

Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?¹

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Introduction

Addressing the future of any movement is an inherently dangerous affair. Winston Churchill once remarked to one of his classmates that he was certain history would treat him well. His schoolmate, a bit incredulous, asked how he could be so certain. Churchill raised an eyebrow and replied, "Because I intend to write the history." That is certainly one way to make sure history looks favorably upon you—provided you have the luxury of writing your own history. The rest of us, however, are left with simply wondering whether the historians of some future age will look back and say we got it even approximately correct. That is of course a risky business, but it is even more dangerous not to envision the future. The greatest risk is assuming the future will somehow "just happen" in a way that brings glory to God.

As we consider the Baptist movement in the twenty-first century, we can look back on more than four centuries of Baptist history, Baptist work, and Baptist witness. By no accident, that also includes four centuries of debate over Baptist identity and the Baptist future.

I should begin with a word of autobiography. I remember as a small child explaining to my neighbors that I belonged to the Baptists. That was the terminology—I never knew a time when I did not consider myself a Baptist. Of course, now I know better theologically, but I was part of the tribe before I ever understood the theology. I was a Baptist by custom before I became a Baptist by conviction. That Baptist heritage leads me to feel at home in

this discussion. I understand something of the grandeur, something of the vibrant texture of faith that is produced not only by the Baptist movement as a whole, but also by the Southern Baptist Convention as we now know it.

I was raised by parents who were convictional Baptists. They were so Baptist, in fact, that when I wanted to become a Boy Scout, my parents would not allow it until I was also a Royal Ambassador. This was an extreme position in my view. The Boy Scout troop was sponsored by the same Southern Baptist church as the Royal Ambassadors, so it was essentially the same boys dressing up in different uniforms on different nights. It was a very small world. To me, the external world was a panoply of different faiths—people called Methodists and Presbyterians. There was a sectarianism there, to be sure, but one that is not to be despised; it was a deeply held sense of belonging. We Baptists knew who we were, and thus we knew who we should be in the future.

Understanding the present and preparing for the future requires us to consider not only our own autobiographies, but also the biography of a great denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention. One of the keys for understanding the current situation is to recognize that Baptists have always debated our identity. From the very beginning, there has been a both/and character to the Baptist understanding of what it means to be a Christian. First, Baptists did not intend to start a new faith. The seventeenth-century Baptists were never about the task of creating a new Christian religion. In

fact, they went to great lengths to point out that they stood in continuity with the faith “once for all delivered to the saints.” Yet at the same time, Baptists were defined by certain unique theological convictions that framed their understanding. Those convictions were of such passionate strength and theological intensity that the early Baptists had to set themselves apart even from other English separatists and non-conformists. Essentially, our Baptist forebears were non-conformists even within the world of non-conformity. So they joined themselves together in congregations of likeminded believers who were uniquely committed to three essential principles.

The first of those principles was regenerate church membership. If there is any one defining mark of the Baptist, it is the understanding that membership in the church comes by a personal profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The church is not merely a voluntary association of those who have been born to Christian parents—even Baptist parents—or of those who might have been moistened as infants. Rather, the church is an assembly of those who make a public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who then gather together in congregations under the covenant of Christ.

The second principle, a derivative of the first, was believer’s baptism, the conviction that baptism is to be administered only upon an individual’s profession of faith. Baptism is not only a symbol, but an act of obedience and entry into the covenant community of the church. To compromise believer’s baptism is therefore to paint a picture of the church that is much distorted.

The third principle was congregational church government. Baptists have made

several and various attempts to define exactly what congregational church government should look like. At its root, however, congregationalism affirms that it is the covenanted community that must take responsibility for the ordering of the church, for the preaching of the gospel, and for everything else God has assigned to the church in this age. There is no sacerdotalism, no priestly class, no one who can be hired to do the ministry of the gospel, and no franchise to be granted. The church itself, the covenanted community of baptized believers, must take responsibility for the fulfillment of all Christ has commanded his people.

Much more could be added to Baptist ecclesiology, but these three principles are an irreducible minimum of Baptist identity. When any one of them is compromised—much less denied—then whatever is left may call itself Baptist only by asserting a lie. It is something less than Baptist when any one of these principles is absent.

