

Out of the Stands, Onto the Sideline, and Into the Game:  
An Eyewitness Account of Southern Baptists and the Bible

A Convocation Address for New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

By

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For the last seventeen years I have preached in chapel one or more times every year except for the year I was on sabbatical leave. Today's message, however, will be something quite different from me. I will not be expounding a text. I will be telling a story. You never hear me talk in a public setting about the various currents swirling around our denomination. Today I have been led to make an exception to my general rule. Borrowing from the title of the fascinating new book by Jerry Sutton, I am going to share my perspective on one piece of the Southern Baptist Reformation. If that term sounds strange, let me begin by saying why I use it. I was born and raised a Southern Baptist in Texas. I started going to church nine months before I took my first breath, and I have been at it ever since. My first pastor was a man who so widely reflected the convictions of Texas Baptists that he was the last man elected Executive Secretary of the Baptist General Convention of Texas without being nominated by a search committee. My second pastor was, in the seventies, elected as a president of the Southern Baptist Convention. My third pastor spent his life as a teacher and pastor and was one of the greatest expository preachers I have ever heard. From all of them, from the most godly parents anyone could ever have, and from the Bible teachers of my church I learned my basic theology:

\*The Bible is the inspired Word of God, infallible and inerrant.

\*What the Bible teaches is true.

\*All people are lost and need salvation, and that salvation comes from Jesus Christ alone.

\*The gospel of Jesus is so powerful it can change any life from any culture in any circumstance.

Far from being a distinctive theology peculiar to my church, as I grew older I learned that this was historic Baptist theology accepted by the great majority of Southern Baptists in Texas and across our nation.

It was not until I went to a Baptist college to prepare for the ministry, that I discovered a very different new theology was beginning to dominate in many Southern Baptist educational institutions, and that a conscious purpose of many adherents of this new theology was to change the theology ministerial students had learned in the church and replace it with theology developed in the academy. As I progressed in my education and saw the great gulf between the

theology of the churches and the theology of many classrooms, I was not very surprised when some twenty years ago a reformation movement began to call Southern Baptists back to their historic theological roots, and that Southern Baptist educational institutions were a particular focus of attention during that reformation. I watched this reformation movement develop as a student, I taught in a seminary classroom during its most heated moments, and now I am facing the task of leading the re-engineering of this seminary for the future in its aftermath. Along the way I found myself drawn out of the stands, onto the sideline, and into the game in the midst of this reformation. What drew me out of the stands, onto the sideline, and finally into the game, was not a passion for theological recovery, although I knew of its importance. What drew me was my personal observations of the effect the new theology was having on lives, churches, and the mission of the church. A statement like that deserves an eyewitness explanation.

For three years I served on the staff of the Baptist Student Union in my Texas Baptist university. For most of those three years I worked an average of four nights a week, about two hours a night, visiting in the men's dorms and doing witnessing, personal discipleship, and Bible studies. During those three years I watched too many students, bombarded with this new theology, grow cold to the faith they had when they started my school. The names and faces of some of those I saw drift away will be with me as long as I live. Later, as a seminary student working on my dissertation, I read every issue of every Southern Baptist publication published from about 1937 through 1980. It was all I did for at least a month. Before my eyes I saw the momentum for evangelism and missions in our denomination change, until some 70 percent of all our churches were plateaued or declining. As a professor of evangelism I saw student after student coming from our churches having no experience at all in personal witnessing, and having more fear than passion about personal involvement in fulfilling the Great Commission. This theology that was new to Southern Baptists had a consistent pattern of influence in other denominations. The pattern was one of gradual decline in the emphasis on missions and evangelism until eventually the whole denomination fell into decline. It was becoming clear to me, a scholar in Southern Baptist evangelism, that it was having a similar effect in Southern Baptist life. Although the passion of my life was and ever will be evangelism and helping churches learn to grow again, it became increasingly clear to me that eventually I would have to address issues raised by the new theology. Little did I know that God had in mind for me a life in theological education and an appointment to the Baptist Faith and Message revision committee.

