

The *SBJT* Forum: Retrospect and Prospect

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Paige Patterson, Mark Coppenger, Jerry A. Johnson, and Richard Land have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: As an outside observer, what comments would you make on the conservative resurgence in the SBC during the last quarter-century?

D. A. Carson: Doubtless I am an "outside observer" in the sense that I am not myself a member of a church belonging to the SBC. On the other hand, I am an ordained Baptist minister, and have followed the resurgence reasonably closely, both in person and by scanning the histories that both sides have produced. The observations that seem most pertinent include the following:

(1) This resurgence is not unique. Several other denominations and associations have followed a somewhat similar path. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was heading for a decline into systemic liberalism, and in the mercy of God that decline was halted. The old Baptist Union of Ontario and Québec, after lurching toward liberalism under the influence of McMaster in the 1920s, gradually built up the percentage of confessional pastors, and about a dozen years ago voted itself *out* of the World Council of Churches. Examples in other countries come to mind. This observation is not in any way meant to

denigrate the conservative resurgence in the SBC. It is merely a way of reminding ourselves that the preservation of the gospel and the purifying of a denomination are not unique phenomena: God's grace has been poured out in similar ways in the past, and will doubtless be poured out in similar ways in the future.

(2) The lines that were drawn were muddied from the start. On the conservative side, the most far-sighted leaders understood that the fundamental issue was the truthfulness and authority of Scripture, but some voices tried to make a handful of other issues touchstones as well. More disturbingly, on the moderate side, not a few well-meaning pastors and other leaders, who themselves were entirely orthodox, viewed the conservatives as nothing more than a nasty group of power-hungry tyrants whose ostensibly theological motives were a cover-up for naked greed, whose asseverations of theological commitment merely masked their native belligerence. These moderates knew many nice people in the moderate camp, and could not believe that they were denying the truth in any fundamental way.

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I must say that on this score I am entirely aligned with the conservatives. Had it been nothing but a power grab by disgruntled right-wingers who were irked by the fact that they were sidelined, I would not assess things this way. But throughout the period of the conflict, I scanned the journals and many of the books put out by SBC seminaries and other organs, and I was deeply disturbed by the theological and critical drift. In the mid-1980s, I was asked to give some lectures at one of the leading SBC seminaries—asked, it must be said, not by the faculty, who at that juncture *never* invited a conservative like me, but by a caucus of evangelical students on that campus. I was told by one of the faculty members that at that institution there were only two members of the faculty (out of about fifty) who considered themselves to be inerrantists. Several students told me of one faculty member who, after introducing his classes to the thought of Rudolf Bultmann, would regularly ask, “So whose understanding of the resurrection of Jesus is closest to getting things right—Paul’s, or Bultmann’s?” In recent years, classes had been voting about 65 percent in favor of Bultmann. I could multiply reports of this sort. Such stances were widespread, virtually unchecked, and growing. The issues were not marginal or merely personal. They very often had to do with the non-negotiable fundamentals of the faith. Those moderates who were personally orthodox but who failed to see these dangers were either extraordinarily ill-informed or extraordinarily blind to the dangers.

(3) In the years since the conservative resurgence, the most frequent charge leveled by the moderate organs runs something like this: The conservatives have

caused the SBC to lurch toward the right, especially in the matter of soul-liberty. Baptists have always cherished the freedom to make up their own minds, to avoid hierarchies and (many would say) creeds that cripple the principle of soul-liberty. Thus in the name of Baptist orthodoxy, the conservatives have sacrificed the most fundamental Baptist principle, constraining soul-liberty by a bunch of politically astute demagogues.

But this is a bit like Brian McLaren trying to convince us he is Reformed. He is Reformed, he says, because he holds to the Reformation principle of *semper reformandum*: the church must always be reforming itself under the Word. True enough. But he acts as if this principle is a *sufficient* definition of what belongs to the Reformation. At no point, however, does McLaren espouse the five *solas* of the Reformation, or think through how these *solas* relate to each other and to the principle of *semper reformandum*. By espousing just one principle of the Reformation, and making it the *sufficient* definition of the Reformation, while ignoring or even denying the five *solas* so characteristic of the Reformation, McLaren succeeds in simultaneously disowning the Reformation while claiming to be Reformed. He is, of course, at perfect liberty to espouse anything he likes, but simple integrity should warn him not to claim he is Reformed while he cuts his independent swath.