Theological Issues

With these historic principles in mind, we turn to consider some theological issues that now face the Southern Baptist Convention and should therefore have our very careful attention. The first of these is the conservative resurgence in the SBC, a movement that emerged most publicly in 1979, even though its roots go back to at least 1963.

The public controversy of 1979 did not emerge out of a vacuum; there was a history behind it. By the 1960s, the Enlightenment had come to Dixie. A region that had long believed itself immune to history suddenly found itself grappling with the very questions that Northern evangelicals had confronted decades earlier and that

European Christians had faced in the previous century. Now, Kant, Hume, Locke, and Hobbes arrived at the very threshold of the SBC.

The controversy that erupted in the SBC centered first and foremost on issues of truth and authority. With modernity having already reached our ranks, higher criticism and other ideological denials of the truthfulness of Scripture now presented themselves as challenges. Southern Baptists were thus forced to make a decision whether to assert, affirm, and cherish the Bible as the Word of God written, or merely to receive it as a human testimony of human religious experience.

Yale University professor Gabriel Josipovici once said that we should see the Bible as an arbitrarily collected group of scrolls, writings of tremendous spiritual interest and substance, but which say more about the persons who wrote them than about the God by whom they claim to be inspired. At such a fork in the road, there are only two options: Either we will affirm the total truthfulness and verbal inspiration of Scripture, or we will decide that Scripture is to some extent simply a fallible witness to human religious experience. Southern Baptists first faced that choice in the 1960s, but they denied it for a number of years and papered over it for another decade. They tried to find some bureaucratic means of denying the elephant in the middle of the denominational room, but eventually the elephant grew so large it could be contained no longer.

By the 1970s, Southern Baptists had coiled into two separate parties: a truth party and a liberty party. Some tried to join both, but ultimately the controversy forced a choice. The issues became so narrowly focused and so intense in applica-

tion that individuals eventually had to understand that the candidates running for the office of president of the SBC represented one of these sets of consuming interests.

The truth party understood doctrine to be the most basic issue confronting the convention. They were suspicious that heterodoxy had entered the ranks of Southern Baptists, and they had documentation to back up their claims—reports from students at colleges, universities, and seminaries. Soon, what had begun as a grassroots concern became an organized movement convinced that if the truth was compromised, all would eventually be lost.

The liberty party might best be described with what became a bumper-sticker slogan of the movement: “Baptist means Freedom!” To this party, liberty itself was the *leitmotif* of the Baptist movement. Now, it is certainly true that members of the liberty party also cherished truth, and members of the truth party had an understanding of Baptist freedom. But for the truth party, freedom had to fit within the truthfulness of God’s Word and the parameters established by divine revelation. For the liberty party, on the other hand, it was truth that had to be accommodated to the more important issue of freedom. Any parameters thus became not only awkward, but eventually impossible. This issue of freedom raises a host of questions, most obviously: “Freedom from what?” and “Freedom for what?” Eventually, the majority of Southern Baptists came to understand that if freedom were the only motif—or even the driving motif—of the denomination, it would finally mean freedom from accountability and freedom from doctrinal responsibility.

From 1963 to 1990, these two parties—truth and liberty—struggled to define the SBC and chart its course into the future. The issues over which they clashed were serious and substantial theological matters. They were not small, they were not minor, and they were not negotiable. Now, in the year 2005, it is willful ignorance to suggest that Southern Baptists were not separated by theological differences of tremendous depth and great intensity. Those who say otherwise should simply read the evidence. The inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible were the primary issues of debate, though of course there was always more than that. Questions of epistemology, truth, and authority were only the entryway into an entire complex of debate that included virtually every major doctrinal issue and would ultimately affect the entire shape of the theological task.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon understood the Baptist Union in Britain to have slipped into what he called a “downgrade,” antiquarian language that nevertheless accurately communicated the reality of his day. Spurgeon saw the downgrade and gave the warning, but he was not successful in calling the Union to theological accountability. Today, the Baptist Union is a shell of its former self, hardly holding on to its declining membership. Southern Baptist conservative leaders in the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s and 1980s, put their lives, their careers, and their ministries on the line to prevent Southern Baptists from following a similar trajectory.

