



**A Personal Perspective
on Theological Renewal
and on the
Direction S.B.C.
Leadership is Now
Taking in Cooperative
Mission and Ministry**

"He that cometh to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him"
(Heb. 11:6).

"Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

"And this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith"
(1 John 5:4).

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God..." (2 Tim. 3:16).

It would seem unnecessary in the present conservative environment to write anything concerning the theological renewal in the Southern Baptist Convention. There still appears, however, to be a need for some who embrace the same view of scripture to be reassured of the motivation which drove the conservative resurgence.

The fundamental concern of Southern Baptist conservatives, as I have understood who we are, is the very simple conviction that we cannot produce the fruit of our faith unless we nourish the root of our faith. Any departure from a complete reliance upon the words of the Bible as being inspired by God would leave Christians without adequate grounds for faith. There has been a binding persuasion that any slippage allowed to persist at this critical theological point would ultimately result in the fail-

ure to carry out the essential mandate of the Bible, which is, of course, the Great Commission given the church by Christ to preach the Gospel and make disciples throughout all nations.

It is my opinion that Southern Baptist Convention leadership has never been more committed than it is now to mobilizing people and resources and to training and equipping them to help complete the task of the Great Commission. If this is true, then the outcome of the theological upheaval in our Convention has had a positive ring to it and gives us hope that good has and will come of it. It is my intention first to demonstrate that there are strong indications of thorough-going commitment to the Great Commission task on the part of current Southern Baptist Convention leaders.

It is the general attitude among those who took the conservative viewpoint that the controversy was primarily theological and that the debate over the authority and inerrancy of the Bible is not an issue to be dealt with further. Southern Baptist leadership in our seminaries, boards and agencies is now committed to this position and the work of each is being prospered.

An Encouraging Glance at SBC Mission Advances During 1979-1999

A Bold Mission Thrust emphasis was launched by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979 with goals aimed at reaching the rest of the world with the gospel by the year 2000. **Statistics reveal** that we have done well toward achieving these goals and that substantial advances continue to be made in significant areas of Southern Baptist ministries and missions.

The Bold Mission Thrust goals **have been more engaged in recent years than at any time since 1979**. This is **evident from the following comparisons** for the twenty-year period from 1979 through 1999.

The 1999 S.B.C. Convention reports indicated that at the end of 1999 we had **5,970 more churches than in 1979** (1999 total 41,374); **2,536,760 more members** (15,728,739 1999 total); **1,918 more IMB career missionaries** (4,815 total); and, **2,220 more NAMB career missionaries** (5,025 total).

The **Cooperative Program** had **tripled** from 165 million dollars in 1979 to **461,629,183** in 1999. The **Lottie Moon Offering** had more than **tripled** from 31.7 million to **96.1 million** dollars in 1999, and the **Annie Armstrong Offering** had multiplied **3.5 times** from 12.2 million to **43 million** dollars given in 1999. **Baptisms** declined below the 1979 level in the mid-eighties but increased consistently in sub-

sequent years, exceeding the 1979 levels. The report for 1999 reached a total of **424,094** baptisms for that year, an increase of 88,044 more than were reported at the 1979 convention.

It is especially encouraging to note that the number of churches under International Mission Board auspices in 1999 had **multiplied 6.1 times** the total in 1979, from 8,533 to **52,186** churches on the mission field. **Annual IMB baptisms** had **increased** from 94,543 reported in 1979 to **363,703** in 1999. During 1999 a record number of 902 missionaries were appointed and **more than 25,000** short term **volunteers** served overseas. Missionary appointments had set new records annually for the last seven years.

The **year 1998** saw significant changes in the overseas structure of the International Mission Board so that **now the entire world** is being targeted for evangelism and church planting. The **central focus** of Southern Baptists is clearly upon evangelizing all nations and planting churches to nurture those who are saved.

Points On Which All of Us Probably Agree

1. The underlying approach through which God works, according to Galatians 5:6, is "Faith which works through love." It has been my motto for many years that, unless we outlive, outlove, outdo and outdie our critics, we do not have the mind of Christ.

