

# “We Cannot Sit in Judgment”: William Whitsitt and the Future of the Seminary

*Joshua W. Powell*

**I**N 1896 WILLIAM H. Whitsitt, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, became the focus of a fierce denominational controversy. On December 31, 1896, Whitsitt wrote in his diary, “This has been the stormiest year of my life.... I am exceedingly apprehensive for the future. Only God knows what 1897 may have in

store for me.” He looked forward to 1897 as the year in which he would exonerate himself of charges of false teaching. Whitsitt’s friends worked hard behind the scenes to develop a plan to defeat Whitsitt’s accusers. The plan hinged on the actions of the Seminary’s Board of

Trustees at Wilmington, North Carolina, the site of the Southern Baptist Convention in May 1897. The plan came together beautifully. After the convention Whitsitt’s friends wrote, this day “was a glorious victory for the Seminary.” Whitsitt returned to the seminary community and exulted that, “the experiences at Wilmington

were more than I could ask or think.” He claimed the victory: “Freedom of research and freedom of teaching when coupled with discretion in utterance and kept within the limits that have been set by the fundamental articles of our institution was vindicated.”<sup>1</sup> This meant that Whitsitt himself was vindicated. He believed that the storms finally had passed. However, in just over a year from the victory at Wilmington, Whitsitt would tender his resignation as president of the seminary.

Whitsitt saw himself as a reformer who was fighting for the “freedom of scholarly research” for himself and the faculty of the seminary. He believed this to be the real issue rather than his alleged errors. B. H. Carroll, a trustee of the seminary and respected leader of Baptists in Texas, agreed that this was the issue, but he took the other side. He believed that the real issue was whether the seminary should be freed from the denomination. He held that the “freedom of research” must have accountability, and that the convention must hold the teachers accountable

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JOSHUA W. POWELL serves as Pastor of First Baptist Church of Fairdale, Kentucky, and also as Instructor of Church History at Boyce College.

He is a Ph.D. candidate in American Church History at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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through the trustees. In the aftermath of the convention meeting at Wilmington, it was Carroll who led the fight against Whitsitt that ultimately led to his resignation.<sup>2</sup>

### **UNCLE BILLY: GETTING TO KNOW WILLIAM WHITSITT**

William Heth Whitsitt was born near Nashville, Tennessee, on November 25, 1841. He would say of his spiritual lineage, "I have been a Baptist for three generations."<sup>3</sup> At the age of twenty, Whitsitt graduated from Union University, and was soon ordained into the ministry by the "old Mill Creek church . . . of which he and his people were members."<sup>4</sup> The Mill Creek Church was a Landmark congregation. Whitsitt rejoiced that the great leader of the Landmark movement, James R. Graves of Nashville, preached his ordination. When the Civil War began, Whitsitt enlisted into the Confederate army as a "fighting chaplain."<sup>5</sup> He served four years in the Confederate army, including two stints in a federal prison that together lasted twelve months.<sup>6</sup>

After the war Whitsitt resumed his education. He enrolled for one year at the University of Virginia, and then in the fall of 1866, he enrolled in The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary located in Greenville, South Carolina. At Southern Seminary Whitsitt demonstrated ability and diligence in his studies and upon graduation was encouraged by professor John Broadus to study in Germany. Between the years 1869 and 1871 Whitsitt studied in both Leipzig and Berlin. Upon returning from Germany, Whitsitt was called to the pastorate in Albany, Georgia.

Whitsitt settled in nicely to his pastoral position in Albany. Just six weeks into his pastorate he wrote to his former professor John Broadus saying, "I have never believed until within three or four weeks that God had blessed me with pulpit power.... I have learned to feel a glorious satisfaction in preaching the gospel."<sup>7</sup> Before accepting the position Whitsitt believed that he was only suited for an academic environment, but these

six weeks "taught him" that he "was not the man that I took myself for."<sup>8</sup> The lure of the seminary, however, was greater, and he accepted an invitation to join the faculty at Southern in the chair of ecclesiastical history.<sup>9</sup> J. B. Jeter, editor of the Virginia Baptist Paper the *Religious Herald*, wrote to Broadus in support of the hire. After hearing Whitsitt several times, Jeter urged, "he is destined to take a high position among the thinkers of the age." Jeter was sure that "though he had no reputation, he will make one."<sup>10</sup> Jeter was correct.

Whitsitt leapt into his new position with much fervor. Though he loved the pulpit, he believed in many ways that his talents were fitted most clearly for the classroom. E. B. Pollard wrote that "Professor Whitsitt impressed himself deeply upon his students." Pollard explained this impression:

When he spoke, he said something. Since no mortal man could predict what that something would be, the students were kept continually on the alert. His lectures were full of meaty observations upon men and movements. Little asides, which indicated at once, close familiarity with his theme and ample mother-wit, were delightful characteristics of his style.... His students had confidence in him, because he impressed them as one who had not only patiently investigated his subject and obtained the facts, but had thought profoundly upon their meaning.<sup>11</sup>

It was well known around the seminary for many years that Whitsitt was a favorite among the students. This would have no small part in his election to President in 1896. Many of his students, including future professor and president of the seminary John R. Sampey, referred to him affectionately as "Uncle Billy."<sup>12</sup>

### **"BOLDNESS AND INDEPENDENCE": ASSUMING A POSITION IN THE CONVENTION**

In 1872, shortly after settling into his position at the seminary, Whitsitt began to struggle per-

sonally with his allegiance to Southern Baptists. During the Civil War, Whitsitt was exposed to other views of Baptist identity than the Landmarkism under which he grew up in Nashville. He had great admiration for Graves and the work he did through his paper the *Tennessee Baptist*. However, he finally came to the conclusion that he “had been misled by the representations of the *Tennessee Baptist*.”<sup>13</sup> He continued to move away from Landmarkism as his education continued in Virginia and then Southern Seminary. The final and ultimate departure came during his years in Germany.

