

A Conflict of Visions: The Theological Roots of the Southern Baptist Controversy

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Southern Baptists enter the twenty-first century facing serious questions of identity, mission, polity, and truth. The very foundations of our denominational life and the convictions most precious to us have been shaken by succeeding waves of cultural change and denominational conflict. The last thirty years have witnessed a remarkable expansion of Southern Baptist ministry and influence. We have seen unprecedented response on the mission fields and a remarkable spirit of cooperation amongst our people. Nevertheless, at this great turning point in history, we face the most important questions in our denomination's history. This is the Baptist crisis.

As the historian Sidney Mead once commented, denominationalism is "the shaping of Christianity in America."¹ Given our heritage of religious liberty and the absence of a state church, denominations emerged as churches of like faith and practice banded together for mutual edification and cooperation in mission. The crisis in the Southern Baptist Convention arises precisely because it is this basic vision that is now at stake.

We can now observe what Stanford economist Thomas Sowell called a "conflict of visions."² This conflict has created a fault line in our denominational life, separating those who hold to rival visions of what the Southern Baptist Convention should be, believe, and do. This conflict of visions explains why Southern Baptists are

divided on so many issues. More precisely, it explains why a small minority of disenchanted Southern Baptists has moved away from the denominational mainstream. The experience of the last thirty years demonstrates that the vast majority of Southern Baptists are indeed united on these most basic issues. Speaking through denominational elections, resolutions, and support for the Convention's work, Southern Baptists have made clear their basic support of this our historic denominational vision.

What can explain years of controversy? In a very real sense, this conflict of visions has led to the development of a two-party system in Baptist life. Just as in the larger political sphere, the development of these parties has led to a division of agenda and competition for leadership. The parties are identified by their most basic conception of the Baptist vision, and their conception of the Convention grows directly out of this vision. One group, identified here as the "Truth Party," roots Baptist identity in a deep appreciation for our Baptist heritage and bold identification with the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The Truth Party insists that Baptist doctrine and polity are inescapably attached to a prior affirmation of biblical truth, to a clear understanding of biblical authority, and an affirmation of revealed truth as demanding our belief in certain doctrinal essentials.

The "Liberty Party" as described here roots Baptist identity in an ethos of indi-

vidual liberty. The platform of this party is established upon an aggressive assertion of individual rights to interpretation, theological formulation, and experience. Though many members of this party give public assent to our most cherished doctrines, the central thrust of this group insists that personal experience is more important than propositional truth.

A two-party system is not unique to Southern Baptists. As a matter of fact, the entire spectrum of America and religious life has been divided over the last half century between progressives and traditionalists. The labels and vocabulary change from denomination to denomination, but the basic pattern remains clearly visible. The most established denominations of mainline Protestantism are deeply divided over issues such as homosexuality, the nature of the gospel, the ordination of women, and other contentious issues. For the most part, the more liberal wing of most denominations holds the reins of political power.

The last fifty years has seen a progressive slide of mainline Protestantism into liberal theology and a radical position on social issues. Liberal Protestantism has been vocal in its support of abortion rights and other social teachings that would be unimaginable just fifty years ago. Though deeply divided over the issue of homosexuality, several of the mainline Protestant denominations have accommodated themselves to public acceptance; regardless of the clear biblical teachings that homosexuality is a sin. Mainline Protestantism is deeply infected with feminist ideology. This has now impacted the ministry of their churches and even the language used in prayers and hymns.³

The intellectual roots of the liberal trend within Protestantism are found in the

enlightenment and the rise of modernist thought. By the late nineteenth century, liberal scholars in the academic world, especially in Germany and England, began to question some of the most basic teachings of the Bible. In particular, these skeptics began to deny the truthfulness of the Bible with regard to matters of history, creation, and the permanence of objective truth. A basic rejection of the supernatural provided the impetus for the denial of miracles and the eventual rejection of cherished biblical truths such as the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ. The Bible was no longer seen as a perfect treasure of divine truth, but was seen as the faulty testimony of ancient religious peoples.

