist Program* denying inerrancy, Owens sought to get a mandate from the SBC that *The Baptist Program* provide “equal space that competent scholars may present the Convention viewpoint, which holds the inerrancy of Scripture.” This issue was referred to the Executive Committee and did not come up again at the Convention.

A strikingly sober and unyielding impasse on the issue of abortion represented the disconnect on moral issues between the two factions of the Convention in 1975. Bob Holbrook, a Texas pastor, sought for several years to lead the Convention to make a strong resolution on abortion. When he made his attempt in 1975, his presentation went immediately to the

Committee on Resolutions. They returned the following statement: “In response to the Holbrook resolution . . . and because of our concern for the widespread and irresponsible use of abortion, we remind this Convention of previous Convention actions in 1971 and 1974 on the subject of abortion, which action sets forth a high view of the sanctity of all human life, including fetal life.”

The previous actions mentioned did little to satisfy conservatives that the sanctity of “fetal” life was viewed with utmost seriousness. The 1974 resolution had self-congratulatory overtones as it referenced a previous resolution (1971) as affirming the “middle ground between the extreme of abortion on demand and the opposite extreme of all abortion as murder.” In light of the “complexities of abortion” the committee concluded that those issues had been treated “responsibly from a Christian perspective” and reaffirmed the 1971 resolution.

Abortion, along with other moral issues, constituted one element of the grievance against Convention leaders. The constant marginalization of conservative concerns, or the partial and dismissive responses given, proved to be a blessing in disguise to conservatives. While several earlier attempts at organization yielded meager results, they developed a growing number of willing dissidents and also uncovered the method couched within the Convention structure itself by which the anti-conservative hegemony could be broken.

A New Direction

With the election of Adrian Rogers as president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979, the direction of denominational doctrine and stance on cultural-social issues changed. Among the many examples that could be given, the abortion resolution of 1982 shows the radically different conviction that now gave voice to Convention positions. Speaking to both

abortion and infanticide the resolution affirmed that “all human life, both born and unborn is sacred, bearing the image of God, and is not subject to personal judgments as to ‘quality of life’ based on such subjective criteria as stage of development, abnormality, intelligence level, degree of dependency, cost of medical treatment, or inconvenience to parents.” The resolution finally asserted that “we will support and will work for appropriate legislation . . . which will prohibit abortions except to save the physical life of the mother, and that we will also support and will work for legislation which will prohibit the practice of infanticide.”

The change in the SBC public stance on worldview came steadily but with firm, aggressive, and resolute determination. The mass of conservative pastors and laymen, confused and feeling betrayed by the years of an unresponsive bureaucratic elite, found a way to make their voice heard. This change, so pervasive in every aspect of Southern Baptist internal relations as well as its witness to the world, cannot be understood apart from the convictions of two men. Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson initiated the effort for change and gave it coherence and an identifiable focus.

Pressler, born in 1930 as a Houston native, was nurtured and saved in a Southern Baptist church. He finished his prep school training and college education in New England. There he saw the destructive effects of liberal theology on what had once been spiritually vital, Bible-believing, evangelically involved churches. When he finished his legal training and eventually landed in Houston again in 1960, he soon began to learn of the Elliott controversy at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. This led to his inclusion on a theological study committee formed at Second Baptist Houston. In that context, he made a major investigation of the theological trends at Southern Baptist seminaries. In them, he found a significant presence of the same theological tendencies he believed had sapped the spiritual life from the northern churches he

had experienced. In particular he was concerned about the system of theological education that produced Ralph Elliott's *The Message of Genesis*.

Subsequent years of contact in Southern Baptist educational circles merely confirmed his fear that Southern Baptist entities were tolerating, and sometimes leading, in a path of theological destructiveness. His energetic attention to these issues combined with his teaching of college students in his church led to his "dismissal" from a college church training class.

