

The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals

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Introduction

What is the future of Southern Baptists as evangelical Christians? In order to address adequately my assigned topic, I must attempt to answer two questions. First, do Southern Baptists *have a future*? And second, what future do Southern Baptists have *as evangelicals*? However, because Southern Baptists have been increasingly engaged in the evangelical world, these two questions are bound inextricably together. I believe that the major issues that will help shape the future of the Southern Baptist Convention arise in large measure from our interface with other evangelical Christian groups over the past few decades.

In this presentation, I'll be suggesting six issues that I believe will play a large role in the future shape of the Southern Baptist Convention. After I describe why I think these issues are so important to the future of Southern Baptist life, I'll make a prediction or warning about how I'm guessing Southern Baptists will address these issues in the next couple of decades unless something changes dramatically.

Let me begin with a few caveats. First, *my purpose*: I offer this talk as neither a sermon nor as a typical research paper, but my purpose is primarily to spur discussion and dialogue as we seek to address these issues together. Perhaps these ruminations will spark or provoke a helpful dialogue afterward. Second, *the spirit with I which present this paper*: I am writing from an unapologetically Southern Baptist perspective. I have been reared a Southern Baptist and have served Southern Baptist churches and institutions all of my life and ministry. I'm not ashamed at all to be a Southern Baptist, and I did not become a Southern Baptist in order to get a job. I'm a deeply loyal Southern Baptist by choice and conviction. Therefore, the concerns that I raise are burdens about the future of the SBC that arise out of my deep love and loyalty to the Convention, not criticisms from someone outside the camp. Third, *my target*: I am addressing issues primarily concerning the SBC as a whole, not local churches. If I were addressing the challenges confronting local churches, I would address issues such as the "worship wars," the pattern of Christian leadership in the local church, and our failure to respond adequately to the exponential increase of senior adults (two-thirds of the people who have lived to be age 65 or older ever in the history of the world are alive today). However, I'll have to reserve those comments for

another occasion. Fourth, *a disclaimer*: I should note that many of my predictions are not necessarily the way I would hope that the future will go, but how in fact I expect it might go. I must also insist that these predictions be understood as merely the prognostications of a seminary dean, not as prophecy. Please do not evaluate these best guesses according to the high standard of accuracy enunciated in Deuteronomy 13, not to mention its concordant harsh penalty of capital punishment if all my predictions do not come true.

Southern Baptists as Evangelicals

To address the future of Southern Baptists *as evangelicals* assumes that Baptists *are* evangelicals. In the pre-1979 Southern Baptist world, many Southern Baptists understood themselves as evangelical or evangelistic, but not as evangelicals. This attitude was classically expressed by Foy Valentine, then Executive Director of the Christian Life Commission of the SBC, who famously said in an article:

We are *not* evangelicals. That's a Yankee word. They want to claim us because we are big and successful and growing every year. But we have our own traditions, our own hymns and more students in our seminaries that they have in all of theirs put together. We don't share their politics or their fussy fundamentalism, and we don't want to get involved in their theological witch-hunts.¹

It is evident that Southern Baptists are emerging from a regional and separatist identity toward broader engagement with the evangelical world. For example, it is instructive to note the profound involvement and influence that Southern Baptists now have in the Evangelical Theological Society and its sister organizations the Evangelical Philosophical Society and the Evangelical Missiological Society. In 1980, Southern Baptist involvement in ETS was rather sporadic. Fifteen years ago, ETS met on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at the invitation of the President, but few NOBTS faculty or students attended. However, at last year's ETS annual meeting in San Antonio, almost 100 Southern Baptist seminary and college faculty presented papers or chaired sessions at the meeting, several plenary sessions speakers were Southern Baptists, and the newly elected President was Southern Baptist. About 20 NOBTS faculty members delivered papers, and about 50 NOBTS students attended. It is also instructive to note the increasing number of faculty members at some SBC seminaries whose background and/or training is from an evangelical denomination other than the SBC. In addition, Southern Baptist mission agencies have engaged with entities from other like-minded

¹ Foy Valentine, quoted by Kenneth L. Woodard in "Born Again! The Year of the Evangelicals," *Newsweek* 88 (October 25, 1976), 76. The issue of whether Southern Baptists were evangelicals was classically discussed in two books a decade apart as the SBC moved through the conservative resurgence: James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, eds., *Are Southern Baptists "Evangelicals"?* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), and David Dockery, ed. (including contributions by Garrett and Hinson), *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993).

evangelical Great Commission organizations to perform their work. Our Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission partners with other evangelical groups in representing conservative Christian concerns in Washington. So, taken as a whole, Southern Baptist engagement with evangelicals is greater than it has ever been.

However, I'm not so sure how long Southern Baptists may feel comfortable in maintaining fellowship with some evangelicals. Southern Baptists and other evangelical groups may be ships passing in the night. Many evangelical institutions seem to be shifting to the left, while Southern Baptists have just made a sharp course correction to the right. These differences are beginning to be reflected regarding issues such as the role of women, the openness of God, biblical inspiration and hermeneutics, and post-conservative openness to pluralism and postmodernism.

The next big and potentially very divisive issue that confronts the Evangelical Theological Society is whether the biblical view of the role of women is best described from either an egalitarian or a complementarian perspective. Southern Baptists within the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood have led the fight for the complementarian approach against the egalitarian approach of Christians for Biblical Equality. But other evangelical groups seem willing to compromise the traditional biblical stance on this issue.

Many Southern Baptists are still stinging from the refusal of ETS to draw a "line in the sand" and exclude those such as Clark Pinnock who affirm openness of God positions. This debate may yet result in a split within ETS. A larger issue is that some evangelicals are more open than others to allowing ETS to be a more pluralistic "public square" or "village green" kind of institution in order to allow for a wider diversity of views.² This wider version of evangelicalism allows for greater breadth on issues of biblical authority and interpretations, and on the issue of pluralistic inclusivism, than has traditionally been the case with evangelicals.³ Southern Baptists may move away from such a "village green" version of ETS in particular and evangelicalism in general.

² See Darrell L. Bock, *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002). For a Baptist response, see Steve Lemke, review of *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* by Darrell Bock, in *Faith and Mission* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2003):114-116.

³ See, for example, William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos, eds., *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Terrance Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004)

The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention

Does the Southern Baptist Convention have a future as evangelicals? If so, what kind of future is it? These are interesting days to be a Southern Baptist. We seem to be standing at one of those unique crossroads in history, with a number of possible futures open to us. In fact, the precise shape of our future as a denomination may be more difficult to predict now than at any time in our history. The convention could go in a number of different directions, and only God truly knows what the future holds. But if we knew how Southern Baptists will deal with these six key issues, we could predict more confidently what the future of Southern Baptists will be like.

- (1) *Doctrinal Integrity* – Will Southern Baptists continue to stand for sound doctrine? In particular, are Southern Baptists going to believe in the divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture?

