

The Future of Southern Baptists: Mandates for What We Should Be in the Twenty-First Century

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Southern Baptists have a colorful and fascinating history by any standard of measure—from the convention’s humble beginnings in Augusta, Georgia, on May 8, 1845 (only 293 persons attended the inaugural convention and 273 came from 3 states: Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia),¹ to the convention’s 2004 *Annual* which could boast of forty state conventions, 1,194 associations, 43,024 churches, and a total membership of 16,315,050. There were 377,357 baptisms, and other additions totaled 422,350. Cooperative Program giving for 2002-2003 was \$183,201,694.14 and total receipts recorded was \$9,648,530,640.² This is quite impressive any way you look at it, and for all of this, and more, Southern Baptists give thanks and glory to God. We are grateful to our Lord for what He has done for us and through us. However, it is to the future that we must now look. In spite of periodic blips on the cultural and moral screen, our nation grows more secular and our world more hostile to “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Southern Baptists, in the midst of the swirling tides of modernity, have attempted to stake their claim and send a clear message on who we are. The conservative resurgence initiated in 1979 charted the course, and I would argue that the revised *Baptist Faith and Message* in 2000 was something of a defining moment.³ Still, I am not convinced we have a clear

understanding and a clear vision of who we are and what we should be. The conservative resurgence gave Southern Baptists a second chance but it did not secure our future. Has there been a resurgence? Yes. Has there been a restoration? Doubtful. Have we experienced revival? Clearly the answer is no. These latter observations are not intended to cast a cloud of despair or disillusion. On the contrary, I am hopeful and optimistic *if* we will embrace ten mandates that have historically defined who Southern Baptists are and what they should *be* as we progress into the twenty-first century.⁴

10 Mandates for Southern Baptists in the Twenty-First Century *The Non-Negotiable of a Regenerate Church*

A regenerate church has always characterized Baptist theology. This does not mean that unbelievers are not invited and welcome to attend. We should be “seeker sensitive” when we gather for worship. We should not be “seeker driven.” The membership of the local church is made up of those who confess Christ as Savior and Lord, and whose lives give evidence of conversion. Baptist commitment to this principle set them apart from the magisterial Reformers, but they did so because of their commitment to the witness of the New Testament. There is no hint whatsoever of unregenerate church membership

in the Bible. That the unregenerate are often present among the people of God is not denied. John the apostle acknowledges in 1 John 2:19, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us . . . their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (NIV).

The failure to uphold this principle with the most fervent commitment has always brought harm to the church, including in our own day. Stan Norman is correct when he notes, "Failing to emphasize regeneration as a prerequisite for church membership has historically resulted in the loss of emphasis upon the church as a holy community and has given rise to moral corruption and heretical teaching within the fellowship."⁵ What issues might Southern Baptists need to address in maintaining our devotion to a regenerate church in the twenty-first century?

First, we need to make it clear that church membership is a privilege, not a right. There are requirements and expectations that are clearly defined and articulated when it comes to local church membership. This involves more than raising a hand, walking an aisle, and filling out a card. It requires an understanding of the gospel, public confession of one's faith evidenced by a clear verbal testimony, and a pledge to walk in the newness of life in Christ. The issue here is not and has never been perfection, but rather a change in direction and the pursuit of Christian maturity.

Second, we must guard against easy believism and a compromised gospel. The gracious invitation to believe on Christ must be complemented with the call to repent of sin. To leave out repentance is to preach only half a gospel. It ignores the first public preaching of John the Baptist

(Matt 3:1-2), Jesus (Matt 4:17), and Peter (Acts 2:38). It neglects the missionary proclamation replete in the book of Acts where persons are called to "turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21).

Third, we must be careful to maintain our theological integrity regarding early adolescent baptism when a clear understanding and confession of the gospel is lacking. Now, I am not one who believes an individual cannot be saved until they become a teenager or later. There is no scriptural defense for such a position, and psychological arguments carry no weight in this discussion. Still, the large numbers of rebaptisms of those who underwent what they now perceive as a meaningless dunking in their adolescence as well as inflated membership roles filled with the names of persons who now give little or no evidence of faith must give us pause. Maintaining the non-negotiable of a regenerate church will demand both better evangelism and discipleship at every level of church life.

The Essential Nature of Believer's Baptism by Immersion

In the New Testament public confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord did not mean walking an aisle. Now, I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am a strong advocate of the public invitation because I find it clearly practiced in Scripture. The criticisms of extreme Calvinists at this point should be heard, but without following their solutions. Public invitations have been abused, but this does not justify their dismissal anymore than spousal abuse justifies the dismissal of marriage! Still, public confession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord was not by coming forward to the front of the church at the time

of invitation. Public confession in Christ was by baptism. Indeed an “unbaptized believer” is an oxymoron in light of the New Testament. Closely connected to, but distinct from regeneration/conversion,⁶ baptism is the means whereby one publicly declares faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and is initiated into the believing community.⁷

That baptism involves a particular member (a believer), mode (immersion), and meaning (public identification with Christ and the believing community) is grounded in New Testament witness and has been a hallmark of Baptists throughout their history. To be a Baptist is to champion believer’s baptism by immersion. The *Baptist Faith and Message* says it well,

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord’s Supper.⁸

What should concern us regarding this Baptist distinctive in the twenty-first century? Where lie the dangers?

