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# SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONSENSUS AND RENEWAL

A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal



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## PREFACE

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In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins asks his readers to “picture a huge heavy flywheel—a massive metal disk mounted horizontally on an axle, about thirty feet in diameter, two feet thick, and weighing five thousand pounds. Now imagine that your task is to get the flywheel rotating on the axle as fast and long as possible. Pulling with great effort, the flywheel only inches forward at first. But with continued force in a common direction, the metal disk builds upon the work done earlier, increasing in speed and momentum until . . . breakthrough!” The flywheel, or the organization or institution it represents, according to Collins, is propelled forward with unstoppable momentum, from “good to great.” By God’s grace and with His providential enablement, I pray for such a breakthrough in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Southern Baptists have entered the twenty-first century following a lengthy period of controversy. The good news is that a commitment to the full truthfulness of Holy Scripture has been reclaimed and we cannot shrink back from this commitment. Southern Baptists, however, continue to struggle, wrestling with identity, cooperation, and unity, which has implications for missions, worship, education, and other ministries of our shared Convention life. What is needed now is a Convention-

wide vision that focuses on rebuilding consensus combined with prayers for God’s Spirit to bring renewal among the people, churches, and entities of the Southern Baptist Convention. For these things to happen we must reemphasize our identity and heritage, even as we trust God to guide our steps for the future.

Many Southern Baptist churches have hit a plateau or are declining. Our Convention-wide baptism totals have not increased appreciably since the 1950s, even though we now have twice as many overall members as we had then. Some entities within the broader SBC family at the association, state convention, and national convention levels are stagnant or fragmented. We need a fresh vision for what cooperative ministry and collaborative efforts can mean. We need to pray for a spirit of unity and we, likewise, need to develop new strategies for ministries that are anchored in the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, in the best of our Baptist heritage, and in the truthfulness of Holy Scripture.

Recognizing the stagnation and fragmentation in the broader world of Baptists, a new coalition, led by former President Jimmy Carter, in January 2007, issued a call for unity, a call for a New Baptist Covenant. A call for unity among Baptists, especially one that emphasizes the importance of racial reconciliation, should be welcomed and not easily or quickly dismissed. Unfortunately the New Baptist Covenant call to unity does not appear to be grounded in the historical confessional commitments of Baptists. President Carter himself told Associated Baptist Press on May 17, 2007, that he hoped that in this new effort issues like “gay marriage, pastoral authority, and creedalism . . . might be completely put aside.”

I was honored to participate with President Carter and other Southern Baptist leaders in a call for unity and cooperation in 1998. I still believe as I was quoted in a news account on January 12, 2007, that “to the degree that Baptists can work together in the areas of racial reconciliation, in promoting compassion, and Christian unity, we should do so. Those themes, however, it seems to me, need to be balanced by a renewed commitment to truth in an age of relativism and religious pluralism, to doctrinal

fidelity, and to faithfulness to the Christ-centered message of the Gospel.”

*Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal* is a call to cooperation and unity among Southern Baptists. It likewise is an invitation for a renewed commitment to truth, to doctrinal fidelity, and to faithfulness to the Christ-centered message of the Gospel. The book grows out of the desire to see Southern Baptists once again cooperate together, particularly for the purposes of advancing evangelism, global missions, and education. It is not so much a critique of the New Baptist Covenant proposal (since the book has been completed months in advance of the scheduled January 2008 event) as it is an alternative vision, one focused not so much on the Baptist family at-large, but on Southern Baptists in particular as we seek to move forward together in the twenty-first century. In many ways, then, this is a family conversation offered with hopeful prayers and a prayerful hope.

Other factors have contributed to the writing of this book. The first factor grows out of the impact of two major conferences held in 2004 and 2007 on the Union University campus. These conferences were built around the theme of “Baptist Identity.” It has become clear to me and to the several hundred people who participated in these conferences that there is a hunger for bringing Southern Baptists together. The prospects for consensus and renewal evidenced at these conferences provided a sense of hope for the future. The second factor reflects the conversations in the blogosphere. It has become clear to all that there is no one category of Southern Baptists called “bloggers”; they represent almost all of the various sectors of our Convention life. But generally, regardless of perspective, many participating in the blogosphere conversations have a longing for renewal among the people called Southern Baptists.