I believe that we are entering an anti-doctrinal era, an age in which not only are specific traditional doctrinal commitments of denominations viewed negatively, but the very notion of having a doctrine falls into disfavor as narrowminded bigotry. Many young ministers have focused their interest not on theological or biblical foundations, but on church growth methodology. Rather than discussing views of the millennium, they compare the Willow Creek model versus the Saddleback model. One of the dangers of some of the new so-called “non-denominational” emerging networks is that they are bound together by methodology, not doctrine. It is not that the church growth movement or the emerging church networks are necessarily untheological or unbiblical, although I do have reservations on a few points. But the commendable emphasis on *praxis* in the church growth movement is exacerbated by our American obsession with pragmatism. Sometimes it is difficult to tell much difference between the commitments of many young ministers from William James – if it works, it’s true. If it reaches people, it’s good. And while they claim that they are trying to be flexible in methodology without changing the central message of the gospel, the means often determines the message. Not everything that grows is good. Cancer results when cells grow faster than the body can incorporate them. The same can be true in the religious world. Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses are among the fastest growing religious groups in the world, but they are not Christian. Cell groups can become cultic cell groups, resulting not in a church growth movement or a church planting movement, but in an aberration of Christianity.

I have seen seminary students over the past decade making a significant move away from an interest in doctrinal matters. Theological issues which were matters of lengthy discussions in the past, such as soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology no longer incite great student interest. One recent event in a seminary Theology class illustrates this anti-doctrinal spirit. In the midst of a Systematic Theology class that was discussing a theological issue in some detail, one student exclaimed in frustration, “I didn’t come hear to learn all this theology. I came here to learn how to grow a church.” The topic of the discussion that day was the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This anti-doctrinal bias is also an unintended consequence of the engagement of our laypersons in nondenominational evangelical groups such as Promise Keepers. Of course, we would all celebrate the wonderful impact that Promise Keepers on the men of our nation. However, there are close similarities between the situation of the Promise Keepers movement and the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening. Most denominations participated in the camp meeting revivals, and many were led to salvation in Christ. All the Christians at the camp meeting would rejoice. But then, inevitably, theological questions arose in order to provide an adequate interpretation of the salvation experience of these new believers. Do I need to experience a second blessing to be really saved? Was salvation something that I chose or God chose? Is sprinkling or immersion the correct manner of baptism? Am I assured of my salvation regardless of my actions, or not? Each of the denominations answered these questions differently, undercutting the notion that doctrine really didn't make a difference. Eventually the ecumenical coalition broke down.

The starting point for all doctrinal discussions must be the inerrancy of Scripture. You may find it strange in our day to raise the issue of whether the Bible is the ultimate standard for truth. Were not evangelical Christians engaged for the past few decades in what one popular writer called *The Battle for the Bible*? Isn't that what W. A. Criswell, Paige Patterson, Adrian Rogers, and many others led us to do in Southern Baptist life in the 1980s? Haven't we already won the battle of the Bible in the SBC? Well, the answer is "yes" and "no." Yes, we did win the battle of the Bible in the SBC in the 1980s. Unfortunately, that is now a quarter of a century ago. A new generation of ministers has arisen that knows not Paige. They were infants in 1979, and not only do they really have no idea what the denominational controversy was all about – they really don't care. For example, while I was team teaching with Dr. Richard Land a course in Baptist Distinctives at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary a few years ago, Dr. Land was recounting some of the battles of the 1970s and 1980s. The students were just shaking their heads. They had never heard any of this. On another occasion, a young prospective faculty member, when asked about his view of inerrancy, answered that while he himself was an inerrantist with respect to Scripture, he described inerrancy as "an old man's battle." Indeed, in a recent meeting of inerrantists, I couldn't help but notice that there were indeed a large number of gray heads in the assembly. It is an older generation who witnessed the dangerous fruit of higher critical methodology in hermeneutics, absolute freedom and subjectivity in existentialism, the authority and autonomy of the individual in modernism, and the dynamic views of biblical inspiration from neo-orthodoxy. It has been a long, hard fight. But the saying is true as ever: "Those who will not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." The Battle of the Bible, I fear, will have to be fought again in another few decades.

The point is that eternal vigilance is required to maintain doctrinal purity.⁴ As G. K.

⁴ See Charles S. Kelley, Jr., "Out of the Stands, Onto the Sideline, and Into the Game: An Eyewitness Account of Southern Baptists and the Bible," a Convocation address at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary delivered September 7, 2000, available online at <http://baptistcenter.com/BCTM%20Articles%20and%20Essays.htm>, and "New Orleans Baptist

Chesterton said, to keep a white fence looking white, you can't just leave it as it is. You have to keep repainting it white over and over again to keep it looking the same. If we are going to keep Southern Baptists believing that the Bible is the inerrant, infallible Word of God, we're going to have to keep repainting that fence in every generation. We need not only to hold to scriptural authority in our hearts, but to teach it diligently to the next generation, talking to them when we are sitting down, and when we walk in the way, and when we lie down, and when we rise up, and bind them for a sign on our wrists, and as a headband between our eyes, and write them on the mantels of our houses and on our gateposts (c.f. Deut. 6:4-9).

Preaching is probably the most crucial place that the doctrine of the Bible impacts the church. Unfortunately, many of the best-known expository preachers in the SBC are at or near retirement age. We may be entering an era in which there is a dearth of the hearing of the Word of God (Amos 8:9-11, Rom. 10:17). As Danny Akin has said so aptly,

Seduced by the sirens of modernity, we have jettisoned a Word-based ministry that is expository in nature. We have in our attempt to be popular and relevant become foolish and irrelevant. Skiing across the surface needs of a fallen sinful humanity, we have turned the pulpit into a pop psychology side show and a feel-good pit stop Preaching the cross of Christ and the bloody atonement accomplished by His death is the exception, not the norm.”⁵

In an article that makes more heartsick than I can describe with words, William Willimon lays an indictment at the feet of us conservative evangelicals. In the article, entitled “Been There, Preached That: Today’s Conservatives Sound Like Yesterday’s Liberals,” Willimon laments that Baptists and other evangelicals have abandoned biblical preaching:

I’m a mainline-liberal-Protestant-Methodist-type Christian. I know we’re soft on Scripture. . . . I know we play fast and loose with Scripture. But I’ve always had this fantasy that somewhere, like in Texas, there were preachers who preached it all, Genesis to Revelation, without blinking an eye, straight from the Scofield Chain Reference – just like Jesus said it. I took great comfort in knowing that, even while I preached a pitifully compromised, “Pealed”-down gospel, that somewhere, good old Bible-believing preachers were offering their congregations the unadulterated Word, straight up. Do you know how disillusioning it has been for me to realize that many of these self-proclaimed biblical preachers now sound more like liberal mainliners than liberal mainliners?” At

Theological Seminary and Texas Baptists: A Response by Charles S. Kelley, Jr.,” available online at <http://baptistcenter.com/BCTM%20Articles%20and%20Essays.htm> at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry website, and at the “Baptist2Baptist” website at <http://www.sbc.net/redirect.asp?url=http://www.baptist2baptist.net>.

