Mission, Transmission, and Confession: Three Central Issues in Theological Education

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A magazine published by a seminary of the old Protestant "mainline" crossed my desk in recent days. The major theme of the issue was the adjustment necessitated by the fact that the seminary sold its majestic and venerable campus and is downsizing to a smaller campus, yet to be built. A faculty focus article featured a professor's new book on the perils of monotheism.

The fault lines in American theological education are clear, and the most important of these dividing lines is, perhaps unsurprisingly, theological.

The mission of theological education, defined biblically, is the task of educating and preparing servants of the church and agents of the gospel. This is accomplished through the transmission of biblical, theological, and practical knowledge from one generation to the next. Viewed over the last 200 years, the history of theological education demonstrates that the one thing absolutely essential to that faithful transmission is a robust and regulative confessionalism.

This was already apparent when the founders of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary set out their design for this institution. The defection of some well-known theological institutions, almost all in the North, was well documented by the 1850s. These schools had exchanged orthodox Christian theology for Unitarianism or were embracing the new "higher criticism" of the Bible. The theological trajectory of these schools was all too evident.

James Petigru Boyce and Basil Manly Jr. had attended Princeton Theological Seminary, where they had studied under confessional Presbyterians. Basil Manly Sr., Southern Seminary's first trustee chairman, was also a proponent of confessional theological education. In 1856, when Boyce presented his inaugural address at Furman

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University, "Three Changes in Theological Education," he was well aware of the danger of theological accommodationism, and he was ready with his prescription—regulative confessionalism.

"A crisis in Baptist doctrine is evidently approaching," Boyce warned, "and those of us who still cling to the doctrines that formerly distinguished us have the important duty to perform of earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints."

Boyce's point was elegant and simple: Theological institutions that do not hold themselves and their professors accountable to a confession of faith will eventually compromise or abandon the faith. Over the course of the past 150 years, the history of Southern Seminary reveals that a regulative confession, though essential, is not sufficient in itself to prevent theological defection. The other essential element is the determination of the seminary's leadership and governing board to enforce the regulative nature of the confession of faith.

Like its oldest seminary, the Southern Baptist Convention has learned a similar lesson from history and hard experience. When organized in 1845, the SBC adopted no confession of faith. The churches represented at the organizing convention in Augusta were virtually all members of Baptists associations that were robustly confessional. Yet, by 1925, with the furor of the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy tearing apart denominations in the North, Southern Baptists adopted "The Baptist Faith & Message" as a statement of faith.

Less than four decades later, controversies over biblical authority again threatened the peace of the Convention. As in 1925, the Convention attempted to resolve a controversy by means of a confession—in this case a revision of "The Baptist Faith & Message." But, as in 1925, the Convention once again attempted to resolve a crisis by means of a confession, but without adopting confessionalism. The confession held an instructive and symbolic status, rather than a regulative function and authority. Though relatively few Southern Baptists seemed to perceive the real peril at the time, a theological crisis was then exploding—an explosion that would thoroughly reshape the convention.

In retrospect, it is clear that the controversy could have been avoided had Southern Baptists held their schools and faculties accountable to "The Baptist Faith & Message" and, at the same time, had the Convention understood that a confession of faith must be updated regularly in order to address the new and unexpected issues raised in every generation.

Those lessons were not learned until the last years of the twentieth century, and those lessons were learned with pain and controversy. Nevertheless, by the time the Southern Baptist Convention again adopted a revised version of "The Baptist Faith & Message" in 2000, it had learned the necessity of a regulative function for the confession—at least for its seminaries and mission boards.

The crisis in Baptist doctrine James P. Boyce saw on the horizon in 1856 came and continued. Boyce's concern for the theological fidelity of the seminary he would found was, as time revealed, prophetic. Yet, at the same time, we can see that his concern for a regulative confession of faith—binding on all who would teach—was crucial to the recovery of confessional theological education well over a century later.

The mission of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is the preparation of ministers and missionaries by means of the transmission of Christian learning from one generation to the next. And that mission, we now know, is anchored in a commitment to confessional theological education.

As Southern Seminary celebrates its sesquicentennial, we dare not forget the lessons we should have known and honored from 1859 onward—and the essential nature of confessional theological education is the first of these lessons we must remember.