

# SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGY IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY



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## *To Rejoice or Not—An Assessment*

*Paige Patterson*  
*Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary*  
*Fort Worth, Texas*  
*presidentsoffice@swbts.edu*

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,  
And do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles;  
Lest the LORD see *it*, and it displease Him,  
And He turn away His wrath from him  
(Prov 24:17-18, NKJV).

There are nobler reasons for this prohibition than that stated in the last words. But as it stands, the author reveals his knowledge of the character of the God he serves. Of course, there is a fine line between rejoicing in victory, especially if God-given, and stepping across that razor thin line to celebrating another's loss. Every moderate arraying himself against the conservatives in what Glenna Whitley, writing in *D Magazine*, styled the "Baptist Holy War," is the object of God's love and compassionate longsuffering no less than conservatives.<sup>1</sup> Who could construe rejoicing over the sorrow of one who is the object of God's love as healthy action?

While I do believe that the reality of human sin demands acceptance of the concept of a just war, I, nevertheless, cannot imagine a genuine follower of Christ as a warmonger. There was never a war without agonizing pain, incalculable loss, wrenching sorrow, and devastating heartbreak. Religious conflicts may not maim the physical body, though that has also happened, but spiritual and emotional injury can be even more traumatic. I did and do rejoice over the return of Southern Baptists to a biblical theology and Christian worldview. But that rejoicing always has to be tempered sternly with an understanding of the suffering on both sides of the aisle.

When I consider moderate foes, the ever forthright Cecil Sherman, the creative Kenneth Chafin, the gifted Duke McCall, and the amiable Milton Ferguson, I do not feel sorry for them. They and hundreds like them would not wish such condescension.<sup>2</sup> But I do regret profoundly that they, as

<sup>1</sup>Glenna Whitley, "Baptist Holy War," *D Magazine* (January 1991), [http://www.dmagazine.com/Home/1991/01/01/BAPTIST\\_HOLY\\_WAR.aspx](http://www.dmagazine.com/Home/1991/01/01/BAPTIST_HOLY_WAR.aspx). (Accessed 8 April 2010).

<sup>2</sup>Carl L. Kell, ed., *Exiled: Voices of Southern Baptist Convention Holy War* (Knoxville:

well as their wives and children, suffered. Luther, Calvin, and the Reformers were right in what they had to do, but the casualties on both Catholic and Protestant sides surely do not represent what God intended. One, of course, cannot fail to recognize that there are consequences associated with beliefs and behavior. But in the end, we are all reduced to the plea of the malefactor on the cross, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Please permit then the salute of a dying soldier to other noble warriors who fought well though in a different uniform.

Religious wars often divide families. Wayne Ward, cousin to my wife and professor of theology for a lifetime at Southern Seminary, taught a summer class in contemporary theology at New Orleans Seminary. This class remains my favorite above any I ever took. Love has remained in our family, though Ward walked on a different side than the rest of our family. Perhaps while such division is tragic on either side of the divide, I tend to find it more distasteful among those claiming to be people of the book, especially when it involves me.

### Thanksgiving

That said, many were the blessings of God for Southern Baptists. First, six seminaries are now all headed in the same direction just as a plethora of other institutions founded by Bible-loving believers had been virtually lost to the faith and now have been pulled back from the edge of fatal compromise by a free people determined to set the course of the schools they generously supported. Today, I am not aware of a faculty member who questions the inerrancy of the Bible at any of the six seminaries. Wide ranges of interpretation are discernible and debate is sometimes vigorous. But all appear to be orthodox, evangelical, Baptist followers of Christ.

There were two bonuses. In the heat of the controversy, there was little hope of salvaging more than five of the state Baptist colleges and universities. Astonishingly, fifteen or more of these institutions have remained Baptist to the core or have returned to the faith after straying for a brief time. But there was more.

Beginning in September 1962, Luther Rice Seminary opened in Florida. Ahead of its time in various forms of distance education and intensely unpopular among its accredited, more avant-garde sister Baptist seminaries, thousands enrolled across the years. Because LRS was led altogether by men committed to the Bible, she exercised an influence on the conservative revitalization far beyond what her resources would have dictated.