The third factor grows out of the quality of students I encounter daily on the Union University campus and their peers at other Baptist colleges, universities, and seminaries. The giftedness, focus, and commitment of this generation of students surpasses those who have gone before. It is our responsibility to hand off the Convention to them in a faithful manner. My hopefulness grows daily because of this student generation. Finally,

this book is an extension and expansion of the “Building Bridges” booklet that was distributed at the 2007 Southern Baptist Convention meeting in San Antonio, Texas. The warm and enthusiastic response to that booklet from all sectors of the convention has largely served as the primary motivation for writing this book.

*Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal* has been inspired by similar models that have been penned at key moments in our Baptist history. Like Benjamin Keach in 1691 (*The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship*), we will seek to address the importance and priority of worship in Baptist churches. Like Dan Taylor in 1775 (*Fundamentals of Religion in Faith and Practice*) and Andrew Fuller in 1805 (*The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*), we will seek to focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as Taylor warned General Baptists of faulty inroads into their theology and Fuller, likewise, challenged the wrong-headed thinking and actions associated with hyper-Calvinism, so we too seek to avoid errors in both “general” and “particular” directions. With William Carey in 1792 (*An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*), we call for advance in our cooperative efforts in global missions.

With J. M. Frost and others in 1900 (*Baptist Why and Why Not*), we appeal to the distinctives and best of our Baptist heritage. With Basil Manly Jr. in 1888 (*The Bible Doctrine of Inspiration*) and W. A. Criswell in 1969 (*Why I Preach the Bible Is Literally True*), we ground our appeal in a fully inspired and truthful Bible, which is God’s authoritative word for us today.

With Carl F. H. Henry in 1947 (*The Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism*), we recognize the dangers of fundamentalism and legalism in our midst. Like Herschel H. Hobbs in 1964 (*What Baptists Believe*) and the framers of the 1833 New Hampshire Confession, we look for avenues to build consensus. With E. Y. Mullins in 1923–24 (“The Duties and Dangers of this Present Hour” and *Christianity at the Crossroads*), we are aware that we live in a unique moment in time and our responses to the present hour will impact the Southern Baptist Convention for decades to come.

*Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal* does not attempt to deal with every issue or wrestle with every intramural squabble that can be named among us. Instead, by reflecting on our history and our heritage, particularly our theological heritage, we call for renewed commitments to and shared cooperation around the truthfulness of Holy Scripture and the uniqueness of the Gospel message. We then look for avenues that point us toward a new consensus, with a focus on overarching issues like missions, worship, education, and leadership. Other key theological and ethical issues are addressed along the way, together with a reminder of our Baptist distinctives and identity. The proposal for consensus and renewal is grounded in a biblical, historical, and theological framework.

I have written this book with much fear and trembling, for I recognize that there are many others who are better equipped than I to address these important matters. I have written the book with much prayer for I desire only to offer a way forward for the people of God called Southern Baptists. I pray that God in His gracious providence will protect me from leading anyone astray in our Baptist family, even as I pray for readers of this book not to misunderstand the book's purpose. The book, by nature of its scope and purpose, is not a full-orbed theological treatment of all the challenges facing Southern Baptists at this time, though the book is primarily a theological proposal. It does address what I believe to be key issues with the hope that the right response will be good for the people, churches, and entities of the Southern Baptist Convention. Documentation has been kept to a minimum throughout the book though resources for further reflection can be found at the conclusion of each chapter. A glossary can be found at the conclusion of the book to help define technical terms.

I am humbled by the opportunity and privilege to write this book and I want to thank Thom Rainer, Chuck Colson, Frank Page, Ray Clendenen, Terry Wilder, and so many others who have encouraged me in doing so. I am deeply grateful for trustees and colleagues at Union University, and for friends across and beyond the Southern Baptist Convention, who have offered their guidance, support, and prayers throughout this project.

