

# The Life and Legacy of Herschel H. Hobbs (1907-1995)<sup>1</sup>

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Herschel H. Hobbs, by any account, was one of the most influential and shaping leaders in Southern Baptist life in the 20th century. His role as chairman of the 1963 “Baptist Faith and Message” committee, coupled with his tireless efforts to formulate and articulate Southern Baptist doctrine and distinctives for almost four decades have cemented his position in history. Hobbs, as preacher, author, denominational statesman and pastor-theologian, has often been called “Mr. Southern Baptist.” By only examining his early years it would have been nearly impossible for anyone to have predicted the influence he later would have on Baptist life. Hobbs stepped onto the Southern Baptist stage under the guidance of and with the obvious blessings of God’s providential hand, for there was no family tradition of church leadership, denominational involvement, or serious biblical exposition or theological reflection on which he could build.

## The Early Years

Hobbs was born on October 24, 1907 in the rural community of Marble Valley in Coosa County, Alabama. Born to Elbert Oscar and Emma Octavia Whatley Hobbs, Herschel was the sixth child, and first son in the family. His father died of malaria when Herschel was two.

Hobbs’s mother was a Baptist and his father had been a member of the Church of Christ, though he had led the singing at the local Methodist Church. The first church Herschel remembered attending

was the Blue Springs Methodist Church. At five years of age he was asked what he wanted to do when he grew up. Hobbs responded, “I’m going to be a Methodist preacher like Brother Smith.” Later in his life he would recall, “I have always felt that even at a tender age God had planted in my mind that I was to be a preacher.”<sup>2</sup> After his father’s death, his mother took her children to the local Baptist church, which according to Hobbs, was the primary reason he grew up a Baptist.

Hobbs made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ when he was eleven years old during a revival service in the Enon Baptist Church in Chilton County, Alabama. The revival preacher was Rev. Ernest Davis, a ministerial student at Howard College (later called Samford University), who baptized Herschel in Montevallo Creek. The words he spoke on that occasion serve as a foreshadowing of Hobbs’s strong emphasis on religious experience: “Back there I felt bad; I came, and now I feel good.”<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1920 his mother sold the family farm and moved her family to Birmingham, Alabama in order to provide better educational opportunities for her children. Hobbs graduated from Phillips High School in Birmingham in 1926. At this stage of life Hobbs had learned the value of hard work through various jobs and family responsibilities, but had yet to develop a commitment to serious study and academic excellence.<sup>4</sup>

The Hobbs family moved to a suburb on the west side of Birmingham, called

Ensley, where they joined the Ensley Baptist Church. Here, Herschel met Frances Jackson, the daughter of a bi-vocational preacher, who soon thereafter would become his wife. Herschel and Frances were married at 8:30 a.m. on Sunday morning, April 10, 1927, in a simple wedding in the parlor of her home. For their honeymoon they went to Sunday School and church and B.Y.P.U. (Baptist Young Peoples Union) and church that night. Six weeks later, Frances graduated from high school under her maiden name.<sup>5</sup>

### **Preparation for Ministry**

Shortly after they were married Hobbs publicly made a commitment to full-time vocational ministry—and as he put it, “I have never turned back!”<sup>6</sup> Upon telling Frances’s family about his commitment, his mother-in-law responded: “Well, if you are going to preach, you and ‘Sis’ (Frances) are going to Howard College . . . we don’t want a ‘jack-leg’ preacher in the family.”<sup>7</sup> Hobbs recalled his first sermon, titled “God’s Universal Call to Humanity” from John 1:39, “Come and see.” Hobbs, adapting the words of R. G. Lee, said, “I had a text and topic large enough to support a skyscraper. And I built a chicken coop on top of it.”<sup>8</sup>

Herschel and Frances entered Howard College in 1930 from which he graduated two and one-half years later. With a special decision from the president, he was allowed to graduate early. They then moved to Louisville, Kentucky where Herschel enrolled in the Th.M. program at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.<sup>9</sup> He studied New Testament under W. Hersey Davis and A. T. Robertson for his Th.M., and went on to complete his Ph.D. under Davis, writing his dissertation on the issue of “Does the Author of the Fourth Gospel Consciously Supplement

the Synoptic Gospels?”<sup>10</sup> The large influence and long shadow of Davis and Robertson would manifest itself in Hobbs’s preaching and particularly his writing over the next sixty years.

Although Hobbs did not have the privilege to study with E. Y. Mullins (1860-1928), his theology was significantly shaped by Mullins’s work, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*. Hobbs claimed to have virtually memorized this important book and was convinced that Mullins was the premier Baptist theologian of all time. Hobbs reflected: “Though I never got to sit at his (Mullins’s) feet, I have lived with his books to the point that I feel that I did know him.”<sup>11</sup> Hobbs largely formed his understanding of Baptist distinctives from Mullins’s work, *The Axioms of Religion*, which Hobbs revised and republished in 1978.<sup>12</sup>

### **Pastor and Denominational Leader**

During his seminary days Hobbs pastored churches in Indiana and Kentucky. After graduation he served key churches in Louisiana and Alabama, including the Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, but it was not until he came to First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City in 1949 that he began to play an unparalleled role in Southern Baptist life. He served on numerous boards<sup>13</sup> and held offices in state conventions, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Baptist World Alliance, for which he served as Vice President from 1965-70. A few of his board memberships included New Orleans Seminary, Oklahoma Baptist University, Foreign Mission Board, and the Executive Committee of the SBC. He served as president of the SBC Pastors’ Conference and the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma. Through these roles and his eighteen years of

preaching on “The Baptist Hour,” a weekly radio program produced by the Radio and Television Commission of the SBC, Hobbs became one of a handful of major denominational spokespersons for Southern Baptists.<sup>14</sup>