⁵ Danny Akin, “Southern Baptists: There Is a Future if . . .,” presentation at “The Mission of Today’s Church,” the annual conference of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry, on February 11, 2005.

the very time those of us in the mainline, old-line, sidelined were repenting of our pop psychological pap and rediscovering the joy of disciplined biblical preaching, these “biblical preachers” were becoming “user friendly” and “inclusive,” taking their homiletical cues from the “felt needs” of us “boomers” and “busters” rather than the excruciating demands of the Bible.”⁶

How sad that the conservative generation of pastors which stood firm for biblical preaching against the need-based preaching of the liberal Harry Emerson Fosdick has handed over their pulpits to a generation that imbibes of Fosdick’s approach to preaching hook, line, and sinker! Fosdick taught us that our sermons should not be biblical expositions, but should address people’s felt needs and help them cope with their problems. I suppose that’s alright, but it’s not the best. Anyone who has confidence in God’s inerrant Word knows that there is nothing more relevant to the deepest needs of the human heart than the Bible. We need to stop trying to “make the Bible relevant” and unleash the life-changing power of the gospel. As the Apostle Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). We need to get back to expository gospel preaching that proclaims Jesus Christ as the Son of God who was born of a virgin, who lived a sinless life, who taught divine truth and performed miracles, who was crucified on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for our sins, who is risen and ascended to the right hand of God to make intercession for us, and who is coming again to take us to heaven with Him. That is the message that our world is hungry to hear, whether they realize it or not.

Willimon, Dean of the Chapel at quasi-Methodist Duke University, recounts the following conversation with a would-be hearer:

“Who’s preaching in Duke Chapel today,” asked a nasal, Yankee-sounding voice. I cleared my throat and answered, “The Reverend Doctor William Willimon.” “Who’s that?” asked the voice. “The Dean of the Chapel,” I answered in a sonorous tone. “I hope he won’t be preaching politics. I’ve had a rough week, and I need to hear about God. My Baptist church is so eaten up with politics, I’ve got to hear a sermon!”

Willimon concludes his story with a stunning indictment on the state of Baptist preaching today: “When you have to come to a Methodist for a biblical sermon, that’s pitiful.”⁷

Prediction/Warning: Unless Baptists return to expository, Bible-centered preaching and an unswerving commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture, doctrinal drift is inevitable.

⁶ William H. Willimon, ““Been There, Preached That: Today’s Conservatives Sound Like Yesterday’s Liberals,” *Leadership* 16 (Fall 1995):76-77.

⁷Ibid., 78.

- (2) *Biblical Authority* – Will Southern Baptists submit their lives and opinions on the authority of Scripture, or will cultural and pragmatic pressures force us to “reinterpret” the Bible?

Even if we pay lip service to the divine inspiration and truthfulness of Scripture, will we place our lives under the authority of the Word of God? Just since I’ve been alive, Southern Baptists have moderated their stand on a number of issues. In each of these issues, we said we took that stand because it was being faithful to Scripture. For example, when I was growing up, many Baptist churches had something called a “Church Covenant” either posted at the front of the sanctuary or printed in the hymnal. This Church Covenant summarized the biblical commitments required for meaningful church membership. Among other things that were in this document that are often ignored today, this Church Covenant called for church members to not only refrain from the use of alcoholic beverages, but from their sale as well.⁸ How consistently is this practiced in Baptist life today? When is the last time you heard a sermon addressing how we keep our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20)?

As a young man growing up in the same home church as Gray Allison, I was taught that dancing was not appropriate for Christians because of its unwholesome associations. As a young adolescent, I remember sitting down with my home church pastor who baptized me, and we talked through this issue of dancing. He gave me all the reasons why I shouldn’t do it, and I made the commitment not to do so. When the high school was having the Prom, we had a “From” at the church (a Christian alternative to the Prom). You can imagine my surprise when, two decades later, I came to serve on his church staff in another church, to discover that the former youth minister had held 1950s dances in the church fellowship hall! If it wasn’t okay in the 50s, what made it okay in the 70s? Indeed, while I was serving at Southwestern Seminary, church groups including seminary students would go together to go line dancing at Billy Bob’s, advertised as the largest honky-tonk in the world. What changed?

Pragmatism has enormous weight in our culture, and Southern Baptist convictions are going to be under tremendous pressure in the next few decades. The ultimate decision we have to make is whether we are going to accord more authority to the Bible or to our culture. Two of the most important areas in which this battle will be fought involve the biblical pattern for marriage and pluralistic inclusivism.

There are at least three burning issues related to the biblical standards for marriage: divorce, the role of women, and homosexuality. In some ways, the battle over the issue of divorce is virtually already lost. A Barna study⁹ last year showed that there is no statistical

⁸ J. Newton Brown, “Church Covenant,” from *The Baptist Church Manual*, in Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 161-162.

⁹ The Barna Group, “Born Again Christians Just as Likely to Divorce as Are Non-Christians,” *The Barna Update*, September 8, 2004, accessible online at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=170>.

difference between the divorce rate of born-again Christians and that of the overall American population (33 percent to 34 percent). In fact, there was only a four percent difference between born-again Christians and atheists! By the way, about 90 percent of these divorces by Christians took place after their conversion, and almost a fourth had experienced multiple divorces. So just because people say that they accept the inerrancy of the Bible does not seem to carry over in a meaningful way to how they live their lives. But what is even more troubling is that over half of the born-again Christian polled disagreed with this statement: “When a couple gets divorced without one of them having committed adultery, they are committing a sin”! This is a direct denial of a red letter quotation of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Matt. 5:27-32, 19:3-10). There is no ambiguity, and there is no appeal to Paul’s supposed patriarchal perspective. It is simply choosing to evaluate divorce by the world’s standards rather than God’s standards.

The biblical standards regarding the role of women is among our most challenging contemporary issues. Culture is already bringing intense pressure to bear on the church to change the traditional biblical view of the role of women. When the Southern Baptist Convention adopted the family amendment to the Baptist Faith and Message, we were savaged by the secular press. But this problem is not merely driven by the media. Many conservative evangelical churches find themselves trapped between two positions. On the left, most mainline denominations already have significant numbers of women pastors. But on the right, many churches in the Assembly of God and black church traditions often have female co-pastors, usually the pastor’s wife, who may preach as much as does the pastor. This cultural pressure was illustrated to me when a friend invited a female bank executive to come with her to church. When the service began, the male church staff members processed up to the podium. The bank executive turned to her friend and asked, “Where are the female staff members?” When her host admitted that Baptists don’t usually have women in leadership positions in the church, the bank executive got up and left the service. My fear is that we may allow pragmatism rather than biblical guidelines to determine our practice.

Unfortunately, discounting the Pauline texts about the role of women because he lived in a patriarchal culture opens a Pandora’s Box. If it was culture that drove Paul to write about gender roles, then it was arguably also Paul’s cultural captivity that drove him to write against homosexuality. Once you start down the path of questioning and reinterpreting biblical authority and the plain sense meaning of biblical commands regarding particular issues, there really is no turning back. Without the Bible being our ultimate authority for faith and practice, everything is up for grabs.