The University of Tennessee Press, 2006). This volume contains a number of testimonies from known and obscure moderates who felt keenly their exodus from Southern Baptist life. Another such volume, which appeared in 1994, contained essays written by disaffected former professors at Southeastern Seminary: Thomas A. Bland Jr., ed. *Servant Songs: Reflections on the History and Mission of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1950-1988* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994).

In 1969, W. A. Criswell, far-famed pastor at the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, established The Criswell Bible Institute, modeled much after Moody Bible Institute. Eventually, the school became The Criswell College. An astonishingly large number of the leaders of the conservative movement in the SBC came from the faculty and graduates of this fledgling college.

In 1971, B. Gray Allison, a widely known professor of evangelism at New Orleans Seminary, led in the establishment of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, located first in Little Rock and then associated with Adrian Rogers and the Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, with an extension campus in Schenectady, New York. Well-known for their emphasis on witness and personal evangelism, Mid-America joined with the Criswell College and Luther Rice Seminary to provide for the denomination pastors who did not compromise on the Word of God. Any fair estimate of the conservative renaissance in the SBC would have acknowledged the profound impact of these schools.

In the midst of this controversy, Southern Baptists found themselves suddenly in the bright lights of the national media. With more than 30,000 churches and twelve million confessing members, Southern Baptists had usually operated beneath the radar of the general public. None were prepared to find themselves center stage, and few handled the press well. All of our controversies had taken place beneath the domes of our own teapots. Fiery rhetoric and vigorous pulpit-shattering gestures were followed by coffee with the opponents and boisterous laughter about the goldfish with which some teen had seeded the baptistery waters. On the big stage of history, we stumbled often. For example, in 1984 Roy L. Honeycutt preached a sermon at Southern's convocation on "holy war."<sup>3</sup> Within minutes of his conclusion the secular press contacted the president of the Criswell College, then a young man in his mid-thirties, for comment. Instead of simply saying, "I cannot comment. I was not there," the combatant replied that this was simply "another case of denominational fascism." While my reply was neither godly nor in any sense helpful, it meant paychecks for paparazzi and was promptly exhibited in both secular and ecclesiastical media throughout the United States. The letter of apology to Honeycutt, who was less than innocent in this incident, was, of course, carried by only one paper, though copied to many. Hundreds of other examples could be cited, but the point is made with my own faux pas.

This new notoriety was not without significance. As time progressed, so hopefully did wisdom come in handling representatives of the press. Southern Baptists became widely known, and often that was a curse when conservatives were painted with the brush of scrappy pugilists out to return society to the Ordovician era. But there were also remarkable blessings.

<sup>3</sup>Roy L. Honeycutt Jr., "To Your Tents O Israel!" 28 August 1984, "Document 29: Roy Honeycutt's 'Holy War' Convocation Address at Southern Seminary," in *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War*, ed. Walter B. Shurden and Randy Shepley (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 124-34.

Sometime in the mid-eighties, Michael Bryan called the president of The Criswell College in Dallas, explaining that he had a contract with Random House to write a book on evangelicals for the general public. Bryan confessed that, though he had some good ideas, he did not know these people from the inside. Having noted an article about the president at Criswell College in the Houston paper and charmed by the unassailable fact that the president was a cowboy and of all things that he wore boots every day, Bryan had concluded that this picture was certainly typical of backwoods evangelicals. He could “feel” this book coming together as he asked to come to the college for six months and literally live among the students and professors. Shocked to be immediately granted his request, Bryan informed the college president that he was an atheist and a graduate of Cornell.

Criswell College president Paige Patterson opened the doors of the school, no strings attached. I could attend classes, trustee meetings, prayer meetings, go out with students and professors on their evangelizing assignments, take a mission trip overseas. But there was a catch of sorts. Patterson confided that I would inevitably become a project at the school, “prime meat for the headhunters . . . We have some Green Berets around here,” he announced gleefully. “How will you handle it when you walk into a prayer meeting and twenty people are on their knees praying for your everlasting soul?”<sup>4</sup>

The inside cover of the book prepares the reader for the literary journey to follow.

Fifty million Americans call themselves evangelical Christians—people who believe the Bible is the inspired word of God. Politically, they are known as the religious right. In *Chapter and Verse: A Skeptic Revisits Christianity*, author Mike Bryan, a lapsed Protestant on the religious left, enrolls as a student at Criswell College, a leading evangelical Bible school in Dallas.