Because there has been so much interest in the Baptist Faith and Message your faculty has affirmed today, and because I played an integral part in shaping the statement, it seemed necessary for me to share with you my perspective on what the document says and why. I wish I could go through the whole statement, but due to time available, I will have to focus on the article which received most of the attention at the convention, and which is the most important for understanding Southern Baptist theology: the article on the Bible.

In the summer of 2000 Southern Baptists did what they tend to do about once a generation. They asked, "How can we summarize for today's churches what most Southern Baptists believe about basic Christian doctrine and the particular theological issues confronting this generation?" They

did this first in 1925, driven primarily by the need for a Southern Baptist response to liberalism and its denial of creation and anything miraculous in the Bible. It happened again in 1963, driven primarily by a concern with the inroads in Southern Baptist educational institutions of neo-orthodox theology and its elevation of the human elements of Scripture above the divine. The 1925 statement was widely embraced across the Convention, but the 1963 statement, although tied forever with the ministry of Herschel Hobbs, one of the SBC's most beloved pastor-teachers, gradually became of more and more concern to a cross section of Southern Baptists. For many years the concern was not with the statement itself, but rather with the fruit of the statement's adoption.

A growing number of the students who were being trained in the denomination's colleges and seminaries were commenting about professors who were passionately advocating theological perspectives vastly different from the historic theology of Southern Baptist churches. The denomination's publishing house was producing books and literature arousing theological concern on an unprecedented scale. Many of the works in question came from the pens of SBC educators and the people they trained. To give you just a few illustrations:

- \* In the sixties the denomination's publisher issued a number of books that created a great outcry over their liberal theology. Among them was the first volume of the *Broadman Bible Commentary*. It became so controversial, the SBC voted to recall the original and replace it with one by a different author. One of my cousins, a professor at Southern Seminary during this era, signed a contract to do one of the Bible books for the Broadman Commentary, but later the editor of the series called him and canceled his contract. The editor's explanation was that this Southern Seminary professor was too conservative for the kind of theology they wanted this commentary series to incorporate and introduce into Southern Baptist life.
- \* In the seventies my Baptist college professor of Old Testament taught his classes the first eleven chapters of Genesis were myth and legend, a man named Moses did not receive Ten Commandments from God, and there was no miraculous crossing of the sea by the Hebrew people fleeing Egypt.
- \* A friend's Baptist college professor began a class by saying his task was to show the class that everything they learned in Sunday School was wrong.
- \* In the early eighties a Southern Baptist seminary professor wrote that we should not try to convert the followers of non-Christian religions, because all of the world religions were as valid for their own cultures as Christianity is for ours. I corresponded with him. He meant it.

By the mid-eighties, the concern was so great that Southern Baptists in record numbers got involved in the annual meeting of the SBC to debate whether or not the denomination should

affirm its historic theological perspectives through the work of its boards, agencies and schools, or allow the new, more liberal theological perspectives of the sixties and seventies to dominate the future. A greater number of Southern Baptists became involved in this discussion than had ever been involved in the annual convention before; the amount of press coverage of the issues and the debate in both Baptist and secular papers was unprecedented; and most of the Baptist paper editors plus a large number of the SBC agency heads and denominational employees passionately advocated that the theology that emerged in the sixties and seventies be allowed to run its course. However, the Southern Baptist Convention instead decided to affirm its historic theological doctrine as the foundation and guideline for whatever future God had in mind for Southern Baptists. That decision, whenever challenged at the denomination's annual meeting, has been continually reaffirmed. The Southern Baptist Convention will stand or fall in years to come on its historic theological convictions. Such a decision, with so large a number of people involved in both the discussion and the decision, and with so much press attending the debate, was unprecedented in the history of Christianity in America. Never had so many members of a denomination been so involved in making so significant a decision. Truly the grass roots spoke, and the word they spoke was reformation.

