

A Book Review of
*THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION:
A SESQUICENTENNIAL HISTORY*

By Sam Sanford

A few times blurbs on book-jackets are true. James L. Sullivan, retired president of the Baptist Sunday School Board asserts, "Fletcher's sesquicentennial history reads much like a free-flowing novel captivating the reader from beginning to end. It is as objective as any historian could make it and is amazingly accurate and complete. . . . Let me congratulate Broadman & Holman Publishers, as well as the author, for this excellent rendition."

Fletcher let the reader see the roots of the beginning of a convention through the strands of the Charleston and Sandy Creek traditions and does not gloss over the dissent that was prevalent at its inception. At issue was the validity of missionaries being slave holders. This new organization struggled through reconstruction and other adversities.

Around 1900 the denomination was being defined and clearer pictures were developing as the first half of the century progressed. The Cooperative Program began, but the Great Depression and war curtailed the grand ideas for Southern Baptists' propagation of the gospel

The second century of the denomination was what the author calls "The Great Advance." America had emerged as a great

nation and there was a resurgence of religion. Leadership was more educated, ironically, in spite of Southern Baptist educational institutions continual struggle with the majority of their constituents. Education and Church, historically, were perilous partners (see pp.376-77).

Administrators, especially those at the various agency levels, began to adopt management leadership principles which filtered to local levels and the advance was on its way! Some have said the espousing of these methods of growth was the prelude to "the battle for the gavel" (see p. 304 about 'organizational theory'). During the period from 1945-1964 Fletcher aptly documents Southern Baptists' rapid growth.

Uneasy lies the head on the pillow of complacency. Fletcher's chapter, "The Uneasy Consensus - 1964-1979," offers a prelude to what is now simply called "the controversy." Not only was the nation in crisis, culminating with Watergate, but also Southern Baptist Convention agencies, such as the Baptist Sunday School Board, were involved in controversy. The Sunday School Board had barely recovered from the Elliott controversy about the publication of a questionable commentary on Genesis when the "ghost" of biblical criticism arose. That was the foundation for turmoil until the present. Valid is the documentation; consensus was being shattered.

The last two chapters, "New Initiatives" and "Foundations

for the Future," causes one to wonder if the absence of Camelot was now present. Fundamentalist-conservatives won in the 1980 New Orleans SBC Convention and the displaced moderate-conservatives began looking in other directions.

A cursory view of Chapter 9 shows the many infant and struggling entities going through "birth-pains" of life. Especially significant for those involved on the higher education scene were the changes involving Baptist institutions. Again, one sees the perilous partnership of church and academe.

Fletcher's choice of the term "fault lines," such as the California San Andreas Fault, to discuss where Southern Baptists are presently living makes any writer envious. He could not have chosen a better analogy. If the count is correct, he chose nine "faults" the SBC has to live uneasily with in the future. These "faults" may affect individuals as well as agencies.

Those in campus ministry would have wished for more space in this history to allow others to see the student influence in missions and local churches, but where BSU is mentioned there is a positive note.

Maybe no better conclusion can be made about this history than "more than one historian claims that the most Baptist tradition of all is dissent. If so, midway through their fourth century as a historically recognized people and halfway through their second century as a denominational entity, Southern Baptists remain true

to their traditions" (p. 361).

Jesse C. Fletcher clutches, however, to the freedom factor, and to hope and faith, yearning for God to be able still to promote His Kingdom/Her Queendom, though as Walter Shurden observed, "they are not a silent people."

One does wonder why Broadman & Holman chose to publish an accurate, objective, and authentic account of this people of God when they obliterated the honorable Leon McBeth's volume on the Sunday School Board's contribution to Southern Baptists.

If campus ministers can have only one volume of Southern Baptist history on the bookshelf, the sesquicentennial one should be their choice.