Whitsitt’s education in Germany had a clear and lasting effect upon him. His education there gave him the framework that he needed to sever his ties with the Landmarkism of his youth. The German approach to history was scientific. As William E. Hull noted, “scholarship in Germany was an exact science characterized by objectivity, originality, and the freedom of independent thought.” In history this meant that there should be “presuppositionless research purged of any bias” and a clear “disinterested search for facts.”<sup>14</sup> Whitsitt wholeheartedly adopted this approach to research and within this framework was able to sever his ties to Landmarkism.

Landmarkism arose in the nineteenth-century south as an answer to the rise of denominationalism and the Baptists. Hull summarized Landmarkism as having three distinctive emphases. First, successionism was the historical belief that the origin of Baptist churches can be traced back in a “continuous chain of true congregations” to the apostles in the New Testament. J. M. Carroll would popularize this succession in his pamphlet, *The Trail of Blood*. Whitsitt would come to believe that this position was completely untenable given the “facts” of history. Second, localism placed the emphasis on the “autonomy and primacy on congregational life.” This placed the organization of missions and education on the local church and not a denominational structure. Third, exclusivism meant a “rejection of alien immersion, open

communion, and pulpit affiliation.” The reason for this is because only the Baptists were the heirs of the true church. Therefore church bodies (or “congregations”) that did not adhere to the Baptist faith were not true churches but “religious societies.”<sup>15</sup> Whitsitt’s research “purged of any bias” and his “disinterested search for facts” led him to believe that Landmarkism was a true “break from history” and the “error in their system” produces “pitiful and hurtful results.”<sup>16</sup>

In his youth Whitsitt had admired Landmarkism for its centralization of power of all true religion in the local Baptist church. However, with his dismissal of Landmarkism and his rise to a position of prominence in the convention, he grew dissatisfied with what he saw on the other side. In his diary he struggled with the impulse to leave Baptist life. With charged language he blasted the Baptists and their problems. He wrote that “their organization is so defective, their egotism is so stupid, their conservatism is so unconservative, and their ignorance is so full of suspicion.” This led Whitsitt to believe that reformation must come, but he was “sure they would crucify [him] if [he] attempted a work of reformation.”<sup>17</sup> Whitsitt believed that the “doctrine which the Baptists teach meets my approval in the main,” but his main grievance was with the system of Baptist government. The insufficiency of the Baptist system was not seen in its biblical warrant, for “it may be most easily proven from the Bible,” but in its practicality. Whitsitt asserts that it “may be biblical, but in our hands it has proved very unbiblical results.” According to Whitsitt, these unbiblical results led to a “corrupt church whose members strongly entrench themselves in their wickedness.” Whitsitt stated clearly that this problem would be solved if the “churches were less independent and democratical.”<sup>18</sup> All of this led Whitsitt to believe that the “Episcopal system is more desirable to the Baptist.” He even claimed, “the prospect of a bishop’s hat might be sort of an enticement.”<sup>19</sup>

Whitsitt turned to two of his favorite professors

in Germany for advice. Both Isaac Dörner of Berlin and Edward Riehm of Halle wrote “long and sympathizing letters” to Whitsitt urging him to “remain quietly” in his position among Southern Baptists.<sup>20</sup> The arguments from the German scholars were so strong to Whitsitt that he “concluded to dismiss for all time the idea of severing my present church relations.” He even found it “difficult to understand why I should have been unsettled in my mind.” Whitsitt also found encouragement in the lives of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Johnson, who died around this time. “These men,” he admits, “perhaps should not be mentioned in the same breath, but they were certainly alike in the profound confidence in freedom.”<sup>21</sup> This firm belief in freedom is why Whitsitt remained a Baptist. However, he was convinced that Landmarkism threatened freedom.

Now settled as a Baptist, Whitsitt was ready to exercise his freedom by dedicating his life to reform the Southern Baptist denomination. This task would take much effort, but Whitsitt was resolved. In 1880 he set out to England to delve into the sources of church history and discover the “true” history of the Baptists. He went to study at the British Museum in May of 1880. His task was to discover the “origins of immersion among English Baptists.”<sup>22</sup> Whitsitt’s discoveries convinced him that he uncovered some new “facts” in Baptist history. He believed these facts to be controversial and yet quite revealing.

Upon his return Whitsitt published his findings in the “Editorial Notes” section of the *New York Independent*. The first of the “Notes” appeared in the September 2, 1880, edition of the paper. Here Whitsitt claimed that Roger Williams, the founder of the Baptist faith in America, “never was a Baptist in the modern sense—that is, never was immersed.” His reason for this conclusion was that the baptism of Williams took place in 1639, and Whitsitt was convinced that “up to the year 1641 all Baptists employed sprinkling and pouring as the mode of baptism.”<sup>23</sup> This editorial was followed up the next week with another editorial

in *The Independent*. In the second “Note” Whitsitt supplied the “proof” of his contention with the date of the “introduction of immersion” in England. Whitsitt argued that the “silence of history” regarding the practice of immersion sustained his contention. In a phrase that would later prove to be damaging to Whitsitt, he referred to the year 1641 as the year of the “invention of immersion.”<sup>24</sup> This phrase haunted Whitsitt some sixteen years later as the controversy heated up. Whitsitt published the 1880 editorials anonymously. It was not until after Whitsitt’s election to the presidency that he acknowledged his authorship. E. B. Pollard suggested that Whitsitt wanted his findings to be assessed on “their own merits” and not with the bias that would come from attaching his name and by default his institution. Whitsitt believed wholeheartedly in the validity of his findings, but he had lacked the boldness to publish them under his name.