What Bryan found there surprised him and will fascinate true believers, agnostics, and even atheists: Criswell was anything but a haven for fundamentalist hypocrites, shysters, or their pathetic dupes. In fact, its students and faculty concur with their less-devoted brethren that the shenanigans of televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart or Jim and Tammy Bakker are an embarrassment to any informed Christian. Instead, what Mike Bryan discovered at Criswell were steadfast, unwavering followers of serious, intelligent religious tenets determined to hold the line against accommodation, be it in the form of “liberal” Christian

<sup>4</sup>Mike Bryan, *Chapter and Verse: A Skeptic Revisits Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1991), back cover.

doctrines, New Age journeys, or burgeoning deism—wherein God is a “warm fuzzy” who makes no demands, leaves us alone, and in the final analysis, doesn’t matter. These religious purists see Jesus Christ as the only true way and light. And pity us for not seeing this light, too.<sup>5</sup>

When Bryan’s volume appeared in 1991, it contained some criticism. But on the whole, the monograph was an endorsement that the Criswell College could not have purchased with millions spent in advertising. Toward the end of the book, Bryan notes,

Then he [Patterson] caught me off-guard and introduced me from the dais. “Mike’s an atheist”—momentarily ashamed, I called out “Agnostic!” by way of correction, and he accepted that—“and I know he won’t mind when we pray for him. He’s a dear person, and many of us have come to love him.”

I was annoyed—with myself. Patterson had caught me off-guard with his “atheist” designation and induced me into the semantic emendation, but he was right. We’re functional atheists, no matter what the polls show. And his sally convinced me of one thing. I’d never attempt to put one over on Paige Patterson. I had always assumed that his unflinching kindness to me during my term at his college was to some extent political. I was writing a book about Criswell College, after all, for a partially secular audience, presumably. Why would he want to antagonize me? But I had never taken his generous and undogmatic attitude, shared by almost everyone else at the school, as *mainly* calculated. It was a Christian attitude, and it was real. I give myself credit for knowing the difference. I took his introduction of me as the pet atheist at Criswell to be another mark of his irrepressible mischievousness and genuine interest in all folks and their diverse ways—a mark of his personality, not his faith. The same holds true for Danny Akin, Jim Parker, Keith Eitel, and just about everyone else I’ve mentioned in this narrative. One thing I had learned at Criswell: theological dogmatism can be passionately espoused by personalities who are not in the least doctrinaire.

This had puzzled me. I had asked several people at the school why, if they believed I was so wrong in my beliefs I am going to hell, I didn’t feel this condemnation on anything but an intellectual level. Why wouldn’t it interrupt a friendship and, for that matter, the whole flow of living in the wide world in which most of the people encountered would also be going to hell.

Patterson answered me this way: “While there is a clear divide, as far as we are concerned, between those who are saved

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., inside book jacket.

and those who are lost, the clear divide is purely the grace of God. It is no matter of character within us that makes us superior to anybody. We just don't see any big difference, we really don't. We are both sinners who have rebelled against God, and just by His precious grace I happen to be forgiven. I have *accepted* His forgiveness.

'Also, and however falteringly we follow the faith we claim to believe, we do believe that every individual, lost or saved, is the handiwork of God—to get technical, he is the *imago dei*—the image of God. And as such this person is the object of God's most intense love, and that being the case, for me to be anything other than totally accepting, not to reach out to him with every fiber of my own being, would be to deny the faith. It would be failure to extend to others the same kindness and love that God has extended to me.

'One of the things that happens to you in conversion is that there's a fundamental change in your attitude toward people when the Lord moves into your life. You don't any longer see them as the girl who sells you the hamburger or the guy who changes your tires. You see each of them as very precious people, each of who has a fascinating personal story. You get to where it's fun to be with them, see what makes them tick.'<sup>6</sup>

Grateful for the assessment and for both hardback and paper editions of the book, I have to say that the opportunity to attempt in a faltering fashion to show the love of Christ and to speak the gospel of Christ to this man and to many other secularists was to me the most important consequence of the confrontation. In 2003, Bryan published a fascinating novel with Pantheon Books, a division of Random House. The intriguing title of the book is *The Afterword*.<sup>7</sup> The copy he sent to me is inscribed as follows. "To Paige, from a guy who's still trying to get it right! Mike Bryan." As I read the novel, I thought I discerned a man who had become a follower of Jesus. One night over supper in New York City, I asked if I read it right. Mike smiled broadly and changed the subject.