Hobbs’s most prominent denominational service occurred when he served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1961-63). During this time he chaired the committee that revised “The Baptist Faith and Message,” which was adopted by the Convention in 1963. Reflecting on the importance of this unique role, Hobbs stated,

What do I consider my most abiding service for the Kingdom of God? I would like to think that all I have said and done was to this end. But if I should have to choose, I would say: as a pastor-preacher, writer, radio preacher, and Chairman of the Committee which drew up the 1963 revised statement of “*the Baptist Faith and Message*,” perhaps Convention-wide, the last will have the most lasting effect.<sup>15</sup>

His service outside of Baptist life was limited though he served as a member of the board of trustees of *Christianity Today* for several years. He retired from the pastorate of First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City in 1972 at the age of 65.<sup>16</sup> Still he continued to serve Southern Baptists for the next two decades before his death in the fall of 1995.

### **Prolific Author**

Through the years Hobbs developed a prolific writing ministry. In 1951 Hobbs published his first book. Forty-four years later Hobbs had penned about 150 different works for lay persons and pastors alike. He has written more books than anyone else in Southern Baptist history and more

materials for the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay) than anyone else. In addition he has authored innumerable articles for state papers and other periodicals. Over 100 of these books were Bible Study guides for Sunday School teachers called *Studying Adult Life and Work Lessons*, which he published quarterly from 1968-93. More than forty of these books focused on Baptist doctrine, Baptist heritage, or biblical commentary/exposition, particularly on New Testament books. He wrote commentaries on Genesis, the four gospels, Revelation, and almost all of the Pauline epistles.

Hobbs was often asked “how do you find time to write as much as you do?” “My reply,” he said, “is manifold”:

I have had a sympathetic wife who did not begrudge me the time, an understanding church, and a staff that has taken much of the load of details off me. And for most of these years, I have had my study in my home. In that way I do much of my writing at night. For instance, if Frances was doing something that did not involve me, I would go into my study and write. I would not leave her to go to the church to do it. Since Frances’ death I find relief from loneliness by staying busy. And writing has been my way of studying. Writing for publication makes me study more carefully. The product may not be worth publishing, but I try. All in all, I have written for seven publishers, the reason being that I have written books faster than any one publisher would want to publish books by the same author. I am grateful to each one of them.<sup>17</sup>

While his books also included pastoral and evangelistic works, in addition to the biblical commentaries and teaching guides, the rest of this article will focus on Hobbs’s exposition of Baptist doctrine. His most important doctrinal contributions included: *Who is This?* (1952); *Fundamentals of Our Faith* (1960); *What Baptists Believe*

(1964); *The Life and Times of Jesus* (1966); *The Holy Spirit* (1967); *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1971); *The Cosmic Drama* (1971); *A Layman's Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (1974); *The Axioms of Religion* (Revised 1978); *You are Chosen: The Priesthood of All Believers* (1990); and "People of the Book: The Baptist Doctrine of the Holy Scripture" published posthumously in *Baptists Why and Why Not Revisited* (1997).

### Exposition

Baptist historian, Walter B. Shurden, described Herschel Hobbs as one of the most influential Southern Baptist theologians of the 20th century. Along with E. Y. Mullins, Shurden named Hobbs as one of two Southern Baptist leaders primarily responsible for the formulation and articulation of Southern Baptist distinctives. He expanded this observation, saying:

Mullins served as Southern Baptists' theologian in the first half of this century and Hobbs in the latter half. Both were inspiring preachers, concerned denominational statesmen and strong advocates of Southern Baptist doctrines. Mullins was responsible for Southern Baptists' first confession of faith in 1925 and Hobbs for the confession of 1963. Moreover, Mullins wrote and Hobbs revised the classic statement of Southern Baptist distinctives, a little book entitled *The Axioms of Religion*. When, therefore, Southern Baptists want to know "historic" Southern Baptist distinctives, they must return to the writings of these revered leaders. Mullins and Hobbs handled the Word of God reverently, and obediently, seeking to make sure that Baptist distinctives came from the Bible and not from culture. They also knew Baptist history and affirmed those Baptist doctrines which were in the mainstream of Baptist thought.<sup>18</sup>

Hobbs, like his friend W. A. Criswell, developed his theological works out of

messages delivered to his congregation. In that sense, Hobbs's theology is Baptist theology at its best; theology developed out of the church for the church. The writings represent Hobbs's efforts to set forth his understanding of Baptist beliefs. For Hobbs, theology is the reasonable study of God. It is trying, by use of God's word, to learn more about who God is, his will, way, and work. Theology is not the province of preachers; it belongs to all believers. It is something to be believed, practiced, and taught.<sup>19</sup>

Hobbs sought to present Baptist doctrine to a wider readership in order for men and women to grow in their faith (2 Tim 2:15), and to be able to defend their faith (1 Pet 3:15).<sup>20</sup> In general, Hobbs's theology represents the historic teaching of the Church through the centuries based on what the Bible says.<sup>21</sup> Hobbs was convinced that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that all theology should be derived from it.<sup>22</sup> In his examination prior to his ordination, one pastor asked the young Hobbs, "Does the Bible *contain* the Word of God or *is* the Bible the Word of God?" Hobbs said, "Frankly, I had never even thought about it . . . but I soon learned and still believe that the Bible *is* the Word of God."<sup>23</sup> Hobbs was aware of issues in historical theology and the role of tradition in Baptist life. He used reason appropriately and, like Mullins before him, put great emphasis on personal experience as a confirming aspect of theology. But, without question or apology, the Bible served as the primary source for Hobbs's theological constructions. Hobbs's books on the *Fundamentals of Our Faith* and *What Baptists Believe* contain careful explications of the doctrine of Scripture and demonstrate that the Bible is the source for Hobbs's understanding of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy



Spirit, Salvation, the Church, Last Things, and other doctrinal teachings.