John Shelton Reed of the University of North Carolina (and who once held the Margaret Thatcher chair of American studies at the London School of Economics) is one of the greatest historians of the

American South. He recently characterized the Southern Baptist controversy as a “pitchfork rebellion.” Southern Baptists heard the issues, became alarmed, and were motivated to action. The true heroes of the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention were men and women who slept in their cars because they could not afford a hotel room. So motivated were they by the cause of truth and concern for the gospel, they would go wherever they had to go and sleep wherever they had to sleep in order to elect a president who represented their hope for the future of the SBC.

Where does the SBC stand now? Can we look back at the conservative resurgence and say the theological issues were settled forever? Absolutely not. Southern Baptists are now exceptional in the broader theological world. On same-sex marriage and a host of other cultural issues, the SBC is consistently recognized by the news media as being the one exception to a trend of churches acquiescing to liberal agendas. We cannot take confidence in that exceptionalism, for that would be a false confidence established on a very flimsy hope. In the conservative resurgence, the SBC was given a second chance, not a guaranteed future. It was not given a pass from history, or from the theological debates of the future.

If that is the case, then Southern Baptists have to grow out of a posture of inherent defensiveness and move to a positive agenda that takes delight in confessing the faith and that points to the glory of God in the comprehensive embrace of biblical truth. We live in a day that is averse to theology and irritated by doctrine. If Southern Baptists find themselves being irritated by doctrinal questions, we will soon find ourselves sharing the

fate of the mainline denominations—just slightly delayed. The tectonic plates of the contemporary theological landscape are shifting. Southern Baptists must accept the challenge of confronting these issues, not merely by defending against them, but by actually using contemporary debates to proclaim a theological reality that is firmly grounded in Scripture.

Of first importance in this challenge is a full embrace of classical orthodoxy. For one thing, we must be unapologetic in speaking about tradition. G. K. Chesterton was not the first to invoke the “democracy of the dead.” Even the author of Hebrews refers to one who, “though he died, still speaks” (Heb 11:4). Tradition—that backward glance at what Christians throughout the centuries have confessed and how they have understood the great doctrines of the faith—allows the dead to have a vote. We are not the first persons to read the Bible, nor are we the first to confess the Christian faith. We must therefore distinguish between tradition and traditionalism. As Jaroslav Pelikan has noted, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; tradition is the living faith of the dead. Moreover, fully embracing classical orthodoxy will require us to move beyond the issues of urgent and immediate debate to an embrace of the whole. The alternative is to be constantly dealing with peripheral matters and never with the center of the faith.

Second, we need to return to a robust confessionalism. Just as Michael Walzer argues that there are “thin ethics” and “thick ethics,” we might speak of thin confessionalism and thick confessionalism. A *thin* confessionalism is one that is merely a matter of requirement—a signature and a statement of allegiance and subscription. Doctrine is a contract rather than a cov-

enant. *Thick* confessionalism, on the other hand, understands that it is a privilege for a person to say, “I stand on these truths with this covenanted community. And as a matter of mutual accountability before God, and under the authority of Scripture, we join together to hold ourselves accountable to contend faithfully for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, even as we address the urgent issues of the contemporary hour.” This is the kind of confessionalism our Baptist forebears espoused, and it is the kind we must recover in the twenty-first century.

Third, we need to seek a recovery of Baptist principles. On regenerate church membership, for instance, there has been too much compromise. Baptist ecclesiology is not merely a matter of church organization. It stands at the very center of the Baptist vision and goes to the very heart of our theology. When Baptist principles are compromised, everything is affected—including our understanding of the gospel, the work of regeneration, and the role of a covenant community as the congregation of faith.

Fourth, we must recover the discipline of theological “triage,” a word normally associated with the emergency room. Patients are brought in with a great variety of injuries—sprained wrists, gunshot wounds, slight stomachaches, and spider bites. In that situation, someone has to make an evaluation of what is most urgent and what can wait. Otherwise, confusion will reign. That triage nurse in the emergency room provides a good model for our theological debates.

In the vast world of theological controversy, there are first order issues, second order issues, and third order issues. Unfortunately, most of our time is usually spent dealing with secondary and tertiary

issues, when we should be focusing our attention on the primary issues. Primary issues are those that distinguish Christians from non-Christians. I remember a student once asking Dr. Lewis Drummond how one should relate to Christians who do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. Dr. Drummond replied, “You relate to them as lost people.” He was exactly right. Those who deny the bodily resurrection are not believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a first order issue.