The book is dedicated in loving memory to three giants in Baptist life: Herschel H. Hobbs (1907–1995), W. A. Criswell (1909–2002), and Carl F. H. Henry (1913–2003). I was privileged to know and learn from all three of these incredible leaders. Like all leaders, each one had weaknesses, but each one was used of God in amazing ways to influence and shape Southern Baptists through the years. I had the opportunity to serve as an Associate Pastor at the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, when Dr. Criswell, the faithful expositor who proclaimed God’s Word from “George Truett’s pulpit,” was serving as the beloved pastor of that historic congregation. Dr. Hobbs invested much time with me. I was the recipient of numerous letters from his pen, each signed with his characteristic reference to 3 John 2. One of the last works from his prolific pen was the foreword he wrote for the book I compiled on A. T. Robertson, one of Dr. Hobbs’s most beloved mentors. I have given two major addresses on the life and work of Dr. Hobbs: the Hobbs lectures at Oklahoma Baptist University and a Founders’ Day Address at The Southern Baptist Seminary. I have fond memories of spending hours with him in Nashville, Tennessee, just weeks before he died in 1995. Union University, where I serve as president, has the honor of being one of only three institutions in the country to carry forth the legacy of Carl F. H. Henry through our Carl F. H. Henry Center for Christian Leadership. Dr. Henry graciously spent time with me and like Dr. Hobbs was a frequent encourager to me through his personal correspondence. I was privileged at his request to compile and edit his 1992 book on *The Identity of Jesus of Nazareth*. With great gratitude and respect for each one, I dedicate this book to them with the prayer that God will raise up in Southern Baptist life a new generation of statesmen like Herschel Hobbs, a new generation of leaders and pulpiteers like W. A. Criswell, and a new generation of scholars and theologians like Carl F. H. Henry.

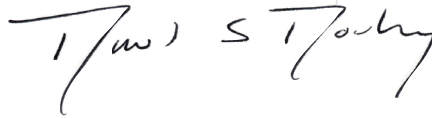
I want to offer my special thanks to the tireless efforts of Melanie Rickman for her capable preparation of this manuscript and to Cindy Meredith, Barbara McMillin, Greg Thornbury, Tim Ellsworth, Jerry Tidwell, Hal Poe, Ray Van Neste, Charles Fowler, Jim Patterson, and Gene Fant for their support and wise counsel in the process of writing this book. Andy Pettigrew and

Preface

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Ben Dockery also offered special encouragement. To Lanese, Jon, Sarah, Ben, Julie, Tim, and Andrea, I offer my love and thanksgiving for your faithful prayers and ongoing words of motivation. I offer this book in the prayerful hope that the people, churches, and entities of the Southern Baptist Convention will be strengthened, that the Gospel will be advanced, and that Jesus Christ our Lord will be honored.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim Dockery". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "T" and "D".



INTRODUCTION  
SOUTHERN BAPTISTS:  
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

. . . . .

*"Now these things became examples for us..."*  
1 Corinthians 10:6

*"The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired,  
and... it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and  
truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter."*  
Baptist Faith and Message 1925, 1963, 2000

*"We accept the Scriptures as an all-sufficient and  
infallible rule of faith and practice, and insist upon the  
absolute **inerrancy**\* and sole authority of the Word of  
God. We recognize at this point no room for division, either  
of practice or belief, or even sentiment."*  
J. M. Frost, *Baptist Why and Why Not*

\*Note: Words marked in boldface indicate terms that are further explained in the glossary. Only the first occurrence of the word in the text is marked.

**O V E R V I E W**

Southern Baptist Identity

1845–1925

1925–1979

Personal Reflections

Southern Baptists before a Watching World

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**C**omprised of more than 16 million church members in all 50 states of the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is the largest evangelical denomination in the country. The SBC has tended to exist separately from the rest of American Christianity over the past 160 years because of its sectionalism, its inability to separate from Southern culture, its parochialism, and its self-sufficiency, though there are some indicators that these things are beginning to change. For almost three decades the SBC has been embroiled in controversy regarding theological issues and denominational polity. We now find ourselves asking important questions about the identity and future of Southern Baptists. To paraphrase the warning of the late Carl F. H. Henry, we must settle the identity issue, and in doing so, coalesce; otherwise we will become by the twenty-first century a wilderness cult in a secular society, with no more public significance than the ancient Essenes in their Dead Sea caves.<sup>1</sup>