First, we must see evidence of regeneration for those we baptize. Second, baptism of young children must be administered with the greatest possible care. The example of W. A. Criswell, who came up with the concept of “a step toward God,” is worthy of our careful consideration. He provided a short catechetical booklet, met personally with every child before his or her baptism, and would not baptize any

child until the age of 10. That we might do more than this is commendable. That we would do less is shameful and irresponsible. Third, baptism should be viewed and emphasized as a first and necessary step of discipleship and obedience to Christ. Fourth, we will reject as inconceivable the idea of admitting anyone into our membership without believer’s baptism by immersion. This is becoming and will continue, I believe, to be a pressure point. Fifth, holding high the New Testament teaching on baptism will impact our understanding of the nature of the public invitation. I believe it will aid us in practicing it with greater care, wisdom, and integrity.

The Recovery of the Lost Jewels of Church Discipline and Genuine Disciple-Making as Essential Marks of the Church

Church discipline is clearly and repeatedly taught in the New Testament. Jesus addresses it in Matthew 18:15-20 and Paul does so in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 6:1-4; and Titus 3:9-11. Unfortunately, it is rarely practiced in Christ’s church today. Its absence is deafening, and this is theologically, historically, and practically untenable.

Theologically it is to disobey the plain teachings of Scripture and ignore the necessity of church discipline in maintaining the purity of the church. An undisciplined church will lose its distinctive character as a holy people. Historically, Baptists have viewed church discipline as an essential mark of the church along with the Word rightly preached and the ordinances properly administered. We find this evidenced in our earliest confessions, going back to the Anabaptists. Anabaptism was known for its emphasis

on church discipline from the beginning with the *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527. Article 2 on the Ban states,

Second. We are agreed as follows on the ban. The ban shall be employed with all those who have given themselves to the Lord, to walk in His commandments, and with all those who are baptized into the one body of Christ and who are called brethren or sisters and yet who slip sometimes and fall into error and sin, begin inadvertently overtaken. The same shall be admonished twice in secret and the third time openly disciplined or banned according to the command of Christ. Matt. 18. But this shall be done according to the regulation of the Spirit (Matt. 5) before the breaking of bread, so that we may break and eat one bread, with one mind and in love and may drink of one cup.⁹

Sadly, there is no specific mention of church discipline in our most recent confessions: the *Baptist Faith and Message* 1925, 1963, or 2000!

Practically, the absence of church discipline has resulted in a spiritually and morally weakened witness to the lost. J. L. Dagg warned us almost 150 years ago, “when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.”¹⁰ And one can hardly disagree with R. Albert Mohler, Jr. who writes, “The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. . . . The present generation of both ministers and church members is virtually without experience of biblical church discipline.”¹¹

Where do we go from here? First, we must teach our people what the Bible says about church discipline. They must see its biblical basis and its spiritual necessity. Second, we must begin to implement church discipline lovingly, wisely, gently, and probably slowly. A cram-course is a certain formula for disaster. Third, we

must apply discipline to areas like absentee membership as well as the specific list provided by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5. This list, I am sure, is not exhaustive, but it is a proper place to begin and a proper guide to direct us. This is not optional but desperately essential, as Mohler makes clear when he says, “without a recovery of functional church discipline—firmly established upon the principles revealed in the Bible—the church will continue its slide into moral dissolution and relativism.”¹²

The Emphasis and Practice of a Genuinely Word-Based Ministry

In John 8:31-32 Jesus said, “If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” If what our Lord said is true (and it is), many Baptists along with their fellow Americans are still in slavery. Why? Because there is, to quote the prophet Amos, “a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Stephen Prothero, a professor at Boston College, recently referred to America as “A Nation of Faith and Religious Illiterates.” Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, he says,

The sociologist Peter Berger once remarked that if India is the most religious country in the world and Sweden the least, then the United States is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. Not anymore. With a Jesus lover in the Oval Office and a faith-based party in control of both houses of Congress, the United States is undeniably a nation of believers ruled by the same. Things are different in Europe, and not just in Sweden. The Dutch are four times less likely than Americans to believe in miracles, hell, and biblical inerrancy. The euro does not trust in God. But here is the paradox:

Although Americans are far more religious than Europeans, they know far less about religion . . .