It was some twelve years before Whitsitt published his historical positions again. This time the opportunity came in a contract with “the Company owning Johnson’s Encyclopedia.” Whitsitt was commissioned “to write all the articles pertaining to Baptist History.”<sup>25</sup> The pay for the task was five hundred dollars in company stock, a sum that Whitsitt said “amounts to nothing.” The publication of these articles, particularly the article on “Baptists,” would cost Whitsitt a great deal. This was the first time that Whitsitt put his name on the claims that he came to almost over a decade before in the *Independent*. The thrust of the article was found in three main claims. First, Whitsitt said that there are “no traces” of the practice of immersion before 1641 in England. Second, Roger Williams was baptized in the year 1639 and the ordinance “was most likely performed by sprinkling.” Whitsitt claimed that his immersion would be improbable since “the immersion of believers had not yet been restored in England.” Third, Believer’s baptism by immersion was not restored in America until 1644. That was the year that Williams returned to the colonies with a charter

for the state of Rhode Island, and he brought the new practice of immersion back with him.<sup>26</sup> To Whitsitt these theses about Baptist history made one thing certain; there was no room in Baptist history for the belief of Baptist succession, the major historical premise of Landmarkism.

Shortly after his installation as president of Southern Seminary, Whitsitt began to receive substantial criticism about his views on Baptists. H. M. King wrote an article in the *Examiner*, a Baptist publication in New York, in March, 1896, questioning Whitsitt's statements concerning the baptism of Roger Williams. King was the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island, the church that was founded by Roger Williams. In the article King called into question the sources that Whitsitt used. Whitsitt responded quickly in the *Examiner* with an explanation as to his research and publication. Whitsitt felt that it was time for him to speak boldly about his research and findings.

He now claimed ownership of all of the findings that he made. He stated that in the year 1878 he "made the discovery" that, prior to 1841, Baptists in England only "practiced sprinkling and pouring." He also claimed that he made known his "discovery" in the *Independent* during the summer and fall of 1880. Whitsitt then mentioned Henry Martyn Dexter, a church historian with whom Whitsitt had corresponded about his research, and stated that Dexter used Whitsitt's research without any credit to Whitsitt. Since his discovery, Whitsitt claimed that many historians published his findings. Whitsitt argued that "this discovery is his own contribution" and that it is "nothing but right that I should defend my property." Whitsitt wanted credit and he was ready to fight for his "property."<sup>27</sup>

Whitsitt brought forth his research in his book, *A Question in Baptist History*. The release of the book in September 1896 attracted immediate attention from all over the South. In the "Introductory" Whitsitt made his feelings clear about the findings that he obtained in 1880 and his right

to them. He began by asserting that the Bible is the ground for all Baptist doctrine, and that "immersion is essential to Christian baptism."<sup>28</sup> Whitsitt suggested that the Bible is the only true "landmark" that Baptists should cling to. The book was 164 pages in length and explained the sources that Whitsitt claimed in support of his position. Whitsitt argued that the "burden of proof rests upon the critics who assert immersion both prior to 1641 and for Roger Williams."<sup>29</sup>

Whitsitt's scientific study of history and his own sense of independence led him to believe strongly in his conclusions. Over a period of time he had taken complete ownership of those conclusions. His bold and independent stance quickly brought a firestorm to his denomination.

#### **"PRAYER AND WAR": THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION IN WILMINGTON, 1897**

The second president of Southern Seminary, John A. Broadus, died on March 16, 1895. In the days immediately following his death, Whitsitt, the longest tenured professor at the seminary, assumed leadership. The faculty elected Whitsitt as chairman of the faculty, a position that carried with it the responsibilities of president until the meeting of the trustees. The election of the president took place in May. Though he was not the only candidate considered by the trustees, after the final vote Whitsitt was able to say, "I was elected President of the Seminary unanimously."<sup>30</sup>

Whitsitt had the great support of the faculty and a retinue of friends. One of his closest friends was the young professor, A. T. Robertson. Robertson was appointed as associate professor in 1890 and upon the death of Broadus, his father-in-law, he assumed the position of professor of New Testament. Robertson remained in that position until his death in 1934. Robertson loyally supported Whitsitt in the controversy. The friends of Whitsitt began to rally around their beleaguered friend. E. Y. Mullins wrote Robertson from New

Hampshire commending him on his support of Whitsitt. Mullins mocked the idea of a “chain of succession” in Baptist history even claiming, “a cap of heresy could be fitted” on the head of those that promote it. He claimed that the argument is really “a matter of such infinitesimal consequence, as compared with other things.”<sup>31</sup>

Those opposed to Whitsitt surely did not see the conflict as “a matter of infinitesimal consequence.” Carter Helm Jones, a Whitsitt supporter, wrote an article in the *Courier-Journal* on September 9, 1896, summarizing the Whitsitt controversy in the local churches. He mentioned that the first attack against Whitsitt came from a pastor outside of Louisville named J. H. Spencer. Spencer invoked the precedent of C. H. Toy’s dismissal from the Seminary. He wrote to the state Baptist paper in Kentucky claiming that Whitsitt’s arguments should be considered “heretical” no less than C. H. Toy’s.<sup>32</sup> The unofficial head of opposition was T. T. Eaton. Eaton was the pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville, the church to which Whitsitt and his family belonged. He was also a trustee of the seminary, the editor of the Kentucky Baptist paper, the *Western Recorder*, and an avowed Landmarker.<sup>33</sup> The *Western Recorder* was at the forefront of the controversy.

The controversy was fought, for the most part, through the newspapers and in Baptists’ annual meetings. Most Landmarkers were of the belief that Whitsitt disqualified himself from the position of president, and possibly even from teaching at the seminary. B. H. Carroll wrote to Eaton in September 1896 saying, “According to manifestations so far, Texas is practically a unit against Dr. Whitsitt and the feeling is *too deep* for dispassionate judgment.”<sup>34</sup> Even though the “feeling” among the people of Texas was running “deep” against Whitsitt, Carroll wrote Robertson and assured him that he would “give Dr. Whitsitt a patient, thorough, and loving hearing before I write anything for the public.”<sup>35</sup> Whitsitt’s supporters were relying on Carroll’s fairness and plotted ways to gain his endorsement. They needed

a public forum where Whitsitt could speak for himself. They needed the trustees of the seminary to come out in full support of Whitsitt. This could happen at the next trustee meeting, which was at the same time as the Southern Baptist Convention in Wilmington, North Carolina, in May 1897. The friends of Whitsitt prepared for “prayer and war.”<sup>36</sup>