**S O U T H E R N B A P T I S T I D E N T I T Y**

The Southern Baptist Convention traces its roots to two groups of Baptists in the South. The first, the “so-called” Charleston tradition, which developed from the Charleston Association in South Carolina, has been characterized by city churches, confessional theology, strong support for education, quasi-liturgical worship, and order. The second was the “so-called”

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelicals at the Brink of Crisis* (Waco: Word, 1967); and Kenneth Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry, eds. *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

Sandy Creek tradition, which developed out of the Sandy Creek Association in North Carolina and emphasized evangelism and revivalism. This association, which primarily included rural churches, tended to be suspicious of educated ministry, and they focused on Spirit-led worship characterized by ardor.

### 1845 – 1925

The leadership in the early years of the Convention, including the initial faculty members at Southern Seminary (founded 1859) and the first group of Convention presidents, had more in common with the Charleston tradition, but the grassroots had more in common with Sandy Creek. Two other movements had a large bearing on the developing formation of Southern Baptists. These included both Landmarkists and Revivalists, which tended to have larger influence as Baptists spread across the frontier from Tennessee to Texas.

While differences obviously existed, nineteenth-century Baptists looked to a fully truthful and authoritative Bible as a guide for beliefs and ministry as seen in *Baptist Why and Why Not*, edited by J. M. Frost with contributions from T. T. Eaton, F. H. Kerfoot, and others. The early twentieth century saw rapid growth and the beginning of significant changes among Southern Baptists. During this time the SBC largely avoided the Modernist-Fundamentalist battles that characterized the denominations in the North. Yet, when pressed, almost every Southern Baptist leader sided with the Fundamentalists. Even E. Y. Mullins, longtime president of Southern Seminary and the SBC's most influential theologian from 1900 to 1928, contributed articles to the famous set of works called the *Fundamentals*.

From the early years of the SBC to the time of Mullins and W. T. Conner, who taught theology at Southwestern Seminary for four decades, Southern Baptists witnessed the diminishing influence of **Calvinism**, the decline of postmillennialism, the rise of revivalism, and an advancement in the understanding of Baptist origins. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the introduction into SBC life of such matters as **historical criticism**, Darwinian evolution, and experiential apologetics. W. L. Poteat, president at Wake Forest College in the 1920s, helped

pave the way for liberal thought to gain an initial foothold in Baptist life with his public advocacy of evolutionary thought.

We can say that Southern Baptist thought moved from a hermeneutic of divine sovereignty with the Southern Seminary founders, James P. Boyce, John A. Broadus, and Basil Manly Jr., to one of personal **revelation** and experience with Mullins, and to a lesser degree with Conner. The initial inroads of Darwinian thought were met with a wide-ranging negative response resulting in a new consensus, which developed around the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message. This new confessional statement importantly affirmed that Southern Baptists “believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.”

### 1925–1979

From 1925 to 1954 the SBC could be characterized by the growth of denominational organization and efficiency. The Cooperative Program was developed under the leadership of M. E. Dodd as a common fund to support education, missions, and benevolent causes in the SBC. It has probably been the key entity to hold together an expanding and diverse denomination for the past 80+ years. During this time the Executive Committee grew in influence, creating within the “grassroots” denomination a sense of “hierarchy” that it had not known before. The growth of the Convention was fueled in unprecedented ways by the “Million More in ’54” campaign.<sup>2</sup>

The SBC entered the second half of the twentieth century as an efficiently run and largely unified organization, but this “consensus” tended to be shaped by adherence to a unified programmatic model, an “assumed orthodoxy” more so than an intentionally formed theological orthodoxy. Pragmatism was the order of the day. In this context critical approaches to biblical studies and tendencies toward theological liberalism entered “under the radar”—as the focus remained on the programmatic consensus. From 1954 to 1979 the SBC was on the road to

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<sup>2</sup> See Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

becoming yet another “mainline protestant denomination”—by this time the largest protestant denomination in the country, having surpassed the United Methodists. It seemed as if many SBC leaders at that time were embarrassed by the Convention’s revivalistic heritage. And their embarrassment about revivalism was even surpassed by their feelings concerning the other tradition of the SBC’s heritage, the Calvinistic aspects of the “Charleston tradition.”