In Europe, religious education is the rule from the elementary grades on. So Austrians, Norwegians and the Irish can tell you about the Seven Deadly Sins or the Five Pillars of Islam. But, according to a 1997 poll, only one out of three U.S. citizens is able to name the most basic of Christian texts, the four Gospels, and 12% think Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. That paints a picture of a nation that believes God speaks in Scripture but that can't be bothered to read what he has to say . . .

When Americans debated slavery, almost exclusively on the basis of the Bible, people of all races and classes could follow the debate. They could make sense of its references to the runaway slave in the New Testament book of Philemon and to the year of jubilee, when slaves could be freed, in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Today it is a rare American who can engage with any sophistication in biblically inflected arguments about gay marriage, abortion or stem cell research . . .

How did this happen? How did one of the most religious countries in the world become a nation of religious illiterates? Religious congregations are surely at fault. Churches and synagogues that once inculcated the "fourth R" are now telling the faithful stories "ripped from the headlines" rather than teaching them the Ten Commandments or parsing the Sermon on the Mount (which was delivered, as only one in three Americans can tell you, by Jesus). But most of the fault lies in our elementary and secondary schools.¹³

I take issue only with Prothero's last statement. The fault lies not with the schools but with the churches and, in particular, the pulpits. 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 pitstop. We have neglected preaching the whole counsel of God's Word and the theology of God's Word. Too many of our people know neither the content of Scripture nor the doctrines of Scripture. Preaching the cross of Christ and the bloody atonement accomplished by his death is the exception rather than the norm. Some choose to focus on politics, others the emotions, still others relationships, and the list goes on and on. If the Bible is used at all, it is usually as a proof-text out of context with no real connection to what the speaker is saying.

For those of us who profess to believe both the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture, there must be in our pulpits what I call "engaging exposition." That is, there must be preaching that is biblical in content and dynamic in delivery, preaching that is expository and theological on the one hand, and practical and applicational on the other. We must advocate an expository *method* with a theological *mindset* under an evangelical *mandate*. It is preaching that models for our people how they should teach the Bible. Before it is too late, we need to heed the wise words of a liberal Methodist who has been down this modernist road and found it to be a dead end street. Listen to what William Willimon of Duke Divinity School says, and weep:

I'm a mainline-liberal-Protestant-Methodist-type Christian. I know we're soft on Scripture. Norman Vincent Peale has exercised a more powerful effect on our preaching than St. Paul. . . . 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. . . . 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 the very time those of us in the mainline, oldline, 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.

I know why they do this. . . . It all starts with American Christians wanting to be helpful to the present order, to be relevant (as the present order defines relevance). We so want to be invited to lunch at the White House or at least be interviewed on "Good Morning America." So we adjust our language to the demands of the market, begin with the world and its current infatuations rather than the Word and its peculiar judgments on our infatuations.

If you listen to much of our preaching, you get the impression that Jesus was some sort of itinerant therapist who, for free, traveled about helping people feel better. Ever since Fosdick, we mainline liberals have been bad about this. Start with some human problem like depression; then rummage around in the Bible for a relevant answer.

Last fall, as I was preparing in my office for the Sunday service, the telephone rang. "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!" When you have to come to a Methodist for a biblical sermon, that's pitiful.¹⁴

The Vision for a Faithful and Authentic Biblical Ecclesiology

The doctrine of the church has become a point of significant debate, especially in terms of polity. Recent books are exploring again the nature of church government and the nature of church offices in terms of function and number, particularly that of the elder.¹⁵

In spite of the absence of any direct word concerning church discipline, article VI on "The Church" in the *Baptist Faith and Message* is well stated. It reads,

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.¹⁶

Drawing from and building on this article, let me narrow the focus and address several crucial observations as to what constitutes a faithful and authentic ecclesiology in our day. First, there must be a regenerate church membership that is

carefully guarded and held to the highest scriptural standards. Second, there must be the three marks of Word, ordinances, and discipline. Third, the local church should be elder/pastor led and congregationally governed. Here, in my judgment, there is room for flexibility in terms of patterns, structure, and implementation. Scripture does not specify the number of elders, though they are almost always in the plural. It is interesting to note throughout our Baptist history, our confessions, until recently, favored the terms bishops and elders. These terms also were almost always in the plural, though there has been debate concerning a plurality of elders versus a single elder.¹⁷ However, there is no debate that a properly constituted church will have both elders and deacons. Similarly, Scripture also does not set forth the specifics of congregationalism, though congregationalism in some form clearly is the most defensible form of church government based upon the New Testament.

As we move forward in this century, Southern Baptists will need to give particular attention to stewardship and discipleship, not that these two issues are unrelated. Those of us whose lifeline is the Cooperative Program are well aware of the dangerous trends before us. Undesignated giving fell one-third over the past fifteen years, from 7.85 percent to 5.30 percent. Our churches are renegotiating how they finance their ministries, missions, and this thing we call the Cooperative Program. A new and younger generation must be properly disciplined and equipped so that they might do their work of ministry and financially support the work of ministry. Every member a minister and every member a giver is biblical and essential. The members of our churches must move

from being *shoppers* to *buyers* to *investors*. Capable and trusted leadership at the top is a must if this is to happen both denominationally and congregationally, both nationally and locally. Much more could be said here, but I must move on.