In the months leading up to the Wilmington convention Whitsitt’s friends began to make sure that the friendly trustees would be there and that they would vote in the proper way. One friend, J. O. Rust, who was counting votes, wrote to Robertson claiming “if we win, we are the convention; the others are seceders.”<sup>37</sup> Robertson, who was not able to attend the Convention, spent much time writing to William E. Hatcher as to the strategy for Wilmington. Hatcher, a Richmond, Virginia, pastor and seminary trustee, led the Whitsitt campaign. Hatcher wrote to Robertson noting his “anxiety” over the situation. He believed that the enemies were working hard and Whitsitt’s friends were thinking that “the excitement was over.”<sup>38</sup> Hatcher stated that it was Robertson’s job to watch Eaton, “the arch-schemer,” and not let him “pack the delegation” from Kentucky. Robertson was to find the friendly trustees in Kentucky and get them to Wilmington. The reason was that they “must fight for a ripping majority, and get in notes to end this thing forever.”<sup>39</sup> The friends of Whitsitt met in Wilmington before the trustee meeting to finalize their plans.<sup>40</sup> Just one week before the convention Hatcher wrote to both Robertson and Whitsitt and stated his optimism. He believed that “the situation is brightening.” The enemies of Whitsitt seemed to be the party of “wrangling” and the friends of Whitsitt appeared to be for peace.<sup>41</sup> The only question was the position of Carroll. Carroll was coming to Wilmington but he did not speak publicly about the controversy as he promised Robertson before. Over the previous year, Carroll was very sick and writing little correspondence. Hatcher believed, through J. B. Gambrell, that “Carroll is not going to fight.” In fact, he was

“sure that he will practically fight with us.”<sup>42</sup>

On May 6, 1897, the night before the convention, the board of trustees of Southern Seminary gathered for their annual meeting at Wilmington. Late in the afternoon, the Whitsitt case came before the group by way of a resolution from B. H. Carroll. Carroll’s resolution, which was not recorded in the minutes of the meeting, sought to deal with Whitsitt’s “historical teaching.” Carroll later published his resolution in the *Texas Baptist Standard*. The main thrust of the resolution was that the board of trustees look into the statements by Whitsitt and “pronounce upon them clearly according to our best judgment of the facts and merits of the case.”<sup>43</sup> Carroll believed that the trustees were the proper judges in the case and he was requesting the convention until the trustees could make a full report. Upon the reading of the resolution “it was promptly seconded and stated by the moderator.”<sup>44</sup> However, the friends of Whitsitt were prepared and answered quickly.

W. J. Northen, former governor of Georgia, immediately offered up a substitute resolution.<sup>45</sup> With some discussion of the substitute Resolution the trustees adjourned to meet again to finish the discussion. Whitsitt’s friends hoped to put an end to the Whitsitt matter once and for all. Hatcher wrote that “We must fortify against a compromise ... this thing ought to be settled this year.”<sup>46</sup> The goal was to “protect” the seminary from further embarrassment, and the only way for that to be accomplished was the clear support of Whitsitt by the trustees.

At 8:30 p. m. the trustees gathered again to discuss Northen’s substitute Resolution. After some discussion the Northen resolution passed. It disavowed any need to investigate Whitsitt’s ideas and asserted the faculty’s freedom of research. The resolution acknowledged “our cordial and thorough adherence to the fundamental articles” of the seminary, also their commitment to hold the faculty to those standards in teaching. But the main thrust of the resolution was freedom:

We cannot undertake to sit in judgment upon questions of Baptist history which do not imperil any of those principles concerning which all Baptists are agreed, but concerning which serious conscientious and scholarly students are not agreed.<sup>47</sup>

The resolution continued to say that it is the duty of the trustees and Southern Baptists to allow the “utmost patience in research and the greatest discretion in utterance to foster rather than to repress the spirit of earnest and reverent investigation.”<sup>48</sup>

After the adoption of the resolution, trustees decided that Whitsitt himself should address the board and “make such statement as he may wish.”<sup>49</sup> The next morning Whitsitt came before the board and delivered a statement that answered the three main charges brought against him. First, he dealt with the editorials that were written in the *Independent* in 1880. Whitsitt admitted “he long felt” these articles were a “mistake.” Amazingly, he argued that he wrote those articles from a “Pedobaptist standpoint with a view to stimulating historical research.” This statement would be one that Whitsitt would soon regret even more than the articles. Second, Whitsitt stated that he would do whatever was needed to remove the offensive material that was in *Johnson’s Cyclopaedia*. Third, a charge had been brought against Whitsitt about a comment that he had made in private. Eaton had heard Whitsitt state that a woman that is married to a pedobaptist must follow her husband in membership to a pedobaptist church. Whitsitt answered that “obedience to God’s demands is above every other duty.” Finally, Whitsitt reaffirmed his belief that Baptists began immersing in 1641, since it derived from “patient and honest research.” Whitsitt closed with a resounding declaration and reassurance that “I am Baptist.”<sup>50</sup>

Immediately after the reading of the statement some members of the board sang the hymn, “How Firm a Foundation.” Also, the minutes of the meeting recorded that “the Members of the Board pressed forward to grasp the hand of Presi-

dent Whitsitt.” Clearly the board saw this as a statement of support on behalf of Whitsitt. The next step in the plan was to take this to the people of the convention. It was decided that the resolution accepted be read before the Convention that afternoon, and Carroll moved that Whitsitt’s statement be read along with it.<sup>51</sup>

That afternoon “a communication” was presented to the convention from the board of trustees “as information.”<sup>52</sup> The report, read by Hatcher, concluded by painting a picture of the scene. During the singing of “How Firm a Foundation,” the statement said, “amid flowing tears and many expressions of satisfaction and joy, the members of the board pressed forward and gave Dr. Whitsitt the right hand of fellowship and confidence.”<sup>53</sup> The report closed with the reminder to the Convention “that this statement is for information and not for action.”<sup>54</sup>

