

SOUTHERN BAPTIST IDENTITY

An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future

Edited by

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Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future

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INTRODUCTION

SOUTHERN BAPTISTS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

David S. Dockery



THE SBC IS THE LARGEST evangelical denomination in the country, with over 44,000 churches in all fifty states. Southern Baptists have often functioned separately from the rest of American Christianity because of their sectionalism, their inability to separate from Southern culture, their parochialism, and their self-sufficiency, though there are some indicators that these things are beginning to change. For almost three decades the Convention has been embroiled in controversy regarding theological issues and denominational polity. We now find ourselves asking important questions about the future and identity of the SBC.¹

The SBC world in which many of us were nurtured—Bible drills, GAs, RAs, Training Union, WMU, Brotherhood, and so on (not to mention uniform Sunday school lessons, the Baptist hymnal, and similar worship patterns)—no longer exists in every SBC church. For almost five decades, during the middle of the twentieth century, Southern Baptists followed the same organizational patterns, the same programs, and the same Sunday school lessons. These practices were to Southern Baptists what the Latin Mass was to Roman Catholics. It provided all within the SBC a sense of continuity and security. This programmatic uniformity all hung together around a ubiquitous commitment to missions and evangelism, expressed in giving through the Cooperative Program and support for Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong. It was absolutely ingenious. Throughout most of the twentieth century, being a Southern Baptist had a cultural and program-

¹See David S. Dockery, *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal* (Nashville: B&H, 2008).

matic identity to it unlike anything else. This kind of intactness provided Southern Baptists with a denominational stability unmatched by any other denomination in the country. Martin Marty, the influential American church historian, was not exaggerating when he said that Southern Baptists were the Roman Catholic Church of the South, because their identity was so intact and their influence so pervasive, providing an umbrella over the entire culture in almost every dimension of life. We were a very practical people, with heart religion—carried out in rather uniformly pragmatic and programmatic expressions.

But for a variety of reasons, this intactness has been challenged by the growing fragmentation of recent years. Even without the “Controversy,” the intactness had started to unravel over the past thirty years due to the growth of multiple Bible translations, the impact of parachurch groups, the expanding diversity of music, varied worship patterns, and the unexpected reality that church models and heroes for many Southern Baptists now come from outside the SBC. Today Southern Baptists seem to be a gathering of loosely connected, if not balkanized, groups. By and large, we don’t know our heritage, our history, or our theological identity. We don’t know Furman, Manly, Broadus, Johnson, Frost, Mullins, Carroll, Conner, Moon, or Armstrong, all heroes of yesteryear. We hardly know more recent leaders like Lee, Rogers, Hobbs, and Criswell. If you can’t identify a Southern Baptist now as you could in the 1950s—by a King James Bible, a uniform Sunday School lesson, a six-point envelope system, fall and spring revivals, and a preaching service that concludes by singing all the verses of “Just As I Am”—then what does it mean to be a Southern Baptist in the twenty-first century? That is the question that must be answered in the next few years, and it lies behind the various chapters in this book.

TOWARD CONSENSUS AND RENEWAL

We now find ourselves at a different moment in American Christianity, and in world Christianity in general. Contemporary culture is being overtaken and submerged by a new spirit, often referred to as postmodernism and sometimes described by the growing trends toward secularism. It is in this changing context that we are made aware that Southern Baptists are at once beneficiaries and victims of tradition. We are beneficiaries who receive nurturing truth and wisdom from God’s faithfulness from past generations, and we are victims who now take for granted things that possibly need to be questioned or reexamined. Southern Baptists are both beneficiaries of

good, wise, and sound traditions, as well as victims of poor, unwise, and unsound traditions.

The Bible must be the “last word” in sifting through and evaluating both our traditions and our challenges. Paul’s word in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 is a helpful reminder for us at this important moment in the SBC: “Test everything. Hold on to the good” (NIV). In our “testing,” we must avoid the extremes of those who stress human moral experience as the primary basis for our message and theological understanding. At the same time we must avoid those who have equated cultural norms and forms of philosophical rationalism with the truth of Scripture. It would be naïve for us to think that the answers to the current challenges we now face in the SBC are simple or that we are the only ones facing such challenges, as if we lived in a vacuum. We must explore issues of identity, while seeking to establish a new consensus, lest we drift apart. This is imperative. Such a consensus must be centered around the gospel and must be connected to the churches. We will need to distinguish between markers of Southern Baptist identity and markers of Southern Baptist consistency. In doing so, we can emphasize primary and core convictions. We cannot, however, ignore necessary boundary markers. The ultimate danger to the gospel lies not in the nuances of our differences, but in the rising tides of liberalism, neo-paganism, and postmodernism that threaten to swamp Southern Baptist identity in cultural accommodation. We must remember that current frustrations and disappointments could reignite a battle—one in which those who are engaged are prone to concentrate on the frustrations or disappointments, while never thinking of the ultimate issues or implications for which the battle is being fought.

CONVICTIONAL AND CONFSSIONAL BELIEFS

We celebrate and give thanks that this generation of Southern Baptists has received the truth of the gospel and recognizes the need to pass on this body of truth to the next generation. Our responsibility is to faithfully pass on what we have received from wells we did not dig and from gardens we did not plant.

We now find ourselves in a culture which often fails to recognize that there is an identifiable body of truth, and that truth is the Christian faith. One of the reasons that Southern Baptists now need to ask the hard questions about a regenerate church membership, a historic and foundational Baptist tenet, is that people have confused the Christian faith for substi-

tutes. The Christian faith is not mere moralism; it is not faith in faith, some subjective amorphous feeling, or a self-help theory. The Christian faith is the manifestation of God's truth revealed in his Son and made known to us today in his Word. What is needed today is a renewed commitment to confess and teach the truth in congregations, academic institutions, and agencies across the SBC and literally around the world.