The Continued Nurturing of a Fervent Missionary and Evangelistic Passion That Is Wedded to Healthy and Robust Theology

Southern Baptists are known for their missions and evangelism. In so many ways they define who we are. Jimmy Draper has well said, “evangelism and missions. Those things are in our DNA.” However, trends in baptisms at home have not been good. We have just experienced our fourth consecutive year of decline. Draper provides his analysis and notes, “unfortunately we as a denomination and as churches have strayed somewhat from that [evangelism and missions] foundation, often focusing on a lot of things that have nothing to do with either of those.”¹⁸ In my twenty-seven years in ministry I have become absolutely convinced of an unquestionable truth: *No church will be evangelistic by accident*. There are some things churches will do well with some ease or naturalness because of their interest, context, and membership, but no church is inclined to do evangelism. It must be intentional, it must be a priority, and it must start at the top. Any pastor not committed to doing the work of an evangelist should not be in the ministry. He has disqualified himself based upon 2 Timothy 4:5. Now, let me be practical and offer some perspective on this.

First, there are multiple ways churches can do missions and evangelism. That they do them is the key. In the American context a multi-pronged approach

is certainly in order. We can train personal evangelists in FAITH, EE, NET, and a dozen other excellent witnessing programs. Do what works best for you, but do something. There is the ministry based approach to evangelism of Charles Rosel and First Baptist Church Leesburg, Florida, a model that more of our churches should adopt. There is the sports evangelism of Prestonwood Baptist Church that fits a large church in a context like Plano, Texas. We can dream and we can innovate.

Marketplace evangelism that can reach into the workplace is an area needing attention, strategizing, and training. In partnership with "Corporate Chaplains of America," Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary is designing a degree program that will help us invade this wide open mission field. Youth and student evangelism needs renewed emphasis. A generation of unregenerate teenagers is growing up in our churches. We can train and we can preach on evangelism. But, we must act. Genuine, biblical evangelism must be a constant drumbeat throughout our denomination, in our seminaries and agencies, in our state conventions and associations. If this is not happening at every level, the entity has become irrelevant in fulfilling the Great Commission and should be radically overhauled or shut down and buried like the spiritual corpse it has become.

Seminaries, in particular, should take the lead in this area. We should train our students as personal evangelists, and we should teach them models for church evangelism. We should challenge them to evangelize without bias or prejudice, loving and going after the increasing ethnic and minority groups across America. The authenticity and integrity of the gospel is

at stake on this one. Bigotry and prejudice must be confronted for the ugly putrid sin that it is. God has brought a mission field to our land. If we ignore or neglect it, He will certainly and rightly judge us severely.

We should continue emphasizing also our 2+2 and 2+3 missions training in partnership with the International Mission Board (IMB), continuing the healthy dialogue begun in the summer of 2004 between the IMB and the seminaries. Aggressive evangelism, especially on the mission field, must be rooted and grounded in healthy theology, a theology that will guard and protect our partnerships, our methods, our strategies and our planting of New Testament churches. In the Fall of 2004 the chairman of the board for the IMB, Tom Hatley, reported in the September meeting ten recommendations worked out in dialogue between the seminaries and the IMB. These recommendations include

1. THAT we encourage meetings with the seminaries on a regular basis and that the board, staff and trustees be represented.
2. THAT we refer to the Overseas Committee the action to implement an accurate annual audit of beliefs on the field as previously adopted by this Board, and that this audit is to be reported to the full board. (This is to insure that Baptist churches are being planted on the field.)
3. THAT the Overseas Committee or appropriate sub-committee revisit the definition of boundaries and level of cooperation with G.C.C. [Great Commission Christian] groups, with the purpose of bringing clarification to the board, staff, and especially to our leadership on the field.
4. THAT the Overseas Committee and appropriate sub-committee continue to study and evaluate the teachings and curriculum at M.L.C. [Missionary Learning Center] and training on the field as especially

regards ecclesiology and the role of women in ministry.

5. THAT the proper Overseas Subcommittee revisit and clarify for all the definition of a local church.

6. We encourage the President and his leadership team to affirm and strengthen the relationship we have with the seminaries in the 2+2 and 2+3 programs. As trustee leaders we give our full affirmation to the continuation of these programs.¹⁹

I see this as a remarkable development of wisdom and cooperation between SBC entities. I believe it has the potential for even greater harvests on the mission field as we work together in reaching the nations with the gospel. Again, much more could be said with respect to nurturing a healthy understanding of God's sovereignty and human responsibility, the danger of soteriological inclusivism, open theism (both in theory and in practice), and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. However, these are positive developments of no small importance, and we can rejoice in them while giving attention to these other issues as well.