So also with the moderates who make soul-liberty the *sufficient* criterion of what a Baptist is. Historically, Baptists stand in the tradition of the Reformation, but, belonging as we do to the believers-church tradition (i.e., we hold that the local church should be made up of regenerate, baptized believers), we are inclined to be suspicious alike of state

churches and of churches that are undisciplined or that wish to mingle the openly regenerate with those who merely claim to belong to the covenant community (as in the Presbyterian tradition). Many Baptists have adopted creeds without feeling that soul-liberty was thereby jeopardized: many Baptists in England in the 1640s bound themselves together under a creed, and many Baptists adopted the famous 1689 Confession. It would be easy to multiply such examples. In such a heritage, soul-liberty was suspicious of an improper mingling of church and state, and of hierarchialism that imposed order but that was careless about regeneration. The contemporary version espoused by moderates, however, wants to elevate soul-liberty to the role of *sufficient* definition of a Baptist, and ties it to freedom from all creeds. Taken consistently, that would mean that a Baptist could disown the deity of Christ, feel uncomfortable about his resurrection, conclude that Christ's death on the cross did not atone for sin, deny the truthfulness and authority of God's written revelation, deny the Trinity, and so forth, and still be called a Baptist. Not for a moment am I suggesting that all SBC moderates go down such paths. But if they protest that, as Baptists, they *do* believe such fundamental truths are bound up with what it means to be a Christian, then of course they *do* adopt a creed, whether written or un-written. But if they say that soul-liberty trumps all such credal affirmations, then of course they are saying that their understanding of soul-liberty, which in their view *defines* Baptist, is more fundamental than what makes a person a Christian. This is such egregious silliness that it deserves to be exposed wherever it rears its head.

(4) On the other hand, it is desperately

important for the conservatives within the SBC, who have so largely triumphed, to avoid several mistakes, some of which are already present. (a) Eschew triumphalism. If God in his mercy has raised up leaders who have seen what needs to be done, if God in his mercy has granted them favor with the messengers year after year, if God has enabled confessional voices to regain the initiative, this ought to be an occasion for deep thanksgiving, renewed repentance, and humility of mind. (b) Avoid a swing to the cultural right. Not every issue on the right-wing of our culture, or on the right-wing of evangelicalism, is consistent with biblical thought. Many are; some are not. But a swing to the cultural right begins to align one's commitment to the Bible with every right-wing cultural item that comes along. Leaders begin to play games of "I'm more conservative than you." (c) Let the leaders become increasingly careful about the extent to which their public utterances are negative. In any movement of resurgence, there is a great deal that must be corrected, so of course there are lots of negative things to be said. The Reformers had to expose the corruption of the indulgences. But a couple of centuries later, Richard Baxter was right when he insisted that if anyone brings a false doctrine of justification into your area, your *first* responsible is to "preach up" (his expression) justification better than he. Within that framework, it is much easier to expose false stances on justification. So also today: God knows there are plenty of errors and dangers around, and we need clear thinking about them and in many cases warnings against them. But leaders who have earned their spurs by correcting things are in grave danger of thinking that our *primary* task is correct-

ing and warning, and end up sounding like perennial self-righteous and angry critics. Our *first* obligation is to unpack the glories of the gospel, the wonders of God and his self-disclosure, the privilege and pleasure of sins forgiven, the power of the Spirit, the anticipation of the glory to come, and much more of the same. Unless our warnings are surrounded by sheer delight in God and his truth, we ourselves become corroded, and invite a nasty backlash with deleterious results for years to come.

(5) And finally: we should be grateful to God for those who tried to be faithful to God and his Word during the years when the decline seemed irreversible. I have a friend, a pastor in New York, who likes to say, “For the Christian, optimism is naive, but pessimism is atheistic.” Just so.