By the turn of the century, many scholars were denying the deity of Christ and dividing what they identified as the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. These scholars sought to peel back layers of history in order to determine the true identity of the historical Jesus. They were certain that the Christ of faith was an invention of the early church as demonstrated in the New Testament writings. Soon after the turn of the century, the battle was joined on American soil. The 1920s saw the emergence of what became known as the "Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy." This great controversy centered on matters of extreme significance, including the most basic biblical teachings about Jesus and the authority of the Word of God. Methodists, Presbyterians, and Northern Baptists were deeply divided over these issues and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy threatened to split those denominations asunder. When the dust cleared, the liberal wing had won virtually every battle. The logic of denominational bureaucracy had grown to the point that

the denominations loved their unity more than they loved the truth. This is certainly a grave warning to Southern Baptists as we look to the future.

What has become of all of this? Over the last fifty years the denominations of mainline Protestantism have experienced precipitous losses. Denomination by denomination, once vigorous and growing, began hemorrhaging its members, its convictions, and its energies. Looking back, we can see that a critical turning point came over the definition of Christian missions. During the 1940s and 50s, mainline Protestantism grew uncertain of the gospel and uncomfortable of making the exclusive claims demanded by the Christian gospel. In response to this, the mainline denominations adopted a program of “moratorium” by which they diminished their program of sending missionaries to convert non-Christians and transformed mission from evangelism into social action.⁴ A quick survey of mainline Protestantism indicates that the mission forces of these denominations are not a fraction of what they once were, even as the membership of these denominations has plummeted.⁵

Baptists should have been forewarned of this trend by observing the “downgrade controversy” in England. Years before these issues were debated on American soil, this controversy saw British Baptists debate the truthfulness of the Bible and the necessity of theological boundaries. The great champion for biblical orthodoxy in this controversy was Charles H. Spurgeon, pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle and the most famous Baptist preacher of the age. Spurgeon was a man of deep convictions and prophetic insight. He saw the acceptance of these liberalizing trends as an infection that would eventually lead to the

death of his beloved denomination. He was concerned not only with the outright denial of essential biblical doctrines, but with the pattern of accommodation and compromise he saw rooted in the denominational establishment. He warned that Baptists were on a steep “downgrade” that would lead to the eventual abandonment of the faith, acceptance of theological error, the redefinition of the gospel, and the loss of vitality for the British Baptist Union.⁶

Tragically, Spurgeon lost the battle of the downgrade controversy. Even more tragically, his prophetic warnings proved true. Today the British Baptist Union is a shadow of what it once was in both numbers and influence. What Spurgeon saw on the horizon came even more quickly than he would have dreamed. Only death prevented his personal observation of the ruin against which he had warned.

In America, the hottest battles of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy were fought among the Presbyterians. Interestingly enough, the fuse that lit the Presbyterian fire was a Baptist preacher named Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick, who was preaching at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City, became the most visible leader of the modernists within northern Protestantism. By the time the dust had settled in the Presbyterian conflict, the liberals had won by forcing the conservatives out of the denomination. Once again, the prophetic warnings of the conservatives became the reality as the denomination refused to deal with theological error and the denial of biblical truth. Institution after institution was lost to the cause of the gospel in the course of this great conflict.

What was happening in the Southern Baptist Convention during this season of fulmination? The Fundamentalist-Mod-

ernist Controversy did emerge in Southern Baptist life in the 1920s, though with much less focus and drama than seen in the northern denominations. Evidence of modernist influence was visible even in Southern Baptist life. This was particularly focused on the issue of evolution and the denial of the supernatural. The infamous Scopes trial had seized the attention of the nation, and the issue of evolution forced Southern Baptists to deal with the nature of our doctrinal unity. The denomination responded to the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy and the crisis over evolution by adopting its first major confession of faith, *The Baptist Faith and Message* in 1925. Furthermore, the denomination adopted an official statement that made clear its expectation that Southern Baptists would fully embrace the truth of the Bible, affirm the supernaturalism central to the Christian faith, and defend biblical truth against modern threats and challenges.

