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The SBC at the Crossroads**

By
William J. Leonard
Associate Professor of Church History
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Bill J. Leonard

Associate Professor of Church History

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The Southern Baptist Convention, like many American denominations before it, has reached a crossroads in its institutional life. If present trends continue, the Convention as we know it, and as it has existed throughout most of this century, will cease to be. It may continue to exist, but not as we have known it.

The reasons for such a conclusion are less theological than institutional and are based on the nature of Baptist polity as well as the experience of other American denominations. Throughout its history, the institutional genius of the SBC has been its ability to hold in balance two powerful and often opposing forces, unity and diversity. Diversity is evident in local church autonomy, congregational government, geography and economics as well as a wide spectrum of practical and doctrinal emphases. While affirming a basic doctrinal agreement based on scripture and occasionally expressed in a confession of faith, diversity has meant that common doctrines could be emphasized in various ways and to varying degrees. Baptists might agree on the importance of evangelism but use different methods--revivals, personal witness, nurture or Bible study--as specific means for implementing the evangelical imperative of the gospel. They might agree

on the centrality of preaching and worship but the style and form of those observances have varied significantly. No two congregations stress the same doctrines, ministries, programs or witness in exactly the same way.

That diversity was reflected in SBC institutions. James P. Boyce spoke to this issue as related to the Abstract of Principles, that doctrinal statement utilized at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the first confessional statement approved by the SBC.

An editorial published in The Baptist (Memphis, Tenn.) in 1874 objected, among other things, to the fact that certain doctrines taught at the seminary were in contradiction to those views held by "four or five state conventions." The writer commented that it was strange to think that Southern Baptists should be asked to support persons who advocated doctrines contrary to those held in the churches. The objections made the Seminary "too far removed from the people to ever recover from its embarrassment." ¹

Boyce's response to these and other objections took the form of a five-part series dealing with the life of the Seminary. The final article dealt with doctrinal differences and the Abstract of Principles. When the seminary was constituted, Boyce noted, many in the SBC hesitated to approve what they feared would be a creed as a doctrinal statement for the institution.

As the convention sought to develop such a doctrinal statement for the seminary, three basic principles were

followed. First, the statement was to give clear expression to the "fundamental doctrines of grace." Second, the Abstract should describe those distinct Baptist principles which were "Universally prevalent." Third, "upon no point, upon which the denomination is divided, should the Convention, and through it the Seminary, take a position." ²

Thus such doctrines as the way of salvation or the ordinances of baptismal immersion and the Lord's Supper were carefully delineated. Where differences of opinion prevailed among 19th century Baptists in matters such as Landmarkism and "Alien Immersion", the seminary was not bound to a position. The school might have professors who differed in their views from some Southern Baptists in certain regions of the Convention, but those views might also be considered orthodox by other members in other regions. These principles permitted the institution to reflect a basic doctrinal unity while retaining an equally basic doctrinal diversity, so characteristic of Southern Baptist life. ³

Diversity means that Southern Baptist churches have maintained a vast appeal to a wide variety of constituents. Persons with different gifts, concerns and preferences in church life find congregations with reasonably compatible commitments for Christian service. Within the same denominational tradition, often within the same geographical region, are churches whose approach to "doing the gospel" is extremely diverse, thereby reaching a greater number of individuals.

These diverse congregations are bound by a number of common concerns, among them a common experience, a common imperative,

and a common method for action. The common experience is found in the evangelical heart religion of personal encounter with Jesus Christ. The means to such an experience may vary -- dramatic event, quiet assurance, thoughtful decision -- but the need of each individual to experience saving grace is a primary emphasis among Southern Baptists.

Several scholars have pointed to the divergent theological and practical traditions which formed Baptist churches in the South. The so called "Charleston tradition" of the Regular Baptists, brought to the Carolinas in the 1690s, was Calvinist in its theology, with a concern for dignity in worship, an educated clergy and order in church life. This tradition spread through the population centers of the deep South -- Georgia, Alabama, parts of Mississippi, and the Carolinas, and was reflected in the theology of those who founded the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1859.