The Pursuit of a First-Century Biblical Model for Church Planting

The twenty-first century is more like the first century than has ever been the case in the history of Western culture. The religious marketplace looks like the book of Acts, and so should our church planting strategies and methods. We are losing America and the West because we are losing the great metropolitan areas where there is a concentration of people. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. points out that 80 percent of Southern Baptists actually attend 20 percent of our churches, churches located in the large cities.²⁰ Paul's strategy for evangelizing the Roman Empire must become our strategy with a clear focus and intensity. Praying and planning,

money and resources, need to flood the great metroplexes that continue to expand across our nation. To this challenge I offer two thoughts for consideration.

First, explore creative methods, but make sure that they are faithfully filtered through the purifying waters of Holy Scripture. Our manual must be the Bible and not a marketing book. Can we learn from the ideas of the latter? Yes. Can we baptize their methods? No! I believe no individual is doing better work and analysis in this area than Thom Rainer, Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at Southern Seminary. The North American Mission Board (NAMB), state conventions, local associations, and individual churches would be wise to read all of his books, weigh his insights, and hear his counsel. It is somewhat embarrassing that he often has a greater impact outside than inside the SBC.²¹ Second, be wise fishers of men. Drag the net, throw in multiple hooks, and use various forms of bait because fish come in all sorts of varieties. Be sensitive to your context, but stay grounded in the Word of God. Third, we (that includes the seminaries, NAMB, and mega-churches) need to work together to recruit our best and brightest for strategic church planting. Some need to provide the resources and some the training. In his "Frog Columns" Jimmy Draper addresses his concern about finding a place for young emerging leaders within the Convention. I commend Dr. Draper's concern while expressing my own concern with many of the responses I have seen so far. Too many sound like whiners rather than leaders, expressing an attitude of entitlement rather than engagement and action. Here is a worthwhile meeting place. Those who really

do exhibit godly, biblical leadership with passion, vision, and wisdom should find us willing to invest in them. Leadership is not given; leadership is earned. Should we find opportunities and should we provide avenues whereby these young leaders can step up and soar for the glory of God, demonstrating the gifts and abilities given to them by God? Absolutely. However, the model of 2 Timothy 2:1-2 must be our model as well, or we will rush into foolish and probably heretical waters.

The Recovery of the Bible's View of Marriage As a Sacred Covenant Designed by God to Last for Life

In Matthew 19:4-11 Jesus gave us his view of marriage, divorce, and singleness. It was consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament, emphasizing in particular God's ordaining of marriage and the home in Genesis 2. Today our Lord must weep at what he observes in Southern Baptist Churches. Few men are willing to stand in their pulpits and utter with a prophetic voice the sin of divorce. Indeed the debate on same-sex union and marriage is the inevitable result of the culture of divorce we have embraced.

In 1999 George Barna reported that "Baptists have the highest divorce rate of any Christian denomination, and are more likely to get a divorce than atheists and agnostics ... the survey ... found that 29% of all Baptist have been through a divorce."²² In 2001 Barna reported that those who profess to be "born again" are less likely to co-habit but just as likely to divorce. He noted,

Born again Christians are just as likely to get divorced as are non-born again adults. Overall, 33% of all born again individuals who have been married have gone through a divorce, which is statistically iden-

tical to the 34% incidence among non-born again adults. . . . The adults analyzed in the born again category were not those who claimed to be born again, but were individuals who stated a personal commitment to Christ, having confessed their sins, embracing Christ as their savior, and believing that they have received eternal salvation because of their faith in Christ alone. *More than 90% of the born again adults who have been divorced experienced that divorce after they accepted Christ, not before* [emphasis mine]. It is unfortunate that so many people, regardless of their faith, experience a divorce, but especially unsettling to find that the faith commitment of so many born again individuals has not enabled them to strengthen and save their marriages.²³

And yet again in 2004, Barna informed us that the trend continues virtually unchanged.²⁴ You would think we would be concerned but apparently we are not. Recently I discovered that LifeWay had discontinued the "Kingdom Family" emphasis that grew out of the Family Council appointed by Morris Chapman and chaired by Tom Elliff. It was my honor to serve on that council. In very recent correspondence with Jimmy Draper I asked if he could share with me what happened and here is his heart breaking response: "we just were not able to build any momentum for the Family Conferences, etc... [it was] just that the whole emphasis didn't take off. I'm not sure why. We had some great personnel on conferences and tried it for quite some time... the response was low."²⁵

Where do we go from here? Let me offer several ideas for us to implement. First, we must teach our people in a comprehensive manner the divine covenant nature of marriage, that it is as the *Baptist Faith and Message* says, "the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant com-

mitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His Church."²⁶ We must also teach that God hates divorce (Mal 2:16) and that divorce is sin. It is neither unpardonable nor unforgivable, but it is serious sin in the eyes of God and to be avoided at all costs.

