

Southern Baptists: Who Are We?

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Every summer while I was growing up in Texas, our family of four went on vacation to the Rocky Mountains. Like typical kids, my sister and I asked a million and one times, "Are we almost there?" It didn't take Mom and Dad long to realize that it was in their own best interest to distract us in order to make the time pass as quickly as possible. One of the ways they accomplished this was to teach us games we could play in the car. One of these "car games" which we played more than once was "Who am I?" One person would think up a personality or character and then ask "Who am I?" The rest of us would try to guess the identity. Whoever guessed correctly won that round. The ideal questioning process narrowed down the possible answers by moving from the general ("Are you living? Are you female?") to the more specific ("Are you a baseball player? movie star? singer?") to the highly particular ("Did you play on the 1964 Yankees team that lost to the Cardinals in the World series?"). By such a narrowing-down process we could eventually guess the identity of the unknown character.

In almost every area of life, discovering identity involves narrowing down from the general to the more specific to the highly particular. This is certainly true of religious groups. Let's pretend that our convention of Southern Baptists is playing "Who Am I?" with the world at large. How would we identify ourselves as a people or as a corporate body?

Christians by Calling

First, we offer the general answer: we are Christians. Above all else we might say to describe

4 *Campus Minister*

Christ. To make this claim is to join the first-century disciples who boldly proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord." Such a statement identifies us as a part of the larger Body of Christ which shares a common confession of the Lordship and Headship of Jesus.

Tied to this general claim are a number of other faith-statements which we freely make along with other Christians from numerous denominations. For example, we believe that the *Bible* is the inspired word of God. It records God's mighty acts of redemption on behalf of the fallen human race. It points us to salvation in Jesus Christ. We also believe that *God* is the creator and sustainer of the world and that His purpose is to draw this world unto himself through His Son. We believe this is necessary because humankind, although created in the image of God and made for Him, has been corrupted through *sin*. Humans are alienated from God and cannot save themselves from moral and eternal doom. But we believe that God, in His grace, sent *Jesus Christ*, His one and only Son, into the world to reconcile the world to Himself. This Jesus, the eternal Word of God made flesh, was born of a virgin, lived a life of moral perfection, died an innocent and sacrificial death for our sins, and was raised from the dead to give us new life. Furthermore, we believe that to taste this *salvation*, that is, to avail ourselves of the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection, we must reject sin as a way of life, place faith in Jesus as Saviour and Messiah, and follow Him as Lord. We believe that the *Holy Spirit*, who is the invisible presence of Jesus, indwells all believers and bestows spiritual gifts upon them to serve Christ in His body, which is the *church*. We believe that this Body has both a universal form composed of all believers of all time, and a local form, as seen in any individual congregation of believers. The rite of admission into the church is baptism and the sacred meal is the Lord's Supper. Finally, we believe that God will consummate His redemption activity in the world on the *last day* by sending His Son back to earth to raise the dead, to judge both believers and unbelievers, and to establish the eternal orders of heaven and hell.

In confessing these bedrock beliefs, we place ourselves squarely in the tradition of evangelical

Christianity throughout the history of the church. Orthodox believers within every Christian denomination, including Southern Baptists, have held to these tenets over centuries. Southern Baptists are indeed Christians first and foremost. But even a casual glance at the church worldwide indicates that there are numerous groupings and families of believers who claim Jesus as Lord. Given that reality, exactly where do we fit into the larger family of Christians? To identify who we really are we need to narrow down the options a little.

Baptists by Conviction

Of the many families of faith within Christianity, we have intentionally chosen to identify with one called Baptists. We are Baptist Christians by conviction. This choice does not radically affect our beliefs on many of the basic Christian teachings mentioned above. In fact, Baptists still agree with the majority of professing orthodox Christians from other denominations on the doctrines of revelation and the Bible, God, humankind and sin, Jesus Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit, the church, and last things.

Baptists do, however, differ radically with many other Christians on the nature of the church. That issue sets us apart as Baptists. For example, we believe that a local church should govern itself congregationally. Each member should seek the will of Christ for the church, then the church should follow its chosen direction under Christ. This view of church polity stands in contradistinction from monarchical or autocratic rule, as seen in the Roman Catholic Church, from episcopal rule, as seen in the Lutheran church, and from representative rule, as seen in the Presbyterian church.