Another important influence which shaped Baptist churches in the South was that of the "Sandy Creek tradition" of the Separate Baptists. Brought from New England by Shubal Stearns and Daniel Marshall in the 1740s, it reflected a strong revivalistic approach to evangelism. Spreading through Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Texas, the Separate Baptist tradition was given to great spontaneity in worship, a more Arminian approach to theology, some mistrust of education, and stress on dramatic conversion experience often within the context of revival method. It characterizes much of the Baptist life in the Southwestern region of the U.S. and is probably reflected in the founding of Southern Baptist' second seminary,

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. 4

Both these traditions, however, have been profoundly committed to a common concern for personal conversion, heart-warmed, pietistic experience with God in Christ. Their methods for securing that conversion might vary significantly, but their stress on the centrality of evangelism was a common bond around which the SBC itself was formed. (Here you will permit me to generalize, recognizing that local churches probably reflect these qualities less concisely than I have described here.)

With the common experience has come a common imperative: mission. Those who receive the grace of God are compelled to share that good news personally and collectively. Thus, this diverse body of churches united to present the gospel to the community, the nation and the world. You will recall that the constitution adopted in 1845 described the purpose of the new body in terms of the evangelical-missionary enterprise. It reads "carrying into effect the benevolent intentions of our constituents, by organizing a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort for the propagation of the Gospel." One must ask if our contemporary squabbles often tend to drain the "energies of the whole denomination" away from the propagation of the Gospel, not toward it.

It was in seeking to implement the missionary imperative that Southern Baptists seized upon a common method, the Cooperative Program, in 1925. It represents a tangible institutional method for carrying out the tasks of the church beyond the local

congregation. In the beginning, few Southern Baptist churches possessed the resources to fulfill national or world wide vision alone. Gradually they developed a cooperative venture in stewardship whereby mission, educational agencies, publishing and other programs could be undertaken. In order to express what they felt to be the essential aspects of the Gospel -- evangelism and mission -- Baptists of diverse background and practice were willing to unite around a common institutional method and trust each other in cooperative endeavor. The Cooperative Program was not easily instituted, however. It was not without strong opposition from those individuals who feared that it undermined local church autonomy and smacked of over centralization. This approach to unified giving has long been a factor which distinguished Southern Baptists from so called "independent" Baptist churches. When controversies threatened to move the Convention from its conservative middle ground or divert it from the missionary task, Southern Baptists worked hard to retain their common basis for unity.

The SBC has again reached a crossroads in its institutional life due to the growing influence of groups which threaten both unity and diversity. Diversity is threatened because there is little toleration of it in some circles. Both implicitly and explicitly, the pressure for conformity to a particular method of preaching, worship, evangelism, mission and ministry has already begun. Efforts toward eliminating diversity from boards and agencies are being carefully coordinated. Complete conformity to particular formulas for describing scripture, church, conversion and other issues is increasingly demanded. The

growing list of doctrinal definitions seems to become more and more minute with each new crisis. Diversity is no longer celebrated among many Southern Baptists, it is condemned.

The unity of Baptist life is likewise threatened. Perhaps the greatest danger is to the preaching of heart religion. While using the language of conversion, some factions within the SBC link faith in Christ to an ever increasing list of doctrines about Christ. Personal faith very subtly becomes equated with rational propositions regarding Jesus.

Other evangelical groups have confronted similar problems in the past. The contemporary generation fears that the faith will be lost if certain doctrines are obscured. In their zeal to insure orthodoxy they unite elaborate doctrinal formulas with simple faith in Christ. With time, succeeding generations are unable to separate saving faith from dogmas about faith and the very thing the fathers feared the most happens to their children and grandchildren -- not because liberalism made them believe too little but because orthodoxy made them believe too much. Faith loses its personal dimension as church members cling to dogmas as a substitute for faith, mistaking doctrines about Jesus for faith in him. One need only look at segments of Lutheranism after Luther, hyper-Calvinism after Calvin and American Congregationalism after Jonathan Edwards for but a few disturbing historical parallels.