SBJT: As one of the key leaders in the SBC conservative resurgence, would you share any reflections on your personal experience?

Paige Patterson: There are numerous approaches I could take in responding to this question. I decided to take the path least expected and be candid about my most profound disappointments over the past twenty-five years. They are easy for me to list.

First, I regret 90 percent of the times when I was angry. Fortunately, by the time the conservative resurgence got under way in 1979, I had to some degree gained mastery over an Irish temper developed in my early years, or, should I say, the Spirit of God had somehow bent me into submission. Consequently, there were not many times across the twenty-five years of the resurgence that I experienced anger, and in a few of those I believe I experienced “righteous indignation” when

someone else was being misrepresented or abused. But, 90 percent of the times that I was angry, though they were relatively few, were simply cases of sin on my part. I was angry because I was embarrassed, had made a mistake, or had been chastised by someone in a public forum. I deeply regret that I did not in every case keep before me the simple truth that “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

Second, I regret that I had so little faith. Much of the time during those twenty-five years I almost despaired of what the outcome might be. I thank God for Dorothy, an incredible wife, who experienced, if anything, greater hurts and sorrows than I, but who simply never yielded for a moment to despair. With the quiet confidence of the saintly martyr, she simply marched ahead with what she believed to be right and often gently picked me up off of the carpet and urged a greater faith. Here, I must credit also Dr. Richard Land and Judge Paul Pressler, both of whom would invariably be used of God to strengthen my own faith and call upon me to stop looking at the waves of confusion around me and look at Jesus. I regret that I had so little faith.

Third, I regret the pity parties that I foisted upon others as a result, no doubt, of my little faith. Hopefully, others did not experience too much of this, but unfortunately, my family members were probably the big losers here. They saw me in the weakness of self-pity, which is never a pretty sight, and, in retrospect, seems uglier to me now than ever. How I wish that whatever my inner thoughts had been, I would have risen above them, at least for the sake of those around me.

Fourth, I regret every sorrow experienced by anyone—liberal, moderate,

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conservative, or fundamentalist—during the twenty-five years of confrontation. Of course, I know just enough church history to understand that this is neither the first nor the last great religious conflict of history. I also know enough to understand that in every conflict people suffer, and, of course, I am well aware of the fact that the Reformation, for all of the agonies that it produced, was absolutely essential. Nevertheless, I just do not like to see people hurt. Many were displaced. Not infrequently that was due to their own actions as much as anything else, but regardless of why it happened, it hurt. Made in the image of God and condemned to be reasoning creatures with our wants and our aspirations clearly in view, we do experience sorrow and hurt. This I hate above all else about the movement.

Fifth, I regret that I did not pray more and witness more. My life was so incredibly busy during those days that it is difficult to imagine how I could have done more. I was faithful in prayer, and I did witness on a regular basis, as I have all of my life. But, the greatest two joys that any man has in life are to walk through the verdant fields with the Shepherd, talking with Him every step of the way, and serving as a spiritual midwife to preside over the birth of little newborn lambs into the flock. How I regret that I did not somehow find a way to spend more time in both enterprises. Some days I fear that in the press of doing those things that were necessary to maintain a reformation movement, I may have neglected these disciplines in a way that is unworthy of a Christian leader.

Finally, there is one matter I do not regret. I do not regret at all that I walked into the sanctuary, took hold of the rope that led to the bell tower, and rang with

all my might the alarm bell that signaled the dangerous drift of our convention to a loss of vital Christianity similar to the slipping away that had overtaken most other mainline denominations before us. I do not regret preaching everywhere that I could and insisting that we return to being a people of the Book. I do not regret preaching a thousand times over that God has spoken a sure and perfect word in the Bible and that both meaningful life and successful eternity depend totally upon following the veracity of what God has spoken. The bottom line is that if I had to do it over again, I would struggle more diligently than ever for the victory over sin in my own life, for the limitation of hurt and sorrow in the lives even of those with whom I disagree, and with the building of my own spiritual liaison with the Lord God. And, while I would attempt to do all of those things in a better way methodologically, I would still ring the bell, and I would still preach the message. On that score, I have no regret. Would I do it again? Before you could say Mephibosheth! I remain more convinced today than ever before that the truthfulness of God's revelation as given in the Bible is critical to all that we are and all that we may accomplish.