While Hobbs looked to an authoritative and inspired Bible as the source of his theology, and while he had a great appreciation for our Baptist heritage, he nevertheless was hesitant to acknowledge the place of doctrinal confessions as normative for the Christian community. His emphasis on individualism and the competency of the soul in each believer moved him to a false dichotomy between a “living faith” and a “confessional or creedal faith.” In the preamble to the 1963 “Baptist Faith and Message,” Hobbs claimed that the confession has “no authority over the conscience.” While no Baptist would want to put any confession on the same level with Scripture or confuse a confession about Jesus with a dynamic trust in Jesus, to say that the confession has no authority is certainly an overstatement. The confession is a secondary or tertiary source of authority, not a primary one. Nevertheless, confessions have historically been understood to have a normative place for believers. James Leo Garrett’s comments at this point are most helpful:

Herschel Harold Hobbs has declared that Southern Baptists “have a living faith rather than a creedal one.” The present author [Garrett] would contend that the statement poses an improper antithesis. The opposite of a living faith is a dead faith. The opposite of a creedal or confessional faith is a vague or contentless or undefined faith. Admittedly confessions of faith may be differentiated from creeds, and the danger of a decadent faith must be clearly recognized, but our Christian faith should be both living and confessional! One can no more eat choice beef from a boneless cow and one can no more work safely in a skyscraper that has no structural steel than one can practice and communicate the Christian

religion without basic Christian affirmations or doctrines.<sup>24</sup>

Let us now turn our attention to Hobbs’s exposition and explication of key theological issues.

### **The Doctrine of Scripture**

Baptists have been called a people of the Book. “The Baptist Faith and Message” begins its statements on the Scriptures by avowing that “the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God’s revelation of Himself to man.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Hobbs believed that the Bible is the inspired written record of God’s revelation to men. He maintained that God is not discovered but is manifest to humanity through God’s own self-disclosure. God’s self-revelation in His written word is clearer than any other source of revelation.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout his life and ministry Hobbs affirmed the inspiration of the Bible. In 1971 he identified four theories describing how God inspired the Scriptures: (1) the intuition theory, (2) the illumination theory, (3) the dictation theory, and (4) the dynamic theory.<sup>27</sup> Hobbs noted that the first two of these theories hold that only portions of the Bible are inspired and thus should be rejected. One or the other of the last two theories, maintained Hobbs, is held by the vast majority of Southern Baptists. Hobbs, at that time, supported the dynamic theory, meaning that the Holy Spirit inspired the thoughts rather than the exact words to express the biblical truth.

In 1971 Hobbs did not mention the plenary view, but in one of the last pieces he penned, an article titled “The People of the Book,” he alluded to the fact that Basil Manly, Jr., in his classic work of inspiration, espoused plenary inspiration. In this same article Hobbs suggested that both the

plenary view and the dynamic view see the Bible as the inspired Word of God.<sup>28</sup>

Hobbs was quite clear that the Bible is an inspired, divine-human book. He unhesitatingly affirmed that “the Bible is historically accurate” and “scientifically correct.” The Bible is not a textbook in science, he said, “but when it speaks in that realm, it speaks truth.”<sup>29</sup> Thus Hobbs maintained, like his mentor, A. T. Robertson, that the Bible is inerrant in the original manuscripts. He insightfully noted that:

To use the word infallible weakens the statement [on Scripture]. Some dictionaries give two meanings of infallible: without error; and anything that does what it is supposed to do. You may have a dull knife with gaps in the blade. But if you use it only to cut string, and it does, in that sense, it is infallible, even though it is full of flaws. In that sense, the Bible could be full of errors. But if it is to lead people to salvation in Christ, and if it does, it is infallible. No, the stronger word is *inerrant*.<sup>30</sup>

Certainly, Hobbs was a thoroughgoing biblicist since the early days of his ordination examination. However, with his huge influence over Southern Baptists, one has to wonder if the controversy over Scripture, which took place in the last decades of the 20th century, would have taken a different road if Hobbs had emphasized in a more pronounced way his own commitment to biblical inerrancy.<sup>31</sup> Hobbs clearly confessed the full inspiration, authority, truthfulness, and inerrancy of the Bible as the position of Southern Baptists at the conclusion of the 20th century.<sup>32</sup>

In what may have been Hobbs’s final words from his powerful pen he raised these questions: “Are you willing to place your trust in something that is in a constant state of flux? Or will you place it in

the Bible, God’s solid rock of revealed truth? Your answer bears eternal consequences.”<sup>33</sup>

### God and Creation

The foundational supposition that God exists is practically universal, according to Hobbs. In *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, he wrote:

The Bible does not argue the existence of God; it only declares his will and purpose. With only one statement the Bible dismisses the atheist: “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God” (Ps. 53:1) . . . Anyone, like the Psalmist, can look about him and see even in nature the evidence of God’s existence and work (Ps. 19:1).<sup>34</sup>

Consistent with theologians throughout history Hobbs maintained that God is infinite and thus impossible to define. Following Mullins, Hobbs offered this description (not definition) of God:

God is the supreme personal Spirit; perfect in all his attributes; who is the source, support, and end of the universe; who guides it according to the wise, righteous, and loving purpose revealed in Jesus Christ; who indwells in all things by his Holy Spirit, seeking ever to transform them according to his own will and bring them to the goal of his kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Hobbs followed Mullins’s understanding and description of the attributes of God with seven natural and four moral attributes.<sup>36</sup> Hobbs emphasized the personal nature of God, affirming there is one God and three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit, all equal in essence and power. Hobbs was unhesitatingly Trinitarian, but his explanation had modalistic tendencies emphasizing three manifestations of God over the classic ontological understanding

of the Trinity.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, the doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible. It is truth for the heart. The fact that it cannot be completely explained is something that should not surprise us. A God who is understood completely is no God. No one could have imagined this doctrine, such a truth had to be revealed. As the church fathers affirmed, the Trinity is divinely revealed, not humanly constructed.