2. We all long to be understood correctly by others but realize that we are judged more by the perceptions that people have of us than by the real truth concerning us. Someone has said that "Perception is the cruelest form of reality with which we have to deal."
3. The Bible should be our authority for faith and practice and we should search its pages to know the mind of Christ for us in all things.
4. We all prefer, in the words of Paul to Timothy, "to lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty."
5. Our differences are generally very honest differences and we normally prefer our own opinions to those of others who differ with us.
6. We all want to know and receive the truth and walk in the light of truth. We do not want to become victims of confusion and error.
7. Most of us are familiar with the command we are given in Jude 3 to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."
8. There is certainly no question among veteran Southern Baptists that the Cooperative Program is a proven means for funding our educational, missionary and ministry programs.
9. All of us who know Christ as Savior and Lord are looking forward to His Return from Heaven and to His clearing up any confusion

and uncertainties that may remain among us.

Concerning Theology Versus Political Process

Perhaps the major difference of opinion throughout the struggle over leadership in Southern Baptist life has been whether or not the controversy was theological or merely political.

The upheaval in the Southern Baptist Convention over the last twenty years has been functionally political, but fundamentally it has been theological. The debate has been principally over what the Bible is, not over the interpretation of the scriptures but over the inspiration and authority of the scriptures.

What About the Political Activity?

Some political process is necessary to the functioning of a large autonomous body such as the Southern Baptist Convention. Where a body is directed by elected leadership and is empowered by the will of the body, some caucusing is essential in choosing that leadership. There would be paralyzing confusion at the Convention sessions if messengers came forward in large numbers to nominate their various candidates individually. Instead those who are sufficiently concerned consult together and agree on persons to nominate. Local Baptist churches follow the same practice in the nominating process.

The practice of unofficial groups getting together to caucus has been going on in the Southern Baptist Convention for many years. Dr. Duke McCall, former President of Southern Seminary and of the Convention's Executive Committee, said at a meeting of moderates at Mercer University in 1990 that "the Southern Baptist Convention has been controlled from time to time by small groups." "Louie Newton of Georgia," he said, "ran the convention for a long period of time until J. D. Gray of Louisiana came along and told me personally, 'I'm going to take it away from Louie Newton,' and he did." McCall goes on to say, "I am trying to tell you that what the fundamentalists said is so - they were not the first to do it." The period Dr. McCall refers to here was in the 1940's and 1950's.¹

Dr. Jimmy Allen, former President of the Radio and Television Commission, said that he worked with Dr. Foy Valentine, Executive Director of the Christian Life Commission, to raise funds in 1984 to employ a full time political consultant to support Dr. Grady Cothen for President of the Convention.² Dr. Charles Stanley was elected, however, and without the employment of a political consultant. Though such employed consultants have admittedly been engaged by moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention and in some State Conventions, I have no knowledge of conservatives having done so on the national level.

I am saying that the use of political process in the Convention was nothing new

when Southern Baptist conservatives became actively involved in the process. I am also saying that appropriate caucusing contributes to more responsible Convention procedure.

The Controversy was Fundamentally Theological.

Concern over the theological direction, which the seminaries and agencies of the Convention had taken, was the underlying motivation for the ground swell of participation in the Southern Baptist Convention, reaching a peak of 45,000 messengers in Dallas in 1985. It was the conviction of conservatives that doctrinal slippage was the inevitable fruit of the lower view of Biblical authority which had come to prevail in our institutions and agencies. It would only be a matter of time before our denomination would follow the other major denominations that were already and have continued to be in sharp decline.

The need for a correction in the theological direction was believed to be necessary if our Convention was to be able to continue to advance as the greatest missionary sending force on earth. Some in our seminaries for forty years had taught the virtues of a lower view of scripture and warned students about the supposed dangers of conservative theology. In Dr. Paige Patterson's words, our seminaries now "fully intend to increase academic rigor, to teach all views, to demonstrate why some of these views are incompatible with the scriptures, and

to advocate orthodox Baptist perspectives in theology."

The point that theology was the fundamental issue was stated quite emphatically by Dr. Cecil Sherman in the meeting of moderates at Mercer University in 1990. He said at that meeting that more was at stake than mere politics. "The issue was never merely political," he said. "Two groups did politic because they disagreed on basic theology and polity. Where the fundamentalists are going to take the Southern Baptist Convention is to their theology. Where the moderates would have taken the Southern Baptist Convention is to their theology. And the theology of the two groups was, is, and will be quite different."³

I bring Dr. Sherman's statement, and the comments of others, to our attention not to impugn their motives or positions but to make my point that the fundamental motivation for the controversy was theological and not merely political. The power to control, for the sake of control, was not the motivation. The proof now is in the fact that extensive theological changes have been made over the entire Southern Baptist Convention, and in the fact that the conservatives have refused to consolidate power in a few.