SBJT: Reflecting on your varied involvement with Southern Seminary over the last twenty-five years, what notable moments come to your mind?

Mark Coppenger: It's very fashionable these days to rehearse your psychic distress. Counselors have taught us to say, "I'm having unhappy feelings about your behavior" instead of "You did a bad thing." Lawsuits are laden with the language of anguish, and countless letters to the editor begin with "I was appalled"

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or “I’ve never been so offended as when . . .” It’s as though we’re all trying to prove we’re royalty. Do you remember the story of the princess and the pea? To determine whether she was the real thing, they placed a single garden pea under the stack of mattresses on which she slept. When she woke up with a backache, it was clear she had the requisite aristocratic sensitivities.

In this context, I’m reluctant to shape my remarks around affective states, but as I think back over my experience of the conservative resurgence in the SBC, particularly as it relates to Southern Seminary, moments of pure astonishment come to mind. Let me note several:

(1) Back in the early 1980s, I was called upon to teach my first “January Bible Study.” That year, the book was 1 Peter, and I turned for help to a special issue of the seminary’s former journal, *Review and Expositor*. Therein, a Southern Seminary professor denied that Peter had written the epistle. By his account, the Greek was just too good for this rough fisherman. Instead, a Petrine school had penned the letter and then honored their hero by attaching his name to it.

I was surprised that an SBC publication would deny the truth of 1 Peter 1:1. Also surprising was the flimsiness of the professor’s argument. One could easily explain the good Greek by Peter’s prolonged exposure to eloquence or the assistance of a secretary. I was amazed that one could so confidently toss aside the clear testimony of Scripture for so little reason.

(2) As a brand new pastor in Arkansas, I got a call from a Southern Seminary ethics professor. My bioethics casebook had just appeared, and I thought he might want to talk about it. Instead, he was calling

from Louisville to ask for my support in opposing a referendum before the voters of Arkansas. The petition in circulation called for a stop to state funding for abortion. I marveled at his zeal for abortion, his recklessness in assuming I would give him a friendly hearing, and his willingness to interject himself into Arkansas politics for the cause of killing unwanted infants.

(3) When I became a trustee in 1987, Southern Seminary bylaws still stipulated that newly elected board members must be confirmed by a vote of the existing board. When time came for the voice vote, several of the Old Guard voted against us in direct defiance of Southern Baptist Convention action. Of course, this sort of behavior is now common practice for Baptist college boards. Trustees elected under the old system to oversee the stewardship of denominational investments defy the rules and steal the assets when things aren’t going their way. But back then, such renegade behavior was a new phenomenon, astonishing in its arrogance.

(4) As a newly-elected trustee, I found right away that a dozen or so professors were under careful scrutiny by the Peace Committee, some for using words such as “myth,” “saga,” and “embellishment” in reference to the Bible’s miracle accounts. Another was charged with universalism. I could see we were in for some prickly discussions, and I thought I’d better double-check the seminary’s doctrinal statement, the Abstract of Principles.

I couldn’t believe what I found. The Abstract of Principles was no exercise in lowest-common-denominator theology but a stout Reformation document. The founders were not ashamed or afraid to take their stand on the utter sovereignty of God, even if it might prove “divisive,” a

terrifying prospect for many pastors. Having been happily flummoxed by Romans 9 in my seminary days, I was on board with the Abstract, but I couldn't help but marvel at the theological pointedness of our forebears.

(5) When I became executive director of the Indiana Convention, we had, in Indianapolis, an extension center for Southern Seminary's Boyce College. One day we were brainstorming over ways to increase enrollment, and one of our state leaders suggested we invite Dr. W. A. Criswell of First Baptist Church Dallas to teach a short course in preaching. It seemed a long shot, but worth a try. To my surprise, the Boyce leadership in Louisville disallowed our plan since Dr. Criswell, a Southern Seminary alumnus, had been "disloyal" to the seminary in his stand for biblical inerrancy. I complained in an *Indiana Baptist* editorial, and the seminary pulled the plug on our Boyce extension. Indiana joined the Oklahoma Baptist University extension system; Southern Seminary tried to bind its self-inflicted wounds.