The plan put in place by Whitsitt’s friends was perceived as a victory. William Hatcher sent Robertson a quick note on May 7 that simply read, “Praise the Lord the agony over result most glorious.”<sup>55</sup> A. C. Dargan, professor of homiletics at the seminary, quickly sent Robertson a statement with the good news. He wrote, “Dr. W’s statement was manly,” and while it did not satisfy everyone “it is a glorious victory for the [seminary] and a blessing to our dear Uncle Billy.”<sup>56</sup> The papers in Louisville were quick to pronounce the victory as well. After describing the events at the Convention, the *Courier-Journal* reported that the trustees “had refused to put Dr. Whitsitt on trial.” Upon the presentation of this news, the paper stated, “the mighty throng arose, and with song and happy tears gave Dr. Whitsitt an ovation unparalleled in religious bodies.”<sup>57</sup> The author made the clear announcement, “Here ends the most serious dissension which has vexed the Baptist denomination for a generation.” Even the Landmarker T. T. Eaton seemed satisfied with the results of the Wilmington Convention. He wrote to his wife on the day of the report, “If Whitsitt had said a year ago what he said today, the situation would have been

very different.... Hope the air will now be clear.”<sup>58</sup>

Writing to A. T. Robertson, William Hatcher wrote to bemoan the fact that Robertson was not in Wilmington. He wrote, “you would have been taken into our council of ‘prayer and war’ with pleasure and profit to us.” He went on to report how the friends of Whitsitt went about the battle: “We treated their attack on Dr. W. as a disease and dosed them with palliatives.”<sup>59</sup> I. J. Van Ness, the editor of the *Christian Index*, wrote to Robertson in a celebratory fashion, “It was indeed a victory.” This was important for Van Ness because the alternative to victory was the “death kneil” of the seminary.<sup>60</sup> W. R. L. Smith wrote that “the freedom of scholarly research was maintained, and that is occasion for joy.”<sup>61</sup>

### **THE “IDOL OF TEXAS”:**

#### **B. H. CARROLL AND “THE FREEDOM OF SCHOLARLY RESEARCH”**

Upon his return home from Wilmington, Whitsitt took the “earliest opportunity” to report to the students the “satisfactory” action of the trustees and the convention. Whitsitt’s address to the students was clear as to the meaning of the victory. He proclaimed, “Freedom of research and freedom of teaching when coupled with direction in utterance and kept within the limits that have been set by the fundamental articles of institution was vindicated.”<sup>62</sup> Whitsitt painted himself as the hero of the Baptist cause and as one vindicated in his handling of the Seminary. He said that the actions of the trustees were “what I had hoped for” but the reaction by the Convention was “beyond all my dreams.” However, Whitsitt stated that this is no time to “exult” but one must be humble, prayerful, prudent, considerate, and diligent after the truth. Whitsitt said that there was no need for further argumentation because, “we have just passed in safety the most threatening crisis in the history of Southern Baptists.” Whitsitt was proud to serve the denomination for the first time in his life. The “religious fervor” of Wilmington reminded him of the “noblest passages in our Baptist



history.”<sup>63</sup> Whitsitt’s assessment was premature.

Upon his return to Texas, B. H. Carroll was besieged with questions concerning the action of the trustees in the Whitsitt case. The Texas Baptists were not happy with Whitsitt and “the desire to condemn Whitsitt’s views were everywhere expressed.”<sup>64</sup> The resolution offered by Carroll at the Trustee meeting was at the request of the Texas Baptists. The thrust of the resolution was over the jurisdiction of the case. Carroll’s resolution centered upon the obligation of the elected board of trustees to consider the Whitsitt case and make a proper judgment. Carroll believed that the trustees, as agents of the Convention, were the proper agents to judge in the case. However, Whitsitt and his friends saw the issue completely differently.

The substitute resolution adopted by the trustees refused “to sit in judgment on questions in Baptist history which do not imperil any of those principles concerning which all Baptists are agreed, but concerning which serious, conscientious and scholarly students are not agreed.” It also argued that in order for the seminary to remain “useful” to Southern Baptists it was the “duty” of the trustees to “foster rather than to repress the spirit of earnest and reverent investigation.”<sup>65</sup> Carroll believed that this resolution was dangerous, for it was “as silent as the grave on the merits of the case.” Even worse, Carroll thought that the idea that the trustees “cannot undertake to sit in judgment” meant the death of the seminary.<sup>66</sup> Carroll took up his pen against the resolution.

On May 20, 1897, Carroll responded with an article in the *Texas Baptist Standard*. In this article he corrected the errors that were reported about the convention at Wilmington. He began by stating, “The facts of the case are not before the people.” He clarified what he meant by pointing out that “they do not appear in the newspaper reports, nor in the swift-winged, many hued rumors.”<sup>67</sup> Carroll said that the idea that Whitsitt was tried for heresy, that he was fully exonerated by the con-

vention, and that the announcement was followed by “a jubilee of song, joy and handshaking” was all “manufactured history.” Carroll clarified that there was no trial, and therefore no acquittal, and that the only people shaking his hand were “students and other friends.” Carroll was upset at the perceived results of the Wilmington convention and was ready to do battle for what he believed was the main principles in the case.

Carroll believed the central issue in the Whitsitt case was the proper relationship of the seminary to the convention. As the events of Wilmington played out, he thought that the convention was at a crossroads with its relationship to the school. The ruling of the trustees in Wilmington and the spin that Whitsitt’s friends placed upon the results were unacceptable to Carroll. He contended that “there must be jurisdiction somewhere.” Carroll argued that the jurisdiction was not in the convention proper or the local churches and associations. Jurisdiction, Carroll believed, must be in the trustees, and if they declare, “We cannot undertake to judge’ then there is no tribunal,” then there is no relationship.<sup>68</sup> It was because of this simple clause that Carroll said he could not vote for the resolution.