The next half-century of Southern Baptist life can be described as a high water mark of growth in the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC emerged out of its southern captivity, embraced a worldwide vision, and organized its energies to take the gospel around the world. A great sense of Great Commission urgency and a world re-shaped by two great wars offered an opportunity for Baptists in the United States, and Southern Baptists in particular, to take leadership in world missions. The Southern Baptist Convention became the largest evangelical denomination in the United States and its career missionary force became the largest in the history of the Christian church. Its institutions and agencies were renowned for both quantity and quality in their fulfillment of the work assigned.

To see in retrospect, the Southern Bap-

tist Convention moved into the mainstream of American Protestant culture. In the south, the Southern Baptist Convention became so dominant that it could set the terms for debate. Southern Baptists began to thrive in what was later to be described as the “Sunbelt” and Southern Baptists moved into the cities and emerging metropolitan areas of the prosperous south and southwest. A sense of mission also took Southern Baptists to new areas of influence and evangelism within the United States. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, Southern Baptist churches were in all fifty states and the Southern Baptist Convention was one of the best known and most admired denominations in America.

Nevertheless, this era also saw the Southern Baptist Convention shift its sense of vision and identity away from a doctrinal core toward a programmatic structure and culture. Experiencing unprecedented growth rates and developing new institutions and structures for its work, the Southern Baptist Convention began to define its denominational identity in terms of participation in the full range of programs, agencies, and emphases adopted by the Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention had become a “full service denomination” offering everything from Sunday school literature to missions involvement to an Annuity Board and six full-scale seminaries. By the 1980s, one out of every ten ministerial students studying in an accredited theological institution was enrolled in one of the six Southern Baptist seminaries.

This program culture became the consensus of the mid-century Southern Baptist Convention. Denominational leaders spoke of the adoption of a “total church program” and this program extended the reach of the local church all the way around the world through the structures and agen-

cies of the denomination. A remarkable denominational unity was cemented by common involvement in and commitment to the structures and programs of the Convention. Nevertheless, working beneath this unity was an emerging division that would later produce the Southern Baptist crisis.

By the 1960s signs of strain were undeniably apparent. The seminaries had been moving toward identification with the institutions of mainline Protestantism. All academic institutions identified to some extent with the larger academic culture. In the case of the six seminaries, patterns were evident even earlier in Southern Baptist life that served as warning of what would eventually come. Controversy erupted in the early 1960s over the publication of *The Message of Genesis* by Ralph Elliott, a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.⁷ Elliott argued for a revisionist understanding of Genesis. He accepted the documentary hypothesis, which denied the unity of Genesis as a book, and argued that Moses could not have been the author of all or even most of this material.⁸

An openness to new theological trends was openly championed by professors in both the seminaries and Baptist colleges and universities. In the larger academic culture, the emergence of radical theology was soon to eclipse neo-orthodoxy as the basic theological consensus. Calling for unfettered academic freedom, some professors in the Southern Baptist Convention claimed a right to develop their own theological convictions independent of the desires of the churches. The Convention responded to the crisis of the early 1960s by adopting a revised form of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. President Hershel H. Hobbs, one of the titanic founders of the Southern Baptist consensus at mid-century,

appointed a committee of state convention presidents to re-visit and revise the *Baptist Faith and Message* in response to the current crisis. Hobbs, who appointed himself chairman, became the champion of the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*. Nonetheless, the revised confession of faith did not prevent further controversy. Intense controversy would emerge even within the decade, again over the integrity of the book of Genesis.

The ties binding the Southern Baptist Convention to its respective state conventions, and the links of loyalty between the state conventions and their own institutions, began to loosen in the 1970s and 80s. By the end of the 1990s, several of the state conventions had lost virtually all control or influence over the colleges and universities they once governed. These schools had been established upon a solidly evangelical foundation and generous Southern Baptists had contributed the support that was so vital to their emergence and growth. Nevertheless, several of these institutions identified themselves with the academic culture and citing threats to academic freedom severed their ties with the denomination. This roll call of institutions would include the University of Richmond, Wake Forest University, Furman University, Samford University, Stetson University, Carson-Newman College, and Ouachita University. The list goes on, including many other schools and institutions.