Hobbs affirmed God as creator (Gen 1:1). He was non-committal as to the length of days in Genesis one, but believed that science and the Scriptures could be harmonized.<sup>38</sup>

### Jesus Christ

Hobbs's theology was Christocentric in the best sense of that term. He believed that Jesus Christ is the key to humanity's knowledge of God and history.<sup>39</sup> Hobbs saw Christ throughout Holy Scripture:

The Old Testament sounds the messianic hope. The Gospels record Christ's incarnation; Acts relates his continuing work through the Holy Spirit; the Epistles interpret his person and work; Revelation proclaims his final triumph and glory.<sup>40</sup>

The addition of the phrase, "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ" to the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" reflects Hobbs's belief that "as an individual reads the Bible, it is essential that he keeps in mind that Christ is central."<sup>41</sup>

Hobbs's Christology was a reflection of classic Chalcedonian orthodoxy. He affirmed the pre-existence of Christ as the eternal second person of the Godhead.<sup>42</sup> He contended that Jesus Christ is God of very God, the center of the universe.<sup>43</sup> Similarly he maintained that the eternal *Logos*, who is God himself, took on human form

to fully identify with and fully reveal God to humanity. Indeed he is the God-man. Thus he affirmed the self-emptying of Christ, his virgin birth, and his divine and human natures.<sup>44</sup>

Hobbs taught that Jesus Christ was prophet, priest, and King. He revealed God perfectly to humanity, was the perfect sacrifice for sins, and reigns over the Kingdom of God. Hobbs was at his best in describing the work of Jesus Christ in behalf of sinners. Only through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross could the righteousness and holiness of God be satisfied. He explained that:

By the death of the Son of God, and by nothing less, could a just God become justifier of sinful man. In the councils of eternity, then the Lamb of God was slain from before the foundation of the world. The cross, thus, was the enactment in time of that which already had been accomplished in eternity.<sup>45</sup>

Hobbs believed that Christ's death was a sufficient and substitutionary atonement, redeeming humans from the penalty of sin, and reconciling them to God—doing for them what they could in no way do for themselves.<sup>46</sup>

Hobbs took seriously the challenges to the belief in a bodily resurrection. But he carefully countered each challenge and defended the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ with biblical and historical evidence, concluding that it "is one of the best authenticated events in all of history."<sup>47</sup> He emphasized that the resurrection demonstrated the complete deity of Jesus Christ while giving hope to believers regarding their future resurrection with Christ. The ascension, exaltation and return of Christ point to Christ's ultimate victory over sin, death, and Satan.<sup>48</sup>

## Holy Spirit and Christian Life

The Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of God” and the “Spirit of Christ.” As God is a person, so is the Holy Spirit a person. He possesses all the attributes of God and all elements of personality. With these broad comments Hobbs described the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. In the commentary on *The Baptist Faith and Message*, he identified four specific aspects of the work of Holy Spirit, which are summarized below:

1. The Holy Spirit revealed God’s will to men. This is related to the Scriptures themselves. The Spirit inspired chosen ones to write Scripture and illumines our minds to understand it.
2. The second aspect of the Spirit’s work is enabling the disciples to understand and communicate the full significance of Jesus’ redemptive work.
3. The third element is the Spirit’s work with lost people. The Holy Spirit convicts them of their sin, shows them the righteousness God demands, and reveals to them the judgment to come for those who reject Christ. The Spirit enables lost sinners to turn to Christ in faith, sealing and sanctifying them as God’s possession.
4. The Spirit then dwells in believers, taking up his abode in their lives. In this way he also dwells in the churches. He indwells believers and fills them for service. The presence of the Spirit in one’s life is evidence of regeneration, not of a second blessing or even of sanctification. The fruit of the Spirit is manifest in godly virtues not ecstatic demonstrations. The Holy Spirit does not reveal himself; he reveals God in Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Hobbs’s treatment of the Christian life is underdeveloped. This is reflected in the revised statement on sanctification in the 1963 “Baptist Faith and Message.” The 1925 statement was more expanded. Hobbs

wrote the section in the 1963 statement himself. The 1925 statement called sanctification a process. Hobbs disagreed, choosing to emphasize sanctification as “an instantaneous experience whereby the regenerated one is set apart to God’s service. Thereafter, he should grow, develop, and serve in the state of sanctification.”<sup>50</sup> Sanctification, then, is a work of the Holy Spirit which fits believers for God’s use. Believers grow and develop, not unto sanctification, but within the state of sanctification.<sup>51</sup>

## Salvation

Steve Gaines has observed that the doctrine of salvation was “at the heart of Hobbs’s ‘Baptist Hour’ preaching.”<sup>52</sup> For Hobbs, God’s redemptive purpose in Christ is the Bible’s theme from beginning to end. Jesus Christ is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8). He taught that from before the foundation of the world forgiveness was in God’s heart before sin was in man’s.<sup>53</sup> A look at the historical context in which Hobbs developed this doctrine will be helpful.