(6) In the midst of the 1988 trustee meeting, I could scarcely have dreamed that the Southern Seminary I see today would eventuate. The "moderates," who outnumbered us conservatives three to one, had just given tenure to a popular, female theology professor who believed in post-mortem evangelism. Over half the "conservatives" voted along with them. They were fearful of a backlash and willing to exchange acquiescence for concessions from Old Guard trustees, who still held every position on the executive committee, even after a decade of inerrantist victories at the convention level.

Against that backdrop, I have to pinch myself as I now look around in faculty meetings, as I study the library's display

cases, as I sit in chapel, as I turn through faculty publications in the bookstore, and as I read through student papers. Who could have imagined such an assembly of Bible-believing stalwarts?

In my childhood, my father, Dr. Raymond Coppenger, spoke of the giants at Southern in his student days, whether professors such as A. T. Robertson and John Sampey or students such as Herschel Hobbs and W. A. Criswell. Southern Seminary was a fabled place in our eyes. Well, I'm having a second childhood as I walk around the campus now. Giants, both present and future, are all around me. Astonishing.

SBJT: Tell us about your firsthand experience during the conservative resurgence.

Jerry A. Johnson: I have lived the SBC "Battle for the Bible" firsthand, in this order: as a college student, pastor, seminary trustee, seminary student, seminary faculty member, and seminary administrator. Now I am president of a Southern Baptist college. This is what I saw at the revolution.

Firsthand, I saw the crisis. As a teenager, I was aware of atheism and skepticism from outside the church, but I had never experienced theological liberalism from within the church, certainly not among any Baptists I knew. After my call to preach, I left my home church in 1982 to attend a Baptist university as a religion major. Initially, I was excited that I was able to get into the New Testament class taught by the chairman of the religion department. Later I was disappointed, to say the least, because he personally doubted the miracles of Jesus and the stated authorship of New Testament books, and he promoted those doubts

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to his students. I voiced my concern in private and asked him if there were any professors at the university who believed in the infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible. He said, “No.”

Initially, this experience caused me to consider leaving the Southern Baptist Convention. Thankfully, I began to learn that some Bible-believing Southern Baptists had already begun an effort to turn the SBC back to its conservative doctrinal roots. In the midst of this decision, a friend brought me to the First Baptist Church of Dallas to hear Dr. W. A. Criswell preach on a Sunday night. He preached in power. That night Dr. Paige Patterson personally recruited me to Criswell College. I transferred immediately.

I was not sheltered from liberalism at Criswell College; in fact, Criswell students were expected to understand all kinds of heresy. The difference between Criswell and other Baptist colleges was that Criswell students were given a scholarly filter, which was biblically conservative, through which all theological notions were to be tested. That filter was based upon the inspiration, authority, inerrancy, infallibility, and sufficiency of the Bible. Three-and-a-half years later I graduated from Criswell College with a biblical and theological foundation that I still draw upon today. From the contrasting experiences of these two schools, I understood how a school ought—and ought not—to do theological education.

I also attended the 1985 Pastors’ Conference and Convention in Dallas. Five years into the conflict, with over 45,000 registered messengers, the atmosphere was electric in the convention hall. It became electromagnetic when W. A. Criswell preached his signature sermon against denominational liberalism,

“Whether We Live or Die.” This message confirmed my conviction that the Southern Baptist Convention was in crisis because the denominational seminaries had been following the wrong educational model for some time. These seminaries had been training a generation of pastors, missionaries, denominational workers, and professors who were not committed to the inspiration, authority, or inerrancy of Scripture. I saw that the conservative resurgence in the SBC was a just cause. Soon it became my cause.

