

# SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGY IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY



SOUTHWESTERN  
JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

## *Southern Baptist Theology in the Twentieth Century: A Denomination Coming of Age*

*David S. Dockery*  
*President, Union University*  
*Jackson, Tennessee*  
*ddockery@uu.edu*

Prior to the beginning of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845 and the establishment of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1859, John L. Dagg (1794–1884), president and professor of theology at Mercer (1844–54), was considered the most prominent theologian among Southern Baptists. Dagg both led the way for Southern Baptists and mirrored them in almost all areas of theology. The first hundred years of Southern Baptist life were largely shaped by a handful of major leaders, scholars, and theologians. Chief among these were J.P. Boyce (1827–88), Basil Manly Jr. (1825–92), B.H. Carroll (1843–1914), E.Y. Mullins (1860–1928), and W.T. Conner (1877–1952).

Two historic changes were initiated in the 1950s in Southern Baptist life in the post-Mullins/Conner era. The first of these was the open practice of historical-critical studies in the curriculum of Baptist colleges and seminaries. Such practices had been introduced in Baptist life by C.H. Toy at Southern Seminary in the nineteenth century and by W.L. Poteat at Wake Forest in the 1920s, but now this approach to reading the Bible was becoming more widespread.

The other more wide-ranging shift in SBC life was the movement toward a program-oriented approach to ministry. While the first development affected the institutions, the second influenced the churches, state conventions, and the mission boards, resulting in a movement toward a programmatic and pragmatic consensus, bringing about denominational trajectories with less theological consensus than that found during the Mullins/Conner era (1899–1952).

When the controversies over the nature of Scripture entered the public arena in 1961, 1969, and 1979, the theological understanding necessary to examine and evaluate such issues did not seem to be readily present among denominational leaders, pastors, or laypersons. The programmatic and pragmatic emphases of the 1950s provides at least one way of understanding how the denominational paradigm shifted in the SBC from the early 1950s to the late 1970s.

Theology in the post-Mullins/Conner era introduced an innovative and changing time in a denomination coming of age. During this period southern society began to take on a new shape. After World War II the New South started to emerge from its previous isolation. The agricultural economy and culture of the Old South gave way to urban and suburban structures. Populations grew and became more pluralistic, employment trends destabilized, and racial tension soared. The community patterns and expectations of the Old South were being visibly disturbed.

Southern Baptists, who at the time were located almost entirely in the deep South states, struggled to deal with these theological, cultural, and social challenges. New tensions were created; new questions were raised in this context. Southern Baptist academic life in the middle of the twentieth century wrestled with these challenging issues, particularly focused on the rise of biblical criticism. The practitioners of this new art sought to combine a belief in biblical inspiration with biblical criticism as publicly evidenced in the debates surrounding the publication of the *Message of Genesis* (1961) by Ralph Elliott, as well as the first volume of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* (1969). Both of these works openly questioned the historical reliability of the Bible and the orthodox belief related to the miracles of God.

The Southern Baptist Convention thus entered the middle years of the twentieth century divided between the progressivism that characterized the moderate leadership in denominational agencies and institutions and the popular traditionalism in most pews and pulpits. As most major denominational leadership posts were claimed by the more moderate wing of the convention, the traditionalists, in general, became more focused on their local churches and less connected to the denomination at large.

Southern Baptist leaders at this time demonstrated an openness to dialogue and interaction with other denominations and traditions, while evidencing a renewed concern for social responsibility. The most progressive wing of the SBC introduced contemporary, existential, and reader-oriented hermeneutics onto the Baptist scene. Emphasizing the ecumenical nature of the church, the moderates coalesced around the theme that "Baptist means freedom."

Many of these struggles in particular dealt not only with matters of ecumenism and hermeneutics, but with the place of Darwinism in the theological arena. Both Dale Moody (1915–91) and Eric Rust (1910–91) pioneered new explorations in the area of the relationship between theology and science. Together with others, such as Frank Stagg (1911–2011), a new theological paradigm was being forged.

Even with all of these changes and initiatives, and the ones we have listed are only intended to be examples of several others that could be included, the more traditional theological convictions held sway in numerous pulpits across the Convention. Chief among these traditionalists were W.A. Criswell (1909–2002), the legendary pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, and Herschel H. Hobbs (1907–95), the most important denominational leader of

his day and pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Even as Criswell and Hobbs, longtime friends since their days together at Southern Seminary in the 1930s, shared common commitments to biblical inspiration, the two giants often viewed the SBC through different lenses.

This issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* is devoted to an exploration of Southern Baptist theology in the second half of the twentieth century. Two significant individuals, whose voices provided shaping influences in various spheres of the SBC during this time, will explore these developments for us through a series of articles. James Leo Garrett Jr., whose teaching career influenced students for six decades at Southern Seminary, Baylor University, and Southwestern Seminary, evaluates the contributions of Hobbs. Paige Patterson, who has served as president of Criswell College, Southeastern Seminary, and Southwestern Seminary, describes the movements that shaped the SBC during the final three decades of the twentieth century. Few people have had the vantage points to observe and interpret these theological developments like Drs. Garrett and Patterson. Their own contributions have been extraordinary and are worthy of being the subjects of such explorations as those found in this issue of the journal.

It is not possible to understand the issues and challenges we face in Southern Baptist life in the second decade of the twenty-first century without understanding what took place in the SBC from the time of the adoption of the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* to the 2000 Orlando Convention where the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* was overwhelmingly affirmed. The differences in the articles on Holy Scripture, including the wording related to the Christological guide to interpreting the Bible, provide the window for understanding the theological developments in Baptist life at the end of the twentieth century. The influences of the mainline denominations on one wing of the SBC and the impact of northern evangelicalism on the other wing also provide windows for understanding this period. Dr. Garrett's articles provide insight regarding the 1963 Statement, while Dr. Patterson's contributions help us understand how the changes took place as the SBC moved toward the twenty-first century.

I am grateful for the privilege to provide this little introductory essay and am privileged to commend to you the contributions that follow from the pens of James Leo Garrett Jr. and Paige Patterson. Learning about our past will not only provide knowledge of what has gone before us, but hopefully will give us understanding and wisdom for the challenges of our day and the days to come.