There remains a sector of Southern Baptist life that is quite hesitant to acknowledge the place of normative, doctrinal confessions for fear of its resulting in creedalism. Behind much of this fear is a misplaced emphasis on individualism and soul competency that has produced a false dichotomy between "a living faith" and "a confessional faith." While we would never want to put any confession on the same level as Scripture itself, or confuse a doctrinal statement *about* Jesus with a dynamic trust *in* Jesus, it is certainly a misunderstanding of our Baptist heritage to deny the importance of a confessional faith.

In response to this false dichotomy, James Leo Garrett Jr. has keenly observed that the opposite of a confessional faith is not a living faith, but an undefined faith that lacks content and depth. Thus, there is no need to construct a false choice between "a living faith" or "a confessional faith." Instead we need a living faith that we confess and a confessional faith that we live and proclaim. We can no more work safely in a frameless building or eat beef from a boneless cow than we can practice and communicate the Christian faith without basic affirmations of doctrinal truth.²

Today, we see the growing impact of secularization and pluralization expanding all around us in seemingly exponential ways—as has been so well documented in R. Albert Mohler Jr.'s insightful analysis of the New Atheism.³ This changing world in which we live has been masterfully described in Charles Taylor's 874-page volume, *A Secular Age*. Taylor claims that once people assumed faith as the norm for making sense of life, and thus had to have a reason *not* to believe, but today the paradigm has shifted so that people now have to be given a reason *to* believe, because he says at best faith in our day is seen as only one option among many in our pluralistic society.⁴

While Taylor's insights about the world in which we live are absolutely brilliant, we recognize, however, that challenges to the Christian faith are not new to the twenty-first century, for false teachers have existed since

²See James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:5.

³See R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Atheism Remix* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

⁴See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

the apostolic period. And while today believers face challenges from both inside the church and out, we need to understand that many of these challenges are merely the contemporary heirs of Marcion, Arius, Pelagis, Abelard, and others. What seems new today is often a repackaging of older errors and heresies. In response we need an authentically confessional faith, grounded in Scripture and the best of our Baptist heritage, a convictional faith that will not give in to this secular age with a spirit of defeat.

COLLABORATIVE AND COOPERATIVE SERVICE

We need an SBC characterized not only by a confessional and convictional faith, but by a collaborative and compassionate sense of cooperation. The recovery of a convictional confessionalism has kept us from going the way of so many mainline denominations who have become untethered to Scripture and have lost their way. Yet the need of the hour also includes the need to regain a spirit of collaborative cooperation. I know that some wonder if we can find a way to cooperate together—after all, we are so different. No longer can a programmatic pragmatism or a cultural homogeneity alone be the foundation for our cooperation. The call to cooperate in 2008 differs greatly from the world of M. E. Dodd in 1925, but we need to reclaim the spirit of M. E. Dodd for our day.⁵

Southern Baptists in the twenty-first century are rapidly changing. A quick look reveals that we are Asian, Hispanic, black, brown, and white. We have dark skin and light, we are young and old, our churches are small and large, and we worship in rural communities and in sprawling metropolitan areas. We are educated and uneducated, well known and anonymous, bloggers and non-bloggers, rich and poor, theologians and practitioners, and while we remain predominately Southerners, SBC congregations are found across this land in the West, East, and North as well. One of the things, however, that gets the attention of the world and authenticates our confession is the way Christians love each other, celebrate our diversity, and serve together in harmony. I believe the absence of such love and cooperation breaks our Savior's heart.

Some think that neither conviction nor cooperation really matters. On the contrary, the reality is this: much is at stake, including the health of the SBC and the eternal life or the eternal condemnation of individuals. We need both collaborative cooperation and convictional confessionalism. Those who emphasize cooperation are prone to compromise. Those who

⁵M. E. Dodd was known as the father of the Cooperative Program in the SBC, which was adopted at the annual convention in Memphis in 1925.

emphasize conviction are prone to be cantankerous. So, choosing between compromised beliefs or a cantankerous spirit is not an inviting option.

I think we would do well to hear again the words of Carl F. H. Henry. About 60 years ago he maintained that our witness to the world will be stronger when the church is united. Cantankerousness, he claimed, often leads to additional and unnecessary fragmentation, thus diminishing opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, for reform and renewal.⁶ As we look toward the future, let us suggest some important steps that might help us focus on our identity, build consensus, and work toward renewal.

INITIAL STEPS TOWARD RENEWAL

1. We must begin afresh to appreciate the best of Baptist history/heritage.

2. We must balance a commitment to the material principle of the gospel and the formal principle of inspired Scripture. As Mohler has recognized, “the material and formal principles constitute not only a center, but rightly understood they also establish boundaries.”⁷ We cannot focus on the center alone and ignore the circumference, for one influences the other. Millard Erickson has suggested that there surely comes some point where the line has been crossed (from either direction) and at least a hybrid orthodoxy can develop.⁸ D. A. Carson similarly notes that there comes a time to “draw lines” even when “drawing lines is rude.” He offers four reasons why this must be done:

- a) because truth demands it;
- b) because distinctions between orthodoxy and heresy must be maintained;
- c) because a plurality of errors calls for it; and
- d) because the implications of the gospel confront our culture and must be lived out in a consistent way.⁹

3. The new consensus must be built upon a full-orbed doctrine of Scripture, which affirms that only those beliefs and practices that rest firmly on scriptural foundations can be regarded as binding on Southern Baptists, because as “people of the Book,” we are first and foremost Biblicists. Southern Baptist theology and spirituality rests on Scripture as the central

⁶Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947).