The first one hundred years of Southern Baptist life witnessed a soteriological understanding largely within a Calvinistic framework. From the early years of J. P. Boyce (1827-88) to the death of W. T. Conner (1877-1952), Southern Baptists saw the diminishing influence of Calvinism. The strict Calvinism of Boyce shifted to a growing consensus that emerged around the moderate (modified) Calvinism of Mullins and Conner. Led by the thought of Herschel Hobbs, Southern Baptists in the middle and latter years of the 20th century moved toward a modified Arminian understanding of salvation.<sup>54</sup> Hobbs embraced the Arminian understanding of predestination and fore-



knowledge. He believed that God affirmed every free human choice in such a way that the choices are not predetermined.<sup>55</sup>

Hobbs believed in human sinfulness but not in total depravity, as understood by Boyce, Mullins, or Conner. For the 1925 "Baptist Faith and Message" confessed that Adam's "posterity inherit a nature corrupt and in bondage to sin." Hobbs's language in 1963 said that Adam's "posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin."

He rejected the idea that God's election is based on his choice of some. Instead he maintained that God chose to limit his sovereignty so that men and women could either accept or reject God's salvific offer in Christ.<sup>56</sup> Hobbs believed that election referred to God's plan of salvation designed for all people. All who responded positively by faith are thus elect. So God elected that all who are "in Christ" will be saved. God's sovereignty has set the condition but human free will determines the result.<sup>57</sup>

Hobbs rejected unconditional election and irresistible grace, both of which had been affirmed by Boyce. Mullins and Conner had revised the understanding of irresistible grace, but Hobbs rejected both. His work was more in line with the General Baptists of the 17th century than with either Boyce, Mullins, or Conner. He believed in a general atonement and a universal call to salvation believing that "God's purpose in election is to save not a few but as many as possible."<sup>58</sup> Any limitation in God's plan, comes not from God, but from human choice.

Yet, Hobbs parted company with Arminians at the point of perseverance or eternal security. "The thundering answer of Scripture," he proclaimed to the question as to whether a Christian "once saved"

can "ever be lost again" was "No!"<sup>59</sup> Hobbs emphasized the perseverance passages in Scripture and generally ignored or re-interpreted the so-called warning passages. For example, instead of reading the warning passages in the Book of Hebrews as real warnings to genuine Christians, Hobbs suggested that the texts refer to Christians who are "faced with the peril of an arrested Christian growth by which they are in peril of falling short of their ultimate destiny in Christian behavior and service."<sup>60</sup> Hobbs's emphasis on "once saved, always saved" is one of his great legacies in Southern Baptist life.

Hobbs, who believed that salvation is by grace through faith, defined faith as "believing what is written about Christ, trusting in him and his work for salvation, and committing one's self to him."<sup>61</sup> He believed that faith resulted in conversion and regeneration, bringing about a new life and turning from the old life of rebellion against God to one of love to and service for God.<sup>62</sup>

Salvation, for Hobbs, has three aspects as articulated in the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message": regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. Hobbs wrote:

Regeneration is the salvation of the soul; sanctification is the Christian life; glorification is the heavenly state. In regeneration one is saved from the penalty of sin; in sanctification one is saved from the power of sin; in glorification one is saved from the presence of sin. In this threefold sense it is proper to say, "I am saved; I am being saved; I will be saved."<sup>63</sup>

Hobbs's strong emphasis on individual experience<sup>64</sup> in salvation caused him to downplay the legal and objective aspects of justification and adoption and the corporate aspects of union with Christ. Hobbs

tended to ignore the important distinctions between regeneration and adoption, blurring them together in an unhelpful manner.<sup>65</sup> Sanctification means to be set apart by God for service in God's Kingdom throughout life.<sup>66</sup> Glorification is the ultimate aspect of salvation experienced in heaven when one is saved completely for all eternity. Thus salvation is permanent, eternal, and cannot be lost.

## The Church

Hobbs understood that the Church in the New Testament never refers to organized Christianity or to a group of churches. It denotes either a local body of baptized believers or includes all the redeemed through the ages. The emphasis among Baptists is on the local church.<sup>67</sup> The 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" says "the New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages." This addition served as a significant development to Landmarkism's theology of the church as only the local church.

Expecting this phrase to be challenged on the floor of the 1963 convention, Albert McClellan provided Hobbs with pages he had cut out of leading books on Baptist theology, including the first page of J. M. Pendleton's *Church Manual*. When asked about the phrase, "The redeemed of all ages," Hobbs quoted Pendleton, saying, "the word *ekklesia* is sometimes used in the New Testament to refer to the redeemed in aggregate."<sup>68</sup> The article on the church was then received with near unanimity.

Perhaps because Mullins, his theological model, did not expound a doctrine of the church in his volume, *The Christian Doctrine in Its Doctrinal Expression*, or perhaps because of his own emphasis on the individual aspect of the Christian faith,

Hobbs gave little attention to the corporate nature of the church.

In his two works that constructed aspects of a Baptist theology of the church: *The Axioms of Religion* (1978) and *You Are Chosen: The Priesthood of All Believers* (1990), Hobbs suggested that the distinctives of Baptist life are not the doctrine of salvation, a regenerate church membership, believer's baptism, the Lord's Supper, or church-state matters as important as these are (and all affirmed by Hobbs), but the competency of the soul and the priesthood of every believer.

According to Hobbs, "the priesthood of the believer" entails both privileges ("Direct access to God," "confession of our sins directly to God," and "the right to reach and interpret the Scriptures as led by the Holy Spirit") and responsibilities (holiness, love, Bible Study, witness) and implies or is related to the doctrine of salvation, the Holy Spirit, ministry, the church, and religious liberty.<sup>69</sup> Hobbs missed the corporate nature of the priesthood in the New Testament and thus de-emphasized the corporate aspect of the church and worship. The church for Hobbs was a fellowship of individual believers gathered together for service, evangelism, and missions. Baptist churches, he claimed, are autonomous fellowships who exercise their independence through voluntary cooperation.<sup>70</sup> It could reasonably be said that Hobbs had a more fully developed doctrine of the Southern Baptist Convention, its structure, organization, purpose, and mission than of the local or universal church.