When, in 1975, Pressler joined the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship, he learned the key to a strategy for changing the course of Southern Baptist denominational life. Baldly political in immediate manifestation, its outcome was perceived as spiritual transformation. In that relation, Bill Powell shared with him what he had learned about the structure of the Convention and the simple, long-term plan by which changes might be promoted. The plan involved the election of an inerrantist president who would use his appointive power for the Committee on Committees to initiate and perpetuate change throughout the administrative structure of the SBC. Powell's 1975 letter to Pressler proved prophetic in saying, "We feel it is a movement of God to accomplish the impossible—the turning around of this denomination. For never in history has a denomination of this size gone this far in liberalism and then reversed."³

As the strategy Pressler learned from Bill Powell became clear and appeared to be functioning predictably, an alarmed *Baptist Press* remarked on the effects. "The struggle is control . . . of the trustees of the SBC agencies and institutions. The key to that system is to control the presidency and its power to name the Committee on Committees which nominates the Committee of Boards which nominates the trustees."⁴ Given that dynamic, another observed after the 1982 Convention, "Time was when Foreign Missions night or a great message dominated the memories of those attending. Not so any longer. Now it's the presidency."⁵

It was difficult for moderates to stigmatize this method as anything other than a straightforward, honest, and an effective use of the strength of the system. As much as they disliked and feared the effectiveness of the strategy, it operated strictly within the historically honored system, constitutionally sound in every phase. They expressed their dislike for the strategy by asserting that the former loosely organized fraternalisms that controlled and forecast elections prior to 1979 were more Baptist than purposefully organized efforts to draw nurture from the system. To work with such precision over such a lengthy time to effect such great change called for an issue serious enough to be threatening, obvious enough to be widely perceived, and deep enough to call forth a sense of sacrifice and perseverance.

Paige Patterson gave theological credibility to the political strategy. Such struggles for change in institutional leadership could never be justified over the long run if the theological issues were not clear, pervasive, and pivotally important. Someone had to give voice to a clearly discernible and deeply felt issue that would put soul conviction into the political action. Because Patterson felt it deeply, saw it clearly himself, and had the training and talent for such a public challenge, it fell his lot to provide that cohesive bond.

His experience in college and seminary convinced him that reform was necessary. From personal experience and the testimony of others he knew that Southern Baptist education frequently subjected students to both negation of truth and ridicule for adhering to it. While serving as pastor from 1970-75 at First Baptist Church, Fayetteville, Ark., he not only evangelized vigorously and faithfully, but taught Bible and theology to young people and college students. He was well aware of the great diversity of intellectual and theological challenges to historic Baptist evangelicalism and trained his students to analyze as well as recognize these dangers.

Patterson endured attacks of caricature, character assassination, judgmentalism, and misrepresentation of numerous types. His activities were described by one highly visible pastor of the denomination as he echoed the suspicions of many others, as a “naked, ruthless reach for personal power that acts in such a way that any means are justified for such a prize”⁶ Though attacks on him were intense, Patterson maintained a clarity of vision about the movement that allowed its focus not to waver.

One may summarize his massive contribution into three clearly discernible areas. One, he was far and away the most sought after person in explaining the meaning of the movement in its first decade. He took advantage of each opportunity and worked tirelessly to clarify and justify the claims in preaching, public and written debate, theological journals, chapters in books, state papers, and pamphlets designed to instruct.

Two, he pressed inerrancy as the foundational issue and would not allow personalities or accusations of political envy move him aside from focus on that issue. Not only did he document departures from it, he crafted sophisticated but clear defenses of it. He was able to show that this was not his contrivance but a historically credible approach with significant theological and epistemological strengths.

Three, he countered the intrinsic theological incoherence of the moderates’ side with an emphasis on the holistic nature of Christian truth and related this concern to Baptist identity. While Patterson focused on the issue of inerrancy and its implications for truth, he did not avoid speaking to the more comprehensive implications of such authority. He was concerned about what it meant to be Christian and what it meant to be Baptist. The health of the denomination as a whole, the viability of churches and their evangelistic witness, and the comprehensive message to be preached to sinners all depended on confidence in a revelation from God as revealed in the

Bible. His argument for clarity, coherence, and comprehensiveness in doctrinal construction from Scripture was the antithesis of that view of Baptist life celebrated by the moderates.

In May 1992, Patterson was elected president of the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The massive departure of both students and faculty during the past five years had created a crisis at Southeastern that seemed insurmountable. During his tenure, Southeastern Seminary grew from a dangerously low enrollment of about 500 to nearly 2,500 and increased the number of faculty threefold. Patterson, seen at one time as one sure to destroy the Southern Baptist Convention, was elected its president in 1998 and 1999. Patterson was elected president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, June 24, 2003.