Second, we must affirm the value and necessity of premarital counseling and mentoring. Any church that allows a single marriage to take place on its property without requiring intensive premarital instruction should be ashamed of itself. We must also begin intentionally and comprehensively to implement the mentoring principles taught in Titus 2:1-8. Never has there been a greater need for older, godly men to mentor younger men, and for older godly women to mentor younger women. The potential such an emphasis has for marriage, family, evangelism, and discipleship is enormous. Why is it that groups like Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Fellowship, and the Navigators are better at this than are we? That is an important question that demands a sufficient answer.

Third, we must acknowledge that some have been given the gift of singleness from God (Matthew 19; 1 Corinthians 7), tap into their tremendous potential for service, and stop harassing them because they are single. We should not forget the significant singles of Scripture: persons like Elijah and Elisha, Daniel, Simeon, Anna, Paul, John the Baptist, and, of course, Jesus.

Fourth, in a culture that seems to be going in the opposite direction, we must affirm in word and practice the gift of children as a "heritage for the Lord" (Ps 127:3). Godly parents will be disciplinarians beginning in the home. They will

understand that no greater investment can be made than that they would raise a brood of godly children who will live for Jesus just like they saw in Mom, and especially Dad.²⁷ Our churches must train parents to evangelize and disciple their children.

The Cultivation of Vibrant, Sound, and Productive Seminaries That Are Really in Touch with the Churches They Serve

God did not ordain seminaries. I do believe he raised them up and has used them for his glory, but there is nothing that would require their existence for the ongoing work of the gospel and the church. The fact is seminaries must justify their worth, value, and existence. If they fail to demonstrate their merit and importance, then they should cease to exist and go the way of all flesh. What then should seminaries *be* and do in order to serve the churches that support them and send their men and women to be trained by them?

First, seminaries must never lose sight of the fact that they are servants of the churches and not the academy. We may speak to and engage the world of scholarship, but our first and primary calling is to serve and equip the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. We should strive to serve all the churches and on every level we possibly can. This was the vision of our founding father of theological education, James Petigru Boyce (1827-1888). His inaugural address, delivered as professor of theology at Furman University on July 30, 1856, entitled "Three Changes in Theological Institutions," remains a monument and a map for training ministers by means of the seminary.²⁸ He hoped to "see the means of theological

education increased ... open to all who would embrace them."²⁹

Second, we must be doggedly confessional, taking with the utmost seriousness the confessions we affirm. Mohler rightly argues that the theological battle of the latter quarter of the twentieth century was fought between a *truth party* (the Conservatives) and a *liberty party* (the Moderates). The truth party prevailed as Southern Baptists recovered their theological roots.³⁰ All six seminaries affirm the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*. Two seminaries, Southern and Southeastern, also adhere to the *Abstract of Principles* (1858), which was primarily the work of Basil Manley, Jr. The *Abstract* was the first theological confession formally adopted by Southern Baptists.³¹ Concerning our commitment to our doctrinal confession, Boyce issued both a warning and a challenge:

It is with a single man that error usually commences; and when such a man has influence or position, it is impossible to estimate the evil that will attend it. Ecclesiastical history is full of warning upon this subject. Scarcely a single heresy has ever blighted the Church which has not owed its existence or its development to that one man of power and ability whose name has always been associated with its doctrines.³²

Therefore given this ever present danger, our institutions should require a public declaration of all its teachers to teach in "accordance with and not contrary to" our doctrinal statements. To do so is right, honest, and fair. Boyce adds,

You will infringe the rights of no man, and you will secure the rights of those who have established here an instrumentality for the production of a sound ministry. It is no hardship to those who teach here to be called upon to sign the declaration of their principles; for there are fields of usefulness open elsewhere

to every man, and none need accept your call who cannot conscientiously sign your formulary. And while all this is true, you will receive by this an assurance that the trust committed to you by the founders is fulfilled in accordance with their wishes, that the ministry that go forth have here learned to distinguish truth from error, and to embrace the former, and that the same precious truths of the Bible which were so dear to the hearts of its founders, and which I trust are equally dear to yours, will be propagated in our churches, giving to them vigor and strength, and causing them to flourish by the godly sentiments and emotions they will awaken within them. May God impress you deeply with the responsibility under which you must act in reference to it!³³

Southern Baptists must produce and foster a positive theological agenda, not merely one that is defensive and reactionary. We must teach doctrine, love doctrine, and proclaim doctrine. Mohler challenges us to have a *thick theology*, not a *thin theology*.³⁴ I am with him 100 percent on this agenda.