The Convention began to reenvision itself, largely ignoring its nineteenth-century roots. New “**enlightenment**” and “individualistic” models of what it meant to be a Baptist, influenced by the new frontier as well as reaction to any kind of state church, were put forward under the umbrella of a “commitment to the priesthood of the believer” and “individual soul competency,” with the basic understanding that “Baptist means freedom.”<sup>3</sup> Under this umbrella a person could read the Bible for himself or herself, influenced by higher critical conclusions while celebrating the “experience” and “freedom” of being a Baptist. The SBC institutions, its publishing house and mission boards, and many “First Baptist Churches,” town churches, and county-seat churches, which dotted the landscape, were often influenced by this mind-set. An attempt to bring about a new and necessary consensus was led by Herschel H. Hobbs in his role as SBC President and as chairman of the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. The confessional statement reconfirmed the Convention’s commitment to Scripture, though the preamble was ambiguous about the importance and normative nature of the Baptist Faith and Message itself.

Southern Baptists have now been embroiled in public controversy for nearly 30 years regarding the essence of the Christian faith, and particularly the nature of Holy Scripture. The reality, however, is that the crisis over Baptist orthodoxy can be traced to a series of issues that have influenced Southern Baptist history for 160 years. We will look at some of these issues later in this book, but first, some personal reflections.

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<sup>3</sup> See Alan Neely, ed., *Being Baptist Means Freedom* (Charlotte: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988); Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993).

### PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I was born in 1952 into a wonderful Southern Baptist home. I was on the cradle roll before I was born, a part of the nursery very soon thereafter. W. T. Conner (who died in the year in which I was born) was the last shaping theologian in Southern Baptist life, having taught at Southwestern for four decades. Shortly after his death, Southern Baptists began to focus on more programmatic emphases. As I began to crawl and walk in 1953, Southern Baptists began to think about how they could reach the world in a much grander way than they had ever done before. Out of this came the “Million More in ’54” campaign, which resulted in 750,000 people being added to the rolls of Southern Baptist churches. The campaign was one of the most significant programmatic and pragmatic emphases in the history of American Christianity.

I grew up a Southern Baptist during those years. It was fairly easy at that time to identify what it meant to be a Southern Baptist. We generally knew what was expected of us—on Sundays and throughout the week. Sundays included Sunday school, “staying for church” (sometimes called “staying for preaching”), afternoon choir practice and Bible Drills, Training Union, less formal church services in the evening, and then an after-church fellowship. It was a very busy day. Wednesdays included suppers, prayer meetings, teachers and officers meetings, Sunbeams, Royal Ambassadors, Girls Auxiliary, committee meetings, and choir practice.

During the week there were outreach visitation, WMU, Brotherhood, and other activities sandwiched where you could fit them on the calendar—along with church softball games, Vacation Bible School, backyard study courses, and the inevitable multi-week revivals each fall and spring. It was exhausting growing up as a Southern Baptist.

You were promoted from nursery to beginners to primaries to juniors to intermediates to the young people’s department to young marrieds and eventually to adults. From the junior departments on, all Sunday school classes were divided—males over there, females over here. Boys and girls did not study the Bible together in most Southern Baptist churches. The same

thing happened at summer camp; there was no “mixed bathing.” Boys and girls did not swim together; and boys and girls did not study the Bible together. That was part of being a Southern Baptist in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Early on we learned that you could measure your spirituality. There was a six-point record system on the envelope:

- attending Sunday school
- on time
- bringing your Bible
- studying your lesson
- giving an offering
- attending worship

You graded yourself each week. To be a good Southern Baptist involved grading out at 100% every week if you could—what seems now to have been a kind of misunderstood and unintended self-righteousness built into system.<sup>4</sup>

We all had the same version of the Bible. In the primary years we were given a black, leather-covered King James Bible with a zipper around it. Everyone had a zippered King James Bible. When we entered the junior department, we were given a hard-back Bible, a style more conducive to “sword drills,” where we learned to find passages located anywhere in the Bible. I loved those Bible drills, and I was a two-year champion of the entire Birmingham Association when I was ten and eleven years old.