⁷See R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Reformist Evangelicalism: A Center without a Circumference,” in *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*, ed. Michael S. Horton (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000).

⁸See Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997).

⁹See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

legitimizing source of Christian faith and theology, the clearest window through which the face of Christ may be seen. We must recognize that to allow one's ideas and values to become controlled by anything or anyone other than the self-revelation of God in Holy Scripture is to adopt an ideology rather than a theology.¹⁰

4. Defining the circumference is necessary, but we should not expect or demand uniformity, lest we impose a straightjacket on our fellow Southern Baptists. Similarly, this new consensus must be grounded in the gospel that is not enslaved to rationalism nor denatured by an alien individualism, experientialism, or postmodernism.

5. We must recognize that a confession of the Bible's truthfulness is an important safeguard, a necessary, albeit an insufficient, statement for the SBC to maintain consistent evangelical instruction and theological method, which is needed for an orthodox statement on matters of Christology, the doctrine of God, and salvation. Certainly there are differences among us. The pressures from a rapidly changing culture will only continue to create significant challenges in our efforts to rediscover a Southern Baptist consensus. We must also clearly affirm the importance of worship, regenerate church membership, and local church autonomy and cooperation, as well as believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper.

6. A model of dynamic orthodoxy must be reclaimed. The orthodox tradition must be recovered in conversation with Nicea, Chalcedon, Augustine, Bernard, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, the Pietists, and the revivalists. In sum, our Southern Baptist identity must be rooted in the *consensus fidei* of the Christian church.

7. We must recognize that Southern Baptists have historically reflected considerable diversity. While we do not hold out doctrinal uniformity as a goal, we do call for renewed commitments to the inspiration, truthfulness, and authority of Scripture, with an accompanying commitment to a hermeneutic of acceptance over against a hermeneutic of suspicion, as well as a reestablishment and reaffirmation of the gospel center.¹¹

8. We must take seriously the biblical call to unity (John 17; Ephesians 4) in accord with the Nicene affirmation of the oneness and universality of the church, as reflected in the Orthodox Confession (1678): a oneness that calls for humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance with one another in love, and a diligence to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:2–3), and a universality with a renewed dedication to racial

¹⁰See David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture* (Nashville: B&H, 1995).

¹¹*Ibid.*

reconciliation, looking forward to a day in which a great multitude from every nation and all tribes, people groups, and tongues shall stand before the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

9. We need to be reminded of where Southern Baptists might be were it not for the conservative resurgence—as well as a recognition of where we could be if we ever become untethered to Holy Scripture. We are reminded that there are first-order gospel issues that define both our core and needed parameters. Simultaneously, we cannot forget that some secondary and tertiary matters belong, as the great W. A. Criswell was so fond of saying, to the “imponderables of God.”

10. We need a new spirit of mutual respect and humility to serve together with those with whom we have differences of conviction and opinion. It is possible to hold hands with brothers and sisters who disagree on secondary and tertiary matters of theology and work together toward a common good to extend the work of Southern Baptists around the world and advance the kingdom of God. We need a like-mindedness on first-order issues—particularly on the exclusivity and uniqueness of the gospel that is found only in Jesus Christ and in him alone (John 14:6).

11. We want to begin to build a new and much-needed consensus around the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ—a consensus that was present at the first Triennial Convention in 1814 and again at the inaugural convention of Southern Baptists in 1845.¹² This consensus carried forward into the 1950s, but it moved from being a theologically informed consensus to a programmatic and pragmatic one. When that cultural and programmatic consensus dissipated, we found ourselves looking for a new direction. It is time to move from controversy and confusion to a new consensus and renewed commitment to cooperation. We need to take a step back, not just to commit ourselves afresh to missions and evangelism, as important as that is. We need to commit ourselves foremost to the gospel, the message of missions and evangelism, the message that is found only in Jesus Christ and his atoning death for sinners.

12. Twenty-first-century Southern Baptists need not only to affirm the Bible’s truthfulness and the saving power of the gospel, but we need to evidence our concern for these matters by careful biblical interpretation and theological reflection, faithful churchmanship, proclamation, worship, repentance, and prayer. We can thus trust God to bring a fresh wind of renewal to Southern Baptist theology, evangelism, missions, worship, education, and service. We can relate to one another in love

¹²See David S. Dockery, *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal*, 38–45.

and humility, bringing about true fellowship and community not only in orthodoxy, but orthopraxy before a watching world. May God grant to us a renewed commitment to the gospel, to the church, and to the truthfulness of Holy Scripture that will help forge and shape a new consensus among us, bringing about genuine transformation and a renewed spirit of cooperation.¹³

¹³*Ibid.*, 201–20.

CHAPTER ONE

SOUTHERN BAPTIST IDENTITY: IS THERE A FUTURE?

R. Albert Mohler Jr.



ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF any movement is an inherently dangerous affair. Winston Churchill once remarked to one of his classmates that he was certain that history would treat him well. His schoolmate, a bit incredulous, asked how he could be so certain. Churchill raised an eyebrow and said, “Because I intend to write the history.” That is certainly one way to make sure history looks favorably upon you—provided you have the luxury of writing it yourself. The rest of us, however, are left simply wondering whether the historians of some future age will look back and say we got it even approximately correct. That is a risky business, of course, but it is even more dangerous not to envision the future. The greatest risk is assuming the future will somehow “just happen” in a way that brings glory to God.

As we consider the Baptist movement in the twenty-first century, we can look back on four centuries of Baptist history, Baptist work, and Baptist witness. By no accident, that history also includes four centuries of debate over Baptist identity and the Baptist future.

