

# Postscript on Biblical Authority: Thinking Together, Memory and Meaning

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"Memorial Day weekend reminds us to remember. Memories of the past can provide meaning for the present.

"In our recent denominational controversy, one of the arguments involved memory. 'What Baptists have always believed' has become part of the issue. But unless we are careful, we will become, as one writer has put it, 'victims of recent bad history.'"

"That is, when most of us talk about 'what Baptists have always believed' we are talking about what we have always believed. Or what, at most, our theological fathers have always believed. But if we would go back just a bit further, we would find those memories, and subsequently their meanings, changing considerably."

"The issue in the convention is not over the Bible. It may be over a lot of other things, but it is most assuredly not over the Bible. It may be over power, and 'ins' versus the 'outs,' but it is not over the Bible. It may be over non-denominationally sponsored institutions versus denominationally sponsored institutions, but it is not over the Bible. It may be over those who believe in a 'go get 'em' theology versus a 'we grow 'em' theology, but it is not over the Bible. It may be over old party alliances — 'evangelism' people versus 'ethics' people — but it is not over the Bible. It may be over licking old wounds — 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are on edge' — but it is not over the Bible. It may be over theories of inspiration, but it is not over the Bible.

"This denomination, and I mean by that, its officers and its teachers and its leadership, are overwhelmingly and unquestionably agreed that the Bible is wholly and totally true. What it means may be a question at some points, but whether what it means is authoritative is not a question at any point. How it was inspired may be a question, but if it was inspired is not a question. Where the Bible brings us its truth in a literal line or figurative picture may be a question, but whether it brings us truth is not a question.

"And furthermore, those who are doing the shrill talking know that — and that's what bothers me the most. They constantly accuse others of 'hiding behind pious cliches and smokescreens of empty assurances' (to quote Paige Patterson in the latest issue of Shoppar,

the official publication of the Criswell Center for Bible Studies), and arrogantly asking 'Is there a champion among the Philistines? Let him come forth!' Well, I am neither a Philistine nor a champion, but I've got a pebble or two I'd like to put in a sling."

"Why don't these people admit their agenda? Why don't they simply list the particular doctrines for which they have particular interpretations, which alone determine whether they think someone believes the Bible is 'wholly and totally true,' I am referring to certain interpretations of the far ends of the Bible, Genesis and Revelation; the verbal 'plenary' area of inspiration; and a selected number of other interpretations of doctrines, such as the atonement, which were not in vogue until quite recent times, and were not held by either W. T. Conner or E. Y. Mullins, the two most important theologians Southern Baptist have produced."

"Why don't they admit that a certain brand of churchmanship is also involved? That it is obvious that they cannot and will not tolerate diversity of gifts among the body, that they have utterly no patience with the more reflective, ethically oriented, transcendent emphases in worship and Christian service. That they have a terminal case of statistical superiority based on their cultural midwifery, but which is equally obviously unwarranted if you check their conservation records (churches who baptize 400 to 700 a year and whose Sunday Schools increase 50 a year are scarcely models of evangelistic victory.) Furthermore, many of the pastors who will have absolutely nothing to do with their movement whatsoever, baptize as many or more and have growing Sunday Schools and church memberships.

"The issue is not the Bible. The issue is a particular, specific, independent Baptist or even non-Baptist brand of theological shibboleths, coupled with hyper-fundamentalist meanness and power politics.

"I don't like the mixture. If force-fed to the denomination, it will make the Baptist body sick. I'm going to fight it.

"And by the way, if they want a 'test' of the 'orthodoxy' of churches, let them compare the total mission giving of their churches versus others of the same size — that would be instructive!"