Not only did we have the same Bibles but we all studied the same uniform Sunday school lesson each week—published by the Baptist Sunday School Board, written by Southern Baptists for Southern Baptists. It didn’t matter if you grew up in Roanoke, Virginia; St. Petersburg, Florida; Dallas, Texas; Birmingham, Alabama; or Jackson, Tennessee—every Southern Baptist church followed the same organization and the same programs, studied the same Sunday school lessons, and read from the same version of the Bible.

These practices were to Southern Baptists what the Latin Mass was to Roman Catholics. It provided all of us with a sense

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<sup>4</sup> See Emma Noland, *The Six Point Record System and Its Use* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1955).

of continuity and security. At home or traveling, whether visiting relatives or on vacation, you could study the same Sunday school lesson in any Southern Baptist church in the land, and this programmatic uniformity all hung together around a ubiquitous commitment to missions and evangelism best expressed in giving through the Cooperative Program and support for Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong.

It was absolutely ingenious!

Now, depending on whether you lived in the city or the country, whether you went to a big church or a small church, you might find some variety in what happened “when you stayed for church” or “stayed for preaching.” I hardly ever remember anyone calling it a worship service while I was growing up.

Big churches in big cities had ordered services, with organs and robed choirs who provided an anthem each Sunday before the pastor preached an orderly sermon. My family attended one of those big churches in a big city with the big robed choir and organ, but other churches were less formal. The pastor in mid-size congregations often preached louder and longer than those in larger churches—and he did so after the choir sang not an anthem but special music. And then there were the largest number of Southern Baptist churches, where the pastor, often bivocational, preached long sermons, hell-fire and brimstone sermons. After the gospel music “special,” the sermon was always followed by an extended invitation, at least six verses of “Just As I Am,” and you kept singing all six verses again if needed until someone “came forward.”

Being a Southern Baptist had a cultural and programmatic identity to it unlike anything else. This kind of intactness provided Southern Baptists with a denominational stability unmatched by any other denomination in the country. Martin Marty, the great American Church historian from the University of Chicago, claimed that Southern Baptists were the Roman Catholic Church of the South because their identity was so intact, their influence so pervasive, providing an umbrella over the entire culture in almost every dimension of life. We were a very practical people, with heart religion—carried out in rather uniform pragmatic and programmatic expressions.



In the late '60s, however, some things began to change with social shifts around us, Vietnam, and racial unrest. Moreover, when the controversies surrounding the Bible broke out during that time, most Southern Baptists were horrified to learn that some professors in our seminaries and colleges did not believe in the full truthfulness of the Bible. Unfortunately our pragmatic and programmatic identity left us ill-equipped to respond to these theological challenges concerning Scripture.

Soon the intactness began to unravel when the Sunday School Board introduced multiple Sunday school series, at which time some churches chose no longer to use the materials from the Baptist Sunday School Board (what is now LifeWay). This change was followed by multiple Bible translations. No longer did everyone read from the King James Bible; soon there were the RSV, the New American Standard, the New International Version, and the Good News, and on and on it went, including paraphrases like the Living Bible—and now even more translations like the ESV and the Holman Christian Standard Bible. Then there were the initial interactions with all of the various evangelical groups, developing new connections with non-Baptist believers, connections previously frowned upon by Southern Baptists. I remember when I became involved with Campus Crusade for Christ as a sophomore at the University of Alabama. My relatives were concerned that I might be part of a cult group or something. Most of them had hardly been introduced to anything outside of Southern Baptist life, apart from Billy Graham and his connection with the broader evangelical world.