## Last Things

Hobbs affirmed that the last judgment determines the final state of those who appear before the judgment seat. Their final

state is either one of everlasting misery and separation from God or one of eternal blessedness. In the final state the wicked are consigned to the place of condemnation, the eternal lake of fire (Rev 20:14-15). The abode of believers will be heaven, a place prepared by Christ (John 14:2). Heaven is not merely spiritual but is the establishment of the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 21-22). Hobbs maintained that all believers will share in “the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit 2:13). His doctrine of Christ’s return moved from a premillennial viewpoint without a program in his early years to what he viewed as an exegetically informed amillennialism.<sup>71</sup>

The eschatology of key Baptist leaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century tended to be predominantly postmillennial. At the end of the twentieth century the large majority of Southern Baptist leaders could be characterized as premillennial.<sup>72</sup> But in the early and middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, amillennialism was generally championed. Mullins, Conner, Ray Summers, as well as Hobbs, and several others articulated an amillennial eschatology. Hobbs taught that Christ’s return would be certain, imminent, sudden, universal, and victorious. Needless to say, his amillennialist position had great influence across Southern Baptist life.

### Conclusion

Herschel Hobbs was indeed “one of a kind.”<sup>73</sup> His abilities as preacher, teacher, author, denominational statesman, and pastor-theologian put him in unique company, perhaps only equaled in his widespread influence by his long-time friend W. A. Criswell. His great sense of humor, his ability to weave a story, and his powerful gifts as a communicator served him well

in every situation. His role in shaping the Southern Baptist Convention, his boardsmanship and statesmanship, were unsurpassed. His role as mediator and his conciliatory style were used to forge a broad consensus (what historian Bill Leonard called the “Grand Compromise”) that carried Southern Baptists through the 1960’s and 70’s, and was used to hold divergent groups together through the 80’s and into the 90’s.

His leadership style and pastoral emphasis was reflected in his theology as well. Hobbs was a thoroughgoing biblicalist, a well-educated and capable biblical interpreter, and a theologian for the church. He saw his role as one to interpret scholars and theologians to pastors and laity and also to interpret pastors and laity to theologians and scholars. It would be fair to say that Hobbs, a progressive conservative by his own identification,<sup>74</sup> was a centrist, but one with courage and characterized by conviction. Hobbs believed that 90% of Southern Baptists could be classified as centrists with 5% to the right and 5% to the left.<sup>75</sup> The consensus, with its broad center, broke down in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It came apart because the “centrists” would not take seriously the conservatives’ concerns about the creeping liberalism in Southern Baptist life, for in Hobbs own words, “we failed to heed the protests.”<sup>76</sup>

When concerns were raised in 1962 over the issues surrounding Ralph Elliott’s *Message of Genesis*, Porter Routh said, “Some people feel that Southern Baptists are becoming more liberal in theology. If so, we should know it. It seems that the best way to determine that would be to have a committee study the 1925 statement of ‘The Baptist Faith and Message.’”<sup>77</sup>

This took place during Hobbs’s tenure

as SBC president. It can easily be said that this was Hobbs's finest hour. The resulting 1963 statement affirmed the convention's biblical roots and rebuilt a consensus that helped advance Southern Baptist work for years, even decades. Yet a similar response failed to develop in the early years of the "inerrancy controversy."

Whether or not the history of the last two decades would have been different is impossible to say. Hobbs conjectured that it may have been. Regardless, his recognition that Southern Baptist seminaries' primary purpose must be to train leaders for Southern Baptist churches remains right on target. He claimed that "if these leaders are to lead as Southern Baptists, they must be indoctrinated as to those things which Southern Baptists believe and practice . . . [their] reason for being is to prepare future Southern Baptist leaders for a specific task."<sup>78</sup>

Hobbs's biblicism, his sound Christology, his emphasis on salvation by grace through faith, and his unapologetic belief in Christ's sufficient and substitutionary death, bodily resurrection and imminent return, coupled with his belief in the eternal state and the final judgement, provided a healthy framework around which Southern Baptist theology built a strong consensus. We believe a similar framework could again serve Southern Baptists well for years to come, assuming that the normative nature of doctrinal confessions could be understood in a manner more in line with James Leo Garrett than Herschel Hobbs.<sup>79</sup>

Along the way throughout this article, we have noted what we believe to have been weaknesses in Hobbs's thinking; areas such as his views on justification, adoption, union with Christ, sanctification, his over-emphasis on individual experience, and his inadequate understanding of

doctrinal confessions.<sup>80</sup> But the orthodox framework grounded in Jesus Christ and shaped by Holy Scripture as identified above is a lasting testimony to Hobbs's great legacy and Southern Baptists would do well to learn from it to build a new and needed convictional consensus for our work together in this new century. As we begin the 21<sup>st</sup> century we do so with a huge debt of gratitude to a great leader and statesman who so faithfully served the "People of the Book," a Convention that he loved, with a life committed to the teachings of the Book, and moreover to the Lord of the Book. For Herschel H. Hobbs we say, "Thanks be to God."

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is the Founders' Day Address delivered at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on March 22, 2001 (portions of this article previously appeared in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, edited by David S. Dockery and Timothy George).