I have to begin with some word of autobiography. I can remember as a small child explaining to my neighbors that I belonged to the Baptists. That was the terminology—I never knew a time when I did not consider myself a Baptist. Of course, now I know better theologically, but I was a part of the tribe before I ever understood the theology. I was a Baptist by custom before I came to be a Baptist by conviction. That Baptist heritage leads me to feel at home in this discussion. I understand something of the grandeur,

something of the vibrant texture of faith that has produced not only the Baptist movement as a whole but the SBC as we know it now.

I was raised by parents who were convictionally Baptists. They were so Baptist, in fact, that when I wanted to become a Boy Scout, my parents would not let me until I was also a Royal Ambassador. This was an extreme position in my view. The Boy Scout troop was sponsored by the same Southern Baptist church as the Royal Ambassadors, so it was essentially the same boys dressing up in different uniforms on different nights. It was a very small world. To me, the external world was a panoply of different faiths—people called “Methodists” and “Presbyterians.” There was a sectarianism there, to be sure, but one that is not to be despised; it was a deeply held sense of belonging. We Baptists knew who we were, and thus we would know whom we should be looking to in the future.

Understanding the present and preparing for the future requires us to consider not only our own autobiographies, but also the biography of a great denomination, the SBC. One of the key issues for our understanding the current situation is to recognize that Baptists have always debated our identity. From the very beginning, there has been a both/and character to the Baptist understanding of what it means to be a Christian. First, Baptists did not intend to start a new faith. The seventeenth-century Baptists were never about the task of creating a new Christian religion. In fact, they went to great lengths to point out that they stood in continuity with the faith “once for all delivered to the saints.” Yet at the same time, Baptists were defined by certain unique theological convictions that framed our understanding. Those convictions were of such passionate strength and theological intensity that the early Baptists had to set themselves apart even from other English separatists and nonconformists. Essentially, our Baptist forebears were nonconformists even within the world of nonconformity. So they joined themselves together in congregations of like-minded believers who were uniquely committed to three principles.

The first of those principles was regenerate church membership. If there is any one defining mark of the Baptist, it is the understanding that membership in the church comes by personal profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The church is not merely a voluntary association of those who have been born to Christian parents—even to Baptist parents—or of those who might have been moistened as infants. Rather, the church is an assembly of those who make a public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and gather together in congregations under the covenant of Christ.

The second principle, a derivative of the first, was believer’s baptism—

the conviction that baptism is to be administered only upon an individual's profession of faith. Baptism is not only a symbol, but an act of obedience and entry into the covenant community of the church. To reject believer's baptism is therefore to paint a picture of the church that is much distorted.

The third principle was congregational church government. Baptists have made several and various attempts to define exactly what congregational church government should look like. At its root, however, congregationalism affirms that it is the covenanted community that must take responsibility for the ordering of the church, for the preaching of the gospel, and for everything else that God has assigned to the church in this age. There is no sacerdotalism; there is no priestly class, no one who can be hired to do the ministry of the gospel, and no franchise to be granted. The church itself, the covenanted community of baptized believers, must take responsibility for the fulfillment of all Christ has commanded his people.

Much more could be added to Baptist ecclesiology, but these three principles are an irreducible minimum of Baptist identity. When any one of them is compromised—much less denied—then whatever is left may call itself Baptist only by asserting a lie. It is something less than Baptist when any one of these principles is absent.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

With these historic principles in mind, we turn to consider some theological issues that now face the SBC and should therefore have our very careful attention. The first of these is the conservative resurgence in the SBC, a movement that emerged most publicly in 1979, even though its roots go back to at least 1963.

The public controversy of 1979 did not emerge out of a vacuum; there was a history behind it. By the 1960s, the Enlightenment had come to Dixie. A region that had long believed itself immune to history suddenly found itself grappling with the very questions that Northern evangelicals had confronted decades earlier and that European Christians had faced in the previous century. Now, Kant, Hume, Locke, and Hobbes arrived at the very threshold of the SBC.

The controversy that erupted in the SBC centered first and foremost on issues of truth and authority. With modernity having already reached our ranks, higher criticism and other ideological denials of the truthfulness of Scripture now presented themselves as challenges. Southern Baptists were thus forced to make a decision whether to assert, affirm, and cherish the

Bible as the written Word of God, or merely to receive it as a human testimony of human religious experience.

Yale University professor Gabriel Josipovici once said that we should see the Bible as an arbitrarily collected group of scrolls, writings of tremendous spiritual interest and substance, but which say more about the persons who wrote them than about the God by whom they claim to be inspired. At such a fork in the road, there are only two options: either we will affirm the total truthfulness and verbal inspiration of Scripture, or we will decide that Scripture is to some extent simply a fallible witness to human religious experience. Southern Baptists first faced that choice in the 1960s, but they denied it for a number of years and papered over it for another decade. They tried to find some bureaucratic means of denying the elephant in the middle of the denominational room, but eventually the elephant grew so large it could be contained no longer.

By the 1970s, Southern Baptists had coiled into two separate parties: a truth party and a liberty party. Some tried to join both, but ultimately the controversy forced a choice. The issues became so narrowly focused and so intense in application that individuals eventually had to understand that the candidates running for the office of president of the SBC represented one of these sets of consuming interests.

The truth party understood doctrine to be the most basic issue confronting the convention. They were suspicious that heterodoxy had entered the ranks of Southern Baptists, and they had documentation to back up their claims—reports from students at colleges, universities, and seminaries. Soon, what had begun as a grassroots concern became an organized movement convinced that if the truth was compromised, all would eventually be lost.