Before 1956 we sang out of the *Broadman Hymnal*, which was published in 1940. After 1956 we all sang out of the *Baptist Hymnal*—but soon the variety of anthems, choir specials, and gospel numbers gave way to praise choruses, influenced by the Gaithers, and new worship songs as the variety of our worship services expanded even more. The *Baptist Hymnal* was revised in 1975 and again in 1991, and today many churches no longer use any kind of hymnal.

### **Southern Baptists before a Watchful World**

During the summer of 1979 in Houston, Texas, the Southern Baptist Convention took a major, and at that time unexpected, turn with the election of Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, as Convention president. The “Baptist Battles,” as the recent decades have been labeled by sociologist Nancy Ammerman, have been lived out in a very public way before a watching world.<sup>5</sup> The conflict has been confusing for many outside of the Convention, both for believers and nonbelievers alike. Most people have interpreted the past three decades as a battle between “conservatives” and “moderates.” While such a statement is generally true, it is probably too broad and somewhat superficial.

In the late 1980s, others started recognizing at least four groups: Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, Moderates, and Liberals. Clearly, the two-group model does not tell the whole story, but neither does the four-group model go far enough. The reality is that those understood to be moderates included:

1. Denominational Loyalists,
2. Programmatic Pragmatists,
3. Centrist Evangelicals (many of whom identified themselves as biblical inerrantists),
4. Moderates,
5. Liberals,
6. Baptist Women in Ministry, and
7. Broad-Minded Ecumenicals with connections to American Baptists and others.

Now, most all of these groups are disconnected from the national convention, though many have remained involved with state conventions.

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<sup>5</sup> See the various perspectives represented by: Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Richard D. Land, “The Southern Baptist Convention, 1979–1993: What Happened and Why?” *Baptist History and Heritage* 28 (October 1993): 1–11; Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000); Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002).

Conservatives were even more diverse. They included a loose-knit coalition of several groups—all of whom wanted some kind of course correction to bring about a more faithful Baptist orthodoxy. At least seven groups, with subgroups among each of these, can be identified among the conservatives:

1. Fundamentalists: hard-lined people who often have more in common with “independent” Baptists than with the SBC heritage.
2. Revivalists: true heirs of the Sandy Creek tradition, including their suspicion of education.
3. Traditionalists: heirs of the Sandy Creek theology, including the strong commitment to evangelism and revivalism, but affirming of education.
4. Orthodox Evangelicals: an irenic group that looked to Carl F. H. Henry and Billy Graham as models. This group wanted a theological course correction, a commitment to the full truthfulness of the Bible, serious intellectual and cultural engagement while interacting with all who would claim the great orthodox Christian tradition.
5. Calvinists: a group that wanted to reclaim aspects of the “Charleston” theological tradition. They have much in common with the “Evangelical” group above. Sub-groups include “Nine Marks,” “Sovereign Grace,” “Founders,” and others. Most among this group no longer tend toward isolation as in years past.
6. Contemporary church practitioners: a group of pastors who wanted to find new ways to connect with the culture, resulting in new models for doing church, including “Willow Creek Models,” “Saddleback Models,” “Missional,” and even some “emergent church types.”
7. Culture Warriors: another group of conservatives who desire to engage the issues of culture and society. This group includes a variety of approaches including “church over culture,” “church transforming culture,” as well as “church and culture/social justice types.”

All of these groups were needed to rally together to bring about the theological course correction/conservative resurgence

in the SBC. They all wanted a recovery of the Gospel and emphasized the full truthfulness and sufficiency of Scripture. There are obvious crossovers and blurring of categories, but it is helpful to understand the complex make-up under the umbrella of SBC “Conservatives.”

While tension exists among all of these groups, several secondary matters in recent years seem to have moved to the forefront with the potential for division or at least great confusion. Twenty-first-century Southern Baptists are not unlike the Israelites described in the opening chapter of Exodus 3,500 years ago. Just as that generation of Israelites knew not Joseph and did not know their history, so we as Southern Baptists in the early years of the twenty-first century are infected with historical amnesia—we do not know our history, we do not know our theological identity, we basically only understand the programmatic expression of what it means to be a Baptist as we relate from local church to local church. So today, unfortunately, we don’t know Richard Furman, we don’t know Basil Manly (Sr. or Jr.), we don’t know John Broadus, W. B. Johnson, J. M. Frost, E. Y. Mullins, B. H. Carroll, W. T. Conner, Lottie Moon, Bill Wallace, or Annie Armstrong. Today Southern Baptists need to begin to build a new theologically and historically informed consensus that will help us understand our past, our identity, and our beliefs—so that we can move forward to carry the Gospel around the world and “disciplize” the nations in the twenty-first century.