During the convention presidency of Tom Elliff (1996 to 1998), the opportunity arose to accomplish a critical task that conservatives had reserved almost to the end of the contest. The confessional document reflecting Southern Baptists is called the Baptist Faith and Message. As such, the confession was first adopted in 1925 as a revision of the New Hampshire Confession of Faith of 1833.<sup>8</sup> Emended again in 1963, under the direction of denominational leaders and theologians, some of whom leaned toward neo-

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 312-14.

<sup>7</sup>Mike Bryan, *The Afterword* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).

<sup>8</sup>William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1969),

orthodox perspectives, the document was vague to conservatives at several points.

Tom and Jeannie Elliff have a large family and strong convictions about the nature of the family. Elliff had noted the absence of an article on the family in the Baptist Faith and Message. In 1997, Elliff appointed a committee who were charged with bringing an amendment on the family for the convention to approve in 1998.<sup>9</sup> The following amendment was hotly debated at the 1998 convention in Salt Lake City but overwhelmingly passed by the messengers, adding Article XVIII to the confession.

### **Article XVIII. The Family (1998 Amendment)**

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood or adoption.

Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel for sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. 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. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.

Children, from the moment of conception, are a blessing and heritage from the Lord. Parents are to demonstrate to their children God's pattern for marriage. Parents are to teach their children spiritual and moral values and to lead them, through consistent lifestyle example and loving discipline, to make choices based on biblical truth. Children are to honor and obey their parents.

<sup>9</sup>The committee chaired by Anthony Jordan of Oklahoma included Bill Elliff, Richard Land, Mary Mohler, Dorothy Patterson, O.D. "Damon" Shook, and John Sullivan.



Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-25; 3:1-20; Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 1:26-28; Psalms 51:5; 78:1-8; 127; 128; 139:13-16; Proverbs 1:8; 5:15-20; 6:20-22; 12:4; 13:24; 14:1; 17:6; 18:22; 22:6,15; 23:13-14; 24:3; 29:15,17; 31:10-31; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 9:9; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 5:31-32; 18:2-5; 19:3-9; Mark 10:6-12; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; Ephesians 5:21-33; 6:1-4; Colossians 3:18-21; 1 Timothy 5:8,14; 2 Timothy 1:3-5; Titus 2:3-5; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Peter 3:1-7.<sup>10</sup>

Just when the secular press found other stories more interesting, the phrase, "A wife is to submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband," unleashed the press in a manner resembling the eruption of Krakatoa. Dorothy Patterson, who, with committee input and approval, largely penned the commentary provided to the convention participants at the time of the vote, anticipated this, remarking in the commentary:

Doctrine and practice, whether in the home or the church, are not to be determined according to modern cultural, sociological, and ecclesiastical trends or according to personal emotional whims; rather, Scripture is to be the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).<sup>11</sup>

Southern Baptists were back in the news, and seemingly every feminist in the world was on the warpath. Like it or hate it, Southern Baptists were now on record with an article of faith strongly supporting the home. This feat could not have transpired under the old regime and is, therefore, to be understood as a direct product of the conservative renaissance.

The next year in Atlanta, T.C. Pinckney, an Air Force Brigadier General and war hero from Virginia, proposed a motion that the president of the SBC appoint a blue-ribbon committee to revise and update the entire Baptist Faith and Message since this had not been done since 1963.<sup>12</sup> In turn, the recommendations of this committee, brought to the SBC in annual session in Orlando, Florida, were adopted on June 14, 2000.<sup>13</sup> Several factors

<sup>10</sup>Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article XVIII (1998 Amendment).

<sup>11</sup>"Report of the Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee," in *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, 1998), 81; "Report of Committee on Baptist Faith and Message," (June 1998), [on-line]; accessed 9 April 2010; available from <http://www.utm.edu/staff/caldwell/bfm/1963-1998/report1998.html>; Internet.

<sup>12</sup>President Patterson appointed the following committee: Adrian Rogers (chair), Max Barnett, Steve Gaines, Susie Hawkins, Rudy Hernández, Charles S. Kelley Jr., Heather King, Richard D. Land, Fred Luter, R. Albert Mohler Jr., T.C. Pinckney, Nelson Price, Roger Spradlin, Simon Tsoi, and Jerry Vines.

