



# SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

BAPTISTS AND UNITY

SOUTHERN BAPTISTS

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

## *Southern Baptists*

### **Pronouncement on Christian Union By the Southern Baptist Convention in Its Session, Nashville, Tennessee, May, 1914**

In view of the widespread discussion of Christian Union and the interest of Christian people generally in this great theme and in order to make clear to the world at large our position on the subject of Christian Union, and to promote the efficiency of our denominational work, the Southern Baptist Convention, assembled in Nashville, Tennessee, on May 13, 1914, adopt the following paper as an expression of the views of Southern Baptists on the subject of Christian Union and Denominational Efficiency:

This Convention rejoices in the many evidences of increasing interest in the subject of Christian union among Christian people everywhere. Many evils arise from the divided state of modern Christendom. The prayer of Jesus in the seventeenth of John and the many exhortations to unity in the epistles of the New Testament should keep us constantly reminded that this matter lay very near the heart of the Master and of His apostles.

We have deep and abiding joy in the spiritual unity and brotherhood which bind together all believers in Jesus Christ, of every name and in every clime. We are intensely grateful for that form of personal religious experience which is the priceless possession of every soul who has known the redeeming grace of God in Christ. All other distinctions among men, whether social, national or racial, are superficial in comparison with this common bond of spiritual unity through grace. We are also in hearty accord with every movement and cause in which Christians of every name may take part without doing violence to the sacred mandates of conscience and without impairing their sense of loyalty to Christ.

In setting forth this declaration of our views on Christian union, there are four things which we take for granted:

1. That all true disciples agree in accepting the Lordship of Jesus Christ as supreme and final in all matters of faith and practice.

2. That none of us desire to seek Christian union by compromise of honest convictions as to duty to Christ.
3. That in the New Testament alone do we find the sufficient, certain and authoritative revelation of His will.
4. That all alike desire to know and obey the revealed will of Christ.

In order to define our attitude to the question of Christian union, we deem it necessary to state our understanding of the gospel on the following points:

1. The relations of the individual to God.
2. The nature of the change which takes place in the individual when right relations are established with God.
3. The initial ordinance whose observance is enjoined by Christ at the outset of the renewed life.
4. The nature of the spiritual fellowship and life of the church into which the renewed man enters.
5. The relation of the church to the state and to the world at large.

It will be found that all these are vitally related to each other, and that if clearly understood they convey the message which Baptists believe to be entrusted to them for the blessing of the world.

1. The relation of the individual to God. We believe that all men are entitled equally to the direct access to God; and that responsibility and freedom are bound up together. This will be recognized by all as a moral and spiritual principle of profound and far-reaching significance. Yet it is in the closest manner connected, for good or ill, with ceremonies and ordinances which are regarded by some as mere matter of expediency or convenience. The spiritual principle, as we believe, expresses the essential nature of Christianity. Hence, it is impossible for us to accept or approve infant baptism, since it takes away from the child the privilege of conscious personal obedience to Christ. We must also refuse to accept or approve any form of proxy religion which puts priest or sacrament between the soul and God. In like manner, we are bound to disapprove of all ecclesiastical systems which set up human authorities over the consciences of those whom Christ has made free. In a word, our view of ordinances, sacraments, priesthoods, ecclesiastical system, is not due to considerations of expediency or convenience, but to the spiritual nature of Christianity itself as revealed in the New Testament.

2. The nature of the change in the individual when right relations with God are established. This is described in the New Testament as a birth from above, a renewing of the Holy Spirit, a regeneration, a partaking of the divine nature, and in other ways. It is a radical renewal of the spiritual nature of man, due to the direct action of the Holy Spirit, and always in connection with conscious acceptance of Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior. Repentance and faith are always associated with it. It is not dependent upon the use of sacraments or priestly mediation. It is a spiritual transformation which results from the direct and immediate contact of the soul with the Spirit of God. Holding as they do that this spiritual birth through the operation of God's Spirit is of the very essence of Christianity, it would be a glaring contradiction if Baptists should place their approval upon infant baptism or any other form of proxy obedience.

3. The initial ordinance of the Christian life. The reason why Baptists hold that the immersion of the believer in water, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the only true baptism may be briefly summed up. First, and chiefly, it is the express command of Christ, and the uniform practice of the Apostles. Secondly, its symbolism is due, in a very large part, to its form as immersion. Death, burial and resurrection could not be set forth symbolically by the act if the form of the ordinance were changed. The beauty, fitness and spiritual impressiveness of the ordinance as thus administered have been abundantly demonstrated by its history. Thirdly, the world's best scholars of all names and country are practically a unit in their opinion that immersion was the New Testament practice.