The liberty party might best be described with what became a bumper-sticker slogan of the movement: “Baptist means Freedom!” To this party, liberty itself was the *leitmotif* of the Baptist movement. Now, it is certainly true that members of the liberty party also cherished truth, and members of the truth party had an understanding of Baptist freedom. But for the truth party, freedom had to fit within the truthfulness of God’s Word and the parameters established by divine revelation. For the liberty party, on the other hand, it was truth that had to be accommodated to the more important issue of freedom. Any parameters thus became not only awkward, but eventually impossible. This issue of freedom raises a host of questions, most obviously: “Freedom from what?” and “Freedom for what?” Eventually, the majority of Southern Baptists came to understand that if freedom were

the only motif—or even the driving motif—of the denomination, it would finally mean freedom from accountability and freedom from doctrinal responsibility.

From 1963 to 1990, these two parties—truth and liberty—struggled to define the SBC and chart its course into the future. The issues over which they clashed were serious and substantial theological matters. They were not small, they were not minor, and they were not negotiable. Now, it is willful ignorance to suggest that Southern Baptists were not separated by theological differences of tremendous depth and great intensity. Those who say otherwise should simply read the evidence. The inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible were the primary issues of debate, though of course there was always more than that. Questions of epistemology, truth, and authority were only the entryway into an entire complex of debate that included virtually every major doctrinal issue and would ultimately affect the entire shape of the theological task.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon understood the Baptist Union in Britain to have slipped into what he called a “downgrade,” antiquarian language that nevertheless accurately communicated the reality of his day. Spurgeon saw the downgrade and gave the warning, but he was not successful in calling the Union to theological accountability. Today, the Baptist Union is a shell of its former self, hardly holding on to its declining membership. Southern Baptist conservative leaders in the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s and 1980s, put their lives, their careers, and their ministries on the line to prevent Southern Baptists from following a similar trajectory.

John Shelton Reed of the University of North Carolina (who once held the Margaret Thatcher chair of American studies at the London School of Economics) is one of the greatest historians of the American South. He recently characterized the Southern Baptist controversy as a “pitchfork rebellion.” Southern Baptists heard the issues, became alarmed, and were motivated to action. The true heroes of the conservative resurgence in the SBC were men and women who slept in their cars because they could not afford a hotel room. So motivated were they by the cause of truth and concern for the gospel, they would go wherever they had to go and sleep wherever they had to sleep in order to elect a president who represented their hope for the future of the SBC.

Where does the SBC stand now? Can we look back at the conservative resurgence and say the theological issues were settled forever? Absolutely not. Southern Baptists are now exceptional in the broader theological

world. On same-sex marriage and a host of other cultural issues, the SBC is consistently recognized by the news media as being the one exception to a trend of churches acquiescing to liberal agendas. We cannot take confidence in that exceptionalism, for that would be a false confidence established on a very flimsy hope. In the conservative resurgence, the SBC was given a second chance, not a guaranteed future. It was not given a pass from history, or from the theological debates of the future.

That being the case, Southern Baptists have to grow out of a posture of inherent defensiveness and move to a positive agenda that points to the glory of God in the comprehensive embrace of biblical truth and takes delight in confessing the faith. We live in a day that is averse to theology and irritated by doctrine. If Southern Baptists find themselves being irritated by doctrinal questions, we will soon find ourselves sharing the fate of the mainline denominations—just slightly delayed. The tectonic plates of the contemporary theological landscape are shifting. Southern Baptists must accept the challenge of confronting these issues, not merely by defending against them, but by actually using contemporary debates to proclaim a theological reality that is firmly grounded in Scripture.

Of first importance in this challenge is a full embrace of classical orthodoxy. For one thing, we must be unapologetic in speaking about tradition. G. K. Chesterton was not the first to invoke the “democracy of the dead.” Even the author of Hebrews refers to one who, “though he died . . . still speaks” (Heb. 11:4, *ESV*). Tradition—that backward glance at what Christians throughout the centuries have confessed and how they have understood the great doctrines of the faith—allows the dead to have a vote. We are not the first persons to read the Bible, nor are we the first to confess the Christian faith. We must therefore distinguish between tradition and traditionalism. As Jaroslav Pelikan has noted, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; tradition is the living faith of the dead. Moreover, fully embracing classical orthodoxy will require us to move beyond the issues of urgent and immediate debate to an embrace of the whole. The alternative is to be constantly dealing with peripheral matters and never with the center of the faith.

Second, we need to return to a robust confessionalism. Just as Michael Walzer argues that there are “thin ethics” and “thick ethics,” we might speak of thin confessionalism and thick confessionalism. A *thin* confessionalism is one that is merely a matter of requirement—a signature and a statement of allegiance and subscription. Doctrine is a contract rather than a covenant. *Thick* confessionalism, on the other hand, understands that

it is a privilege for a person to say, “I stand on these truths with this covenant community. And as a matter of mutual accountability before God, and under the authority of Scripture, we join together to hold ourselves accountable to contend faithfully for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, even as we address the urgent issues of the contemporary hour.” This is the kind of confessionalism our Baptist forebears espoused, and it is the kind we must recover in the twenty-first century.

Third, we need to seek a recovery of Baptist principles. On regenerate church membership, for instance, there has been too much compromise. Baptist ecclesiology is not merely a matter of church organization. It stands at the very center of the Baptist vision and goes to the very heart of our theology. When Baptist principles are compromised, everything is affected—including our understanding of the gospel, the work of regeneration, and the role of a covenant community as the congregation of faith.

Fourth, we must recover the discipline of theological “triage,” a word normally associated with the emergency room. Patients are brought in with a great variety of injuries—sprained wrists, gunshot wounds, slight stomachaches, and spider bites. In that situation, someone has to make an evaluation of what is most urgent and what can wait. Otherwise, confusion will reign. That triage nurse in the emergency room provides a good model for our theological debates.