<sup>13</sup>Two excellent volumes provide analysis of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Charles S. Kelley Jr., Richard D. Land, and R. Albert Mohler Jr., eds., *The Baptist Faith & Message* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2007); and Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, eds., *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*

necessitated revisiting the confession. Most Baptists would agree that truth never changes but the issues confronting society, and even the church, present new challenges to be addressed.

The fact that Southern Baptists began on the wrong side of the slavery issue, accompanied by a tragic history of harboring and perpetuating racism, necessitated a clear statement about the teachings of the Bible regarding race. Statements on both race and gender were added to Article III, "Man." The "openness of God" had become an issue, so Article II, "God," addresses the extent and fullness of God's knowledge. Article VI, "The Church," specifies that pastors will be men. Article XV, "The Christian and the Social Order," addresses the abortion debate by adding a strong affirmation for the sanctity of human life.

Article I, "The Scriptures," represented a major alteration and predictably attracted the most vigorous and prolonged debate. The committee developing the 1963 revision was influenced by growing neo-orthodox perspectives on Scripture.<sup>14</sup> They had added two phrases, which, because of ambiguity and with the two phrases added by moderates as cover for introducing questions about the reliability and authority of the text, were the issues that leaders of the conservative renaissance most wanted clarified. These can best be appreciated by the following comparison:

### 1925

*We believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds and religious opinions should be tried.*

### 1963

*The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure*

(Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007). In the foreword of the latter volume, Susie Hawkins notes, "Given this charge, the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* study committee was formed. It was my privilege to be a part of this committee and to be present for all of its meetings. Dr. Patterson appointed a committee representative of Southern Baptist life. It was diverse not only in gender but also in ethnicity, representing the African-American, Hispanic, and Asian communities. It included theologians, pastors, a Baptist Student Union director, a state convention's Woman's Missionary Union and Women's Ministry director, seminary presidents, an agency head, and laypersons. Only persons committed to the inerrancy of Scripture were appointed to the committee," vii.

<sup>14</sup>See Paige Patterson, *Anatomy of a Reformation: The Southern Baptist Convention 1978-2004* (Fort Worth: Seminary Press, 2004), 16.

of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. *The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.*

## 2000

*The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.*

The Committee affirmed that the Bible is a record of God's revelation, but they also realized that such language lent itself to a bifurcation of the Bible—a division between what is accepted as divine revelation and what is suspect. They also believed that the criteria by which the Bible should be interpreted is Christ, but they knew that what is known of Christ is from Scripture. Further, they had seen this phrase employed to negate certain passages that had made moderates socially uncomfortable as they tried to allege that Jesus would somehow have taught differently from what is recorded in the Bible on these points. Moreover, these 1963 insertions were not found in the New Hampshire Confession or the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message.

The most memorable moments in my ministerial life are easily identifiable. The opportunity to be spiritual midwife and assist, either through individual personal witness or through public proclamation, as people experience the New Birth—this joy is one my soul craves and to me is more fulfilling and astonishing than anything else. Only two other incidents come close, and they both occurred at meetings of the SBC. The first is the one-hour debate on the night of June 15, 2000, in Orlando, Florida. Scheduled for thirty minutes, the time was twice extended. Although apparently the mind of the messengers was to approve, unamended, the report of the Baptist Faith and Message committee, every opportunity was provided for messengers to debate the issue. As presiding officer and president of the convention, I did my best to exercise fairness and justice. The chairman of the committee, Adrian P. Rogers, assisted by committee members Charles S. Kelley Jr., Richard D. Land, and R. Albert Mohler Jr. spoke with brilliance

and perception that was as close to inspiration as I have ever heard. Clearly, opponents would never agree. I leave the resolution of that debate to all who will listen to the discussion.<sup>15</sup>

The other most memorable night unfolded on June 17, 1997, in the meeting of the SBC in Dallas, Texas. In every annual meeting of the SBC, each of the six seminaries must give a public report. On that night, a document composed by Al Mohler, with the encouragement and full consent of the other five presidents, entitled “One Faith, One Task, One Sacred Trust,” was distributed to the messengers.<sup>16</sup> Ken Hemphill, the president of Southwestern Seminary, had added his own touch by arranging for the desk and chair used by B. H. Carroll, the first president of Southwestern Seminary, to be placed on the platform as the setting for this historic moment. After the presentation of the document, each of the presidents—William Crews of Golden Gate Seminary, Charles Kelley of New Orleans Seminary, Mark Coppenger of Midwestern Seminary, Ken Hemphill of Southwestern Seminary, and Paige Patterson of Southeastern Seminary—each sat in Carroll’s chair to sign the document. Unfortunate illness and hospitalization prevented Al Mohler of Southern Seminary from being present, but Danny Akin, dean of Southern’s School of Theology, signed in Mohler’s behalf.