Another major area that we will experience tremendous pressure from culture in the next few decades is to give in to inclusivism and pluralism. Already many persons in the pew of even the most conservative churches are functional universalists. In the media, the assertion that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ is and will be depicted as hopelessly narrowminded bigotry. When Southern Baptists sought to undertake a focused mission effort in the city of Chicago, numerous religious leaders decried the effort, asserting that it would inevitably lead to violence. Toleration has become the supreme virtue in our culture. Everything is tolerated (except intolerance and religious particularism). If you don’t think this is having an impact on

the church, I challenge you to hand out a survey sheet at the next Christian youth camp you attend. What I believe you'll find (and what several surveys taken among Christian young people have revealed)¹⁰ is that at a surprisingly high percentage of Christian young people in Baptist churches – the best of the crop – don't believe that Jesus is the only Way to salvation. For example, in one poll of "Third Millennium Teens" by Barna, in which 70 percent of the teens answering the questions were active in some church group and 82 percent identified themselves as Christians, 62 percent of the teens said they believed that all religions pray to the same god, and 58 percent believed that all religions faiths teach equally valid truth. This generation of young people has been bombarded by pluralism all of their lives. Getting them to believe that Christ truly is the narrow way to salvation will be a profound challenge.

Are Southern Baptists going to yield to cultural pressures and pragmatism? Are we going to compromise what we have historically affirmed about the biblical pattern for marriage and about Jesus as the one only way to salvation? Only if Baptists believe and practice living under biblical authority can these immense cultural pressures of culture be put aside.

Prediction/Warning: Unless Baptists refocus on living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ as the Christian life is defined in Scripture, cultural pressures from within and without the church will lead to increased moral compromise and worldliness in our churches.

(3) *Baptist Polity* – Will Baptists hold to their traditional confessions in issues regarding the doctrine of the church, such as the appropriate practice of church ordinances and the scriptural offices of the church or will we compromise our historic beliefs in order to become more homogenized with other evangelical Christians?

The Southern Baptist Convention that I was reared in was a much more homogeneous group than we are now. There really was no question about how Baptists did church. The two scriptural ordinances were the baptism and the Lord's Supper, and they were understood as the entry point and the fellowship point in a local church. The scriptural offices were understood to be pastor and deacon. Church discipline was applied when necessary according to the scriptural instructions.

The Baptist doctrine of the church is evidently not as clear as it was at earlier times. Both the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board have recently taken steps to address concerns about the ecclesiology of church plants. To their credit, NAMB initiated the development of a study entitled "Ecclesiological Guidelines to Inform Southern Baptist Church Planters." At NAMB's request, after this document was originally sketched out by Stan Norman, Director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at New Orleans

¹⁰ Barna Research Group, "Third Millennium Teens," (Ventura: Barna Research Group, 1999), 48-51.

Baptist Theological Seminary, it underwent a thorough process of vetting by seminary theologians and by NAMB trustees in the Fall of 2004. It presents a clear and coherent vision of how to plant churches that are truly Southern Baptist churches.

Although the IMB has been somewhat less proactive than NAMB in these discussions, IMB Board Chairman Tom Hatley presented 10 recommendations to the IMB staff and trustees last September which arose from earlier consultations with faculty and administration from the six SBC-owned seminaries and Mid-America Seminary. The recommendations included (a) asking for the implementation of an accurate annual audit of beliefs on the field as previously adopted by the IMB Board, and that this audit is to be reported to the full Board, in order to insure that Baptist churches are being planted on the field; (b) asking for continued study and evaluation of the teachings and curriculum at the Missionary Learning Center and training on the field as especially regards ecclesiology and the role of women in ministry; and (c) asking that the trustees revisit and clarify for all the definition of a local church.¹ Obviously, within some circles in the SBC there is some confusion about what exactly it means to be a Southern Baptist church.

Other key elements of Baptist polity are no longer emphasized or practiced as they were 50 years ago. Now we see churches who do not consistently practice believer's baptism by immersion, one of the key distinctives of Baptist beliefs. Many churches commonly allow persons to join the church by "statement" even if they have not been baptized by immersion in a fellowship of like faith and practice. Joining many Baptist churches is more like joining a club than uniting heart and soul with a strong confessional commitment. Having a regenerate church is foundational to any New Testament church, and allowing persons into church membership who do not share our basic convictions is a recipe for disaster. Likewise, few churches give serious attention to reserving participation in the Lord's Supper to believers, thus not heeding the scriptural admonition in 1 Cor. 11:27-30 to not be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord by partaking in the Supper unworthily.²

Another common divergence from traditional Baptist distinctives concerns the appropriate offices of the church. According to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, the two "scriptural offices" of a New Testament church are pastor and deacon.³ Many young ministers, sometimes driven by anecdotal horror stories about deacons, have followed pied Pipers from other denominations to add another office of elder and/or delete the office of deacon. However, I believe that you and I do not have the right to arbitrarily change the church offices delineated in

¹ See Mark Kelley, "IMB chairman: Overseas growth demands aggressive training," a Baptist Press story dated September 17, 2004, available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?Id=19127>.

² *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, article VI - VII.

³ *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, article VI.

Scripture. Elders are synonymous in Scripture with pastors or bishops, not another office.⁴ If young pastors want to force a Presbyterian form of church government on a church, they should have the integrity before they are called as pastor to speak honestly and openly with the church regarding their disagreement with article VI of the Baptist Faith and Message and their intention to lead the church to have a Presbyterian church governance.

These are potentially crisis days for Baptist polity and a distinctive Baptist ecclesiology. If we do not go back to our biblical roots, our polity will become homogenized such that it is indistinguishable from other denominations and traditions.

Prediction/Warning: If the current trajectory of Southern Baptists is not redirected, key Baptist distinctives about ecclesiology and church polity will be increasingly compromised and ignored.

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- (4) *Hyper-Calvinistic Soteriology— Will Baptists change their soteriology such that persons are no longer seen as having any capacity to respond to God’s invitation to salvation? Will Baptists take a “hyper-Calvinist turn” than hinders missions and evangelism?*

Among Southern Baptists, Calvinism has been on the rise for the past few decades. Throughout its history, the Southern Baptist Convention has swung periodically toward and away from Calvinism. In the 1980s, while a few faculty members at the six SBC seminaries had Calvinistic commitments, none of the faculties of the were predominantly Calvinistic. Some faculty members were vocally anti-Calvinist. However, the number of Calvinist faculty dramatically increased over the next twenty years. Two major factors contributed to the resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC. First, presidents with strong Calvinist commitments were elected at a couple of the six seminaries. Second, most Calvinists hold to a high view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and were thus attractive faculty candidates in a denomination in the midst of controversy over the inerrancy of Scripture. There are more Calvinist faculty members at the SBC seminaries now than at any time in my lifetime. Calvinism may be reaching its high water mark in the SBC, at least in this century, but it will not go away quickly. The many Calvinistic faculty members in SBC institutions will make disciples, and the strong influence of Calvinists such as John MacArthur on young ministers is going to continue

⁴ See Steve Lemke, “The Elder in the Early Church,” *Biblical Illustrator* 19 (Fall 1992), 59-62; Gerald Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government*, with foreword by Jerry Vines and appendices by Emir E. Caner and Stephen Prescott (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003); Chad Brand and Stan Norman, eds., *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, with Daniel Akin, James Leo Garrett, Jr., Robert Reymond, James R. White, and Paul F. M. Zaul (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004); and Steven Cowan, ed., *Who Runs the Church? Four Views of Church Government*, with Peter Toon, L. Roy Taylor, Paige Patterson, and Samuel L. Waldron (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

for many years to come.