In the vast world of theological controversy, there are first-order issues, second-order issues, and third-order issues. Unfortunately, most of our time is usually spent dealing with secondary and tertiary issues, when we should be focusing our attention on the primary issues. Primary issues are those that distinguish Christians from non-Christians. I remember a student once asking Dr. Lewis Drummond how one should relate to Christians who do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. Dr. Drummond replied, “You relate to them as lost people.” He was exactly right. Those who deny the bodily resurrection are not believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a first-order issue.

Second-order issues are those that would prevent two Christians from joining the same covenant community, even though they would still call one another “Christians.” A church, for instance, will either baptize babies, or it will not. A church will either ordain women as pastors, or it will not. This does not mean we would necessarily say that those who ordain women as pastors are non-Christians. Nor would we say that those who baptize babies are non-Christians. Nevertheless, we must affirm without apology that a theological seminary, a denomination, and even individual churches

will have to stand with one confession, not a multiplicity of diverse choices. These second-order issues are the right place to focus much of our debate, so long as we remember where they rank.

Third-order issues are those that would not prevent two Christians from joining together in a covenant community. These are not unimportant issues; all truth is important. Yet they are not of such importance that disagreement on them means we cannot cooperate with each other. Many current debates within our churches—including everything from questions about the timing of the millennium to issues of cultural engagement—stand on this third level. As such, they are ripe for discussion, but they should not become cause for division.

Without the discipline of theological triage, we are constantly at risk of confusing third-order issues for first-order issues—the original besetting sin of fundamentalism. At the same time, we are also at risk of mistaking first-order issues for third-order ones—the besetting sin of liberalism. Keeping our equilibrium requires that our triage be clear and self-conscious, articulated and accountable.

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

Having considered some of the theological issues that the SBC will face in coming years, we turn now to a second category—organizational issues. The SBC, like the Baptist movement as a whole, has experienced transformation over time. When Southern Baptists established themselves in Augusta, Georgia, in 1845, it was something new under the Baptist sun. The SBC was not merely a Southern version of the Triennial Convention; it was an entirely new model of the convention itself. The Southern Baptists organized their convention with a centralized purpose and sense of identity that drove it forward in a way the Triennial Convention was never intended to be driven.

Southern Baptists adjourned their convention in 1845 with just two boards, but over the next fifty years they negotiated their way into several others. They did not found a seminary in 1845; that would happen in 1859, when the Convention founded what would become The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. By 1925, the SBC had grown, innovated, and been remarkably transformed. Still largely regionalized in the South after the Civil War and Reconstruction, it began the twentieth century by founding a second seminary—Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas—even as the mission boards were continuing to test the limits of Southern Baptist

vision. The Memphis convention in 1925 was perhaps the most critical turning point in the denomination's history. At that one convention and at that specific time, more crucial decisions were made than at any SBC held before or since. Messengers adopted the Cooperative Program, organized the Executive Committee, and accepted the *Baptist Faith and Message* in the first convention-wide, self-conscious adoption of a confession of faith.

The question is sometimes raised as to why the issue of religious liberty became so central at that particular moment. About that same time, Al Smith had run with the Democratic nomination for president in the 1920 election, and Southern Baptists were concerned. What would a Roman Catholic President mean? Even more urgently, World War I had been a disastrous experience for Southern Baptists. In fact, they had pulled all their chaplains out of the war effort because the War Department declared that chaplains had to function as nondenominational religious workers. More than anything else, that rankled the Baptist conscience, and religious liberty became a driving concern—one of the concerns, in fact, that led George W. Truett to preach his famous sermon, “Baptists and Religious Liberty,” on the steps of the United States Capitol.

Not only were religious liberty issues a matter of concern, but so was the fundamentalist and modernist controversy being fought most hotly in the Northern denominations. Southern Baptists managed to reach an accommodated settlement, a solution possible only because they thought heterodoxy to be confined to the periphery of the denomination's experience, nowhere near the center. E. Y. Mullins, a statesman of unparalleled and unprecedented power, was able to articulate for Southern Baptists a way to the future that appeared to give them another pass through history. And it appeared to work for some time.

The adoption of the Cooperative Program and the organization of the Executive Committee showed that the SBC realized it could no longer operate as an ad-hoc meeting on an annual basis. There were fifty-two weeks in the year, all of which brought serious business to be done on the denomination's behalf, and in which the interests and gifts of the churches had to be channeled into some structure of support and accountability.

Fast forward to 1945 and the end of World War II, and not only did America enter a time of unprecedented prosperity and international influence, but the SBC also began a remarkable institutional, organizational, and denominational advance. The SBC became a national denomination by awkward default in the years from 1945 to 1965. Because no one needed any sort of denominational permission to start a Baptist church, Baptists

were doing just that all across the country. Some of these churches operated without even acknowledging they were Southern Baptist, until they came out of the closet and sent messengers to an annual meeting. All of a sudden, Southern Baptists found themselves to be a national denomination with churches in all fifty states.

More subterranean developments pointed to the future as well. The SBC's Executive Committee hired Booz Allen Hamilton, the organizational and efficiency experts that had recently reorganized General Motors, to help them rethink their own denominational structure. In this way, the SBC took on the safeguards of a modern multinational corporation, with various branches like those of General Motors—Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, Buick, and Cadillac lines. The SBC now had various branches and institutions, all orchestrated in a very tight logic of efficiency.

That sort of organizational structure worked well because it fit the American mind. Moreover, so long as Southern Baptists assumed themselves to be together theologically, they could energize themselves around their institutions and pursue their goals of greater reach, expansion, and efficiency through the streamlined logic of the corporation. The slippage from that ideal began even in the mid-1960s, because if the SBC was a corporation, it had become very confused about its mission. Its own constituency was divided, and its senior executives were not even certain of the direction it should go. The SBC's corporate identity began to fall apart in the 1960s and 1970s, until the conservative resurgence brought a new energy and a new rallying point.