Third, seminaries in the twenty-first century need to be more active in partnering with local churches to provide a wholesome and well rounded educational experience. Seminaries are often criticized for what they do not teach. John Maxwell became a wealthy man by addressing our perceived and real shortcomings. I, however, have come to a conclusion on the matter that I am all but certain is correct. If it is, it will require some changes in our thinking and in how we do theological education. While seminaries are guilty of numerous imperfections and shortcomings, it is time for us to stop criticizing them for what they cannot do, both by design and culture. We cannot so easily teach our students leadership, interpersonal relationship skills, and

give them pastoral/ministry experience. Those things are best learned and refined in the furnace and fire of the local church under the mentoring of a mature senior minister who can more adequately fulfill this aspect of 2 Timothy 2:1-2. Our curriculums are hardly set up to fulfill this need in theological education, and we are only fooling ourselves if we think what is popularly known as “Supervised Ministry Experience” is delivering what is needed. Furthermore, the type of persons drawn to the teaching ministry of the seminary are not wired to teach leadership, relational skills, and so forth. This is not who they are, and this is not what they know.

On the “intensive side,” I would direct you to the Bethlehem Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the partnership of Lakeview Baptist Church in Auburn, Alabama, with Southern Seminary. John Piper at the Bethlehem Institute and Al Jackson at Lakeview Baptist, as well as men like Mark Dever (Capitol Hill Baptist Church) and Johnny Hunt (First Baptist Church of Woodstock), have chosen to pour their lives into others in an intense, intentional mentoring method of theological/ministerial training. A “less intensive” approach, but more conducive to seminary based education, is the partnering of seminaries with local healthy churches where students can go through a structured and well planned mentorship, earning six to twelve hours towards their degree and learning the pastoral ropes from those who do it every single day. Here I have in mind the mentoring program of Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, under the leadership of Senior Pastor Kevin Ezell and Student Minister Jimmy Scroggins (who also serves as Dean of Boyce College at Southern Seminary),

and that of Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, led by Pastor David Horner. Southeastern Seminary partners with this church, and is looking to expand and multiply this model in partnering with other churches that have this passion and vision. Such an approach to theological education allows the seminaries to focus on and do what they do well, and it allows local churches to play a vital role in educating ministers for the churches, something they should have been asked to do all along.

The Wisdom to Look Back and Remember Who We Are So That, As We Move Forward, We Will Not Forget Who We Were

The Southern Baptist Convention today is not the Southern Baptist Convention of your parents, and certainly not your grandparents. Theirs was the SBC of Sunbeams/Mission Friends, RAs and GAs, Acteens, Brotherhood, and WMU. Ours is the SBC of Awanas, Upward Basketball, Promise Keepers, Precept Bible Study, and Bible Study Fellowship. Ours is an SBC influenced by Rick Warren and Bill Hybels, Ed Young and Andy Stanley, Lou Giglio and John Piper, Jerry Falwell and, sadly, TBN. The SBC monopoly over its thousands of churches is gone. We have moved from the country to the city, from the lower to the middle class, from isolation to significant participation, from loyal customer to mall shopper. Not everything involved in the old SBC was good, but neither was it all bad. There was a structure and a plan present that, if implemented and followed, could provide an education into our history and heritage. That mechanism is simply gone and the results are far reaching. We now have several generations who know almost nothing

of William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Bill Wallace, Lottie Moon, and Annie Armstrong. They know nothing of Boyce, Broadus, Manly, Carroll, Robertson, Frost, Mullins, and Truett. Many who are now entering our seminaries were only small children or were not yet born when the conservative resurgence began in 1979. They have never heard Criswell, Rogers, or Vines preach, and they are not really sure who they are. Pressler means next to nothing, and Patterson simply was the president of Southeastern Seminary, who is now the president of Southwestern Seminary.

This is unacceptable and must change. To lose sight of our heritage is to forget who we are. It is to be ignorant of the great theological issues that shaped and molded us into who and what we are. It is to be unaware of the wonderful heroes on whose shoulders we now stand. The six seminaries have been working with the SBC Executive Committee to address the situation but that will not be enough. The IMB, NAMB, and LifeWay must join us. In creative and dynamic avenues fitting a twenty-first century context, we need to retell the Baptist history story in a way that will grab the attention and stir the heart of our people. As we look to the future we must not forget our past, a past rooted in the New Testament itself, a past amazingly played out on the screen of history for almost 500 years now, marking our beginnings in Anabaptism. I do not have the answer for this mandate. Hopefully one or some among you will discover the means whereby we accomplish it.

Conclusion

I do not always agree with Ron Sider, but I do agree with him on this: “If Christians do not live what they preach, the whole thing is a farce.” Sider poignantly illustrates this in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*. He writes,

Graham Cyster, a Christian whom I know from South Africa, recently told me a painful story about a personal experience two decades ago when he was struggling against apartheid as a young South African evangelical. One night, he was smuggled into an underground Communist cell of young people fighting apartheid. “Tell us about the gospel of Jesus Christ,” they asked, half hoping for an alternative to the violent communist strategy they were embracing.