Firsthand, I saw the cause. After college, I spent over ten years in ministry at the Central Baptist Church in Aurora, Colorado. In that pastorate I saw that the average Southern Baptist had conservative instincts and when presented with the facts of the SBC controversy, would support the movement to return the convention to its conservative heritage. From the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties our congregation prioritized sending the maximum number of messengers to the SBC every year to ensure the success of the conservative agenda. I saw the genius of SBC denominational polity. The churches elect the messengers that elect a convention president. Through his appointive powers, that president is eventually able to affect change in every trustee board in the Southern Baptist Convention. The trustees can then bring any needed change to the denominational agencies and institutions.

Because of my convictions and involvement, I was elected as a trustee of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1989. Although I knew little about the school, I immediately read Mueller’s *A History of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* and fell in love with the institution. The history and heritage of the

school was, and still is, second to none. I had heard that Southern had drifted into theological liberalism. Of course, that is why conservative trustees had been elected, to fix the theological problems. After my initial campus visit and research of the faculty, I remember one conservative friend asking me, “Is it really as bad as they say it is at Southern?” I responded, “No—it is much worse.” In fact, the more I saw and read about the faculty, the more it shocked me.

There is no joy in reporting this, but we dare not forget it. It is an established fact that there were professors teaching in our SBC seminaries, including Southern, who did not believe in the virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death, or bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. In addition, many did not believe in the historicity of Adam and Eve or biblical miracles. They certainly did not believe in the authority or inerrancy of Scripture. All of this has been documented elsewhere by others and me. We had drifted a long way from the faith of our fathers. The cause was to return these seminaries and other denominational entities back to conservative biblical theology.

Firsthand, I saw the correction. As a Southern Seminary trustee, I spoke up, as did others. Eventually Southern Seminary trustees woke up and finally stood up to meet the crisis and fight for the cause. It was a fight. Let no one deny it. Some things are worth fighting for—the Bible and the gospel. And yes, as with all revolutions there were excesses on both sides of the scuffle and people got hurt. In my zeal for the cause of truth, perhaps I went overboard from time to time. Nevertheless, while the end did not justify every means, the end certainly justified the means of working within the denomina-

tional system to elect SBC presidents that eventually resulted in new trustees that would correct the denominational drift toward liberalism. The turning point for Southern Seminary was the selection of R. Albert Mohler, Jr. as president. I believe Mohler is the singular human instrument God used to save the seminary from the years the locusts had eaten.

From my time as a trustee from 1989 to 1998, I saw a glorious turnover in administration and faculty that transformed Southern Seminary from a limping, liberal, leftward-leaning institution into a conservative, evangelical juggernaut for the gospel of Jesus Christ and the glory of God. I had so much confidence in the faculty and staff at this point, that I moved to Southern Seminary to do my Ph.D. work. Later, I had the joy of serving on the faculty and administration.

That is *some* of what I saw, and did, at the revolution. Happily, through the conservative resurgence, other SBC agencies and institutions have experienced similar transformations, if not so dramatic. And, that is what the revolution was all about. May we never forget how close we came to losing everything. May God be praised that we did not.

SBJT: Having been involved from the beginning of the SBC controversy, what observations would you offer on what happened and why?

Richard Land: Has it really been a quarter-century since what is variously known as the “convention controversy,” the “conservative resurgence,” or the “fundamentalist takeover” commenced officially in the public mind?

We must always remember that the struggle to define the acceptable theological and doctrinal parameters of Southern

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Baptist life began long before the Patterson-Pressler Coalition coalesced and the Southern Baptist Convention held its annual meeting in Houston in 1979.

As a theologian and historian, I am convinced that one cannot truly understand events or people unless one understands the history that surrounds them. Like all human situations, the convention controversy and the people involved in it had a past—though this fact is often unacknowledged.