Along with the theological matters at stake in the conservative resurgence, there was also a renewed sense that the structure of the denomination no longer fit the needs of the time. In 1995, the Program and Structure Study Committee presented to the convention a covenant for a new century. The proposal was a partial reversal of the corporate logic that had prevailed for so long. It was a significant step, reducing the total number of entities from nineteen to twelve—something which, to my knowledge, no denomination had ever done, except in response to a financial crisis. Southern Baptists did it because they wanted a new structure that was leaner, more mission-oriented, easier to understand, and more accountable to the denomination and its churches.

Not only have changes taken place at the national level, but associational principles are also being rewritten in our day. An understanding of general Baptist bodies is being recovered, even by people who do not know the term "association." There is a renewed understanding that Baptists

can rethink the way we relate to each other, and it is the churches that are driving that change—again, without asking for permission. The large infrastructure of modern Southern Baptist life may not survive in the postmodern age, but that decision will not be made by the executives of Southern Baptist agencies, or by the executives of state conventions. It will be made, eventually, by the churches.

In the 1900s, the primary issue was efficiency. In the twenty-first century, the primary issues are credibility and accountability. For the younger generation, the issue is this: “Is the SBC the answer to a question anyone is asking?” I would suggest the response to that is both “yes” and “no.” There is a new congregationalism now being established. It is real, and it is evolving. We can see it in churches such as Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, which now has a *third* location—in other words, one church in multiple locations. Such a thing was unheard of among Baptists in the past, but it is becoming more and more common because churches are beginning to understand that being a covenanted community may no longer mean we all have to be in one room at one time. Any church that holds multiple services in one location has already made the great theological jump, so going from two services to two locations is not too complicated or radical. Churches are also experimenting with a redefinition of the role of a deacon and a renegotiation of the role of an elder. There are real questions here about how we as Baptists should appropriate our tradition and maintain our understanding of congregational church government, especially when it is so easy to look at other alternatives and different denominations that may be more efficient, but that are also less Baptist.

PARACHURCH, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND DEMOGRAPHIC ISSUES

Three other issues deserve mention here. First, the parachurch will be a very significant part of the Southern Baptist future. By necessity market-driven, parachurch organizations offer expertise in customization and relevance. They emerge because they are generally able to meet a particular need faster than a denominational structure, and they can adjust themselves faster and get closer to the local church more quickly than a denominational entity accountable to 40,000 churches. The rise of parachurch organizations will spell a very different future for the SBC.

The second issue is the rise of a technological society. Churches are no longer dependent upon the SBC as they were just a few decades ago. The

SBC essentially has lost its monopoly, and that monopoly will never be recovered. In the same way, local newspapers have also lost their monopoly because people can go to the Internet and find newspapers from virtually anywhere in the world. Cable television was once the wave of the future. Now it is largely a thing of the past, because people can look on the Internet and even beat the reporters to a news story. The SBC is being affected by the information age in much the same way, and the only way it will be able to recover a sense of affection, accountability, and relevance with the churches is by understanding the real needs of real churches and reshaping itself to meet those needs.

The third great issue is demographic realities. In the first volume of his new history of the United States of America, William McDougal does what historians do not normally like to do—he makes judgments. McDougal says that over the last 400 years, the most important event in world history was the emergence of the United States of America. As much as others in the world may hate that assertion, he argued, “Try to discuss anything in contemporary history without making essential reference to the United States of America.” Since 1845, the SBC has grown, and its expansion has taken place in the midst of this American reality. In just over 160 years, we have seen it grow from being a denomination embedded in an essentially agrarian social context to being a denomination that is now engaging a highly mobile, highly professional, and largely metropolitan society. Today’s society is radically different from the one that gave birth to the SBC; in fact, it is almost impossible to imagine a citizen of the United States of America in 1845 recognizing much of the shape that America has taken today.

All this has led to changes in the SBC, and to a variety of new church types. We have seen the rise of megachurches and micro-churches—megachurches that understand growth and size to be an essential component in responding to an expanding metropolitan reality, and micro-churches that fit a niche for particular communities within those metropolitan areas. These megachurches and micro-churches have become models for others—especially the megachurches, which have been our denomination’s great innovators of ministry for the last twenty years. With this phenomenon, however, has come an understandably low level of denominational commitment. Not only did the SBC lose its monopoly, but now many members of these large churches are not even aware that they are Southern Baptist. Megachurches are communities that are largely self-defined, and they do not need the SBC in order to conduct their seven-day-a-week ministry. They may connect with the SBC for missions, theological education, and

other causes, but many of the members of these churches have only a vague awareness of what their denomination is, or should be, or could be.

Southern Baptists are still clustered in the South, but we are now in the New South—or maybe the *New* New South. In this highly mobile society, made up of the driving energy of young professionals in metropolitan areas, we face a missiological challenge that is different from anything we have seen before. Ponder this: if current statistical trends hold, by the year 2010 the majority of the people who attend our churches on any given Sunday morning will do so in just 19 metropolitan areas in the United States of America. In other words, most of the people who attend Southern Baptist churches now live in the cities and suburbs. This situation leads to statistical confusion, for often we hear that only about half of Southern Baptist pastors have a seminary degree. That may be true, but 90 percent of the people who hear a sermon on Sunday morning are hearing a seminary-educated pastor. The statistic mentioned above tells only half the story, and indeed a misleading part of the story. The SBC's energy has moved from its rural roots, where it began, to the metropolitan areas that have become the future of the nation. This was not done by any strategy, but simply by the shape of economic, political, and social dynamics—from transportation and the interstate highway system to the shape of the modern economy. That presents a tremendous challenge to Southern Baptists, one we ignore to our great detriment.