Second order issues are those that would prevent two Christians from joining the same covenant community, even though they would still call one another “Christians.” A church, for instance, will either baptize babies, or it will not. A church will either ordain women as pastors, or it will not. This does not mean we would necessarily say that those who ordain women as pastors are non-Christians. Nor would we say that those who baptize babies are non-Christians. Nevertheless, we must affirm without apology that a theological seminary, a denomination, and even individual churches will have to stand with one confession, not a multiplicity of diverse choices. These second order issues are the right place to focus much of our debate, so long as we remember where they rank.

Third order issues are those that would not prevent two Christians from joining together in a covenant community. These are not unimportant issues; all truth is important. Yet they are not of such importance that disagreement on them means we cannot cooperate with each other. Many current debates within our churches—including everything from questions about the timing of the millennium to issues of cultural engagement—stand on this third level. As such, they

are ripe for discussion, but they should not become cause for division.

Without the discipline of theological triage, we are constantly at risk of confusing third order issues for first order issues—the original besetting sin of fundamentalism. At the same time, we are also at risk of mistaking first order issues for third order ones—the besetting sin of liberalism. Keeping our equilibrium requires that our triage be clear and self-conscious, articulated and accountable.

Organizational Issues

Having considered some of the theological issues that the Southern Baptist Convention will face in coming years, we turn now to a second category—organizational issues. The SBC, like the Baptist movement as a whole, has experienced transformation over time. When Southern Baptists established themselves in Augusta, Georgia, in 1845, it was something new under the Baptist sun. The SBC was not merely a Southern version of the Triennial Convention; it was an entirely new model of the convention itself. The Southern Baptists organized their convention with a centralized purpose and sense of identity that drove it forward in a way the Triennial Convention was never intended to be driven.

Southern Baptists adjourned their convention in 1845 with just two boards, but over the next fifty years they negotiated their way into several others. They did not found a seminary in 1845; that would happen in 1859, when the convention founded what would become The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. By 1925, the SBC had grown, innovated, and been remarkably transformed. Still largely regionalized in the South after the Civil War and Reconstruction, it began the

twentieth century by founding a second seminary—Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas—even as the mission boards were continuing to test the limits of Southern Baptist vision. The Memphis convention in 1925 was perhaps the most critical turning point in the denomination’s history. At that one convention and at that one time, more crucial decisions were made than at any Southern Baptist Convention held before or since. Messengers adopted the Cooperative Program, organized the Executive Committee, and accepted the *Baptist Faith and Message* in the first convention-wide, self-conscious adoption of a confession of faith.

The question is sometimes raised as to why the issue of religious liberty became so central at that particular moment. About that same time, Al Smith had run with the Democratic nomination for president in the 1920 election, and Southern Baptists were concerned. What would a Roman Catholic President mean? Even more urgently, World War I had been a disastrous experience for Southern Baptists. In fact, they had pulled all their chaplains out of the war effort because the War Department declared that chaplains had to function as non-denominational religious workers. More than anything else, that rankled the Baptist conscience, and religious liberty became a driving concern—one of the concerns, in fact, that led George W. Truett to preach his famous sermon, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” on the steps of the United States Capitol.

Not only were religious liberty issues a matter of concern, but so was the fundamentalist and modernist controversy being fought most hotly in the Northern denominations. Southern Baptists managed to reach an accommodated settlement, a solution possible only because

they thought heterodoxy to be confined to the periphery of the denomination’s experience, nowhere near the center. E. Y. Mullins, a statesman of unparalleled and unprecedented power, was able to articulate for Southern Baptists a way to the future that appeared to give them another pass through history. And it appeared to work for some time.

The adoption of the Cooperative Program and the organization of the Executive Committee showed that the SBC realized it could no longer operate as an ad-hoc meeting on an annual basis. There were fifty-two weeks in the year, all of which brought serious business to be done on the denomination’s behalf, and in which the interests and gifts of the churches had to be channeled into some structure of support and accountability.