Pivotal Events in the Process

That singular event to which all historians, favorable and unfavorable to the eventual issue of it, was the election of Adrian Rogers as president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979. Prior to the Houston Convention, Patterson and Pressler had held meetings with conservative pastors and layman in at least 15 states urging them to send their full contingent of messengers to the Convention. The plan of electing a president and the benefits that would follow gave confidence that finally something could be done to overcome the marginalization of conservative concerns of the past. Pressler candidly identified one purpose of the meetings as a discussion of “ways by which we might be able to secure the elected leadership of the Convention from among those who we know are committed to biblical inerrancy.”⁷ A Pastors Conference agenda prepared the way both in personnel and strong rhetoric that led to a stunning Adrian Rogers victory over five other candidates on only one ballot. The Convention involved many confusing and highly confrontational moments over issues of doctrinal integrity and overt

political activity. The process of seeing the effects of appointive powers had begun and would not be intermitted.

Rogers decided to serve only one term. He was followed by the election of Bailey Smith, Jimmy Draper, Charles Stanley, Adrian Rogers again for a two-year term of service, Jerry Vines, Morris Chapman, Edwin Young, Jim Henry, Tom Elliff, Paige Patterson, James Merritt, and Jack Graham. In each case, with rare exceptions, the plan of seeking inerrantists for appointed positions was followed.

In 1984, several forceful challenges were issued to the conservative movement by denominational employees. At the annual SBC meeting, Russell Dilday delivered a powerful sermon clear in affirmation of biblical humility and service to Christ and rightfully antagonistic to any government intervention in the cause of the Christian gospel. Nevertheless, strongly implied that much in the conservative movement was demonic. Reaction by conservatives was strongly negative. More inflammatory than Dilday's sermon was Roy Honeycutt's "Holy War" convocation address at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He spoke about the "subversive action of inerrantists who substitute a theory about the Bible for the reality of biblical revelation." He called conservatives "Southern Baptist Judaizers" for their supposed removal of freedom from the gospel and said their autocratic and dictatorial outlook would rob Southern Baptists of a necessary and historically ennobled pluralism. He accused conservatives of being clones who "duplicate a single style of ministry and a monolithic biblical and theological system."

This fervent opposition, however, became tamer and more docile by 1986 as conservatives continued increasing their presence on boards of trustees. The Peace Committee, formed for the purpose of investigating the counter claims of the two factions of the controversy

and charged with bringing some sort of healing recommendations, made its preliminary report. This report identified significant theological diversity within the seminaries of the Convention. Soon after the report the seminary presidents met with the Peace Committee at Glorieta, N.M. After careful dialogue among themselves, the presidents issued a surprising statement that sought to defuse the alarm at the reports of the degree of theological diversity that the Peace Committee had uncovered.

The seminary presidents affirmed the supernatural origin of Christianity and its doctrines, the reality of the miracles reported in the Bible, the full inspiration of Scripture so that its 66 books “are not errant in any area of reality.” They promised a hiring policy that would include inerrantists and that they would seriously manage present faculty members to be faithful to the confessional statements of the respective schools. A leading moderate member of the Peace Committee, Cecil Sherman, was so surprised and shocked by this seeming capitulation that he resigned from his position on the Peace Committee. Later he said, “The Glorieta Statement was shameful,” and added, “For me, it was a betrayal.”⁸

Evidently some of the presidents thought it shameful also as their post-Glorieta interpretations sought to appease some members of their faculties. Randall Lolley denied that he had inerrancy of historical and scientific matters in mind but only of redemptive purpose. He also expressed his dislike for the requirement that professors sign a confession of faith and, left to his own viewpoint in the matter, he “would do away with them.” Roy Honeycutt expressed similar interpretations of the Glorieta action. Russell Dilday of Southwestern renewed his active and open resistance to the conservative movement. With this aftermath to Glorieta, what could have served as a preservative for the existing leadership became a source of deeper distrust and more

solid conviction that nothing short of sweepingly thorough change would bring resolution to the problems and, thus, the conflict.