Carroll believed that the resolution adopted by the board of trustees placed the future of the seminary in a perilous position. If the trustees could not judge on “historic” principles “about which good men are not agreed,” then that leaves the door open for all kinds of beliefs. Even though the Abstract of Principles might not directly address such issues, it was still the duty of the trustees to judge the teaching. Carroll used the issue of “Higher Criticism” as an example. On July 22, 1897, Carroll published a sermon that he preached at First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas.<sup>69</sup> The thrust of the sermon was the “death” that resulted when seminaries gave any toleration to liberalism. The point of the sermon was clear. Unless the trustees took responsibility to investigate Whitsitt and the seminary, then it would suffer death also. This was Carroll’s great fear. He wrote, “It can-

not be denied that there is an alarming tendency in theological seminaries to drift away from the simplicity of the gospel of Jesus, and that sad fact calls for unassuming vigilance.”<sup>70</sup>

On August 5, 1897, Carroll stated that the only thing that could protect the seminary and the convention would be the “voluntary resignation of Dr. Whitsitt.”<sup>71</sup> Carroll explained,

As I expect to stand before the judgment bar and answer to my Lord for my conduct and stewardship on earth, I do solemnly aver and avow that the main question in the case is not Eaton vs. Whitsitt, is not a mere question of English Baptist history, is not, “shall Landmarkism be arbitrarily forced on the Seminary for dogmatic teaching,” is not this or that theory of organic church succession, is not traditionalism versus the Scriptures.... I fear there are extremists on both sides working hard to make this unfortunate matter an occasion of rending the Convention.... It is better to let the Seminary perish than to split the Southern Baptist Convention.... I solemnly affirm that it is better to sever absolutely the connection between the Seminary and the Convention than for the Convention to be disrupted.<sup>72</sup>

If the “freedom of scholarly research” meant that the seminary was not under the judgment of the convention, then Carroll believed it was time to sever ties to the seminary.

On June 19, 1897, A. T. Robertson received a letter from professor John R. Sampey about the situation with Whitsitt. Sampey was touring the Middle East at the time and the news had traveled slowly to him. Writing from Alexandria, Egypt, Sampey was ecstatic. “How I rejoice that the crisis in our history has been safely passed,” Sampey wrote, “and that the cause of freedom and enlightenment has been victorious!” After calling Whitsitt’s “Address to the Students” a “gem,” Sampey urged, “we must try to heal all wounds, though not by surrendering the ground we have won by

swords.”<sup>73</sup> That ground was about to be overrun.

The editor of Georgia’s *Christian Index* and Whitsitt supporter, I. J. Van Ness, told Robertson that he was “not pleased with Dr. Carroll’s article.” He was “not a fan” of the “idol of Texas.”<sup>74</sup> Van Ness believed that people would dismiss Carroll as “Texas bossism” and that, therefore, Whitsitt would be fine. Carroll’s “opposition” would “die.”<sup>75</sup> William Hatcher, the mastermind in the Wilmington plan, wrote about Carroll’s position to the trustees by stating that “Carroll can never be a leader in our ranks any longer.” Hatcher attacked the opposition to Whitsitt as “truly demoniacal” and “deadly orthodoxy of the letter.” Hatcher was ready to continue his policy of full support of Whitsitt against “an Ephesian mob.”<sup>76</sup> However, C. S. Gardner the pastor of First Baptist of Greenville, South Carolina, had a different idea of the influence of Carroll. He wrote to Robertson, “I think Carroll is the man whom we now have to fear.”<sup>77</sup> Gardner’s fears were quickly realized.

Carroll’s influence became evident far beyond Texas and the West. J. W. Bailey, the editor of the *Biblical Recorder*, wrote to Robertson to tell him that most of North Carolina had turned against Whitsitt after previously supporting him. After assessing the situation, Bailey stated that the sentiment was “overwhelming” that Whitsitt should resign. He told Robertson that “I know the Seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention will lose the confidence of our people if Dr. Whitsitt remains.” Bailey also defended Carroll’s actions. He argued that he would fight for Whitsitt if Eaton was the one leading the opposition, but with Carroll joining the fight the issue was more serious. The arguments of Carroll convinced many of the leaders of North Carolina to push for the resignation of Whitsitt.<sup>78</sup> Van Ness admitted that with North Carolina “gone,” then the “line of battle is broken.” Also, he was afraid that “South Carolina shows signs of breaking.”<sup>79</sup> The turning of North Carolina and South Carolina were just the tip of the iceberg as far as Bailey was concerned. He again wrote to Robertson to try and open his

eyes to the situation. He said, "I still think that Dr. Whitsitt and his closest advisors are blind to the real state of affairs." Bailey went on, "if Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, half of Alabama, Georgia, all of Arkansas, and North Carolina, with half of Kentucky and Tennessee, with a few scattering in Virginia" are against Whitsitt then the Convention is heading toward a split. He felt that the only thing that could stop that was the resignation of Whitsitt. Carroll promised with "strongest assurance" that with the resignation the "fight would stop."<sup>80</sup>

As the year progressed the two sides in the debate became more and more polarized. Plans were made to set up another battle at the Norfolk meeting of the SBC in 1898. That battle did not come to pass. Many leaders were not happy with the way that Eaton and the *Western Recorder* attacked Whitsitt, but Carroll's influence was still strong. The only action of the trustees was to appoint new trustees and offer a resolution that was written by Carroll. The resolution asked the Convention to look into the relationship between the seminary and the Convention. The resolution stated that the purpose of the relationship between the Seminary and Convention was "unity in mission" and this "unity in mission work is more important than unity in seminary work." Therefore, they resolved,

That this Convention without expressing any opinion whatever on the merits of the controversy concerning Seminary matters, about which good brethren among us honestly differ, but in the interest of harmony, particularly with a view to preserve and confirm unity in mission work, does now exercise its evident right to divest itself of responsibility in the Seminary management, by dissolving the slight and remote bond of connection between this body and the Seminary; that is, that this body declines to nominate trustees for the Seminary or entertain motions or receive reports relative thereto, leaving that Institution to stand on its own merits and be managed by its own trustees.<sup>81</sup>

Carroll had already invoked the heritage of Boyce and Broadus as it concerned the seminary and the relationship to the Convention. He offered, "When Dr. Broadus died, the Seminary was in the hearts of all our people ... its faculty was welcome at every state convention in the South. In two years time under the present executive, and by his own course, what a sad change! The wisdom of thirty years reared an imposing structure, a veritable lighthouse, and two years of unwisdom threatens it with overthrow."<sup>82</sup>