During the years of debate between the advocates of historic Baptist theology and the advocates of the new theology promoted in the sixties, seventies, and early eighties, a nagging question emerged. How could the advocates of the new theology affirm the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message statement which, quoting directly from the 1925 statement, said the Bible has "God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter." For most of the twentieth century this simple but elegant phrase summarized what Southern Baptists believe about the nature of Scripture, including its unity, truthfulness, subject, and sufficiency. The statement was being used by Baptists before the Southern Baptist Convention was even born. The original source of the classic expression was famed British philosopher John Locke. In 1702, Locke received a letter from a young English minister who wanted advice on how to build a successful ministry. Locke's reply included this statement:

Preach the Bible! For it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error for its matter. (Hobbs, Baptist Faith & Message, p. 26)

The philosopher's advice became one of the most popular descriptions of the nature of the Bible ever used by Baptists.

Obviously something must have been added to this historic language in 1963 that opened the door for a dramatically different theology to enter Southern Baptist life. It became apparent over the years that rather than serving as the expected course correction for the inroads of neo-orthodox theology in SBC educational institutions, two phrases added to the Baptist Faith and Message in 1963 were instead used to justify a radical departure from what most Baptists had always believed about the Bible.

One of those phrases was that the Bible "is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man."

Over the years since 1963, Southern Baptists learned that, to professional theologians, this is a classic statement of neo-orthodox theology. What the new phrase meant in theological circles is that all of the Bible is not a revelation of and from God. Somewhere in the record is the revelation, and the purpose of Bible study is to sort through the record and find the revelation. Thus much of the Bible is a human work wrapped around portions that are divine revelation from God. The Baptist Faith and Message phrase on the Bible having “truth without any mixture of error for its matter,” in their interpretation, refers only to those portions of the Bible that are revelation. For most Southern Baptists such an idea is a dramatic departure from what 2 Timothy 3:16 teaches: “**All** scripture is inspired by God. . .” The problem this perspective creates is in how to know which parts of the Bible are revelation and which are merely the background record. Interestingly enough, not even neo-orthodox theologians could agree on what in the Bible is revelation and what is not.

The other phrase added in 1963 was “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.” While the phrase was commonly understood by typical Baptists to mean one should ask what does any given passage tell us about Jesus or how does a biblical passage relate to what the Bible teaches about Jesus, over the years it became obvious that in professional theological circles this was actually another neo-orthodox statement that would take Southern Baptists in a significantly different theological direction. What many professional theologians meant by affirming this statement is that they would use Jesus as the spotter for separating divine revelation in the Bible from the human record. Any passage that, in their opinion, did not appear to agree with what Jesus said or did must not be divine revelation. In addition, they did not mean to use just the Bible passages about Jesus to determine which parts of the Bible were revelation. They felt this statement also included using whatever one’s opinion was about what Jesus would have said or done to interpret matters the biblical record of Jesus does not address. In other words this new theology says my answer to the question “What would Jesus do?” carries more weight than the clear teaching of the Bible. The Christ of my experience thus becomes the final authority for theology rather than the Bible.

Notice the operating assumption: The Bible is not an integrated whole with God as the ultimate author of both the whole and all its parts. God did not intend all of the Bible to be a revelation of Himself and His Son. Some of it is divine revelation and some of it is human record. Notice also the vivid difference between this idea and the sentence that preceded it in the Baptist Faith and Message: The Bible is “the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, **and religious opinions** should be tried.” This was clearly a new theological perspective in dramatic contrast to what most Southern Baptists had always believed about the Bible, and it significantly changed the interpretation of the historic Baptist Faith and Message statement about Scripture.

