

# Baptism, Assurance, and the Decline of Conservative Churches

Editorial: Paul R. House

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Over twenty years ago Dean Kelly explained why conservative churches were growing.<sup>1</sup> He argued that congregations that held a high view of scripture, that were making a concerted effort to reach persons they considered lost, and that expressed high expectations for its members were thriving. In contrast, more liberal churches were not growing because they did not emphasize these ideals. Instead, the liberal churches were stressing the “felt needs” of society, the desirability of the church being involved in social action, the necessity of having loose membership requirements for church growth to occur, and a more critical approach to the Bible. Ironically, in their desire to reach the masses by these means they failed to convince the very people they sought to influence of the importance of the church and its mission. More and more people simply considered the churches to be weaker, less compelling versions of the churches their parents and grandparents attended.

More recently, Dean R Hoge, Benton Johnson and Donald A. Luidens have confirmed Kelly’s research.<sup>2</sup> They agree that many mainline churches have so relaxed their definition of Christianity and church membership that many congregations now consist of baptized pagans. The way back to health in a relativistic age, the authors write, is for the churches to recapture *moral* authority without returning to pre-critical notions of the Bible, the church, or the church’s authority. Perhaps in this way the Baby Boomers who have

left or ignored the mainline churches will once again participate in worship and service. Though I do not believe they have the proper answer for the mainline denominations, I do think they have, like Kelly, analyzed the problem accurately.

Many conservative pastors and denominational leaders have cited such studies to prove that conservatism has triumphed over its liberal competitors. They seem to think that simply *claiming* a high view of scripture and *preaching about* evangelism will keep the conservative churches from going the way of the liberal denominations. Though biblical authority and evangelism are central to the health and usefulness of a congregation or denomination, conservatives had better learn from the mainline experience, not sooth themselves with the notion that they are insulated from what hampers others. An examination of baptism and Christian assurance, the two doctrines this issue addresses, proves the need to be concerned.

Of course, a Baptist seminary committed to believers’ baptism publishes this journal. Thus, when I cite concern for baptism practices I mostly mean in churches that define “the people of God” as “believers in Christ.” Still, most churches that administer infant baptism also baptize adult converts, so these observations are not totally irrelevant to our pedobaptist friends.

The problem with baptism today is not merely that it is administered improperly. The problem is that many candidates for baptism are not converted. Millions of

members of Southern Baptist churches are absent from services each Sunday, and are equally absent from Christian living during the rest of the week. Average attendance figures sag, while the divorce rate, levels of dishonesty, and biblical illiteracy of Baptist church members keeps pace or exceeds that of the society as a whole. Many people who do attend are indifferent to the truths of Christianity, and others are divisive, even mean-spirited.

Clearly, many persons have not been taught that Christians are committed to Christ and his teachings. They may have mentally assented to certain gospel facts. They may have hoped being baptized would help solve life's problems. They may have been told that repeating a prayer amounted to a saving experience. They may have walked forward at an evangelistic meeting, but by any biblical measurement they were never converted. There was no conviction of sin, no repentance, no commitment to Christ's lordship, no intent to love Christ by keeping his commandments.

Gratefully, many people wake up to the fact that they were never saved. For instance, statistics compiled by the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention reveal that as many as half of all the adults baptized in Southern Baptist churches are *rebaptisms of persons already baptized by Southern Baptist pastors!*

Another forty percent of adults baptized are Christians from other denominations that have never been immersed. Only ten percent, then, of all adults baptized by Southern Baptist churches are making first-time professions of faith. Despite our joy over those who come to understand salvation, the very existence of these statistics ought to make us wonder what Baptist churches are teaching

about salvation. One also has to wonder if persons who did not understand salvation the first time have necessarily understood it the second time.

Conservative churches must beware lest we forget what happened to liberal churches. As liberals modified their teaching on conversion and commitment they took in new members for a time. In the heyday of Modernism crowds of people rejoiced in the relaxing of doctrine and the way in which these churches had entered the "real world." In time, however, people of substance came to question the value of a church without biblical authority and biblical definitions of conversion and discipleship. They either stayed away from church altogether or sought out churches with solid convictions. The day may soon be coming when persons seeking the challenge of New Testament Christianity will flee conservative churches that baptize the lost and uncommitted in the name of evangelism, missions, and church growth.

One of the reasons it is hard to reclaim unsaved, yet baptized, persons is that Baptist churches generally teach the perseverance of believers. They claim that persons who are converted can have assurance of their salvation. Now there is no doubt that the Bible teaches that those who are truly saved will never repudiate that salvation. God will keep them by his power (1 Pe 1:3-9). No one can pluck them from the father's hand (Jn 10:32-33). Certainly this doctrine needs to be emphasized so that believers may have appropriate confidence in the Lord's work in their lives.

But the danger of preaching assurance of salvation to those who have not understood conversion properly is obvious. Those who are unsaved will become certain that they cannot lose what they think

they possess. Having been taken into the church without a real experience with Christ, they then become convinced that they need never change their lives to be pleasing to God. In other words, they can offer the most tepid “Christian commitment” and remain a member in good standing of their local church. They can act virtually however they wish and be satisfied that their soul is set for eternity.

Sixty years ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this sort of belief “cheap grace,” which he defined as “grace we bestow on ourselves.” He argued that such “grace” is not grace at all. It is simply unbelievers letting themselves off the hook. His context was quite different than ours, but his diagnosis is applicable to the conservative church today.

Liberal churches discovered that weakened views of conversion coupled with strong belief in the acceptability of non-biblical lifestyles did not strengthen their churches. In fact, this deadly combination emptied their pews and eviscerated their witness. They are trying to find ways now to overcome their dilemma, with little success so far. Conservative churches must understand that the liberal churches may have dropped traditional, biblical standards for different reasons, but in too many cases they have compromised the same standards.

Today’s conservative churches will stop growing if they do not wake up. Mouth-ing traditional conservative platitudes will not suffice. A return to the Bible we rightly claim is infallible and inerrant is needed. Biblical definitions of conversion, baptism, assurance, and discipleship must be recovered. Courage to be God’s remnant must emerge. If the needed awakening does not come the Lord will retain a remnant, just as he always does. The tragedy will be that

churches that knew better did not act better. If the awakening does come, it will come slowly, painfully, and yet gloriously. The gates of hell will not prevail against the faithful church, a promise we have received from the highest possible authority. The question is if the churches and denominations we love will be part of that remnant, or if our grandchildren will be writing books about how conservative churches stopped growing.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dean M. Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

<sup>2</sup>Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).