Full-scale conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention emerged in 1979, when the Convention was presented with an inescapable choice. Conservatives, concerned with the pattern of theological compromise already visible in Southern Baptist life, pressed for the election of a president who would lead a movement to appoint trust-

ees to the boards and commissions of the Southern Baptist Convention. They sought a president who would share their concern and press for a recovery of evangelical conviction. Reversing the trend of the mainline Protestant denominations, conservatives were victorious in the Southern Baptist Convention, not only in the election in 1979 but in every presidential election to the present. The two party system in Southern Baptist life was immediately visible in the open conflict that ensued in the 1980s and 1990s. The Liberty Party claimed that the basic issues were political, and they saw the conservative movement as a threat to the libertarian impulse, academic freedom, and the basic ethos by which they defined Baptist life. Conservatives, on the other hand, were more concerned with the loss of biblical conviction and the corrosive effects of denying the total truthfulness of the Bible. The controversy was soon focused on the issue of biblical inerrancy—the belief that the Bible is truth without any mixture of error. The Truth Party insisted that the most basic issues were theological, and that nothing less than the faith once for all delivered to the saints was at stake.

In successive years of controversy the issues were debated and Southern Baptists had the opportunity to come to their own conclusions regarding the nature of the controversy. In 1985, at the very height of the conflict in the Convention, Southern Baptists established a Peace Committee. This committee included members representing both parties in Southern Baptist life. Both conservatives and moderates were represented by visible leaders who spent the next two years debating the nature and meaning of the controversy. In this unanimous report, overwhelmingly adopted by messengers to the Convention in 1987, the

Peace Committee affirmed that the basic issue in the Southern Baptist conflict was deeply theological. “The primary source of the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention is the Bible; more specifically, the ways in which the Bible is viewed,” the Peace Committee reported.⁹

A Theological Study Committee appointed by President Ed Young brought its report in 1992, again affirming that theological concerns were the very basis of the Southern Baptist conflict. Though every theological controversy had political dimensions, the theological concerns were paramount and unavoidable.

Over twenty years after the public emergence of the Southern Baptist controversy, with a consistent election of conservative presidents, the Southern Baptist Convention has experienced remarkable unity and unprecedented growth. The Convention now supports more than 5,000 international missionaries and the reach of both mission boards goes beyond anything a previous generation of Southern Baptists could have imagined. The conservative renewal in the Southern Baptist Convention brought dramatic changes to the seminaries as well. The result of these changes has been remarkable, as the seminaries have sought to identify with and champion the evangelical convictions so deeply held among the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. Entering the twenty-first century, the Southern Baptist Convention demonstrates a remarkable vitality as well as greater ethnic diversity and an international reach in evangelism and church planting.

Nevertheless, the two party system has been evident, as a small percentage of churches dissatisfied with the direction of the Convention have started competing organizations. The Southern Baptist Alli-

ance was established in 1987, and quickly identified with mainline Protestantism. Eventually, the group was to change its name to the “Alliance of Baptists,” and was to arrange mutual clergy recognition with the United Church of Christ, one of America’s most liberal denominations. The Alliance has taken positions supportive of homosexuality and is identified with a liberal political and social agenda. As one of its spokesmen claimed, the Alliance of Baptists is “more Jesse Jackson than Jesse Helms.” The Alliance of Baptists includes a very small percentage of churches once related to the Southern Baptist Convention. It does not consider itself a full service denomination, but functions as an interest group and networking core for churches on the far Baptist left.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) emerged out of the same dynamic but defined itself against the Southern Baptist Convention without joining the Southern Baptist Alliance. The impetus for the creation of the CBF came after moderates experienced a defeat in the presidential election of 1990. Soon thereafter, a group of moderate Baptists met in Atlanta, Georgia and established what became the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Eventually, the CBF was to take on the marks of a full service denomination, though its membership remains divided over whether it should declare itself a denomination. To this date, the CBF has declined to admit its denominational status out of concern that it would alienate many of the churches it seeks as cooperating congregations.