<sup>2</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, *My Faith and Message* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993) 1-4.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup>See Stanton Nash, "Operation Baptist Biography Data Form for Living Persons," Hobbs Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Commission Archives, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Hobbs, *My Faith and Message*, 17-63.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>During his years at the seminary Hobbs

developed strong friendships and created a wide-ranging network that would serve him well throughout his life. Many of these relationships grew out of his involvement in a "secret supper club" called *Dodeka*, the Greek word for twelve. Each year, twelve couples were invited to join this exclusive group. Herschel and Frances were received as members during their first year at the seminary (see *My Faith and Message*, 63). Important friendships with W. A. Criswell and others were birthed during this time. Hobbs was the first guest preacher Criswell invited after he was called to the pastorate of the First Baptist Church, Dallas, TX. Hobbs also drove the "getaway car" at the wedding of W. A. and Betty Criswell.

<sup>10</sup>See Hobbs's personal recollections of these days in the foreword to *The Best of A. T. Robertson*, compiled by David S. Dockery and edited by Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996) xi-xv. Of all the professors at Southern, Hersey Davis was the most influential in Hobbs's life. He said, "Robertson had an accumulative mind . . . Davis had an incisive mind. He was more like Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian Knot; he cut right through and went to the heart of the thing" *My Faith and Message*, 76.

<sup>11</sup>Hobbs, *My Faith and Message*, 61, 74. Hobbs said, "In my judgment Dr. E. Y. Mullins was the greatest theologian Southern Baptists have ever had. He died in 1928 so I never knew him . . . Next to Mullins I would place Dr. W. T. Conner of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary . . . When they spoke, Southern Baptists listened" *My Faith and Message*, 74.

<sup>12</sup>The dedication to the revised edition

reads: "Dedicated to Edgar Young Mullins, whom I never knew personally but who through his books has been my teacher through the years."

<sup>13</sup>One of his earliest trustee appointments was to the Board of New Orleans Baptist Seminary. He recounted his fondness for Dr. John Jeter Hurt, Sr., president of Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, "Though many years separated us in age, he and I were kindred souls. He liked to recite Baptist history, and I liked to listen to it. Often at night during trustee meetings he and I would get to ourselves in the corner of the motel lobby for such sessions" (*My Faith and Message*, 63).

<sup>14</sup>See John Steven Gaines, "An Analysis of the Correlation between Representative Baptist Hour Sermons by Herschel H. Hobbs and Selected Articles of The Baptist Faith and Message" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991).

<sup>15</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, "Reflections on My Ministry," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 15 (Spring 1973) 76. In another place he replied similarly, "I have been asked many times what I consider my greatest privilege of service in the Southern Baptist Convention has been. My answer is the privilege of being chairman of the committee which drew up the 1963 statement of "The Baptist Faith and Message." A close second would be writing *Studying Adult Life and Work Lessons* for more than twenty-five years. The consensus he helped build for Southern Baptists following the Elliott controversy in 1963 evidenced his impressive leadership skills.

<sup>16</sup>Hobbs said about C. B. Arendall, who preceded him as pastor at Dauphin Way in Mobile, "He taught me how to work, and he taught me how to retire" (*My Faith and Message*, 130).

<sup>17</sup>*My Faith and Message*, 216. Like his mentor, A. T. Robertson, Hobbs wrote every work in longhand.

<sup>18</sup>Walter B. Shurden, "In Defense of the SBC: The Moderate Response to Fundamentalism," *The Theological Educator* 30 (1985) 13; likewise see Shurden, "The Pastor as Denominational Theologian," *Baptist History and Heritage* (July 1980) 21.

<sup>19</sup>See Herschel H. Hobbs, *A Layman's Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1974) 2-3.

<sup>20</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, *What Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Broadman, 1964) 8.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>See the preface in Herschel H. Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, 1960).

<sup>23</sup>See *My Faith and Message*, 27.

<sup>24</sup>James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-95) 1:5; see Herschel Hobbs, "Southern Baptists and Confessionalism: A Comparison of the Origins and Contents of the 1925 and 1963 Confessions," *Review and Expositor* 76 (1979) 55-68.

<sup>25</sup>See Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention, 1971) 20-21.

<sup>26</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, *Getting Acquainted with the Bible* (Nashville: Convention, 1991) 10-11.

<sup>27</sup>Hobbs, *Baptist Faith and Message*, 23. In my opinion Hobbs misunderstood the dictation theory and the

verbal plenary theory, unfortunately blurring them and failing to distinguish this key matter regarding the doctrine of biblical inspiration. See David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995).

<sup>28</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, "People of the Book: The Baptist Doctrine of the Holy Scripture" in *Baptists Why and Why Not Revisited*, edited by Timothy George and Richard Land (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997) 12-16.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 16, 18.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 14. In this sense he is both an heir to and continuation of the Broadus-Robertson tradition.

<sup>31</sup>That Hobbs was always a thoroughgoing biblicist is unquestioned. Yet there were nuances that could be detected in his emphases along the way. In *Fundamentals of Our Faith* (1960), the first chapter contends that the doctrine of Scripture is foundational to others. In this book the order of the initial chapters was the Bible, God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The order of the initial chapters in *What Baptists Believe* (1964) was God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Bible. One wonders if the Elliott controversy (1961-62) or discussion regarding these important matters during the writing of "The Baptist Faith and Message" (1963) influenced the shift. Following the Genesis controversy (1970) related to the release of volume one in the *Broadman Commentary*, Hobbs seemingly adopted a position similar to an "inerrancy of purpose" or infallibility, which he later stated differently. In 1971, in his commentary

on *The Baptist Faith and Message*, he wrote: "What is the infallibility of the Bible? It is infallible as a book of religion. While Southern Baptists hold to the inerrancy of the Scriptures, their infallibility rests upon the fact that they do what they are designed to do" (p. 29). At the 1980 Convention in St. Louis, Hobbs's warning that a commitment to inerrancy was a form of creedalism was not well received by the messengers. In 1981, at the Convention in Los Angeles, Hobbs as Chairman of the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message Committee, was asked to explain the meaning of the phrase, "truth without any mixture of error for its matter." He explained, based on the Greek construction of 2 Timothy 3:16, "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God," that it "means every single part of the whole is God-breathed. And a God of truth does not breathe error." (See Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* [Nashville: Broadman, 1990] 527; also Bill Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 52-53; and Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention* [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995] 268). In his chapter on "People of the Book" in *Baptists Why and Why Not Revisited*, Hobbs affirms that the Bible is inspired, truthful, inerrant, and authoritative in all areas, including not only matters of religion, but areas such as science and history as well.