This new perspective was also being introduced intentionally in a very subtle way to keep it “under the radar” of most Southern Baptists. Ralph Elliot was a former professor at Midwestern Seminary. His 1961 work *The Message of Genesis* is widely recognized as the first SBC publication to create a controversy by introducing liberal theology to Southern Baptists. A few years ago he wrote another book entitled *The Genesis Controversy* in which he reflected over the

decades of theological controversy that followed the release of his earlier volume. In it he talked about the seminary professors of his era who used what he called “doublespeak” to introduce neo-orthodox theology to Southern Baptist life but avoid the controversy which would have come if their true theology had been widely recognized. Listen to him describe the professors of that day:

Through the years, the program at Southern Seminary has acquainted students with the best in current research in the given fields of study. Often, however, this was done with an eye and ear for the “gallery” and how much the “church trade” would bear. Professors and students learned to couch their beliefs in acceptable terminology and in holy jargon so that although thinking one thing, the speaker calculated so as to cause the hearer to affirm something else. When I was at Southern Seminary years ago, we often said to one professor who was particularly gifted at this “doublespeak” game, that if the Southern Baptist Convention should split, he would be the first speaker at both new conventions. (Elliot, *Genesis Controversy*, p. 33-4)

This was not a statement from a conservative railing against liberalism. This was from a liberal theologian who was open about his new theology and was upset that his colleagues were not being just as open about how very different their new theology was from historic Baptist doctrine. What became obvious over the years is that the changes made to Article One on the Bible in the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message were a textbook illustration of Elliot’s complaint. The language was being given one meaning in many SBC classrooms, but a different meaning in the churches.

The tremendous impact of these two phrases, along with the need to identify clearly the Baptist perspective on issues that had become important for Baptists in the contemporary culture led to the decision to take a fresh look at the Baptist Faith and Message statement in 2000. The study committee appointed for the task was in many ways the most diverse group ever assembled for such a task by Southern Baptists. It included two professional theologians, pastors of large and mid-size churches, two women, representatives of three ethnic groups, a lifelong minister to college students, laymen, an evangelist and this writer. Many if not most Southern Baptists felt that the committee’s proposed revision included fewer changes than expected. Virtually all the discussion about the proposed revision during the Convention and much of the discussion before and after the Convention focused on the deletion of those two phrases about the Bible added in the 1963 statement. **The comments made by those who criticized the deletion of the two phrases from 1963 made the theological differences so clear, one no longer had to be a professional theologian to see how vivid the differences were.**

Here are some examples of the reactions to deleting the two phrases added in 1963 by those who are advocates of the new theology the 1963 phrases introduced. One editor of a state Baptist paper complained,

“Of greater concern to many Baptists is the increasing exaltation of Scripture at the

expense of the believer's personal experience with Christ. While the current [1963] Baptist Faith and Message statement speaks of Christ as the criterion for interpreting the Bible, proposed changes would make the Bible the criterion for interpreting Christ.” (Tony Cartledge, *Biblical Recorder* of North Carolina, June 10, 2000, p.2)

Such a statement made in earlier years would have been viewed as shocking. Southern Baptists have always viewed the Bible as the sole authority for believers, a view, in fact, that goes back in history beyond the point of Baptist origins to the Reformation and beyond the Reformation to the early church. For most Southern Baptists the Bible has always been the judge of our experience; our experience does not serve as the judge of the Bible. My understandings of Jesus must be in harmony with what the Bible teaches, or my understanding is wrong. To quote again the Baptist Faith and Message from 1925, 1963, and 2000, the Bible is “the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.” The only certain knowledge we have about Jesus is what we find in Scripture.

Another editor of a Baptist state paper, attempting to explain how he used the 1963 statement “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ,” wrote that Paul appears to contradict himself in two consecutive sentences, Ephesians 5:21 and Ephesians 5:22. Based upon his experience with Jesus, this editor was certain that Jesus would choose Ephesians 5:21 over 5:22. And, in his words, “being divine, Jesus settles the issue”(Marv Knox, *Baptist Standard* of Texas, June 20, 2000). He was saying the words of Jesus in effect trump the words of Paul. Did you notice the misdirection? The editor attempted to make the issue the authority of Jesus versus the authority of Paul. But that is not really what this editor is questioning. If you could get one hundred percent of Southern Baptists to agree on anything, it would be that Jesus is Lord and Paul is one of His servants. His real question is whether or not Paul was writing under the same kind of inspiration as the writers who wrote what the Bible says about Jesus.