Now, I know that this issue of Calvinism is a very “hot” and sensitive topic, so before I address it I want to make several things very clear. First of all, Calvinism is a valid expression of the Christian faith and of the Baptist tradition. Its popularity has risen and fallen through history, and today it is a minority view in the Southern Baptist Convention. But it is a valid and important perspective within the Baptist tradition. For this reason, Dr. Kelley and I have brought more Calvinists to our NOBTS faculty than (to my knowledge) at any time in our institutional history. We did this because of their conservative theology, their academic excellence, and our desire for a balanced representation of perspectives on Baptist theology on our campus. Second, let me quickly acknowledge that there is not just one Calvinism, but many Calvinisms. If you’ll allow me to oversimplify a bit, in the Southern Baptist Convention there are essentially two streams of Calvinism. One stream is what we might call hard hyper-Calvinism (often associated with the Founder’s Movement), and the other is a softer baptistic Calvinism. I will be delineating these more clearly later, but for now my point is that it is with hyper-Calvinism that I have major concerns. Third, it is simply not the case that Calvinism does not have a long history in Southern Baptist life, as some have suggested.⁵ Southern Baptist roots draw directly from the Particular Baptists and Regular Baptists who were Calvinist in orientation. Fourth, although I’ve not been a cheerleader for the resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC, Calvinism has indeed made valuable contributions to Southern Baptist life. It has probably offered a healthy counterbalance and a useful corrective to the somewhat Arminian tendencies in the revivalism and the church growth movement within the SBC. In particular, it has rightly reminded us we must never fall into the heresy that our actions or methods accomplish salvation. Calvinism has also reminded us that evangelism is not accomplished as the result of a magic formula from some church growth guru. No revival takes place by human means alone; it is God that gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). However, God has invited us to have the privilege of taking part in His harvest. So I want to be very clear that I am not challenging the validity of Calvinism within the Southern Baptist Convention.

Despite these positive contributions of Calvinism, however, there would appear to be a strong possibility that the Southern Baptist Convention may become embroiled in what I might whimsically refer to as the “battle of Geneva.” We will be deciding in the next couple of decades what we’re going to do with the resurgence of Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention. Pendulum swings are very common in human history, and there is always a danger of pendulums swinging too far in the opposite direction. Some questions we have to address are: “How far is the resurgence of Calvinism going to go in the SBC?” “What boundaries should there be when

⁵ Paul E. Robertson and Fisher Humphreys assert that “traditional Baptists are not Calvinists,” and that “the first Baptists were not Calvinists.” See Paul E. Robertson and Fisher Humphreys, *God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 2000), 2. These claims seem difficult to justify in light of the significant influence that Calvinists have had on Baptists through the years.

the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction toward hyper-Calvinism?” “Will Baptist Calvinists distinguish themselves clearly and definitively from hyper-Calvinists?” “Will some varieties of Calvinism limit or hinder our evangelistic focus?” My concern is not primarily the status of Calvinism right now in Southern Baptist life, but what it could be twenty years from now if we continue on the current trajectory. Wise voices such as Adrian Rogers, Danny Akin, and Paige Patterson have warned about the dangers of unchecked hyper-Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention.⁶ I believe that it is potentially the most explosive and divisive issue facing us in the near future. It has already been an issue that has split literally dozens of churches, and it holds the potential to split the entire Convention.

What is the difference between hyper-Calvinism and the more typical baptistic Calvinism? Timothy George, President of Beeson Seminary who is himself a Calvinist, has provided a helpful clue in contrasting the “TULIP” acronym of Synod of Dort hyper-Calvinism (although this popular acronym does not fully communicate the affirmation of that Synod) with a “ROSES” acronym of a softer version of Calvinism that is closer to what most Baptists believe.⁷ TULIP, of course, stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. ROSES stands for radical depravity, overcoming grace, sovereign election, eternal life, and singular redemption. Each of these phrases moves away from the hard Calvinism represented in the TULIP. Compared with total depravity, *radical depravity* agrees that we can do nothing to save ourselves, but affirms that humans are not totally evil because we retain the image of God despite our fallenness. Compared with irresistible grace, *overcoming grace* (or effectual calling) affirms that God accomplishes salvation, but differs in that rather than salvation being a mechanical and deterministic process, it allows for human responsiveness to God’s persistent wooing. In contrast to the double predestinarianism of unconditional election, *sovereign election* allows for a genuine human accountability to respond to God. The phrase “perseverance of the saints” might suggest that although we are saved by grace, we are kept by our good works. The phrase “Once saved, always saved” could suggest that we could claim Christ as Savior without making Him Lord of our lives. George prefers *eternal life* or eternal security to convey the scriptural truth of the

⁶ Adrian Rogers, “Predestined for Hell? Absolutely Not!,” preached at Bellevue Baptist Church on August 23, 2003, available online from Love Worth Finding website at <http://resources.christianity.com/ministries/lwf/main/talkInfo.jhtml?id=16068>; Danny Akin, “The Danger of Loving a Theological System More than a Savior,” chapel message delivered at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on September 17, 2002, available online at <http://www.sebts.edu/president/resources/viewResource.cfm?ResourceID=63&CategoryID=114>; and Paige Patterson, “Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God,” The Gurney Lectures on Evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, delivered March 2-4, 2004, available online at <http://www.nobts.edu/Chapel/Archives/Spring2004.html>.

⁷ Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God’s Initiative – Our Response* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2000), 71-83.

assurance of the believer. Finally, unlike limited atonement, *singular redemption* communicates that Jesus' death was sufficient to save everyone but is efficient only for those who repent and believe.

I think that most Baptists come out to be about two and a half point Calvinists (as do I), although hyper-Calvinists would probably not like the way we count the points. We usually affirm *total depravity*, although often not in the same sense that Dortian Calvinists intend. While affirming the sinfulness of all mankind, most Baptists usually see some role for human response or "point of addressibility," along the lines of Romans 1 and 2. *Unconditional election* is largely affirmed by Baptists, again with some adjustments. While Baptists believe that salvation is wholly from God, they also believe that in the economy of God's salvation He has chosen for human response to be prerequisite to actualizing salvation. Most Baptists view *limited atonement* as the least scriptural of the five affirmations, and this doctrine is rejected by most Baptists, except in a merely functional sense that Christ's atonement is sufficient for all, but actualized only by the elect. *Irresistible grace* is also flatly denied by most Baptists, except for the affirmation that salvation is through grace alone. All Southern Baptists, however, affirm *perseverance of the saints*.

While Calvinistic perspectives have a long history in Baptist life and Southern Baptists have always tolerated five-point Calvinism as a legitimate position within Baptist life, I do not believe that the majority of the Southern Baptist Convention will ever embrace or require five point Calvinism. If most Baptists really are between two and three point Calvinists, there are countervailing forces in the SBC which constitute a limit factor on Calvinism in the convention.