The Opposition in Decline

Daniel Vestal, a member of the Peace Committee who showed himself to be an articulate and knowledgeable inerrantist but politically unaligned, decided to run for president of the SBC in 1989. He lost to the incumbent Jerry Vines. Feeling that Southern Baptists needed a balanced perspective from their president, Vestal decided to run again in 1990 and devoted nine-months to numerous speaking engagements in pursuit of what he viewed as an effort at reconciliation. The 1990 Convention in New Orleans elected Morris Chapman over Vestal.

Vestal saw this defeat as the end of the political effort by moderates. In August, Vestal led in the formation of an organization in 1991, became known as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). Even prior to that, however, moderates had begun to develop alternative ministry organizations. Apparently alarmed at their rapidly waning influence and the dismissal of Baptist Press employees Al Shackleford and Dan Martin, moderates began the Associated Baptist Press, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, and the Baptist Cooperative Missions Program, Inc., a funding mechanism for moderate causes. Cecil Sherman served the CBF as its first coordinator while Vestal served as its first moderator and eventually became its coordinator.

After 1990, political struggle at annual Convention time ceased as moderates conceded that in fact they had lost. Their leadership and historians that went into the CBF offered several analyses concerning this loss, but it was, in fact, seen as an objective reality. The last SBC theological institution to call a chief administrator committed to the conservative view was The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary when, in 1993, R. Albert Mohler Jr. was elected. After a

few years of intense internal strife and even violent resistance, that seminary became one of the chief exhibits as to how thoroughly the conservatives had accomplished their goals, an accomplishment surprising even to the most committed leadership.

State Convention Support

During the years of SBC denominational struggles and theological corrections, the controversy gradually moved more and more toward state conventions. State conventions began to address issues such as doctrine, friendly cooperation in the receiving of Cooperative Program funds, and whether they would align themselves with the directions of the SBC on a national level. Many state conventions became more political in attempting to elect and/or maintain conservative leadership. The election of representatives for state convention executive boards became more intentional. Each convention had to decide if they would maintain or increase their Cooperative Program support of national SBC leadership, reflecting their affirmation of the direction of the SBC. Or they had to decide to vote with their dollars, expressing their displeasure for the direction. Each state convention had to decide what percent of their Cooperative Program receipts they would keep within the state and what percent they would forward to the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville to be dispersed to national boards and agencies.

As a whole, based on Cooperative Program dollars received, the majority of state conventions either maintained their percentage support or slightly increased their support. While a slow process, state conventions have generally affirmed the theological direction and ministry emphases of the national SBC. In Virginia and Texas, new conventions have emerged. These new conventions resulted in large measure because a large number of pastors and church leaders

desired to align closer with the theological, social and organizational emphases of the national SBC. As a result, in Virginia you now have the Virginia Baptist Mission Board (old) and the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia (new). In Texas you have the Baptist General Convention of Texas (old) and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention (new).

Some state conventions have experienced their own struggles in relationship to Baptist universities, schools, hospitals, and other institutions. Perhaps some of the universities and colleges have produced the most controversy with some having a widening gap in relationships to a few instances of total severance of relationships. In many cases, state conventions pressed the agenda, while in others their institutions took the initiative. State conventions have reflected positively their concern about evangelism, church planting, missions, ministry, missionaries, and educating “their preachers” by maintaining their financial support in these areas.

Conserving the Gains

Since those decisive events of the early 90s, Southern Baptists have been engaged in a more positive program of ministry. The volatile era of correction, reaction, and struggle has given way to one of construction and creative engagement with the tasks of world missions and evangelism. Some of the results in reorganization, new program initiatives, and the content of resolutions have already been noted. A major indicator, however, of the new-modeled SBC that also seeks to profess and reclaim its original and historically tested identity is the adoption in 2000 of a revised and expanded “Baptist Faith and Message.”

In his last year of serving as Convention president, Paige Patterson appointed a “blue ribbon committee” to review the “Baptist Faith and Message” with the responsibility to report and bring any recommendations to the SBC meeting in Orlando. A revised and strengthened

confession was brought to the Convention in 2000 and, after some vigorous attempts to amend pivotal sections, the committee's recommendations were adopted. The confession represented a reclamation of historic Baptist affirmations constructed in light of several contemporary challenges. It was the natural and graceful outflow of several doctrinal issues that already had been addressed in recent Conventions.