We need a new generation that will be both convictional and cooperative. Sometimes when we put the emphasis on conviction, we become very cantankerous people. On the other hand, when we put the emphasis on cooperation, we are prone to become compromising people. Neither of these is a good option. I suggest that it is time for us to take a fresh look at our history, at the Gospel, at our theological foundations, and our worship. In doing so we can move beyond confusion and controversy to a new consensus focused on the Gospel. It will also help us to develop a renewed appreciation for developing a theologically, historically, and biblically informed identity of what it means to be a Southern Baptist, since the once-clear

programmatic and cultural identity of Southern Baptists has now basically disappeared.

The Associated Press released an important story on November 1, 2006, which announced the selection of Katherine Schori as the first presiding female bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States. In that news announcement she told the Associated Press that she did not think that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. In that interview she said, “If we insist that we know the only way to God, we have put God in a very small box.”

Though the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians that “in Christ all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily,” the new bishop said in that interview “that truth is more than any one person can encompass.”

These statements are a sobering reminder to us today of where we could be as Southern Baptists if we ever become untethered to Holy Scripture. We could become like some mainline denominations, drifting without a theological compass. It also reminds us that matters like the uniqueness of the Gospel and the exclusivity of Jesus Christ are indeed ultimate first-order issues. Jesus Christ Himself said that He is “*The Way, the Truth, and the Life*,” no one comes to the Father apart from Him. A new consensus can develop for our Convention only with a shared and united recommitment to first-order issues and a simultaneous respect for those with whom we disagree on less important matters. Many of these secondary or tertiary issues belong, as the great W. A. Criswell was so fond of saying, to the imponderables of God that we will never fully grasp or understand. But we need to be of like mind on first-order issues, issues such as the authority and truthfulness of the Bible, the deity and humanity of Christ, the Holy Trinity, and the uniqueness of the Gospel that is only found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone, as well as those distinctives that define us as Southern Baptists.

This book offers a biblical, historical, and theological proposal for Southern Baptists to build a new and much needed consensus around the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ—a consensus that came together in 1814 at the first Triennial Convention and in 1845 at the first gathering of the Southern Baptist Convention. The goal of those Baptist gatherings was to bring

men and women together around the purpose of advancing missions and evangelism in a very well defined manner with people of somewhat varied theological perspectives. This nineteenth-century consensus carried forward into the 1950s, but it moved from being a theologically informed consensus to a more pragmatic and programmatic one over the course of the twentieth century. When the programmatic center dissipated, we found ourselves and our identity in great confusion. The Southern Baptist world in which many of us were nurtured no longer exists. We now find ourselves at a different moment in Baptist life, in American Christianity—in world Christianity in general. It is in this changing context that we are made aware of the need for renewal in Southern Baptist life.

It is now time for us to move from controversy and confusion to a new consensus and take a step back not just to commit ourselves afresh to missions and evangelism, as important as that is. We need to commit ourselves first and foremost to the Gospel, the message of missions and evangelism, the message that is found only in Jesus Christ and His atoning death for sinners. I trust that we can hold hands together for the good of the Gospel, which can bring a fresh breath, a fresh wind of God's Spirit across the Southern Baptist Convention.

This book is an invitation to a new and fresh consensus-building project for the good of the churches, institutions, and agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention—as we seek to become more focused on the Great Commission to impact the world for Christ, doing so for the glory of our great God. As we begin, we turn our attention to three key aspects of our identity: Scripture, missions, and cooperation, which have been the overarching priorities of Southern Baptists since 1845. Let us think together about our identity as Southern Baptists.

*Introduction*  
*For Further Reflection*

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