In a discussion that might be as astonishing to most Southern Baptists in the pew as to deny the virgin birth, a Southern Baptist seminary recently printed in one of its publications a debate between three of its faculty members about whether or not it is unbiblical for churches to have an invitation for the lost to be saved at the end of the worship service.⁸ Just the fact that there was some question about this long-standing evangelistic tradition was troubling enough for me. Jim Elliff argued that "it is my contention that our use of the altar call and the accouterment of a 'sinner's prayer' is a sign of our lack of trust in God."⁹ Elliff claimed that "there is no

⁸ The three articles were printed under the heading of "Walking the Aisle," in *Heartland* (Summer 1999):1, 4-9, a publication of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The three articles were "Closing with Christ," by Jim Elliff, which argued that altar calls were unbiblical; "Rescuing the Perishing," by Ken Keathley, which argued that invitations were biblical and appropriate, and "Kairos and the 'Altar Call'," by Mark Coppenger, which allowed for some limited use of altar calls.

⁹ Elliff, "Closing with Christ," 6. Keathley more than adequately refutes these claims with biblical evidence in "Rescuing the Perishing," 4-5; c.f. Ken Keathley, "Rescue the Perishing: A Defense of Giving Invitations," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003):4-16, available online in a .pdf file at the website for the Baptist Center for

biblical precedent or command regarding a public altar call,” but was an invention of Charles Finney, and that “the sad truth is that it [the sinner’s prayer] is not found anywhere but in the back of evangelistic booklets.”¹⁰ Elliff further questions the practice of pastors who would share Scripture verses about assurance of salvation with new believers, or to present them to the church publicly for baptism, because Elliff believes that the majority of these would-be converts are probably not genuinely saved.¹¹

I find these suggestions illogical and unbiblical. While we should always guard against excesses of revivalism or emotional manipulation which might lead some into mere emotional response that lacks any real commitment, we should be eager to accept even a thief on a cross into the Kingdom. Even C. H. Spurgeon complained that some of his fellow Calvinists seemed “half afraid that perhaps some may overstep the bounds of election and get saved who should not be,” and claimed that “there will be more in heaven than we expect to see there by a long way.”¹²

Beyond theological discussions about soteriology, it will be interesting to study the impact of high Calvinism on evangelistic efforts. While we all know five point Calvinists who are effective evangelists and missionaries, it is a common intuition that those with a theology of hard Calvinism are not apt to be as evangelistic as others. Certainly, this was the case with the hyper-Calvinists who discouraged William Carey from going to India as a missionary on the grounds that if God wanted to save the heathen He would do so Himself without human assistance. But apart from intuitions and anecdotal stories, is there any evidence that a hard Calvinist theology might negatively impact evangelism?

A New Orleans Seminary faculty colleague and myself compared the baptisms, worship attendance, and membership patterns of 233 Southern Baptist Churches self-identified as Founder’s Fellowship-friendly churches (as listed on the Founder’s Fellowship website). The study produced startling results. Founder’s Fellowship churches had considerably fewer baptisms, smaller congregations, more declining membership than the average Southern Baptist Church. In 2004, not a single one of the 233 self-identified Founder’s Fellowship Southern Baptist Churches had 40 or more baptisms. Their baptism to member ratio was 1:62; it was 1:42 in the rest of the Southern Baptist Convention (which is the worst in our history). Nearly a fourth

Theology and Ministry of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at <http://baptistcenter.com/Journal%20Articles/Spr%202003/02%20Rescuing%20the%20Perishing%20-%20Spr%202003.pdf>.

¹⁰ Elliff, “Closing with Christ,” 7.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² C. H. Spurgeon, *Tabernacle Pulpit*, vo. XVII, p. 449, and XII, p. 477, cited in Timothy George, *Amazing Grace*, 77.

of the Founder's Fellowship churches had no baptisms at all in 2004, just over 60 percent had fewer than five baptisms, and over 80 percent of the Founder's Fellowship churches had fewer than 10 baptisms in 2004.¹³

The Southern Baptist churches associated with the Founder's Fellowship also tended to be smaller than the average Southern Baptist church. Only eleven of the 233 churches had more than 1,000 members in 2004, and only one had regular worship attendance of 1,000 or more. Over 42 percent of the Founder's Fellowship churches had 100 or fewer members, and over 60 percent had 200 or fewer members. In the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole, 24 percent of the churches are smaller than 100 members and 46 percent have 200 or fewer members. So nearly twice as many Founder's Fellowship churches had 100 or fewer members than churches in the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole, and about 25 percent more of the Founder's Fellowship churches had 200 or fewer members than the typical Southern Baptist Church. The Founder's Fellowship churches were not only smaller, but they were more likely to be plateaued or declining than most Southern Baptist churches. Over 79 percent of the Founder's Fellowship churches were plateaued or declining, 10 percent more than the typical Southern Baptist church.

So, does the fact that someone has hard Calvinist theology *necessarily* mean that he is not evangelistic? Of course not. Some of the most effective evangelists in Christian history – George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and D. James Kennedy, were Calvinists. But do churches who emphasize hard Calvinist theology *tend* to be less evangelistic? Look at the hard evidence and you be the judge!

The newest generation of Southern Baptist ministers is the most Calvinist we have had in several generations. Will most of them remain modestly Calvinistic, or will they continue moving toward hyper-Calvinism? If this generation of ministers moves significantly toward hyper-Calvinism, what will Southern Baptist missions and evangelism be like in a few decades? Will we be more passionately evangelistic, or less so? My concern is that Southern Baptists could suffer decline in our evangelism and missions due to overzealous and misinformed application of Calvinistic theology.

Prediction/Warning: The resurgence of Calvinism will slow over the next few decades, but will exert a stronger influence on the SBC in the future than has been the case in many years.

¹³ These numbers compare the most recent Founder's Fellowship affiliated church numbers as recorded in the SBC statistics in 2004. The most recent complete figures for all SBC churches is 2003. However, lest anyone worry that this makes these comparisons unfair, or an "apples to oranges" comparison, please note that baptisms in the SBC were up in 2004 from 2003. Therefore, when the total SBC figures from 2004 are released, the numbers will make the Founder's Fellowship churches to be even less evangelistic, not better.

- (5) *Denominational Identity* – Can Southern Baptists survive as a denomination in what is often depicted as a “post-denominational era”? What does the future hold for Southern Baptists in a day when denominational name brand loyalty is at an all-time low? How will traditional Baptist entities such as Lifeway and NAMB intersect with the emerging church movement? Will the Cooperative Program survive?

We appear to be in a period in which there is a sense of disconnect between churches and the entities of the convention. This is not intentional, but the convention agencies just don't seem to be connecting with local churches or their members. This disillusionment is evidenced in many ways. The prominence of aging, gray-haired attendees and the paucity of young ministers attending the annual SBC conventions has become so obvious that it is undeniable. The cooperation between Baptist state conventions with NAMB and the IMB has not always gone smoothly. Many churches have moved away from using Lifeway materials for Bible study and discipleship. Small churches, which still make up the overwhelming majority of SBC churches, have begun to view megachurches in a way not dissimilar to how small business owners in small towns viewed a new Walmart superstore moving into their town. In this day of megachurches, we may easily forget that just about 7,000 of our 43,000 SBC churches run more than 200 in Sunday morning worship, so 85 percent of our churches have less than 200 in weekly worship attendance. These smaller churches are feeling increasingly disenfranchised and have a perception (rightly or wrongly) that they are neglected by the convention.