In 1998, "The Baptist Faith and Message" Study Committee recommended the addition of a new article on "The Family." In light of many contemporary challenges to the soundness of the family unit, the nature of marriage and sexuality, the relationship of men and women to each other, and the value of unborn children, a clear and biblically based article was deemed as valid material for inclusion in a confessional statement. The issue in society called for more than just the statement of opinion by a particular convention at a particular time but was deemed to be a matter of divine revelation and necessary faith commitment. A national furor developed over the article, particularly over the statement that: "A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ."⁹ The committee and other leaders gave public support to the fullness of the article's affirmations, including its call for a husband to "love his wife as Christ loved the church" and to embrace the "God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family." This process showed that biblical authority, not mere human opinion, was operative in forming the beliefs of Southern Baptists.

Perhaps even more severe was the reaction to a resolution passed at the same Convention entitled "On the True Christian Gospel." The resolution affirmed the Bible as "complete, trustworthy, and inerrant written record of God's revelation of Himself." Affirmations of an orthodox understanding of the Trinity and the unique Sonship of Christ finally issued in the

statement affirming “the finality, sufficiency, and exclusivity of the Christian gospel and of biblical revelation as the sole source of saving truth.” When this resolution was followed in months to come by calls to pray for the conversion of Jews, Hindus, and of Muslims national attention again represented Southern Baptists as narrow and divisive bigots, spiritual kin to the grand inquisitors of Spain or the witch hunters of Puritan New England. Again, the reaction offered opportunity for many assertions of the gospel and the authority of Scripture.

Since it appeared that other theological issues loomed on the horizon for some kind of public witness, the most efficient way of addressing these would be a complete refurbishing of “The Baptist Faith and Message.” Thus, came the appointment of a new committee. A serious engagement with historical Baptist identity was underway beyond the pale of negative controversy and reactionary corrective action. The historic profile of Baptist identity would conserve the initial gains and sustain a Baptist witness into the future.

The “Baptist Faith and Message” 2000 edition indicates a positive development in orthodoxy. On the issue of divine revelation, at least three ambiguities were removed from the article on Scripture. The wording removed any hesitance on its status as true revelation, by the words “and is God’s revelation of Himself to man” in place of “is the record of God’s revelation.” The added sentence, “Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy” follows the debated phrase “truth without any mixture for its matter” to give greater certainty to the Baptist conviction of the sole authority and errorless nature of Scripture. The final sentence of the article of 1963 generated much heated debate and many misconstruals of its intent: “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted in Jesus Christ.” The possible misuse of that phrase to justify setting Christ in opposition to some of the Old Testament or even the apostle

Paul was greatly diminished by changing the sentence to read, “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.”

The confession also strengthened the doctrine of God. A possible opening for the ancient heresy of modalism was cut short by inserting “triune” into the sentence “The eternal [**triune**] God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.” This addresses, at least partially, an issue of slow declension in this article from the New Hampshire Confession to this third version of the “The Baptist Faith and Message.” The New Hampshire Confession spoke of the true God as “revealed under the personal and relative distinctions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; equal in every divine perfection, and executing distinct but harmonious offices in the great work of redemption.”

For the contemporary challenge of open theism, the confession added a new sentence affirming an old and orthodox truth, “God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures.” In addition, the phrase “all knowing” is added to the section on “God the Father.”

The 2000 edition of “The Baptist Faith and Message” relates God’s fatherhood to His providential care of all His creatures and His special fatherly care of His redeemed ones. That acknowledges His fatherhood in temporal matters but fails to mention that His fatherhood is natural and eternal reflecting an eternal relationship. He is always Father because He always begets the Son. Eternal Sonship, and, thus, eternal Fatherhood, is fundamental to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Happily, however, that truth is not denied, but implicit in the article on the Son. A positive affirmation of orthodoxy comes in this article. The former phrase, “partaking of the

nature of God and of man,” gave way to the phrase “fully God, fully man.” Wording also was added to “God the Holy Spirit,” affirming that He is “fully divine.” Perhaps some indication of the discreet personality of the Spirit and His eternal coexistence with Father and Son would strengthen this. It is implied in other articles.

The confession of 2000 marks itself off from the position of Charles Kimball, chair of the Department of Religion, Wake Forest University. Kimball, in 2003, at a break-out session at the annual meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, rejected the necessity of belief in the deity of Christ, and thus the Trinity, for a proper belief in God. He asserted that exclusivist ideas of orthodox Christians toward the Allah of Islam created an indefensible position.