In fact, a Southern Baptist theological tradition had emerged among the people called Baptists in the Southern United States at least half a century before the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in Augusta, Georgia, in 1845. Consisting of a providential amalgamation of the older Particular and General Baptist traditions with the young Separate Baptist (e.g., Sandy Creek) tradition, which emerged explosively from the First Great Awakening, this clearly defined tradition “was distinctly Reformed, a modified version of Westminster.”¹

This common doctrinal tradition, characterized by an “evangelical outlook” and “strong biblicism” must be the necessary introduction to all discussions of the various and divergent theological traditions in Southern Baptist life.² Whatever diversity existed between, for instance, the Charleston and Sandy Creek traditions was topsoil layered over the bedrock commitment to the Bible as God’s Holy Word and the compelling obligation to missions and evangelism.

This bedrock of shared theological and doctrinal worldview among Baptists in the South provided the foundation and fertile soil for a remarkable century and a half of expansion and growth across the Southland and beyond. Alas, as the

twentieth century progressed, the doctrinal consensus began to be eclipsed by a more pragmatic, programmatic emphasis, which accelerated exponentially with the massive expansion of the denomination’s institutional and program structure in post-World War II America.³ This programmatic consensus and emphasis created an environment that allowed a new and unprecedented doctrinal diversity to develop among the institutional entities of Southern Baptists at the national and state levels.

Consequently, by the 1970s, the Elliot (1962-63) and the Broadman Commentary (1970-71) controversies signaled to all with eyes to see that the parameters of the acceptable doctrinal diversity in Southern Baptist life were being stretched to the breaking point. This growing tension erupted into full public view in the winter of 1978-79 as the Patterson-Pressler coalition called upon Southern Baptists to bring their institutions and agencies back into alignment with traditional Southern Baptist doctrinal convictions.

The possibility that such a movement might take place was perceived as early as 1963 when Samuel Hill noted that in spite of the Convention’s increasing programmatic centralization ultimate authority still resided in the churches and that “the Convention’s polity being as it is, wresting of control by the ultra-conservatives from the moderates is not impossible.”⁴

Undoubtedly, Hill was saddened to have been proven prophetic in his insight. Southern Baptists’ polity saved them from the abyss and wasteland of liberalism. Ultimately, Baptist agencies and institutions were accountable to the messengers from the local churches that make up the denomination.

As one who was present and involved

from the beginning of the controversy, it must be said that Southern Baptists succeeded in returning their national agencies to their historic doctrinal foundations because tens of thousands of dedicated Southern Baptists worked tirelessly to mobilize the people of their denomination and to inform them that there was a problem and there was a way to rectify it.

As we were ascending the escalator to vote for president at the San Antonio convention in 1988, my wife turned to me and said, "this is the culmination of what we used to talk about all the time in the seminary cafeteria, isn't it?" I replied, "Yes, it is."

During our time at New Orleans Seminary in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the topic of conversation in daily coffee klatches in the cafeteria was that if the people back in our churches knew what was being taught about the Bible in our seminary classes, they would have a duck. Well, they finally found out, and they had a whole flock of ducks.

The conservative resurgence has been successful beyond even the greatest optimists' hopes and dreams. All of us who applaud the results should give praise to God for his providential watch care and blessing in our endeavors. We should also give thanks for the tens of thousands of Southern Baptists who labored sacrificially to back their convictions with sustained action. We will not know this side of eternity many of the unsung heroes and heroines of the faith who suffered and sacrificed to stand for the faith of their fathers.

I am certain that all of those who served in the cause join me in saying that any price we were personally called upon to pay was well worth it, considering the end achieved, a dearly beloved Southern

Baptist Convention safely returned to her historical doctrinal foundations.

The reality and wonder of what God has wrought was brought home afresh to me when two of my three children felt led to attend seminary in response to God's call on their lives, and I could happily and confidently recommend *all* of our seminaries unreservedly to them. In 1972 when I finished seminary, I would not have dared believe that such a day would come to be. Praise God for his blessings.

May we all resolve to do our best to make certain that our beloved institutions never drift from their biblical moorings again.

ENDNOTES

¹Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 321

²Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 57

³Richard D. Land, "The Southern Baptist Convention 1979-1993: What Happened and Why?" *Baptist History and Heritage* 28, no. 4 (October 1993): 5.

⁴Samuel Hill, "The Southern Baptists: Need for Reformation, Redirection," *The Christian Century*, 9 January 1963, 40