Baptists also believe that the rites of baptism and the Lord's Supper do not bestow grace in and of themselves, but are commemorative and symbolic. For this reason Baptists refer to them as *ordinances*, not sacraments. We believe that *baptism* is reserved for believers only, not for infants of believers; that the proper mode is immersion, not sprinkling; and that the meaning

6 *Campus Minister*

centers in public witness to the physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is a type of our own spiritual death and resurrection. In reference to the *Lord's Supper*, we believe that the elements represent the body and the blood of Christ and never actually or quasi-spiritually become the body and the blood. The Supper reminds believers of the ultimate and final sacrifice which Jesus paid for our sins. As such, it can never be repeated.

Furthermore, Baptists believe that there are only two church officers, the pastor (bishop or elder) and the deacon (presbyter). No biblical warrant exists for the church offices of priest, archbishop, cardinal and the like. The New Testament provides for only two offices, and Baptists believe that this normative guideline protects the church from the sinful tendency to self-serving power which generally accompanies religious hierarchy.

Finally, Baptists believe in the separation of church and state. These are two distinct institutions with two distinct purposes. The purpose of the church is to witness to the Kingdom of God by means of missions, evangelism, education and social ministries. Its aim is to challenge people to submit to the reign of God as expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus. Its ends are eternal and spiritual. The purpose of the state, however, is quite different. Its aim is to regulate human conduct according to accepted cultural norms. Its ends are temporal and secular. History has demonstrated time and again that both church and state function best when treated as separate institutions. When the church rules the state, which may be called Petrine Supremacy, the eternal purposes of the church are often sublimated to the temporal goals of the state, and the church often adopts the state's secular means to reach its own supposedly spiritual ends. When the state rules the church, which may be called Caesaropapism, the measure of the church's doctrinal truth often becomes nothing more than the personal preference or passing whim of the current political leader. Neither church nor state rules the other well. This does not suggest that church and state have no point of contact or are unrelated, but it does claim that the two are

necessarily independent. Baptists believe that church and state should be neither married nor divorced, but separated. A "free church in a free state" is the ideal arrangement.

All historic Baptists hold to these distinctive doctrines and even defend them on the basis of the Scriptures. These teachings on the church are affirmed by the Northern Baptists, American Baptists, Fundamental Baptists, Independent Baptists, Missionary Baptists, and Southern Baptists. But is there anything that distinguishes Southern Baptists from other Baptists? We must now narrow down from the specific to the highly particular to see the unique identity of the Southern Baptist.

Southern Baptists by Cooperation

Voluntary cooperation is the major characteristic which has set apart Southern Baptists from all other Baptist groups. We cooperate at the local level through associations of churches, at the state level through conventions of churches. We cooperate to support missions, Christian education, and benevolent programs. That is our ultimate purpose, our overarching goal, our *raison d'être*.

When Baptists from around the world created a new convention in Augusta, Georgia, on May 8, 1845, they specifically and explicitly recorded their reason for doing so. Here is how they defined their purpose: "to provide a general organization for Baptists in the United States for the promotion of Christian missions at home and abroad and any other objects...which it may deem proper and advisable for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God."¹ It is a nondebateable fact that the Southern Baptist Convention was established to support a cause: missions, evangelism, and anything else that furthers the Kingdom of God on earth. The method for supporting this cause which was ultimately adopted in 1925 was called the Cooperative Program. It allows Southern Baptists the opportunity to support, through giving to their local

8 *Campus Minister*

opportunity to support, through giving to their local churches, those various programs which fulfill the convention's original and abiding purpose.

For over half a century this method of supporting God's work in the world has worked effectively. It has functionally united Southern Baptists from Virginia to California and from Massachusetts to Texas, even those who have differed over theological and hermeneutical issues such as the millennium, women in the ministry, and the nature of biblical authority. The rallying cry has been "Christ for the world!"

An Identity Shift?