Kimball positioned himself purposefully against the new “Baptist Faith and Message” and at the same time illustrated why such an affirmation must be made if Southern Baptists are to maintain a viable and aggressive conversionist stance toward the world.

Evangelicalism constitutes the second mark of Baptist identity reaffirmed in the “The Baptist Faith and Message” 2000. As without a true understanding of God in the context of biblical Christology, so without a true gospel, a church cannot exist. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their willingness to hear and tolerate “a different gospel” put them in jeopardy of being fatally deceived.

One of the most obvious and pertinent ways, therefore, to maintain Baptist identity, is to pay attention to all doctrinal issues that pertain to the gospel. A doctrine of universal sinfulness and total corruption and, therefore, a necessary condemnation unless there can be just terms of redemption is foundational to the gospel. Diluted views of sin lead naturally and inevitably to diluted views of redemption.

“The Baptist Faith and Message” in its three versions shows a slightly altered view of sin from 1925-2000. The 1925 version contains this phrase; “whereby his posterity inherit a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin, are under condemnation, and as soon as they are capable of moral action, become actual transgressors.” The phrase “in bondage to sin” is dropped altogether in favor of “his posterity inherits a nature and an environment inclined toward sin.” Also, the relationship between condemnation and actual transgression also shifted. “As soon as they become capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation.” The 1925 wording reflects more clearly the earliest and most persistent confessional teaching. The *Abstract of Principles*, the confession that governs both Southern and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminaries is vigorous in its language. The 1925 version of “The Baptist Faith and Message” borrowed some of that language: “whereby his posterity inherits a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His Law, are under condemnation, and as soon as they are capable of moral action, become actual transgressors.” Condemnation is predicated on a corrupt and vicious nature even prior to what is called “actual transgression.” The words “wholly opposed to God” in the abstract give way to “in bondage to sin” in the 1925 edition, but carried no substantial theological difference. The 2000 version does not relate condemnation to corruption of nature as clearly as earlier confessions.

A centerpiece of evangelical doctrine is justification by faith. The *Abstract*, reflective of the older tradition dominated by The Second London Confession, places justification as a separate article and emphasizes both the satisfaction and obedience of Christ. Both His death and His righteousness are emphasized as necessary to justification. The New Hampshire Confession also contains this dual emphasis (“through His own redemption and righteousness”). All three versions of the “The Baptist Faith and Message” omit the specific issue of Christ’s righteousness

and substitute a more general statement. “Justification is God’s gracious acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ.”

The 2000 version, however, in an improvement does give a discreet heading to the doctrine of justification. Also in the doctrine of the “God the Son” affirms that He “honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision et cetera.” The emphasis on substitution is foundational to a biblical and historically Baptist view of preaching the cross.

The doctrine of the church separates Baptist evangelicals from other evangelicals. Baptists have historically contended that their view of the church expresses more consistently the biblical gospel than those groups that included baptism of infants as part of their church life. While every aspect of agreement within historic Christianity gives reason for joy and fellowship, failure at a proper constitution of the church accelerates the possibility of decline. A consistent Baptist witness, therefore, will relate its doctrinal peculiarities to the broader spectrum of truth and demonstrate its consistency.

Baptist ecclesiology builds on a consistent application of the Lordship of Christ, the total depravity of all individuals born of the seed of Adam, the necessity of the new birth, the acceptability of the sinner only through justification by faith, the new covenant as the manifestation of the arrangement by which God always had saved sinners, Christ as the one who by His death effects the provisions of that covenant of redemption, and the work of the Spirit as the means by which His people are known to the world. When it involves no violation of conscience or scriptural mandate and may enhance gospel witness in the world, churches should cooperate with one another in “carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ’s Kingdom.”

“The Baptist Faith and Message” 2000 affirms all these distinctives in clear and concise terms in the articles on “The Church,” “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” “Cooperation,” and “Religious Liberty.” Baptism of none but professing believers more precisely coincides with the full biblical witness in several ways. One, it duplicates the examples that the New Testament gives of baptism. Second, its practice is directly obedient to the commands of baptism in the New Testament all the way from the baptism of John the Baptizer as a manifestation of a repentant heart (Mark 1:4) through Peter’s description of baptism as the pledge of a “good conscience” (1 Peter 3:20-22). Finally, it incorporates in a more consistent manner all the evangelical doctrines mentioned above.