Graham gave a clear, powerful presentation of the gospel, showing how personal faith in Christ wonderfully transforms persons and creates one new body of believers where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, rich nor poor, black nor white. The youth were fascinated. One seventeen year-old exclaimed, “That is wonderful! Show me where I can see that happening.” Graham’s face fell as he sadly responded that he could not think of anywhere South African Christians were truly living out the message of the gospel. “Then the whole thing is a piece of sh-,” the youth angrily retorted. Within a month he left the country to join the armed struggle against apartheid—and eventually giving his life for his beliefs.³⁵

The North Carolina evangelist Vance Havner said, “What we live is what we really believe. Everything else is so much religious talk.” By God’s grace and for his glory may we know who we are and what we should be, know what we believe and live as we should. If we do, we have a bright future. If we do, our Lord will be well pleased.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 388.
- ²*Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 2004 (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, 2004), 118.
- ³The best treatment, and really the only treatment, of the conservative resurgence is Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000). Paul Pressler's *A Hill on Which to Die* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999) provides an autobiographical look from one of the resurgence's key leaders. From the moderate perspective there has been a flood of books. Two, however, stand out in scholarship and balance. See Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles* (Rutgers: Rutgers University, 1990) and Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002). In addition to the adoption of the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 2000, other watershed moments would include the re-election of Charles Stanley in Dallas in 1985, the Glorieta Statement issued by the 6 seminary presidents in 1986, the adoption of the Peace Committee Report in 1987, Jerry Vine's sermon, "A Baptist and His Bible" preached in St. Louis also in 1987, and the election of Morris Chapman as president of the SBC in New Orleans in 1990. This election of Chapman is important because it was "the last straw that broke the camels back" leading the liberal/moderate faction of the SBC to form what has become the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF).
- ⁴The emphasis must rightly fall on *being* not on *doing*.
- ⁵Stan Norman, "Ecclesiological Guidelines to Inform Southern Baptist Church Planters," Position Paper Presented to the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (28 September 2004), 15-16.
- ⁶See the fine article by Robert Stein, "Baptist and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 6-17.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 14. Stein highlights the significance of the latter aspect.
- ⁸*The Baptist Faith and Message*, a statement adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, 14 June 2000, Article VII.
- ⁹Text and commentary can be found in Daniel L. Akin, "An Expository Analysis of the Schleithem Confession," *Criswell Theological Review* 2, no. 2 (1988): 345-370.
- ¹⁰J. L. Dagg, *A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1958), 274.
- ¹¹R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Church Discipline: The Missing Mark," in *Polity*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 43.
- ¹²*Ibid.*
- ¹³Stephen Prothero, "A Nation of Faith and Religious Illiterates," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 2005, sec. B, p. 11.
- ¹⁴William Willimon, "Been there, preached that," *Leadership Magazine* (Fall 1995): 75-76, 78.
- ¹⁵See Chad Brand and R. Stanton Norman, eds., *Perspectives on Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004).
- ¹⁶*The Baptist Faith and Message*, Article VI.
- ¹⁷One need only survey W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1959; rev. ed., 1969). See also Daniel Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church," in *Perspectives on Church Government*, 57-59.
- ¹⁸Chris Turner, "Draper Expounds on Young Ministers Involvement, Decline in Baptisms," *Facts & Trends* (January/February 2005): 26-29.
- ¹⁹Correspondence from Tom Hatley to the six seminary presidents (23 October 2004).
- ²⁰R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?" Address delivered at Union University, Jackson, Tennessee (6 April 2004).
- ²¹See Thom Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); *idem*, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).
- ²²Reported in the Associated Press (30 December 1999).
- ²³"Born Again Adults Less Likely to Co-Habit, Just as Likely to Divorce," *The Barna Update* (6 August 2001).
- ²⁴"Born Again Christians Just as Likely to Divorce as Are Non-Christians," *The Barna Update* (8 September 2004).
- ²⁵Personal e-mail correspondence with Jimmy Draper (29 January 2005).
- ²⁶*The Baptist Faith and Message*, Article XVIII.
- ²⁷For a popular take on this, see Henry G. Brinton, "Praying for More Men," *The Washington Post*, 19 December 2004, sec. B, p. 4.

²⁸The address is summarized and analyzed in John A. Broadus, *A Gentleman and a Scholar: A Memoir of James Petigru Boyce* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 1893; repr., 2004), 120-145.

²⁹Ibid, 122. See also 132.

³⁰Mohler, "Baptist Identity." Greg Wills provides a similar analysis in his article in this issue of the journal.

³¹H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 305.

³²Broadus, *A Gentleman and a Scholar*, 139.

³³Ibid, 140-141.

³⁴Mohler, "Baptist Identity."

³⁵Ronald J. Sider, "The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Don't Christians Live What They Preach?," *Books & Culture* 11, no. 1 (January/February 2005): 8. Online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2005/001/3.8.html>.