However, during these last fifty years while our convention has grown dramatically from a few million church members to over fourteen million in over thirty-seven thousand congregations, subtle changes began to occur within the ranks of Southern Baptists. Specifically, during the last two decades a number of pastors of large churches led their congregations to redirect their funds to independent missions organizations such as Wycliffe Bible translators, Campus Crusade for Christ, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Organization, and others, thereby diminishing the amount given to missions through the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program. Certainly none of these missions organizations was undeserving, and it was the unquestioned prerogative of every church to designate its gifts wherever it chose. But to divert funds from the Cooperative Program to support others organizations revealed an independent spirit which could be viewed as a non-cooperative, non-Southern Baptist mindset.

During the same time that these pastors were leading their churches to give more to extra-convention causes than to convention causes, the same pastors and some of their lay friends began to feel that they were being left out of denominational decisions and to think theologically toward liberalism. In an attempt to correct these two perceived wrongs, these pastors and laymen organized in the late 1970's with the express goal of

taking over the convention by controlling the trustees of its various boards and agencies.² Their avowed leaders stated that they were "going for the jugular"³ of the convention and that the "Cooperative Program [was] a golden calf"⁴ Some of the first convention presidents whom they elected were pastors whose churches gave no more than two or three percent of their undesignated funds through the Cooperative Program.⁵ Their actions revealed an attitude more independent than cooperative.

Their goal was to turn the convention back to the theological right and to place themselves and their followers in position of leadership throughout the denomination. After twelve years of zealously working their plan, these pastors and laymen, who earlier felt alienated from the convention's power structure and believed that the seminaries and boards were not theologically conservative enough, now find themselves with the lion's share of power in their hands and with virtually every denominational entity bowing at their feet. Meanwhile, these reformers of the Southern Baptist Convention are seeking to move the national seminaries and boards to the theological right of what many consider to be mainstream, orthodox Christian thought.⁶ These leaders have certainly done what they set out to do.

Along the way, however, they have done a lot more than they ostensibly set out to do. They have changed the identity of Southern Baptists. The new identity consists of correct doctrine and independent churchmanship. Southern Baptists are no longer known as primarily a missions-minded denomination which has as its highest priority the conformity of all of its members, especially educators, to a specific interpretation of the meaning of Scripture. Missions advance has been replaced by doctrinal controversy, while ecclesiastical cooperation has been sacrificed at the feet of theological conformity.⁷

At the same time, the idea of thousands of churches cooperating to do what none of them could do alone is being threatened by the model of the independent super-church which is a mini-denomination in and of itself and seemingly has little need of cooperating with other congregations. The super-pastor

and the super-church have been elevated by many to the status of near-idolatry. Could it be that small and medium-sized churches are often left wondering if there is any place in God's kingdom for their contribution of service? The danger is that the cooperation of many could be replaced by the elevation of a few.

By redefining the convention's corporate identity, the leaders of the "new" Southern Baptists have alienated hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of their brothers and sisters in Christ who have always seen themselves as Christians by calling, Baptists by conviction, and Southern Baptists by cooperation. The "new" alienated group within the Southern Baptist Convention is struggling with the new identity which has been imposed upon it by the ruling majority. Many of those who now find themselves in their voting minority at annual conventions are wondering about their future as Southern Baptists. There seem to be at least three streams of thought and activity at the present.

First, there are some within this group who have decided that the future of Southern Baptists lies in a direction which excludes them. Therefore, they are actively seeking to align with another denomination or to form a new denomination. They have a resigned "It's all over" attitude.

Others within the group fear that a formal split may eventually occur, but they still hold out hope for future reconciliation. In the meantime, they are exploring opportunities and options for cooperating with other like-minded Southern Baptists in order to support the convention's ministries which their churches have traditionally funded. They have a cautious "wait and see" attitude.

Still others who have been alienated think that the division within the convention is temporary. They believe that voices of reason will eventually win the day as the denomination moves into a new decade, which is no longer ruled by Reagan and the New Right, and toward a new millennium, which will again spotlight the missions imperative. They have an optimistic "business as usual" attitude.

Now What?

The question at hand is, "Now What?" We have a denomination which appears to be divided. The voting patterns for the presidency at the annual convention reveal that fact. But the division is not formal yet. While such a formal division may be imminent, an official split may never occur.