Fast forward to 1945 and the end of World War II, and not only did America enter a time of unprecedented prosperity and international influence, but the SBC also began a remarkable institutional, organizational, and denominational advance. The SBC became a national denomination by awkward default in the years from 1945 to 1965. Because no one needed any sort of denominational permission to start a Baptist church, Baptists were doing just that all across the country. Some of these churches operated without even acknowledging they were Southern Baptist, until they came out of the closet and sent messengers to an annual meeting. All of a sudden, Southern Baptists found themselves to be a national denomination with churches in all fifty states.

More subterranean developments pointed to the future as well. The SBC’s Executive Committee hired Booz-Allen & Hamilton, the organizational and efficiency experts that had recently reorganized Gen-

eral Motors, to help them rethink their own denominational structure. In this way, the SBC took on the safeguards of a modern multi-national corporation, with various branches like General Motors's Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, Buick, and Cadillac lines. So the SBC now had various branches and institutions, all orchestrated in a very tight logic of efficiency.

That sort of organizational structure worked well because it fit the American mind. Moreover, so long as Southern Baptists assumed themselves to be together theologically, they could energize themselves around their institutions and pursue their goals of greater reach, expansion, and efficiency through the streamlined logic of the corporation. The slippage from that ideal began even in the mid-1960s, because if the SBC was a corporation, it had become very confused about its mission. Its own constituency was divided, and its senior executives were not even certain of the direction it should go. The SBC's corporate identity began to fall apart in the 1960s and 1970s, until the conservative resurgence brought a new energy and a new rallying point.

Along with the theological matters at stake in the conservative resurgence, there was also a renewed sense that the structure of the denomination no longer fit the needs of the time. In 1995, the Program and Structure Study Committee presented to the convention a covenant for a new century. The proposal was a partial reversal of the corporate logic that had prevailed for so long. It was a significant step, reducing the total number of entities from nineteen to twelve—something which, to my knowledge, no denomination had ever done, except in response to a financial crisis. Southern Baptists did it because they wanted a new structure that

was leaner, more mission-oriented, easier to understand, and more accountable to the denomination and its churches.

Not only have changes taken place at the national level, but associational principles are also being rewritten in our day. An understanding of general Baptist bodies is being recovered, even by people who do not know the term "association." There is a renewed understanding that Baptists can rethink the way we relate to each other, and it is the churches that are driving that change—again without asking for permission. The large infrastructure of modern Southern Baptist life may not survive in the postmodern age, but that decision will not be made by the executives of Southern Baptist agencies, or by the executives of state conventions. It will be made, eventually, by the churches.

In the 1900s, the primary issue was efficiency. In the twenty-first century, the primary issues are credibility and accountability. For the younger generation, the issue is this: "Is the SBC the answer to a question anyone is asking?" I would suggest the answer to that is both "yes" and "no." There is a new congregationalism now being established. It is real, and it is evolving. We can see it in churches such as Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, which now has a *third* location—in other words, one church in multiple locations. Such a thing was unheard of among Baptists in the past, but it is becoming more and more common because churches are beginning to understand that being a covenanted community may no longer mean we all have to be in one room at one time. Any church that holds multiple services in one location has already made the great theological jump, so going from two services to two locations is not all that complicated

or radical a change. Churches are also experimenting with a redefinition of the role of a deacon and a renegotiation of the role of the elder. There are real questions here about how we as Baptists should appropriate our tradition and maintain our understanding of congregational church government, especially when it is so easy to look at other alternatives and different denominations that may be more efficient, but that are also less Baptist.

Parachurch, Technological, and Demographic Issues

Three other realities deserve mention here. First, the parachurch will be a very significant part of the Southern Baptist future. By necessity market-driven, parachurch organizations offer expertise in customization and relevance. They emerge because they are generally able to meet a particular need faster than a denominational structure, and they can adjust themselves faster and get closer to the local church more quickly than a denominational entity accountable to 40,000 churches. The rise of parachurch organizations will spell a very different future for the SBC.

The second reality is the rise of a technological society. Churches are no longer dependent upon the SBC like they were just a few decades ago. The SBC essentially has lost its monopoly, and that monopoly will never be recovered. In the same way, local newspapers have also lost their monopoly because people can go to the internet and find newspapers from virtually anywhere in the world. Cable television was once the wave of the future. Now it is largely a thing of the past, because people can look on the internet and even beat the reporters to a news story. The SBC is being affected by the information

age in much the same way, and the only way it will be able to recover a sense of affection, accountability, and relevance with the churches is by understanding the real needs of real churches and reshaping itself to meet those needs.