In fact, this tendency to preserve faith by encasing it in increasingly obtuse doctrinal definitions seems to occur in most major religious movements from time to time. The "New Divinity men" who considered themselves the descendents and

protectors of the theology of Jonathan Edwards are a case in point. The awakening which swept the colonies in the 1730s and 40s had produced innumerable conversions, quickened churches and, in the minds of many, restored religion to its rightful and necessary place in American society. In the generation after this First Great Awakening, however, the followers of Edwards sought to carry his theology and practice to their ultimate intellectual conclusions. They were also concerned to address the rising influence of those Enlightenment ideas which reflected optimism about human nature, a concern for individual free will and a "supernatural rationalist" view of revelation.

This produced, among other things, a tendency to intellectualize faith into a series of propositions. As William McLoughlin writes, "The doctrines that had brought such fervor and had inspired such hope in Edwards' generation had hardened into a discordant, unbelievable formula."⁵ While the New Divinity men made some important contributions to American theology, their fatal flaw, as Sydney Ahlstrom says of Samuel Hopkins, their most ardent spokesman, was a tendency to become "overly concerned with detail and acrimonious theological controversy."⁶ Others add that "In Hopkins, Calvinism was suffering from focusing attention on its enemies instead of on its God."⁷ The same thing could easily apply to many in the Southern Baptist camp today. Since this process does not occur immediately, the well meaning protectors of orthodoxy often do not live to see the possible and dangerous fruits of their acrimonious labors.

Southern Baptist unity in the missionary task is also in danger. As attention is focused from mission to doctrinal debates, from world vision to localized squabbles, the missionary activity of Southern Baptists suffers. As denominational unity is threatened, mission funds, programs and philosophy are likewise weakened. Permit me to digress briefly to note that present accusations of "liberalism" in SBC agencies are nothing new. In fact, in the early part of this century such an accusation was made against numerous Baptist foreign missionaries. A group of Georgia Baptists accused one missionary in China of not teaching the scriptures according to "fundamental" Southern Baptist doctrines. The missionary responded: "I have never taught contrary to the usual views of the Southern Baptists. I am trying in a very poor way, as I am aware, to lead the Chinese to the Lord Jesus. Deeply conscious of weakness and failure, I yield to none in devotion to the Lord." The accused heretic's name was Lottie Moon.⁸ Heresy hunts continue to divert Southern Baptist attention from efforts to lead persons around the world to the Lord Jesus.

That threat is also related to a third strike against Baptist unity, the weakening of the Cooperative Program. Institutionally this may be the most serious threat of all. The last twenty years have witnessed the increase of "mega-churches" within the SBC. With great numbers and large budgets they develop programs on the local level which in the past have often been left to the denomination. Instead of pooling resources for schools, missions, publications and media endeavors, the trend in many of these churches has been to use church funds to build

their own schools, send their own missionaries, develop their own publications and media ministries, thereby reducing Cooperative Program funds significantly. While this has been characteristic of independent Baptist churches, it has not represented the basic approach of Cooperative Program churches in the SBC.

Some churches have also withheld monies from the Cooperative Program in general, designating funds for specific activities of which they specifically approve. Certainly that is the right of all churches in the SBC. The danger, however, is that it represents a lack of trust in denominational diversity which was basic to the earliest cooperative ventures among Southern Baptists. Southern Baptist unity is founded explicitly upon Christian trust. Although some might disagree on certain approaches, they were willing to join hands and funds for the sake of a greater good and a broader ministry throughout the world.

Unity and diversity as well as basic trust is now threatened and may already have been dealt a death blow. If we do not reassert unity in missions and cooperative programs; if we do not affirm the benefits of diversity, we may well go the way of numerous American denominations: schism. It is not that any faction desires schism, but that the basic institutional framework of the Convention is being undermined. Should schism begin it will not be a neat division resulting in only two cleanly separated, ideologically pure groups. There will be no way to stop the proliferation of multiple groups from what was once the Southern Baptist Convention. The American Baptist Churches (ABC) experienced doctrinal divisions following the

fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s and continuing through the 1950s. They experienced not one split but many. Today the ABC numbers some 1-2 million while the SBC claims over 13 million. Given our local autonomy, regional differences and increasing doctrinal delineations, we can expect that divisions in the SBC would lead to multiple Baptist groups, court suits over property and loss of funds for missionary programs, seminaries and other ministries. Each individual Baptist would ultimately be forced to decide which of the new Baptist denominations to follow while each congregation would confront legal problems over property, assets and other corporate programs. If we believe that this can never happen to Southern Baptists we need only study the history of American Congregationalists, Presbyterians and other Baptist groups.