<sup>32</sup>It was my privilege to discuss many of these things with Dr. Hobbs on several occasions including a lengthy private conversation at the Baptist

Sunday School Board in the Fall of 1995, just weeks before his death.

<sup>33</sup>Hobbs, "People of the Book," 22.

<sup>34</sup>Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, 25.

<sup>35</sup>Hobbs, *Baptist Faith and Message*, 34, citing Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1917) 214-215.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>38</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Origin of All Things: Studies in Genesis* (Waco: Word, 1975).

<sup>39</sup>Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, 28.

<sup>40</sup>Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 39.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. Many have criticized this phrase as opening the door to neo-orthodoxy in Baptist life, but that was not Hobbs's intention.

<sup>42</sup>Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, 42.

<sup>43</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 25-27.

<sup>44</sup>See Herschel H. Hobbs, *Who is This?* (Nashville: Broadman, 1952); also Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Life and Times of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966).

<sup>45</sup>Hobbs, *Who is This?*, 104-105.

<sup>46</sup>Hobbs, *What Baptists Believe*, 40-41.

<sup>47</sup>Hobbs, *Baptist Faith and Message*, 43.

<sup>48</sup>Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, 49-50. A very fine and more complete summary of Hobbs's Christology can be found in Albert Perry Hopkins, Jr., "An Analysis of the Theological Method of Herschel H. Hobbs and His Doctrines of Christ and Salvation" (Th.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Seminary, 1994).

<sup>49</sup>Hobbs, *Baptist Faith and Message*, 46-47.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>52</sup>Gaines, "An Analysis of the Correlation Between Representative Baptist Hour Sermons by Herschel H. Hobbs on Selected Articles of *The Baptist Faith and Message*," 159.

<sup>53</sup>Hobbs, *Getting Acquainted With the Bible*, 159.

<sup>54</sup>See Paul A. Basden, "Theologies of Predestination in the Southern Baptist Tradition: A Critical Evaluation" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986); idem., "Predestination" in *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 62-65. While Boyce gave too little emphasis to matters of individual experience and freedom of the will, Hobbs gave too much.

<sup>55</sup>Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 52-54.

<sup>56</sup>Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, 91-93.

<sup>57</sup>Herschel H. Hobbs and E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman, 1978) 70-72.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>59</sup>Hobbs, *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, 106, also see Hobbs, *Studies in Hebrews* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1954), 52-59; idem., *What Baptists Believe* (Nashville: Broadman, 1964), 103-04; idem., *A Layman's Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1974), 130. See James Leo Garrett's discussion of these matters in Vol. 2 of his *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>60</sup>Hobbs, *Studies in Hebrews*, 55.

<sup>61</sup>Hobbs, *What Baptists Believe*, 94.

<sup>62</sup>Hobbs, *Handbook of Christian Doc-*

trine, 39-40.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 128.

<sup>64</sup>See Raymond E. Carroll, "Dimensions of Individualism in Southern Baptist Thought" (Th.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995) 127-148.

<sup>65</sup>An example of how Hobbs confused these issues is found in *Fundamentals of Our Faith*, 106-107. For Hobbs, regeneration and adoption are how one is brought into the family of God, de-emphasizing the legal aspect of adoption and merging both metaphors into union with God. Regeneration, he said, "declares the sinner righteous as though he had never sinned." In reality, this is justification, not regeneration.

<sup>66</sup>We have previously discussed Hobbs's unique understanding of sanctification in the section on the Holy Spirit.

<sup>67</sup>Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 75.

<sup>68</sup>Hobbs, *My Faith and Message*, 243-244.

<sup>69</sup> See *The Axioms of Religion and You Are Chosen*. In each the competency of the soul is given priority of attention. Timothy George counters Hobbs's understanding, contending that the priesthood of all believers is not to be equated with "soul competency," "religious liberty," "modern individualism" or "theological minimalism" and as "a part of the doctrine of the church" "has more to do with the Christian's service than with his status." See George, "The Priesthood of All Believers" in *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*, edited by Paul A. Basden and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broad-

man, 1991) 85-92; also see Garrett, 2:562-563.

<sup>70</sup>Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 80-82.

<sup>71</sup>See Herschel Hobbs, *The Cosmic Drama: Studies in Revelation* (Waco: Word, 1971).

<sup>72</sup>See Helen Lee Turner, "Fundamentalism in the Southern Baptist Convention: The Crystallization of a Millennialist Vision" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1990).

<sup>73</sup>The words "one of a kind" are taken from Harold Bennett's foreword to Hobb's autobiography, *My Faith and Message*.

<sup>74</sup>Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 102-103.

<sup>75</sup>Hobbs, *My Faith and Message*, 252.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 250-252. Hobbs lamented that Baptist seminary students in the 1960's and 1970's knew more about German theologians than they knew about Mullins and Conner.

<sup>79</sup>At the time that this chapter is being written, a committee chaired by Adrian Rogers is preparing a revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message*. Time will tell whether it will result in a new consensus for the SBC.

<sup>80</sup>I offer these observations not only out of conviction from biblical exegesis/theology and Baptist tradition, but out of great respect for Hobbs's leadership and deep appreciation for his friendship and support for me during the latter years of his life.