The third great issue is demographic realities. In the first volume of his new history of the United States of America, William McDougal does what historians do not normally like to do—he makes judgments. McDougal says that over the last 400 years, the most important event in world history was the emergence of the United States of America. As much as others in the world may hate that assertion, he argued, “Try to discuss anything in contemporary history without making essential reference to the United States of America.” From 1845 to 2004, the SBC has grown, and its expansion has taken place in the midst of this American reality. In just over 150 years, we have seen it grow from being a denomination embedded in an essentially agrarian social context to being a denomination that is now engaging a highly mobile, highly professional, and largely metropolitan society. Today’s society is radically different from the one that gave birth to the SBC; in fact, it is almost impossible to imagine a citizen of the United States of America in 1845 recognizing much of the shape that America has taken today.

All this has led to changes in the SBC, and to a variety of new church types. We have seen the rise of mega-churches and micro-churches—mega-churches that understand growth and size to be an essential component in responding to an expanding metropolitan reality, and micro-churches that fit a niche for particular communities within those metropolitan areas. These mega-churches

and micro-churches have become models for others—especially the mega-churches, which have been our denomination’s great innovators of ministry for the last twenty years. With this phenomenon, however, has come an understandably low level of denominational commitment. Not only did the SBC lose its monopoly, but now many members of these large churches are not even aware that they are Southern Baptist. Mega-churches are communities that are largely self-defined, and they do not need the SBC in order to conduct their seven-day-a-week ministry. They may connect with the SBC for missions, theological education, and other causes, but many of the members of these churches have only a vague awareness of what their denomination is, or should be, or could be.

Southern Baptists are still clustered in the South, but we are now in the New South—or maybe the *New* New South. In this highly mobile society, made up of the driving energy of young professionals in metropolitan areas, we face a missiological challenge that is different from anything we have seen before. Ponder this: if current statistical trends hold, by the year 2010 the majority of the people who attend our churches on any given Sunday morning will do so in just 19 metropolitan areas in the United States of America. In other words, most of the people who attend Southern Baptist churches now live in the cities and suburbs. This situation leads to statistical confusion, for often we hear that only about half of Southern Baptist pastors have a seminary degree. That may be true, but 90 percent of the people who hear a sermon on Sunday morning are hearing a seminary-educated pastor. The statistic mentioned above tells only half the story, and indeed a misleading part

of the story. The SBC’s energy has moved from its rural roots, where it began, to the metropolitan areas that have become the future of the nation. This was not done by any strategy, but simply by the shape of economic, political, and social dynamics—from transportation and the interstate highway system to the shape of the modern economy. That presents a tremendous challenge to Southern Baptists, one we ignore to our great detriment.

Another demographic challenge is the rise of ethnic and minority groups. The 1950 American census did not even record Hispanics as a category. Now Hispanics comprise the largest minority group in America. Just recently I was listening on CSPAN as a Republican strategist said, “You have to realize there are more Hispanic voters in Los Angeles than there are voters in Chicago.” Once that fact is taken into consideration, it becomes obvious that the shape of the United States of America is not well represented by the annual meeting of the SBC. In terms of the ethnic diversity of this country, we are more than just a few years behind; we are in a different world altogether, and it will take the most concerted denominational leadership to address this challenge well.

There is also a generational challenge. Thanks to advances in medical technology, people are living longer. Not only so, but their vitality and energy has also been extended. Demographers are now being forced to talk about not only the old, but the “old old,” which might lead us to speak also of the “young old.” These “young old” are the most under-utilized generational cohort in our churches today. These are persons who are recently retired, who have great gifts and sound leadership experience, but who are being largely ignored because the church has bought

into a pagan understanding of retirement. In pagan terms, retirement means “You’re done.” As Christians, however, we should understand retirement years not as “vacation time” in which we are to be left alone, but rather as an opportunity to work full-time for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and the good of His church. This “young old” cohort represents a great—but so far largely overlooked—opportunity for the church.