The celebration of the Lord’s Supper in connection with discipline assumes one has publicly attested his life in Christ through baptism as a believer, that he properly discerns the Lord’s body, both as a historical sacrifice broken for sin and as a continuing presence through the church, and that he glories in this humiliation and sacrifice of Christ till the time that Christ comes again to give a visible display of His glory. The confession affirms this is saying, “The Lord’s Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.”

Conclusion

Baptists have historically believed that conscientious confessionalism as an expression of their belief in biblical authority and its clarity serves as the foundation for a ministry of truth-telling. This mark of identity is reaffirmed by the “The Baptist Faith and Message.” Purity and power in Baptist witness depends on the tenacity with which the biblical meaning of baptism, implying regenerate church membership, is held in light of a full confessional theology. Baptists

must insist on saying “Our distinguishing marks are meaningless without a commitment to orthodox evangelicalism.”

The combination of these theological truths as a clear mark of Baptist identity has best been displayed historically in confessions of faith. Not only have these documents served to give clear witness to the world as to who Baptists are, they seal the relationship between pastor and people as a common commitment to truth. The primary task of a minister of the gospel, and indeed the task that defines all else that he does, is the proclamation of a message.

Likewise, in its role as reflector of the wisdom, power, and grace of God, the church has as its preeminent function the proclamation, defense, and confirmation of the gospel. Of great consequence to both pastor and people is the determination that they agree on the content of the message that largely will give shape to their lives together and their mutual efforts to glorify God.

If this is true between a pastor and the local church, it is also true in a missionary fellowship of churches like the Southern Baptist Convention. Mission goals are dependent on doctrinal foundations. A confession describes the churches’ view of truth and much more. It describes also what kind of church they envision as being established through their joint efforts in propagation of the gospel. Also, it serves as a seal of trust within a large community of churches. This trust allows every adherent to that community to participate with confidence that his contribution of time, energy, spiritual gift, and money has a positive and cumulative effect. Other like-minded people, he may confidently believe, work with him toward the same end. While some resist this and believe that such conscientious adherence to a confession amounts to a narrow credalism and a usurpation of the rights of conscience under the Lordship of Christ, Southern Baptist have rejected that viewpoint. The freedom to operate with just such confidence

is the treasure for which so many worked, prayed, and hurt. A trust reestablished is a precious and godly thing.

Notes

1. Robert A. Baker, *A Baptist Sourcebook* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), p. 62.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
3. Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), pp. 63-64.
4. Baptist Press
5. Walter Shurden, ed., *Going for the Jugular* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996), p. 77.
6. Ken Chafin in typescript of a debate held at the Annual Meeting of the Religion News Writers of North America, June 6, 1981), p. 11.
7. Shurden, *Jugular*, p. 12.
8. Shurden, *The Struggle*, pp. 41-42.
9. "The Baptist Faith and Message", Article XIV (Nashville: Executive Committee, SBC, 2000).

Publications Used in Preparation and for Further Reading

Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1971-2002.

Baker, Robert A. *A Baptist Sourcebook*. Nashville, Broadman Press, 1966.

Bush, L. Russ and Nettles, Tom J. *Baptists and the Bible*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999.

Fletcher, Jesse. *The Southern Baptist Convention*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994.

Hankins, Barry. *Uneasy in Babylon*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002.

Leonard, Bill. *God's Last and Only Hope*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

Pressler, Paul. *A Hill on Which to Die*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999.

Shurden, Walter, ed. *Going for the Jugular*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996.

Shurden, Walter, ed. *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1993.

Staton, Cecil P., Jr. ed. *Why I am a Baptist*. Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1999.

Sutton, Jerry. *The Baptist Reformation*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000.

“The Baptist Faith and Message.” Nashville, Executive Committee, SBC.



4200 North Point Pkwy.
Alpharetta, GA 30022-4176

A Southern Baptist Convention entity supported by the Cooperative Program and the Annie
Armstrong Easter Offering®

For general information, call (770) 410-6000, or visit www.nambnet.

E033028A/1-03