What transpired next was never anticipated. When the first president sat and began to sign, the thousands of messengers stood spontaneously and began sustained applause, which continued until all six presidents had signed and for a total of almost fifteen minutes. The presidents understood clearly that the applause was not for them. This was an expression of profound gratitude to God for what was viewed by the messengers as the culmination of all that for which conservatives had sought. This event, coupled with the adoption of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 three years later, can be considered the climax of the conservative renaissance in Southern Baptist life.

### **The Devil Never Sleeps—What Is the Future?**

The dawning of the twenty-first century appeared to be a hopeful era for Southern Baptists. Moderates left the train, some to the newly formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and some to more liberal denominations. A confident peace seemed prevalent, and the day had come to pursue the stated goal of the conservative renaissance—the evangelization of North America and the world. The spurs to the flanks of the SBC mare had never been orthodoxy for orthodoxy’s sake but orthodoxy as a launch pad for the gospel.

<sup>15</sup>Audio and video cassettes of the debate are available for purchase—see <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc00/home2000.html>.

<sup>16</sup>See Appendix. Also included in Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 478–80; available on-line in the “Baptist Confessions and Doctrinal Statements” of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry, a research institute of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at <http://www.baptistcenter.com/onefaithonetaskonesacredtrust.html>.

Baptists and Anabaptists have been nothing if not aggressively evangelistic and missionary.

But the new orthodox consensus was scarcely in place before flood waters of change threatened. The massive resources of the SBC were now the object of much interest from many individuals and groups. Multiple interests began pulling at the structure of the convention and at its churches as though they were a piece of taffy candy. To mention a few, Baptist churches by virtue of their autonomy are easy targets for some strands of the emergent movement. A new form of ecumenism threatens the distinctives of Baptist doctrine, especially in ecclesiological matters. As Harvey Cox points out in his monograph on charismatics, their infiltration of other denominations, if only partly successful theologically, has been overwhelmingly adopted in much contemporary music.<sup>17</sup> The remarkable history of Calvinists and non-Calvinists working together in SBC life has become strained with the advance of Reformed ideas and even ecclesiology in the convention. How divisive this becomes remains to be seen. As moderates predicted, the conservative victors have had a difficult time working with one another once the moderates departed. Concerns, sometimes petty and sometimes serious, have divided leaders.

Other concerns, which to my mind are much more serious and threatening, begin with a failure adequately to seek the face of God. Associated with this failure is a loss of the sense of what is holy. I am less than certain that their remains in most of our churches the discernment to distinguish between the holy and the profane. Some of this arises in reaction to legalism, real and perceived, but much of it seems to confuse the Jesus of faith and the popular culture, which somehow can both be tolerated within the body of Christ. Roger Scruton, as a critic of contemporary culture, has written one of the most unpopular but incisive assessments, which all would do well to read. Scruton, in a chapter entitled “Yoofanasia,” observes:

It must by now be apparent that high culture in our time cannot be understood if we ignore the popular culture which roars all around it. This popular culture is pre-eminently a culture of youth. There is an important reason for this, and my purpose in this chapter is to bring this reason to light—to show why it is that youth and the culture of youth have become so visible, in the world after faith.

Among youth, as we know it from our modern cities, a new human type is emerging. It has its own language, its own customs, its own territory and its own self-contained economy. It also has its own culture—a culture which is largely indifferent to traditional boundaries, traditional loyalties, and traditional forms of learning. Youth culture is a global force, propagated through

<sup>17</sup>Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo, 1995), 139-57.

media which acknowledge neither locality nor sovereignty in their easy-going capture of the air-waves; “one world, one music,” in the slogan adopted by MTV, a channel which assembles the words, images and sounds which are the *lingua franca* of modern adolescents.<sup>18</sup>

Later, Scruton becomes more specific.