Our view of baptism also emphasizes in another way our intense desire to preserve the spirituality of the gospel. Baptism is, in no measure or degree, a saving ordinance. It has not the slightest efficacy in regenerating the soul. It is purely and exclusively a symbol of a spiritual renewal wrought by the Spirit of God through faith in Christ. Our chief concern, therefore, in holding our view as to baptism, is not to preserve "a mere form," or contend merely for an empty ceremony. It is rather to express symbolically through the ordinance the meaning of the spiritual life, and to practice in its observance that obedience to the command of Christ which, in principle, is the glory of discipleship.

The reason for our insistence upon the form of baptism as related to its meaning may easily be made clear to Protestant Christians. All feel a sense of the incongruity and unfitness of the Catholic practice of withholding the cup from the laity. Half the form and half the meaning are thus taken from the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. So, also, in our view of the form of baptism as a symbol of spiritual truths and facts.

In thus holding that baptism is a symbol we protect the spiritual realities symbolized from being identified with the form, and at the same

time we secure the symbol itself against the very human tendency to convert outward ceremonies into spiritual causes.

Holding as we do these Scriptural views of the ordinance of baptism and believing that Christian baptism is a necessary condition of access to the Lord's Supper, we cannot in good conscience do otherwise than uphold the divine order in our practice.

4. The church is the outward organization which conserves and propagates the spiritual principles we have outlined. Its polity and ordinances are the formal expression of the spiritual life in Christ. The equality of believers in the church is the necessary consequence of the equality of the status of men before God. That each local church is, and in the nature of the case should be, self-governing and independent is a truth inseparable from the other truth that all men are directly responsible to God. The priesthood of all believers carries at its heart the necessity for self-government in church life. The freedom of the sons of God is a freedom which requires democracy for its adequate expression.

In all that we are saying about the church, it will be seen that our emphasis is upon the spiritual nature of Christianity and upon the outward forms only as they first belong to such a religion. Our chief concern is not with ordinances and polity. Our concern is not with them at all for their own sake. We find that the New Testament prescribes two ordinances, and hence we maintain them. We find in the New Testament a form of church life adapted to the universality, simplicity and spirituality of the Christian faith. Our supreme desire is to make known to men this universal and supremely spiritual religion. When confronted with the suggestion that we abandon our position as to ordinances and polity, we have been unable to find sufficient grounds for so doing. Our unqualified acceptance of the Lordship of Jesus Christ holds us to that position. The close connection between right views as to ceremonies and the duty of conserving the spirituality and universality of the gospel reinforces our sense of loyalty to Christ. The service which we may render to civilization through the propagation of these views powerfully influences us. That they are practicably workable as well as self-consistent within themselves is shown by the marvelous growth of our people and the spread of our principles.

The complete separation of church and state is clearly the only proper relation between ecclesiastical and civil organizations. Soul freedom and civil liberty are twin blossoms on the stalk of Christian faith. A free church in a free state has become an American axiom. We rejoice in the witness our Baptist people have ever borne to this great truth, and pledge ourselves to its perpetuation through all the future.

It follows from all that has been said that as we regard the matter, the interests of Christian unity cannot be best promoted by a policy of com-

promise. Much good will come of fraternal conference and interchange of view. There will no doubt gradually arise far greater unity of conviction than exists now. But this cannot be artificially produced or made to order. A deepening and enriching of the life in Christ among Christians of all names are a prime condition. Groups of Christian bodies which stand nearest each other can first come to an understanding. The desire and prayer for the coming of Christ's Kingdom on earth will more and more intensify the spiritual unity of His people.

We have declared ourselves on those matters which enter into the question of outward or organic Christian union. We have not dwelt upon the truths and doctrines in which there is substantial agreement among evangelical Christians. We rejoice that the measure of agreement is already so great. We regret that it is not great enough to remove our separateness from brethren in Christ who bear other names.

We wish to add that pending the realization of Christian union in the ideal sense, we may resort to the principle of Christian co-operation. Many moral, social, civic and other movements invite the united effort of every lover of his fellowmen and friend of righteousness. Our modern civilization is undergoing many changes and making rapid progress in material things. Moral issues are multiplying on all hands. The moral forces of the nation are challenged as never before. We hereby avow in the most emphatic manner our desire and willingness to co-operate in all practicable ways in every cause of righteousness. We join hands with Christians of all names in seeking these common ends. We ask no one to compromise his convictions in joining us in such movements, and we ask only that our own be respected. We firmly believe that there are ways by which all men who stand together for righteousness may make their power felt without invading the cherished convictions of any fellow-worker. Mutual consideration and respect lie at the basis of all co-operative work. We firmly believe that a way may be found through the maze of divided Christendom out into the open spaces of Christian union only as the people of Christ follow the golden thread of an earnest desire to know and do His will. But, meantime, we may have the rare joy of fellowship and co-operation in many forms of endeavor wherein angels might well desire to have a part.