For example, since 1979 very few persons have served on more than one board. Instead, more new names have been brought into leadership positions than in the twenty-five years prior to 1979. Conservative leaders

set this as a major goal in 1978 and flow charts of Presidential, Committee on Committees, and Committee on Nominations appointments will show that they have honored their word.

One further word about the conservative motivation being theological rather than being merely political comes from the late editor of the *Western Recorder*, Dr. Chauncey Daley, in an address made at Southern Seminary in 1984. He made the statement that there had not been any place in our seminaries for years for the conservative position. He said that even when he was a student at Southern twenty-five years earlier (about 1959) there was only one professor left who would stand up for the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. "That is exactly why we have Mid-America Seminary," he said. "So, if you want the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and Jonah and Job as historical figures, and so forth, go to Memphis and Mid-America and you get it there."⁴

Perhaps I have labored the point unnecessarily, but I think that this is a particular point at which conservatives have been most often wrongly perceived. Again, it is the underlying conviction that unless we nourish the root of our faith we cannot produce the fruit of our faith, meaning that we could not go on to finish the Great Commission task unless a course correction had been made in the theology being propounded in our seminaries especially, but also by Southern Baptist leaders throughout

our boards and agencies.

Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher of London a century ago, sounded a solemn warning in the Baptist Union of Great Britain that such a course correction, such as Southern Baptists have made, was needed if the missionary vision of that Union was to survive. No such correction was made and Spurgeon's word was like a prophecy. That theological debate was called "The Downgrade Controversy" and the Baptist Union went "down grade" ever after.

Martin Luther, who took on the whole Catholic hierarchy and gave birth to the Protestant Reformation, was a radical fundamentalist in the eyes of the established church, but he had the same conviction that conservatives have embraced in seeking this theological renewal. Here is his own statement of that conviction: "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest expression every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace, if he flinches at that point."⁵

Spurgeon says that though "everybody admires Luther" for what he did 400 years ago, many do not want anybody else to do the same today. Yet, Christendom and the age would

have been left in darkness had Luther and the other reformers failed to challenge the error in their day; if, indeed, they had said: "The world is out of order; but if we try to set it right we shall only make a great row, and get ourselves into disgrace. Let us go to our chambers, put on our night-caps and sleep through the bad times, and perhaps when we wake up, things will have grown better." "We must defend the faith," Spurgeon adds, "for what would have become of us if our fathers had not maintained it?"⁶

Conclusion

The choice which is being faced now in some of our churches is a choice which cannot be divorced from our view of the Bible. Where we are personally in our stand on the scriptures will be reflected in the direction which we choose. I realize that it is not as important to some as it is to me personally to make it clear which way we intend to go theologically, but I truly believe that it will be of great consequence in the end which way we take.

It is my sincere opinion that God is demonstrating that He is pleased with the stand which we have taken as a denomination to honor His Word. I see it in evidence daily at Southeastern Seminary and in the thrilling reports from other Southern Baptist seminaries and ministries everywhere. It does not mean that everybody has done everything through these years in a way that was pleasing to our

Savior, nor that His Will has been perfectly understood and followed at all times, but I believe it does mean that where we are now, and what we are about, is being abundantly blessed by Him.

I believe it can be truly said of those with whom I am associated, and of virtually all the leaders that I know across the Convention, that the arms of Southern Baptists are open to embrace all who desire to walk with us in the direction which we have taken concerning the integrity and authority of scripture, and concerning the urgency we feel for finishing the task that Christ has given us in the Great Commission.

- ¹ Mohler, R.A., Jr., Editor. *The Christian Index*, Vol. 171, No. 39. "Moderates Recount Movement's History at Mercer Conference, p.4
- ² Ibid., p.3
- ³ Ibid. p.3
- Shurden, W.B. Struggle for the Soul of the SBC, Mercer University Press, Macon GA, 1993. p. 29.
- ⁴ Daley, C.R. Lecture to Ethics Class at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Audio Tape and transcript in archives at SEBTS Library, 7-24-84.
- ⁵ Morris, H.M. Back to Genesis, Article No. 97, "Defending the Faith," January 1997, p. a
- ⁶ Ibid. p. a

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