Though the CBF claims to be supported by 1800 churches, the core of its support is probably less than one tenth of this figure. It has refused to release a public list of contributors and contributing churches, and counts a church as cooperating even if only

one member of the congregation designates funds to the CBF. Though claiming to define itself without reference to the Southern Baptist Convention, virtually every public pronouncement taken by the CBF is a direct response to an action or statement of the SBC. Interestingly, it refuses to take positions on most social issues. Controversy erupted in 2000 and 2001 over the issue of homosexuality, as several key CBF leaders were willing to explicitly endorse such ideas as same-sex marriage and gay ordination.¹⁰ The debate over gay liberation in the CBF shows no sign of abating in the years to come.

Over the last ten years, moderates have also established rival theological institutions, designed to compete with the six SBC seminaries. These institutions include Baptist Theological Seminary, Richmond, Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, Wake Forest Divinity School, and programs at Campbell University, Hardin-Simmons University, and Mercer University. These institutions set themselves over against the Southern Baptist schools and presented themselves as options for moderate churches. All together, these institutions have enrolled only a small fraction when measured over against the total enrollment of the six Southern Baptist seminaries. In a very real sense, these institutions have become little more than refugee resettlement programs for theological liberals disenchanted with the Southern Baptist Convention.

The bonds between the SBC and the respective state conventions have also experienced tension. In some of the more liberal conventions, shadow conventions have emerged. In two states, rival conventions have been organized. The Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention

have identified closely with the SBC and have presented themselves as alternatives to the historic state conventions, which in these cases have opposed the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention. At the same time, the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT) has pinned its hopes for denominational status on virtual isolation from the SBC. While the BGCT seeks to retain a Texas constituency that is basically conservative in its theological convictions, the BGCT leadership pursues an anti-confessional rhetoric that can only lead the group ever leftward. To the surprise of the BGCT leadership, their move toward isolation has resulted, not in the birth of a full service “Baptist Convention of the Americas,” but in the “giant sucking sound” of declining budgets and Texas Baptist churches abandoning the BGCT for the more conservative and cooperative SBTC.

The defining issues are now before us. The Southern Baptist crisis now comes down to the urgent issue of conviction, confession, and cooperation. The question now presented to the Southern Baptist Convention demands an answer. Will we stand with the faith once for all delivered to the saints? Will we stand upon the absolute truthfulness and full authority of Holy Scripture? Will we have the courage to define and to defend the gospel of Jesus Christ even as we are committed to bear witness of that gospel throughout the whole world? Are we determined to hold our institutions, schools, and mission boards accountable to the convictions of our churches? Do we want to follow the pattern of decline so evident in liberal Protestantism, or are we determined to see the Southern Baptist Convention emerge in the twenty-first century as a vital missionary convention of churches? Will we stand

against the secular culture and declare the whole counsel of God? These are the inescapable questions presented by our Baptist crisis.

ENDNOTES

¹Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

²Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: William Morrow, 1987).

³See, for example, Thomas Reeves, *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity* (New York: Free Press, 1996) 179-184.

⁴For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Arthur Johnston, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1978).

⁵Reeves, 122, 134.

⁶For an analysis of Spurgeon’s role in the downgrade controversy, see Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994) 139-206.

⁷Ralph Elliott, *The Message of Genesis* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962).

⁸Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 187-189.

⁹“The SBC Peace Committee Report,” reprinted in *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War*, ed. Walter Shurden and Randy Shepley (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996) 208.

¹⁰Russell D. Moore, “CBF to Approve Funding for Pro-Homosexual Groups; Gay Church Literature Featured in CBF Exhibit,” *Baptist Press*, 30 June 2000.