All of this was more than Whitsitt could withstand. A little over thirteen months since his return from Wilmington and declaration of victory to his students, he tendered his resignation from the seminary. Carroll successfully shifted the thrust of the controversy from Whitsitt's historical views to the future control of the seminary. Many of the friends that had so staunchly supported Whitsitt began to see the need of his resignation. Van Ness finally urged that "Whitsitt cannot bring victory, he must resign."<sup>83</sup> Even Robertson in the end urged Whitsitt to resign. He believed that, "the denomination did not want another campaign"; so, in order to avoid it, Whitsitt could "go with dignity and grace."<sup>84</sup> On July 14, 1898, Whitsitt wrote to Robertson, "I have sent my resignation to Mr. Levering," the trustee chairman.<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Upon Whitsitt's death in 1911, E. B. Pollard took up his pen to memorialize his friend. He characterized Whitsitt as "gentle as a woman, guileless as Nathaniel, as devout as Francis, but in matter of conscience and conviction, he was a Luther."<sup>86</sup> The comparison with Luther would probably have satisfied Whitsitt. As he prepared his "Farewell Address" to the seminary community he was prepared to take his stand much like Luther at the Diet of Worms. After giving appreciation to the people of Louisville, the authorities of the seminary, his fellow faculty, and his many students, Whitsitt desired "to make a part-

ing request.” He asked that “all who have ever studied with me in the Theological Seminary ... to maintain and industriously to proclaim the fundamental Baptist doctrine of the universal spiritual church.” This doctrine, Whitsitt urged, is “the very citadel of Baptist orthodoxy.” The loss of this doctrine among Baptists comes from an “inexplicable freak of history,” and the recapturing of this doctrine has become the “issue of the hour among us.” Whitsitt explained, “It would be the keenest satire of history if our beloved Denomination should disown and forsake the fundamental Baptist principle of the universal, spiritual church, and should embrace the contradictory opposite doctrine of general, visible church, and of visible church succession.”<sup>87</sup> Whitsitt saw himself as a modern Luther. He fought against the Catholic nature of the Landmark view of church succession. He argued that the spiritual nature of the church had been lost in the “third century.” To make his point clear he asked, “Are we to follow the sad example of the Christians of the third century?” Just as Luther fought against the Catholic Church, Whitsitt fought against the catholic view of church. Pollard urged that Whitsitt would never give up a principle in which he believed. When the possibility was suggested, Whitsitt replied, “I’d die *dead* first.”<sup>88</sup> Here he stood before the seminary community, and before the denomination, and he was making his stand; he could do no other.

On Founder’s Day 1954, W. O. Carver gave an address entitled, “William Heth Whitsitt: The Seminary’s Martyr.” Picking up on the theme that was implied in Whitsitt’s own speech, Carver believed that the Whitsitt controversy, culminating in Whitsitt’s resignation, had secured “a new and continuing recognition of the right and responsibility of Baptists for free research.”<sup>89</sup> Carver urged that Whitsitt “actually won his contention and that his victory” was evident in the fact that W. J. McGlothlin, who succeeded Whitsitt as professor of church history at the seminary, was in complete agreement with Whitsitt’s find-

ings in the history of the Baptists. The hiring of E. Y. Mullins as the next president was further evidence, since he was in agreement with Whitsitt. Carver’s interpretation was accurate in important respects, but did not give the full story.

It became clear in the summer of 1897 that for many Southern Baptists, the real issue of the case was the relationship between the seminary and the convention. At Wilmington, Whitsitt seems to have averted the danger that was before him concerning his positions in Baptist history. Even Eaton, his most prominent foe, seemed satisfied. However, when Carroll pressed the issue of denominational control, most Southern Baptists applauded. Whitsitt may have been victorious in the issue of history, but his resignation represented the denomination’s commitment to the Convention’s control of the seminary. The seminary would always have to answer to the people.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>William H. Whitsitt, “Dr. Whitsitt’s Address to the Students,” Correspondence—Whitsitt Controversy, B. H. Carroll Collection, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup>The author wants to express thanks to Gregory A. Wills. Without the many conversations and his assistance with the sources, this article would not have materialized. It was providential that Dr. Wills was working on his chapter about Whitsitt for his forthcoming book, *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859-2009*, at the same time this article was being written. While we came to our conclusions independently, his influence is seen in this article.

<sup>3</sup>E. B. Pollard, “The Life and Work of William Heth Whitsitt,” *Review and Expositor* 9 (1912): 159.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>W. O. Carver, “William Heth Whitsitt: The Seminary’s Martyr,” *Review and Expositor* 51 (1954): 449.

<sup>6</sup>Pollard, “Life and Work,” 160.

<sup>7</sup>William H. Whitsitt to John A Broadus, 25 March 1872, Broadus Papers, Archives and Special Collections, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS).