From this there follows the iconisation of the totem. Singers, groups or lead performers are not constrained by musical standards. But they are constrained by their totemic role. They must be young, sexually attractive, and with the plaintive voice of youthful desire—like the girly group called All Saints. Of course, popular musicians have always been idolized, as were Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Cliff Richard. But those old-style icons grew up in time, passed over from adolescence to adulthood, became mellow, avuncular and religious. The modern pop star does not grow up. He grows sideways, like Mick Jagger or Michael Jackson, becoming waxy and encrusted as though covered by a much-repainted mask. Such spectral creatures haunt for a while the halls of fame, trailing behind them the ghosts of their vanished fans. And then, overnight, they disappear.

Modern pop stars and groups often refuse to answer to a normal human name, since to do so would compromise their totemic status. The name must be an icon of membership. Sting, R.E.M., Nirvana, Hanson, Madonna, U2 are like the species names assumed by tribal groups, in order to clarify their social identity, with the difference that is not biological species that are invoked by the titles, but glamorized human types.<sup>19</sup>

Having less of an authentic historical perspective is another serious problem. There is little memory about the sacrifices of four centuries of Baptist leaders; and, in fact, most seem not to even know the names of their progenitors. The Baptist triumph of religious liberty for all has been so prevalent in America that the present generation cannot recall the day when persecution came from every direction. Fewer pastors seem to be calling out the called. The age of the internet freeway to quick access to knowledge inspires fewer to seek the steadying influence of years of study and guidance in Bible college or seminary, and the general tendency toward shorter degree programs and the overall dumbing down of pastoral preparation, as well as the shallowness of sermonettes all raise serious questions about what the churches will look like in twenty years. “Networks” become quasi-denominations and

<sup>18</sup>Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2000), 105.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 111.

seek the loyalty and financial support of affiliated churches, sometimes even providing pastors with sermons ready to preach like prefab buildings. I could go on.

So what of the future for Southern Baptists? Am I concerned? Always. Am I profoundly concerned? Never. Here is why. I am a West Texas country preacher and not a historian. But I have lived nearly forever and have read a few books along the way. Here is how I see it.

First, Baptists need God, but God will do just fine without Baptists. He will coach whichever team desires to know His mind and to do His will. But He has promised never to leave Himself without a witness, and should Baptists wish to be a part of that plan He will welcome them.

Second, fads rise and fall with increasing frequency. Much of what churches face as new and innovative will soon move out to sea, replaced without doubt by other new fads on steroids. Wood, hay, and stubble are always consumed by the fire of Christ's gaze; but gold, silver, and precious stone are only purified thereby. So it has been and ever it will be.

A Southern Baptist—even if he lives in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan; Horseheads, New York; Gun Barrel City, Texas; or Front Sight, Nevada—cherishes his freedom; but many have some difficulty making accurate distinctions between their personal desires and God's will and purpose. Commoner roots and a rambunctious and torrid history make them awfully puckish—exactly the right word, I think, since many Baptist gatherings resemble nothing if not a hockey contest. Excessive activity racing to and fro in following an object of relatively little significance, frequent confrontations, occasional penalties, and rare scores characterize both endeavors. But both tend to bring out the crowds.

Third, there is a generational cycle to the history of the church. Revival fires are lit by one generation, stoked and admired by another, and, as often as not, neglected and even ignored by a warm third generation. Then arises a cold generation, who, in the search to be warm, discovers the barely simmering coals of former generations. They began to pray that the billows of the Holy Spirit will blow on those embers, and soon the fire rages again.

Finally, Southern Baptists do have a generation gap in leadership due to the era of wandering from the faith in our seminaries. That admitted, the younger generation is amazing. I am not speaking of those who seem ubiquitous based on the turmoil they generate and who spend inordinate time meditating on their personal whims on the blogs. Rather I speak of a generation of young adults with a will to take Christ to the nations regardless of sacrifice. They love the Word of God, desire to teach its message, and desire holiness before God. They will grow in grace, prayer, sanctification, and knowledge. The future is in good hands.