The decline in inflation-adjusted Cooperative Program giving is one of the most crucial marks of the disconnect between church and convention. The SBC Funding Study Committee reported ¹⁴ that although total receipts of SBC churches had doubled between 1987 and 2001, an increase of 108 percent (from \$4.2 billion to 8.9 billion), Cooperative Program giving increased just 47 percent over that period. Churches gave between 10 and 11 percent to the Cooperative Program for the 50 years leading up to the 1980s, during which it began to decline. Over the past few years Cooperative Program giving by churches has plunged by a third from 7.85 percent to 5.3 percent. To those of us for whom the Cooperative Program is a lifeline, this is a serious issue.¹⁵ Some seem to be moving toward the old “society” approach by encouraging direct giving outside of the Cooperative Program. There has been considerable anxiety on a number of fronts

¹⁴ “Report of the SBC Funding Committee,” available online at <http://www.baptist2baptist.net/b2barticle.asp?ID=274>.

¹⁵ At New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, for example, the Cooperative Program in 1991 provided \$146.58 per credit hour for Southern Baptist students, while the students paid \$37.92 per credit hour. In 2002-2003, the Cooperative Program support had gone down to \$131.61 per credit hour, while students paid \$91.33 per credit hour. In the 1970s, the Cooperative Program provided over 70 percent of the seminary's budget; it now provides less than 50 percent. Student tuition has increased from under \$10 per credit hour in 1975 to over \$130 per credit hour in 2004, an increase of 1,300 percent!

about IMB representatives soliciting funds directly rather than supporting giving through the Cooperative Program. Only the future will tell whether Southern Baptists are going to revert back to the old “society” method of funding, or if we going to unite our giving through the Cooperative Program.¹⁶

Many Baptists have the perception that the convention is moving toward a more centralized power structure, and they don’t like it.¹⁷ There is always a danger of convention executives and staff forgetting that they exist not to direct the churches of the SBC but to serve them. The close ties of loyalty that once bound local churches to convention entities are no

¹⁶ See Charles S. Kelley, Jr., “Roots of a Dilemma: SBC Entities and the Cooperative Program,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 27-46; available online at <http://baptistcenter.com/BCTM%20Journal%20-%20Spring%202003.htm>.

¹⁷ These concerns are expressed articulately in Charles S. Kelley, Jr., “The Baptist Way: A Personal Perspective,” a Convocation address at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary delivered on September 4, 2003, available online with a PowerPoint presentation at <http://baptistcenter.com/BCTM%20Articles%20and%20Essays.htm> on the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry website. For a response favoring increased centralization in the SBC, see David Hankins, “The Relation of the Southern Baptist Convention to Its Entities: A Response to Charles Kelley’s *The Baptist Way*,” at the “Baptist2Baptist” website of the Southern Baptist Convention at <http://www.sbc.net/redirect.asp?url=http://www.baptist2baptist.net>. For two responses to Hankin’s paper, see Ken Keathley and Lloyd Harsch, “A Program of Cooperation: A Rejoinder to David Hankins’ Paper,” at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry website at <http://baptistcenter.com/BCTM%20Articles%20and%20Essays.htm>, and Ergun Mehmet Caner, “Voices from the Past, Voice for the Pew: History of the Support for the Direct Linkage between Trustees and the SBC Churches,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 6-21; available online at <http://baptistcenter.com/BCTM%20Journal%20-%20Spring%202004.htm>.

For one example of a possible step toward centralization, representatives of the SBC Executive Committee considered closing or dramatically changing Midwestern Seminary a couple of years ago. The Executive Committee representatives met with the Midwestern Seminary President and a couple of their trustees. When asked what would be done if the Midwestern Seminary trustees did not agree with the committee’s suggestion, the Executive Committee representatives reportedly threatened that since the MWBTS had rmade the SBC the sole member of its corporation, as requested by the Executive Committee, the Executive Committee would simply ask the Convention to replace the entire Midwestern Trustee Board with people who would agree with the suggestion. While this action did not go forward, even the threat of such action reminds one more of a hierarchical organization headed by a CEO or a Pope than by the free church tradition of Southern Baptists. See Don Hinkle, “Time to Tell Missouri Baptists about Midwestern Debate,” *The Pathway* (July 29, 2003), 4-5, available at *The Pathway* (journal of the Missouri Baptist Convention) at <http://www.mobaptist.org/thepathway/-1999989059/-1999943078.htm>.

longer as close as they once were. Attendance at national, state, and associational meetings is dwindling. Many of the larger churches rarely participate in meetings and activities sponsored by the local association and the state Baptist convention.

In the past, we looked to our denominational leaders, mission agencies, and publishing house for our ideas, programs, and materials. Now convention leaders are seen by some as bureaucrats out of touch with local church life. This is the first generation in which 1st John, 2nd John, and 3rd John have had more impact on Southern Baptists than have our denominational leaders and denominational publishing house (I refer, of course, to John MacArthur, John Piper, and John Maxwell). Rick Warren's Purpose-Driven Church, Purpose-Driven Life, and 40 Days of Purpose have had more impact on the lives of the people in many churches than anything published by Lifeway Christian Resources. The point is not that Lifeway may not produce great materials; the point is that Southern Baptist churches are increasingly looking outside the name-brand identity of traditional denominational channels to find alternative materials and ideas that meet their needs.

Much to his credit, Dr. Jimmy Draper, President of Lifeway Christian Resources, has actively engaged the leaders of the Emerging Church Movement. His well-circulated article, "Is the Southern Baptist Convention a Frog in the Kettle?" resonated with many Baptists.¹⁸ Draper was sensitive to the fact that younger leaders in the SBC have been asking, "Is there a place for me at the table in the SBC?" Draper has been one of a few SBC leaders who have consciously and intentionally reached out to a younger generation of leaders, and this is a crucial step in passing the baton of leadership to the next generation.

Perhaps the demise of denominations has been greatly exaggerated. In a new book out this year entitled *Chasing Down a Rumor: The Death of Mainline Denominations*, authors Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskip present statistical evidence that proclamations of the beginning of the post-denominational era may be premature.¹⁹ As a staunch denominationalist, I

¹⁸ Jimmy Draper, "Is the Southern Baptist Convention a Frog in the Kettle?" available online at the Lifeway Christian Resources website along with other materials and an endorsement in Trennis Henderson, "Draper's 'Frog' Campaign Deserves Support," available at http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A%253D159346%2526M%253D150032,00.html. For more reflection on this subject, see Ed Stetzer, "What Will It Take to Bring Young Leaders Back?" available online at the Lifeway Christian Resources website at http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0,1703,A%253D159734%2526M%253D150032,00.html, and Stetzer's "The Missional Nature of the Church and the Future of Southern Baptist Convention Churches," a paper delivered February 12, 2005 at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry conference on "The Mission of Today's Church."