In the meantime, what should we do as ministers on college and university campuses? My suggestion is this: remember who we are. First and foremost, we are Christians. We are followers of Jesus Christ. That fellowship will inevitably lead us not only to minister to unbelievers but also to include in our fellowship some believers who articulate their faith somewhat differently than we do. One test of our true Christlikeness will be our ability to accept and bless those whose view of life and religion is not identical to ours.

Second, we are Baptists. We have chosen a particular family of faith in which to exercise our gifts and in which we offer our service. That family, now as much as ever, needs our prophetic voice to sound out again the basic tenets which Baptists have held dear for the last four centuries. "Speaking the truth in love" about our rich heritage should be our posture as we seek to educate a new generation of Baptist students about the "Faith of Our Fathers."

Finally, we are Southern Baptists by cooperation. If ever there were a time for Southern Baptists to work through their differences in order to work together to reach a suffering world, it is now. Whereas many Southern Baptist students intentionally align with one or the other of the opposing sides in the current denominational controversy, many others are ignorant of the issues involved and see no reason to become informed. One of our tasks is to challenge all Southern Baptist students to come up with effective solutions to some of the problems within the convention which they have inherited. Who knows? Perhaps some of those who neither caused the current controversy, nor exacerbated it, nor have ever been involved in it, may well lead us out

12 *Campus Minister*

of it and help us to recover and to reclaim our true identity as cooperating, missions-minded followers of Jesus Christ.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in "The SBC: Our Mission in the World," Baptist Standard, Dec. 10, 1984, p. 9.

² "Seek Long Range Control of SBC Boards," Baptist Standard, April 23, 1980, pp. 4-5.

³ "Pressler: 'Going for the Jugular' to Control SBC," Baptist Standard, Sept. 24, 1980, p. 4.

⁴ "Rogers: Program has become 'Golden Calf,'" Baptist Standard, May 19, 1982, p.10.

⁵ "SBC Hopes to Be 'Unifier,'" Baptist Standard, June 18, 1980, p. 5; "SBC Continues Right Turn in Kansas City," Baptist Standard, June 20, 1984, p. 3.

⁶ At the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy held May 4-7, 1987, at Ridgecrest, North Carolina, some of the most popular proponents of a conservative view of Scripture spoke to the current controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention. Clark Pinnock, originally a mentor to some of those who wanted to turn the convention more to the theological right, pleaded with attendees at the conference to exercise moderation in their zeal to rid the denomination of all vestiges of liberalism. He stressed that one could accept the inerrancy of the Bible without holding to the strict interpretation of inerrancy proposed by the leaders of the convention. Those leaders rejected Pinnock's moderating voice. See "Former Inerrantist Leader Asks Reconciliation," Baptist Standard, May 13, 1987, pp. 3-4. At the Conference on Biblical Interpretation held April 25-27, 1988, also at Ridgecrest, J.I. Packer, an inerrantist by anyone's definition, claimed that the Bible did not forbid the possibility of ordination of women to the ministry. He then opined that, in reference to the controversy among Southern Baptists, "the people who have insisted most strongly that they stand for the inerrancy of scripture have also been standing for a particular way of interpreting scripture that in certain respects would seem to to others of us to be less than scholarly." Such people, according to Packer, so dogmatically tied biblical inerrancy to their interpretation of the Bible "that they won't believe that anyone who

doesn't handle the Bible in the same way they do really believes the total trustworthiness of scripture." See "Controversial Doctrines, Detour Dominate," Baptist Standard, May 11, 1988, pp. 9,12.

⁷ By no means am I suggesting here that theology is unimportant or that the missiological imperative can be fruitfully carried on where the truth of the Bible's message is doubted and scorned. Nor am I suggesting that there are no theological parameters for what we as Southern Baptists believe. As I have already suggested, our doctrinal parameters are best described as an historically orthodox Christian stance, informed by our Baptist distinctives. Careful attention to the theological agenda has been and remains an important task for every generation of believers. But the genius of Southern Baptists has been their approach to world missions and evangelism, built upon and derived from their conservative, evangelical doctrinal commitment. To try to change the uniqueness emphasis on biblical inerrancy is to run the risk of transforming us into a Fundamentalist or Independent Baptist denomination, both of which are noted more for doctrinal haggling than for missionary effectiveness.