Division in these denominations over fundamentalism indicates that once fundamentalist tenets are followed, the next question becomes, "which of the fundamentals is most fundamental?" One faction produces another led by those who believe that the earlier schism was not fundamental enough. In the 1930s J. Gresham Machen led a fundamentalist group from the Presbyterian Church, USA to found the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and its educational arm, Westminster Seminary. But this group did not go far enough to suit some more right wing theologians so Carl McIntyre broke away to form the Bible Presbyterian Church and its institution, Faith Seminary. But this group could not agree on orthodox doctrine and a faction broke away to found Covenant College and Seminary in St. Louis, leading one scholar to write that "the continual splintering of

conservative Christianity has brought disrepute upon the church." Do Southern Baptists wish to be party to similar divisions? Many trends which led to divisions in other denominations are today present in the SBC. Should the fragile balance of unity and diversity collapse, all our ministries will suffer and many will surely disappear.

What we are confronting is a "fundamental" change in the basis of denominational unity. It is a change from unity grounded in common task -- evangelism and missions - to common ideology -- fundamentalism, a relatively new and frequently reactionary movement in Christian history. As John Hurt, former editor of the Texas Baptist Standard, writes: "Thumb through the pages of the constitution and all those of Southern Baptist history and there is no escaping the fact the Convention is functional and not doctrinal. Steer it away from its 'promotion of Christian missions' and you can seat the messengers in a small town bus." 10

There is a difference in affirming conservative principles within a broad ideological framework, united by common evangelical concerns and accepting an overarching ideology around which uniformity of doctrine and practice must be established. Will Southern Baptists choose Fundamentalism as opposed to pietism and mission as their most distinguishing characteristic? Such an approach was repudiated when Landmarkists sought to impose their ideology on the Convention in the 19th century. It was repudiated again in the early 20th century when Fundamentalists like J. Frank Norris tried to make their views normative for the Convention. In fact, many "independent" Baptist churches have

come directly out of the Norris tradition and have set the pattern directly or indirectly for many mega-churches in the SBC. Which model will we choose? The model of pietism which has served us so well in the past, or that of fundamentalist independency which we rejected in other eras?

The issue is increasingly an institutional one. Will we retain our cumbersome, sometimes faulty, denominational structure which by God's grace has been one of the most amazing vehicles of the Gospel in the history of American Christianity? Or will we in the name of doctrinal conformity and political intrigue pursue a course of division, malice and destruction? If you believe it cannot happen or believe it should, that is your right. As an historian of American Christianity, I fear it can occur if certain trends are not reversed. As a child of the Southern Baptist Convention I pray that it will not. May God help us to reclaim the SBC for unity, for diversity and for the Good News.

1. Elder M. P. Lowery, The Baptist (February 28, 1874).
2. James P. Boyce, "The Objections to the Seminary," Part V, Western Recorder (June 20, 1874), p.2.
3. Ibid; and Bill J. Leonard, "Types of Confessional Documents Among Baptists," Review and Expositor (Winter, 1979), pp. 29-42.
4. Walter B. Shurden, "The Southern Baptist Synthesis: Is it Cracking?," in the 1980-81 Carver Barnes Lectures, published by Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1981, pp. 5-6.
5. William G. McLoughlin, Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 101.
6. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yales University Press, 1972), p. 409.
7. Joseph Haroutunian, Pietism versus Moralism: the Passing of the New England Theology, p. 62, cited in Ahlstrom, p. 409.
8. Catherine B. Allen, The New Lottie Moon (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), p. 245.
9. Millard Erickson, The New Evangelical Theology, p. 194, cited in James Barr, Fundamentalism (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 187.
10. John Hurt, "Should Southern Baptists Have a Creed/ Confession? -- No!," Review and Expositor (Winter, 1979), p. 85.