If the “young old” are the under-utilized generation, there is also a generation that is almost entirely missing from the SBC—pastors and leaders between the ages of 35 and 55. There is a tremendous younger generation coming, and there are many pastors 55 and older who are demonstrative leaders, servants of the word, and preachers of power, but the most difficult pastoral search to conduct right now is for someone between 35 and 55. That is not to say, of course, that there is no one between the ages of 35 and 55, but statistically speaking, this is an area of urgent vulnerability.

The worst news, however, is this: we are not even baptizing our own teenagers. Statistics can be deployed in many different ways to make many different arguments, but one can only grieve over the figures on adolescent baptisms. According to some estimates, we are now baptizing only slightly more than 14 percent of our own teenagers. It is often noted that the years between 12 and 25 are the prime ages for making major decisions in life, including a public profession of faith in Christ. Ninety percent of persons who are baptized in our churches are baptized before age 21. If we are reaching 14 percent of the 12-25 cohort, we are therefore missing 86 percent of them. The SBC’s organizational issues must take a back seat here.

If Southern Baptists do not address this problem quickly, an entire generation of young people who have grown up in our churches will not be defining the future of the SBC—they will instead be absorbed into a pagan America.

Despite all this, there is hope to be seen in the students on many university campuses and on the campuses of the SBC seminaries. There you will find hundreds of very serious young Christians ready for leadership. They are more conservative than their forebears, and they are more committed because they were not raised in a context of cultural Christianity. They have fought their way to every decision, and they made their public profession of faith in Christ when it was not popular. They are not interested in *laissez-faire*, lighthearted Christianity. They want the real thing, the red meat, a serious challenge, and they want to be taken seriously. It is not too much to say that this generation is our denomination’s hope for the future.

Cultural and Moral Issues

Fourth, we are being confronted by a host of cultural and moral issues. One author has said that in the 1960s, Southern Baptists were at ease in Zion. The South was largely intact and basically unaffected by many of the social problems that had torn apart the North, not to mention post-Christendom in Europe. By the 1970s, the culture wars had arrived at the doorstep of the SBC. In 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* was handed down by the United States Supreme Court, the SBC went on the record about abortion—and on the wrong side, to our denominational shame. It was not until 1979 that the SBC adopted a resolution that reversed that pro-choice affirmation. Incidentally, the issue of

abortion was far more important in the conservative resurgence than most people have recognized. While most sociologists would describe the inerrancy issue as an opaque issue—one that is hard for lay people to understand—there is nothing opaque about killing a baby in the womb. The evil of such a thing is obvious.

In the 1980s, the culture wars broke with open intensity, and we now face a panoply of issues, each of which seems more insistent than the one before. Genetic engineering, biotechnology, germ line therapy, embryo research, stem cell experimentation, in vitro fertilization, human cloning, euthanasia, assisted suicide: each of these issues presents the church with a formidable challenge. Already, over a dozen SBC churches have had transgendered persons present themselves for membership, and those congregations have had to decide right then and there what they believe. The church in this age cannot avoid giving an answer to these questions. The rising cultural confusion around us will eventually demand it.

Pastors are already facing questions about euthanasia and assisted suicide. People in our churches are also making decisions about reproductive technologies, and the day is not far off when they will be confronted with the issue of cloning. These are not distant issues. We cannot avoid giving an answer much longer. The culture wars are no longer “out there” or “up there” in the North. They are right here, in our churches and in our denomination. We as Southern Baptists will either muster the courage to address these issues in the comprehensive truthfulness of God’s Word, or we will join the other mainline Protestants in their utter confusion. The sexual revolution, the clash of

worldviews, the issue of homosexuality, the personal autonomy theme, the rise of moral relativism, the theological culture, the psychologies of the self, and the pervasiveness of postmodern worldviews all present inescapable challenges to our denomination, our seminaries, our churches, and to Christian fathers and mothers.

Our denomination will be involved in controversy from now on. Our children will face these questions in their schools. Our families will face them in the workplace. What will your church members do on “Gay Day” at the local corporation, when someone comes by passing out gay-pride flags and the executive warns that it will not go well on evaluation day for anyone who refuses to celebrate? Philosophers such as Robert Audi are now arguing that the only assertions that should be allowed in the public square are those with a secular rationale, a secular purpose, and a secular effect. According to this logic, arguments about homosexuality that rely on scriptural teaching would be ruled out of bounds—if not silenced altogether. How will Southern Baptists react to the legal sanction, social ostracism, and prejudice that will soon be heaped upon us?

