

Editorial: Past, Present, and Future

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As one reads the New Testament, at least two complementary truths stand out in regard to the proclamation, defense, and passing on of the gospel. First, there is the sad fact of how quickly people depart from the truth and substitute it for false doctrine. It would seem that we as fallen creatures love to believe error much faster than the truth. Second, and in light of the first observation, there is the constant exhortation to stand for the truth, which requires nothing less than constant diligence and Spirit-wrought faithfulness to the Lord and his Word.

The first fact is clearly evident in the New Testament. For example, think of the church at Galatia. Paul himself is astonished at how quickly this church has turned to another gospel, which he makes very clear is “really no gospel at all” (Gal 1:6). But sadly this is not an isolated occurrence in the New Testament. Think of Paul’s warnings to his young pastor-apprentice Timothy where he describes the “last days”—the entire period between the first and second comings of our Lord—as characterized by those in the church who are “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim 3:7). Hence the need for Timothy to be vigilant, to persevere in the faith both in terms of his life and doctrine (1 Tim 4:15-16), and to preach the Word with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim 4:2-3). Or think of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. How many times does the risen and exalted Lord warn the churches to stand for the truth in the face of those within the church who are introducing false doctrine and

departing from the gospel? The answer is obvious on any reading of these important chapters.

The second truth is unmistakably evident as well. In light of the fact that we so quickly depart from the truth, there is the constant need for the church to “guard the deposit” (2 Tim 1:14), for leaders in the church to “keep watch over yourselves and all the flock” (Acts 20:28), for the entire church to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1), and to “watch out for those who cause divisions” (Rom 16:17). The New Testament is clear: we must not only love the Lord and the truth of the gospel, but we must do so by being vigilant in proclaiming it, standing against those who attempt to replace it by “another gospel,” and faithfully passing it on to the next generation.

Now what is true in the New Testament is also found in church history. The battle to stand for the gospel and not exchange it for another and to pass it on faithfully is an ongoing task. In the patristic era, the church had to stand diligently against Gnosticism and Arianism; in the Reformation, against the distortions of Rome especially in matters of biblical authority and the glorious doctrine of justification; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, against liberalism which sought to undermine all biblical doctrines with an alien worldview structure; and now in the twenty-first century against the challenges of postmodernism and philosophical pluralism.

It is important to note that in Southern Baptist life, vigilance over the gospel

is an ongoing task as well. In fact, over the last twenty-five years, the Southern Baptist Convention has faced this challenge head-on. A creeping liberalism, in a variety of forms, entered the seminaries, institutions, and churches—a liberalism which attempted to make peace with contemporary thought and speak to the “cultured despisers” of the gospel. This liberalism, however, forfeited biblical authority and the great truths of the gospel. As a result, many people in the SBC had to heed afresh the exhortation and command of Scripture to stand firm for the gospel in their generation. It is this courageous stand, known as the “conservative resurgence” that we commemorate in this edition of the journal. Our goal in doing so is twofold. First and foremost, we want to give our Triune God thanks for what he has done among us. Apart from his sovereign work of power and grace this resurgence would not have been possible—*solī Deo gloria*. Second, we want to remember the past twenty-five years in order to prepare ourselves for the future. It is not enough to rest on the accomplishments of the past. Instead we must continue to proclaim, defend, and stand firm for the gospel for the next generation. We must learn afresh that until our Lord Jesus comes again to consummate all things, the battle for truth is ongoing, and we need to think carefully about what challenges we will continue to face.

All of our contributors help us fulfill this twofold goal. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. leads the way by not only remembering the past but challenging us to think about various wide-ranging issues with which we must wrestle if we are going to be found faithful in the next generation. Greg Wills helps us think through true Baptist identity throughout history and

how scriptural faith and practice is the only basis for our true unity and identity as Baptists and Christians. David Dockery nicely summarizes *the* main issue in the debate between conservatives and liberals and what was at the heart of the conservative resurgence, namely, biblical authority. He goes on to challenge us that if we are to remain faithful to the Lord in the next generation we must stand firm on the full authority of God’s inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word. Thom Rainer and Danny Akin both challenge us to look to the future and not merely rest on the past. In the area of evangelism, Rainer shows that, though a conservative resurgence has taken place on the doctrinal front, it has not yet been fully realized in evangelism to our world. In our rejoicing in the gains that have taken place, we must not forget that our task is to take the gospel to the nations. Akin, in a very helpful article, lays out ten mandates for us that are tied to our history but that are also necessary if we are to have a successful future. Finally, all of our Forum contributors provide helpful reflections on our past, and more importantly, wise counsel as to our future.

It is my prayer that this edition of *SBJT* will lead us to give our great God thanks for all that he has done among us, but also that we will be stirred afresh to stand for the gospel in our generation, thus identifying ourselves with those who have faithfully gone before us.