Did you catch that last sentence? There it is, the real issue underlying this editor's suggestion. Were the writers of the gospels more inspired than Paul was when he wrote the epistles? Were the epistles completely inspired or partially inspired? All we know about Jesus is what the Bible teaches us. We believe that what the Bible teaches us about Jesus is true, because God inspired what was written. He is the ultimate Author. Southern Baptists believe that same God inspired Paul in what he wrote as well. If the gospels are true, then so are the epistles. It is not the word of Jesus versus the word of Paul. All Scripture is the Word of God!

Before the influence of the 1963 statement, the very idea of setting Jesus against Paul, as though one would contradict the other, would have been stunning to most Southern Baptists. After all in John 15:12-15, Jesus Himself said the disciples were not ready for all that He wanted to teach them. Therefore He promised He would send the Holy Spirit to tell them more, and the Holy Spirit would tell them only what Jesus wanted them to know. The epistles, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are the fulfilment of that promise. Most Southern Baptists have always believed the gospels and the epistles were complementary, not contradictory. They certainly would not think a biblical writer, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would

contradict himself in consecutive sentences. This kind of theological reasoning stands in stark contrast to historic Baptist theology. Most Southern Baptists believe that there is a unity and harmony underlying the rich variety of the Bible's teaching.

Perhaps the best illustration of the new and different direction these two phrases started in Baptist life is a pastor from Texas who attempted to amend the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 during the discussion at the SBC. His amendment was to return the two phrases from 1963 to the document and to delete the description of the Bible as truth "without any mixture of error." In explaining his amendment he said that

"The Bible is a book that points toward the truth. With that being said the Bible is still just a book. Christians are supposed to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, the living Word, not a book."

His statement -- "the Bible is still just a book"--brought an audible gasp from the assembled messengers. No one had ever said so clearly where the new theology was leading Southern Baptists. Doubtless he did not mean the Bible was just a book like Huckleberry Finn, but he did mean the Bible was less of a book than Southern Baptists had ever believed it to be before the inroads of neo-orthodox theology. He felt that to affirm the whole Bible as a divine revelation inspired by God somehow put the Bible in competition with Jesus. In his opinion God revealed Himself perfectly either in Jesus or in the Bible.

For most Southern Baptists, however, this is an illogical fear. God revealed himself completely in Jesus and perfectly in both Jesus and the Bible. We worship Jesus as our Savior and Lord because the truth about Him is revealed in the Bible. I doubt if Southern Baptists before the sixties and seventies could have conceived of such a discussion taking place on the floor of the Convention. Throughout their history, Southern Baptists believed that it is only because the Bible is inspired by God, a divine revelation of truth without any mixture of error, that we know Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Everything we know of Jesus is revealed in the Bible. In the words of the beloved children's song, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Apart from the Bible we have no certain knowledge of Jesus. If the Bible is not the inerrant Word of God, then we have no certain knowledge of God. To undermine the authority and truthfulness of the Bible is to undermine all that we know about Jesus. This is why the impact of the two phrases added to the Baptist Faith and Message in 1963 created such concern for so many Baptists.

It is possible for two paths to start at the same place but lead in two different directions. In retrospect the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message proved to be the common starting place for paths that offered Southern Baptists two different directions for their future. Those who advocated the new theology introduced in 1963, whether they realized it or not, were starting Southern Baptists down a road that would eventually replace the authority of the Bible with the authority of personal experience and personal opinion. If it seems right to me, in light of my experience, it must be right. Down through the ages the church has consistently refused to have that much



confidence in any man's opinion. We must lay our insights and understandings before God's Word and find confirmation there. The Bible alone is our measure of the true and the correct. Those who advocated a revision of the 1963 statement on Scripture did so because they saw the results of the 1963 changes, and chose to walk a different path. They saw too much good in Southern Baptist life to leave, but too much wrong to ignore.