Financial Issues

The final issue to consider is our denomination’s financial challenges. Other matters we have discussed are far more important, but the questions surrounding our denomination’s finances also demand some attention. From 1987 to 2002, church receipts in the SBC grew 120 percent to a high of \$9.5 billion. During that same period, the missions budget grew only 55 percent—about half the growth of total receipts. Similarly, giving

to the cooperative program grew only 49 percent—less than half the total budget. The percentage of undesignated receipts given from local churches over the last fifteen years fell one-third from 7.85 percent to 5.30 percent. On a straight-line projection, that means the Cooperative Program would die in thirty years. Of course such a scenario is unlikely, but it is clear that we are renegotiating the way we finance the work of this denomination and its entities, and once again, the churches are driving that change.

Two considerations are especially important in this matter. First, the rise of an American investor class means that patterns of giving are remarkably different at the local church level than they have been in the past. People are no longer looking forward to pensions established on a guaranteed benefit plan. Instead, they have to invest, and their future is dependent upon that money being protected. Therefore, people are no longer giving out of accumulated wealth, but are increasingly waiting to give a portion of their estates after they die. If a 55-year old man makes a major estate gift to Southern Seminary right now, we would thank him heartily for the gift. But actually speaking, that gift probably will not come to Southern Seminary for another thirty years. Thus, a great deal of the wealth transference upon which Christian churches and Christian organizations have always depended is now being delayed for years and even decades—a reality that will make the next twenty or thirty years a significant financial challenge for churches and Christian institutions.

Another sobering statistic is that in the metropolitan sectors of America, the average couple in their 30s is living on 115 percent of their annual income, which

means they simply do not have much money to give. These economic realities immediately impact the bottom line. Is this a spiritual issue? Of course it is. Is it a stewardship issue? Of course it is. But the problem will not be reversed quickly. As Christians in the twenty-first century, we must entirely rethink the way we look at wealth, retirement, income, and materialism.

Conclusion

For all the challenges we will face in the future, this is a great time to be a Baptist. We now have the opportunity to recover our nonconformist roots. That is where we began. We were outsiders, not insiders. In fact, Baptists are always better when we are outsiders. When Baptists are forced to be nonconformists, we are forced to go back home. We have an opportunity now to think more clearly about what it means to be a Baptist, to be a covenanted community, and to be a Christian in communion with like-minded, Christ-professing, mutually accountable believers.

We have an opportunity to rekindle the Baptist vision of the church. Baptists have always understood Christianity in the context of the congregation. There can be no lone rangers, no theme of personal autonomy. Baptists understand that we are mutually accountable to each other. For it is in the context of the covenanted community—where Word and Spirit come together by the preaching of the Word and the nurture of Christian fellowship—that the Holy Spirit conforms us to the image of Christ.

We have an opportunity to reestablish our commitment to the *consensus fide*. Baptists are different from every other Christian denomination—and yet the same. We must remember that sameness

as we stand together with others who stand with us in the faith, even if they do not stand with us in our own covenanted communities.

We have an opportunity to recommit ourselves to the confessionalism that was the high-water mark of the Baptist experience. The confession of faith was never an excuse or an invasion. It was simply a way of saying, "This is who we are, and this is how we intend to communicate what we believe both to the world and to each other."

We have an opportunity to restore church discipline in the congregation. Without discipline, we have a half-covenant, not a whole one. In the same way, we must reenergize evangelism, recognizing the challenge we face in ethnic, metropolitan, and urban realities. This is the challenge of a national denomination with an international mission.

Lastly, we have an opportunity now to reach out to a world desperately in need of hope, help, and the gospel. We are the vessels of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Missions is the heartbeat of our denomination precisely because we believe that "whosoever will may come," and that "all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." We believe that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ, and therefore we go, for without a preacher they will not hear.

When John F. Kennedy was running for President in 1960, N. Y. Stevens, who carried the Democratic banner from 1952 to 1956, advised him concerning religion. He said, "Senator, a politician's best refuge is a vague faith strongly held, or a strong faith vaguely held." What God requires from Southern Baptists, however, is a strong faith strongly held. That alone points the way to the Baptist future.

ENDNOTE

¹This article was presented as an address at Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, April 6, 2004.