### Conclusion

Numerous assessments of the conservative renaissance in the Southern Baptist Convention, written from widely disparate perspectives, already line the shelves of the library of the Baptist Historical Archives in Nashville, Tennessee. This brief overview suffers along with all such efforts by way of its proximity to the events. All sources will doubtless be consulted by future historians, who can attempt, having been removed from the emotions and passions of the present, to assess the motives, actions, and results of all the players on the SBC stage.

Every generation has its own battles, and not infrequently, resurrects conflicts from the past. The next few generations of Baptists, being a free people, will debate fiercely. But the reliability and authority of God's Word that guided Baptist life for the first 100 years of the Southern Baptist Convention will likely now guide the next 100 years if Jesus delays His return. Those who led the movement are retiring or transferring residence to a happy clime where God's Word is never contested. None to my knowledge regrets what was done, though hindsight might dictate some changes of method and action. Pastors, evangelists, and missionaries determined to get the saving gospel of Christ to all people will never consistently emerge from the framework of those who question the truthfulness of the Bible, whatever their virtues. We have given our children, grandchildren, and sons in the ministry a chance to live under and to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ by preserving the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. May the grace of God attend them and keep them faithful. We gladly pass the torch to the next generation!



## Appendix

### **One Faith, One Task, One Sacred Trust: A Covenant Between Our Seminaries and Our Churches**

For over 135 years, the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention have looked to their seminaries for the training and education of their ministers. These six schools were established and undergirded by Southern Baptists in order that our churches may be served by a more faithful ministry.

This is a critical moment in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention and for our seminaries. The six seminaries serving this denomination bear a precious and perishable responsibility on behalf of our churches; for we are entrusted with those who will be their ministers, pastors, preachers and servants.

Looking to the dawn of the twenty-first century, we hereby restate and reaffirm our commitment to the churches we serve, to the convictions those churches hold and honor and to the charge we have received on their behalf.

#### **One Faith**

The church of Jesus Christ is charged to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Our seminaries, charged with the theological formation of ministers, must take this charge as central and essential to our mission. In an age of rampant theological compromise, our seminaries must send no uncertain sound.

Let the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention know that our seminaries are committed to theological integrity and biblical fidelity. Our pledge is to maintain the confessional character of our seminaries by upholding those doctrines so clearly articulated in our confessions of faith; by teaching the authority, inspiration, inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible; by maintaining the purity of the Gospel and affirming the identity of Jesus Christ, by whose blood we have been redeemed and in whose name alone salvation is to be found; and by proclaiming with boldness the precious and eternal truths of God's Word.

In this we stand together, and we stand with our churches. We understand that those who teach take on an awesome responsibility and will receive from our Lord a stricter judgment. We stand before this convention and our churches to declare that we stand together in one faith, serving our Lord Jesus Christ.

#### **One Task**

Our mission is to prepare ministers for service. We cannot call ministers nor appoint them to service. Ministers, called by God and commissioned by our churches come to us in order that they may through our seminaries receive learning, training and inspiration for service. Preachers, evangelists, missionaries and those who minister throughout the life of the churches

come to our seminaries with the hope that they will leave their programs of study better equipped, armed and matured for the faithful exercise of their calling.

Our mission is to remain ever true to this task. We declare our unflinching resolve to provide the very finest programs of theological education for ministry. We will match theological fidelity to practical ministry, passion to practice, vision to calling and honor to service. This is our task.

### **One Sacred Trust**

Our schools are not generic institutions for religious studies. We are the six theological seminaries serving the Southern Baptist Convention. We belong to you; we belong to the churches of this Convention. We are proud to carry your charge, and we declare our fidelity to you as a sacred trust. In this trust we stand before the Southern Baptist Convention, and we stand together.

Through the trustees elected by this Convention, our churches must hold our seminaries accountable to the faith once for all delivered to the saints, to the essential task of training and educating ministers and to the sacred trust which unites our seminaries and our churches.

As the presidents of your seminaries, we declare our unbending and fervent resolve to uphold all of these commitments. We will lead our institutions so that no harm shall come to your students and ministers; so that they will be rooted and grounded in the truth; so that they will be trained as faithful and effective preachers and teachers; so that they will bring honor to the church and not dishonor; and so that we shall be able to give a good answer and receive a good report when we shall face that stricter judgment which is to come.

This is our pledge, our resolve, our declaration.

*Signed in the presence of the messengers to the 140<sup>th</sup> session of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Dallas, Texas, June 17, 1997.*