These Southern Baptists who became so active in the denomination during the last two decades did not follow the path of abandonment chosen by many fundamentalists who became independent Baptists, nor the path of guerilla warfare, chosen by those in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship bemoaning a loss of influence. The path chosen by that record number of Southern Baptists was reformation--a return to the historic theology that has characterized Southern Baptists throughout their history in order to re-mobilize our churches to fulfill the Great Commission. If that was not the motivation of all, it was at least the motivation of this eyewitness and those he knows personally. This was the reason I was drawn out of the stands, onto the sideline, and into the game. Now that I am in the game, I plan to keep my eye on the ball and devote the rest of my life to that which was the purpose for this Southern Baptist Reformation: the re-mobilization of our churches to fulfill the Great Commission.

In closing, here is a very brief summary of what most Southern Baptists have always believed about the Bible as highlighted in the Baptist Faith and Message.

**The Bible has one Author.** In the eloquent language found in the 1925, 1963, and 2000 editions of the Baptist Faith and Message, the Bible "has God for its author." God alone is ultimately responsible for all that is in Scripture. There is nothing in the Bible He wishes was not there. Everything is present that He intended to reveal. The Bible we have is the Bible God wanted us to have. He chose the writers to inspire. He inspired those writers to write what He wanted to include. Because those writers wrote what God wanted them to write, the result is a revelation of and from God. We call that revelation the Bible. The Bible is not to be worshiped, but it is to be studied, practiced, and proclaimed as that which we know with certainty about God. The Bible is more than a collection of parts or books. It is a divinely inspired whole because it is composed of divinely inspired parts that fit together according to God's design. The more we study the Bible the more we will come to see its unity and harmony. To clarify this, the opening sentence of the 2000 statement was adjusted to read: "The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man."

**The Bible is true.** In the language found in the 1925, 1963, and 2000 statements the Bible has "truth, without any mixture of error for its matter." Because God is the author we know that the Bible is true. Because He moved the writers of Scripture to write what He wanted them to write we know that it is without error. The truthfulness of the Bible is certified by the character and integrity of the God who inspired it. Because God does not lie, mislead, or deceive, neither does His Word. The whole Bible is true because all of its parts are true. Therefore the Bible is the best commentary on the Bible. To clarify this, the 2000 statement added "Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy."

**The Bible is about Jesus.** In its earliest pages the Bible tells us that we are created by God but fallen, doomed by our sin. From the point of our sin the Bible is fixed on one story, the story of our redemption through Jesus. In the language of the 1925, 1963, and 2000 statements, the Bible has “salvation for its end.” Southern Baptists have always believed one good question to ask about every passage of Scripture is this: “What does this passage tell me about Jesus?” God gave us the written Word so that we could know the living Word, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior of the world. To clarify this, the Baptist Faith and Message added the sentence: “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.” The Baptist Faith and Message also has a separate section that describes what Southern Baptists believe about Jesus. Above all else, the Bible is about Jesus.

**The Bible is sufficient.** The undergirding conviction of Southern Baptists have about the Bible is a deep, abiding confidence in the Word of God. In every age the Bible has been sufficient for the needs of the church, and so it will be until the Lord returns. In the historic language of the 1925, 1963, and 2000 statements, the Bible “is a perfect treasure of divine instruction.” It is the divinely inspired instrument God chose to use to reveal Himself and to instruct His church. Southern Baptists believe that if we teach and proclaim it in our churches, if we measure our opinions and dreams by it, and if we day by day submit our lives to its commandments, we will be blessed, lives will be transformed, and the church will remain healthy. We do not need a new or different word for the contemporary church. We need a fresh commitment to be faithful to our Savior and to the Bible He has provided for His people.

What has always been said about Southern Baptists I pray will always be said. We are a people of the Book. May future generations not look back and label us as the generation who turned away from our heritage and chose to walk a different path. May they look back with gratitude for a generation who believed the Bible that served as the anchor for the first two thousand years of the church remains our anchor still. On our lips is an amen to words spoken long ago at the launch point of another reformation by a man on trial for his life over his convictions about the supremacy of Scripture. With Martin Luther we say:

Our conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here we stand. God help us. We can do no other.