¹⁹ Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskip, *Chasing Down a Rumor: The Death of Mainline Denominations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). Although primarily addressing mainline denominations, most of the book's findings are applicable to the issues surrounding the Southern

find so-called nondenominationalists to be rather curious. If I were in a church with a hierarchical structure, perhaps I could appreciate the denominational/nondenominational distinction more fully. However, since Southern Baptist polity is in the free church tradition, it is difficult to see much difference between a free church denomination and a nondenominational denomination. Every local Southern Baptist church has maximal freedom in all its decisions, without any necessity of responding to the direction of convention officers. I call them “nondenominational denominations” because they seem to have all the characteristics of a free church denomination – a funding mechanism for missions, Christian colleges and seminaries, publishing houses, regional and national meetings and events, benevolence and social agencies, etc. So, to utilize the old saw, “If it walks like a denomination, and quacks like a denomination, perhaps it really is a denomination.” However, Southern Baptist leaders have much to do if they are going to reconnect with local churches and individual Baptists.

Prediction/Warning: Without a course correction in which SBC entities earn again the respect and confidence of Southern Baptists, other evangelical groups will fill the void left by a disconnection between individual Baptists (and their local churches) with the SBC. The day is over that Baptists will use an approach just because of denominational name brand identity.

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- (6) *Evangelistic Fervor – Are going to revive our focus on evangelism, or we going to go into decline like most other denominations? Are we going to continue on the plateau of baptisms that we have been on for the past half a century, or are we going to refocus on evangelism again?*

Perhaps my greatest concern about the future of the Southern Baptist Convention is whether or not we can recover our evangelistic fervor. We love to talk about evangelism, design programs about evangelism, have conferences about evangelism, and everything else except really doing evangelism. The Southern Baptist Convention had an amazing spiral of additions by baptism in the first half of the nineteenth century. Our increase in baptisms was capped by a dramatic vision that Southern Baptists dreamed and enacted in the 1950s called “A Million More in ‘54.” Baptisms in SBC churches exploded from about 100,000 in 1900 to over 400,000 after 1954. Between 1900 and 1960, United States population increased 137 percent, but SBC church

Baptist Convention as a denomination. The authors discuss four foundational claims associated with “The Rumor,” and then examine six versions of “The Rumor.” I do not accept all of their conclusions, but they do offer food for thought for those who believe we have already entered the post-denominational era, and offer food for thought for those who desire reform and renewal within denominational life.

membership increased 487 percent.²⁰

Sadly, in the half century since A Million More in '54, baptisms in Southern Baptist Churches have not increased significantly. There were fewer baptisms in 2004 than in 1954. In the last fifty years, our churches have increased significantly in every key area except baptisms. We have over 13,000 more new churches in 2004 than in 1955, but we had about 40,000 fewer baptisms. We have doubled in church membership from 8 million members in 1955 to 16 million members in 2004, but 40,000 fewer baptisms. Our giving has increased almost from \$334 million in 1955 to over \$9 billion in 2004, but 40,000 fewer baptisms. The population of the United States has grown by over 100 million between 1960 and 2000 (from about 179 million to over 280 million), but baptisms in Southern Baptist churches has not budged. In 1900 a person was baptized for every 21 church members; in 2004 that had doubled to 42 church members needed to reach and baptize one person. What's worse, over half of the adult baptisms in SBC churches are actually rebaptisms, so to count them is really double counting the same people. Over 70 percent of our churches are plateaued or declining.²¹

Traditionally, evangelism was driven by the Sunday School. From 1900-1960, when baptisms quadrupled, there was a very strong correlation between increased enrollment and baptisms. Unfortunately, many churches have de-emphasized Sunday School, and stopped working the principles of Flake's Formula through the Sunday School. Since 1960, there is only a minimal correlation between Sunday School enrollment and baptisms.

In the past couple of decades, many churches have bought into the theory that evangelism should be driven by worship rather than Sunday School. Everything is focused on an entertaining and seeker-friendly worship service. Worship attendance has been increasing in Southern Baptist churches, while Sunday School attendance has increased at a much slower percentage. Just a decade ago, 85 percent of Southern Baptist church worship attenders also attended Sunday School. Now just under 70 percent attend both the worship service and church. Many would be amazed to find that over the past decade, the percentage of increase in worship

²⁰ Most of the data in the following four paragraphs comes from two studies done by Bill Day, Associate Director of the Leavell Center for Evangelism and Church Health at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, entitled "The State of the Church in the Southern Baptist Convention" and "A Study of Growing, Plateaued, and Declining SBC Churches: 2004." Most of the information in these studies is published in William H. Day, Jr., "The State of Membership Growth, Sunday School, and Evangelism in the Southern Baptist Convention 1900-2002," in *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 107-21, available online at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry website at <http://baptistcenter.com/Journal%20Articles/Fall%202003/07%20The%20State%20of%20Membership%20Growth%20-%20Fall%202003.pdf>.

²¹ From the Bill Day studies entitled "The State of the Church in the Southern Baptist Convention" and "A Study of Growing, Plateaued, and Declining SBC Churches: 2004."

attendance at churches in the Southern Baptist Convention have doubled the percentage of population increase in the United States, a 26 percent increase in worship attendance compared with a 13 percent population increase. However, baptisms have remained essentially the same.

I'm sure that we all affirm the restored emphasis on worship and praise that God has brought into our churches, and a more celebrative worship service has been meaningful for many of us. However, while our worship attendance has increased in the last 20 years at a faster rate than the general population, we had fewer baptisms in 2002 than in 1982. In my opinion it is hard to see any significant correlation between increasing worship attendance and baptisms. Worship simply does not take the place of personal evangelism. We need to structure our Sunday School or other small discipleship groups by whatever name to be a focal point of evangelism in the church. And we need pastors to lead by example and by emphasis that fulfilling the Great Commission through personal evangelism is a basic responsibility for all Christians. There is no alternative to personal evangelism.

To his great credit, our current SBC President Bobby Welch, who designed and popularized the FAITH evangelism program, has poured himself the past year into refocusing Southern Baptists on evangelism. I would be so bold as to predict that our President's efforts may represent Southern Baptist's last hope for returning to the dramatic increases in baptisms and church membership. If the Lord does not succeed in revitalizing evangelism in the SBC, the future of the Convention is very dim. Unfortunately, even if we were so refocused on evangelism that 40,000 more persons were baptized this year than last year, we would still not exceed the baptism total of 50 years ago. You cannot sit on a plateau forever. You either go up or you go down. We've been on this plateau of about 400,000 baptisms for 50 years. If that figure does not change dramatically, we are doomed to decline.

Prediction/Warning: Southern Baptists will go into a spiritual and numerical tailspin of decline unless we refocus on sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with a lost world and God sends a revival.

When you add it all up, I'm deeply concerned about the future of the SBC and our churches. If we continue in some of the same directions that we're going now, the future looks rather dim. But we dare not trust in our own genius, organization, or resources. The only real hope for the future of the Southern Baptist Convention is a heaven-sent revival. What we need is a God-ordained, Christ-centered, Spirit-anointed, Bible-based revival. No human or group can change the course can change the course of the Southern Baptist Convention. Only God can do that. Let us pray that God revives His church in this generation of Baptists to the praise of His glory!