- <sup>8</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup>William H. Whitsitt to John A. Broadus, 4 April 1872, Broadus Papers.
- <sup>10</sup>J. B. Jeter to John A. Broadus, 16 February 1872, Broadus Papers.
- <sup>11</sup>Pollard, "Life and Work," 164.
- <sup>12</sup>John R. Sampey to A. T. Robertson, Robertson Papers, Archives and Special Collections, SBTS.
- <sup>13</sup>William H. Whitsitt, Personal Papers, Reel 1, Microfilm, SBTS.
- <sup>14</sup>William E. Hull, "William Heth Whitsitt: Martyrdom of a Moderate," in *Distinctively Baptist: Essays on Baptist History* (ed Marc A. Jolley; Macon, GA: Mercer University), 244.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid., 251.
- <sup>16</sup>William H. Whitsitt, Journal, c. 1 January 1875, 248-49, Whitsitt Papers, Archives and Special Collections, SBTS.
- <sup>17</sup>William H. Whitsitt, Journal, c. 1 January 1874, 248-49, Whitsitt Papers.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., 266.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid., 265.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., 280.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., 284.
- <sup>22</sup>Charles Basil Bugg, "The Whitsitt Controversy: A Study in Denominational Conflict," (Th.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 75.
- <sup>23</sup>[William H. Whitsitt], "Editorial Notes," *The Independent*, September 2, 1880, 17.
- <sup>24</sup>[William H. Whitsitt], "Editorial Notes," *The Independent*, September 9, 1880, 16.
- <sup>25</sup>William H. Whitsitt, Diary, 5 March 1892, quoted in Mary Whitsitt Whitehead, "Excerpts from the Diary of William Heth Whitsitt for W. O. Carver," W. O. Carver Papers, Archives and Special Collection, SBTS.
- <sup>26</sup>William H. Whitsitt, "Baptists," in *Johnson's Universal Cyclopedia* (new ed.; ed. Charles Kendall Adams; New York: A. J. Johnson, 1893), 1:490-93.
- <sup>27</sup>William H. Whitsitt, "Baptist History," *The Examiner*, 23 April 1896, 5.
- <sup>28</sup>William H. Whitsitt, *A Question in Baptist History* (Louisville, KY: Chas. T. Dearing, 1896), 5. It must be noted that at this time most all Baptist histori-
- ans had accepted the 1641 date as the first known date that immersion was practiced, however, no one would assert the certainty that Whitsitt had that there was no immersion before the date. The "argument from silence" was not strong enough for such a claim. Whitsitt believed it was.
- <sup>29</sup>James Thomas Meigs, "The Whitsitt Controversy," *The Quarterly Review*, 31 (1972): 46.
- <sup>30</sup>Whitsitt, "Excerpts from the Diary," 30 September 1895.
- <sup>31</sup>E. Y. Mullins to A. T. Robertson, 6 September 1896, A. T. Robertson Papers.
- <sup>32</sup>Carter Helm Jones, "The Recorder," *Courier-Journal*, 9 September 1896.
- <sup>33</sup>C. Ferris Johnson, *Thomas Treadwell Eaton: Pastor, Controversialist, and Denominational Servant* (Th.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1965).
- <sup>34</sup>B. H. Carroll to T. T. Eaton, 11 September 1896, Eaton Papers, Archives and Special Collections, SBTS.
- <sup>35</sup>B. H. Carroll to A. T. Robertson, 27 August 1896, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>36</sup>William Hatcher to A. T. Robertson, 18 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>37</sup>J. O. Rust to A. T. Robertson, 1 January 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>38</sup>William E. Hatcher to A. T. Robertson, 11 April 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup>William E. Hatcher to A. T. Robertson, 27 April, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup>B. H. Carroll, "The Whitsitt Case at Wilmington" in *The Texas Baptist Standard*, 20 May 1897, 1.
- <sup>44</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup>"Minutes of the Board of Trustees," May 1897, 221, Archives and Special Collections, SBTS.
- <sup>46</sup>William E. Hatcher to A. T. Robertson, 19 April 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>47</sup>"Minutes of the Board of Trustees" May 1897, 222.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid.

- <sup>50</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup>"Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention held at Wilmington, N.C., May 7-10, 1897, 14.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup>William Hatcher to A. T. Robertson, 7 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>56</sup>E. C. Dargan to A. T. Robertson, 7 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>57</sup>"Peacefully the Whitsitt Case was Ended Yesterday," *The Courier-Journal*. 8 May 1897. Robertson Papers, Archives and Special Collections, SBTS.
- <sup>58</sup>T. T. Eaton to Alice, 7 May 1897. Eaton Papers. Eaton understood Whitsitt's speech as a thorough retraction of his views, except the 1641 position. Note that Eaton was satisfied with this position.
- <sup>59</sup>William Hatcher to A. T. Robertson, 19 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>60</sup>I. J. Van Ness to A. T. Robertson, 17 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>61</sup>W. R. L. Smith to A. T. Robertson, 18 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>62</sup>William H. Whitsitt, "Dr. Whitsitt's Address to the Students," Correspondence—Whitsitt Controversy, B. H. Carroll Collection.
- <sup>63</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>64</sup>Robert A. Baker, *Tell the Generations Following: A History of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary 1908-1983* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983), 91.
- <sup>65</sup>B. H. Carroll, "The Whitsitt Case at Wilmington," 1.
- <sup>66</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup>B. H. Carroll, "Theological Seminaries and Wild-Gourds," *The Baptist Standard*, 22 July 1897, 6.
- <sup>70</sup>B. H. Carroll, "A Word in Passing on the Seminary Issue," *The Baptist Standard*, 9 September 1897, 5.
- <sup>71</sup>B. H. Carroll, "The Real Issue in the Whitsitt Case," *The Baptist Standard*, 5 August 1897, 5.
- <sup>72</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup>John R. Sampey to A. T. Robertson, 19 June 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>74</sup>I. J. Van Ness to A. T. Robertson, 26 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>75</sup>I. J. Van Ness to A. T. Robertson, 31 May 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>76</sup>William Hatcher to A. T. Robertson, 15 July 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>77</sup>C. S. Gardner to A. T. Robertson, 10 August 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>78</sup>J. W. Bailey to A. T. Robertson, 9 August 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>79</sup>I. J. Van Ness to A. T. Robertson, 11 August 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>80</sup>J. W. Bailey to A. T. Robertson, 1 September 1897, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>81</sup>"Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1898," 22-23.
- <sup>82</sup>Carroll, "The Real Issue in the Whitsitt Case."
- <sup>83</sup>I. J. Van Ness to A.T. Robertson, 11 July 1898, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>84</sup>A.T. Robertson to E.C. Dargan, 21 July 1898, Dargan Papers.
- <sup>85</sup>William Whitsitt to A.T. Robertson, 14 July 1898, Robertson Papers.
- <sup>86</sup>Pollard, "Life and Work," 183.
- <sup>87</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>88</sup>Ibid, (emphasis in original).
- <sup>89</sup>Carver, "William Heth Whitsitt," 468.