Another demographic challenge is the rise of ethnic and minority groups. The 1950 American census did not even record Hispanics as a category. Now Hispanics comprise the largest minority group in America. Just recently I was listening on CSPAN as a Republican strategist said, "You have to realize there are more Hispanic voters in Los Angeles than there are *voters* in Chicago." Once that fact is taken into consideration, it becomes obvious that the shape of the United States of America is not well represented by the annual meeting of the SBC. In terms of the ethnic diversity of this country, we are more than just a few years behind; we are in a different world altogether, and it will take the most concerted denominational leadership to address this challenge well.

There is also a generational challenge. Thanks to advances in medical technology, people are living longer. Not only so, but their vitality and energy have also been extended. Demographers are now being forced to talk about not only the old, but also the "old old," which might lead us to speak also of the "young old." These "young old" are the most underutilized generational cohort in our churches today. These are persons who are

recently retired, who have great gifts and sound leadership experience, but who are being largely ignored because the church has bought into a pagan understanding of retirement. In pagan terms, retirement means “You’re done.” As Christians, however, we should understand retirement years not as “vacation time” in which we are to be left alone, but rather as an opportunity to work full-time for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and the good of his church. This “young old” cohort represents a great—but so far largely overlooked—opportunity for the church.

If the “young old” are the underutilized generation, there is also a generation that is almost entirely missing from the SBC—pastors and leaders between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five. There is a tremendous younger generation coming, and there are many pastors fifty-five and older who are demonstrative leaders, servants of the Word, and preachers of power; but the most difficult pastoral search to conduct right now is for someone between age thirty-five and fifty-five. That is not to say, of course, that there is no one between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five, but statistically speaking, this is an area of urgent vulnerability.

The worst news, however, is this: we are not even baptizing our own teenagers. Statistics can be interpreted in many different ways to make many different arguments, but one can only grieve over the figures on adolescent baptisms. According to some estimates, we are now baptizing only slightly more than 14 percent of our own teenagers. It is often noted that the years between twelve and twenty-five are the prime ages for making major decisions in life, including a public profession of faith in Christ. Ninety percent of persons who are baptized in our churches are baptized before age twenty-one. If we are reaching 14 percent of the twelve to twenty-five cohort, we are therefore missing 86 percent of them. The SBC’s organizational issues must take a backseat here. If Southern Baptists do not address this problem quickly, an entire generation of young people who have grown up in our churches will not be defining the future of the SBC—they will instead be absorbed into a pagan America.

Despite all this, there is hope to be seen in the students on many university campuses and on the campuses of the SBC seminaries. There you will find hundreds of very serious young Christians ready for leadership. They are more conservative than their forebears, and they are more committed because they were not raised in a context of cultural Christianity. They have fought their way to every decision, and they made their public profession of faith in Christ when it was not popular. They are not interested in *laissez-faire*, lighthearted Christianity. They want the real thing, the red meat, a

serious challenge, and they want to be taken seriously. It is not too much to say that this generation is our denomination's hope for the future.

CULTURAL AND MORAL ISSUES

We are also being confronted by a host of cultural and moral issues. One author has said that in the 1960s, Southern Baptists were at ease in Zion. The South was largely intact and basically unaffected by many of the social problems that had torn apart the North, not to mention post-Christendom in Europe. By the 1970s, the culture wars had arrived at the doorstep of the SBC. In 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* was handed down by the United States Supreme Court, the SBC went on the record about abortion—and on the wrong side, to our denominational shame. It was not until 1979 that the SBC adopted a resolution that reversed that pro-choice affirmation. Incidentally, the issue of abortion was far more important in the conservative resurgence than most people have recognized. While most sociologists would describe the inerrancy issue as an opaque issue—one that is hard for laypeople to understand—there is nothing opaque about killing a baby in the womb. The evil of such a thing is obvious.

In the 1980s, the culture wars broke open with intensity, and we now face a panoply of issues, each of which seems more insistent than the one before. Genetic engineering, biotechnology, germ line therapy, embryo research, stem cell experimentation, in vitro fertilization, human cloning, euthanasia, assisted suicide—each of these issues presents the church with a formidable challenge. Already, over a dozen SBC churches have had transgendered persons present themselves for membership, and those congregations have had to decide right then and there what they believe. The church in this age cannot avoid giving an answer to these questions. The rising cultural confusion around us will eventually demand it.

Pastors are already facing questions about euthanasia and assisted suicide. People in our churches are also making decisions about reproductive technologies, and the day is not far off when they will be confronted with the issue of cloning. These are not distant issues. We cannot avoid giving an answer much longer. The culture wars are no longer “out there” or “up there” in the North. They are right here, in our churches and in our denomination. We as Southern Baptists will either muster the courage to address these issues in the comprehensive truthfulness of God's Word, or we will join the other mainline Protestants in their utter confusion. The sexual revolution, the clash of worldviews, the issue of homosexuality,

the personal autonomy theme, the rise of moral relativism, the theological culture, the psychologies of the self, and the pervasiveness of postmodern worldviews all present inescapable challenges to our denomination, our seminaries, and our churches, and to Christian fathers and mothers.

Our denomination will be involved in controversy from now on. Our children will face these questions in their schools. Our families will face them in the workplace. What will your church members do on “Gay Day” at the local corporation, when someone comes by passing out gay-pride flags and the executive warns that it will not go well on evaluation day for anyone who refuses to celebrate? Philosophers such as Robert Audi are now arguing that the only assertions that should be allowed in the public square are those with a secular rationale, a secular purpose, and a secular effect. According to this logic, arguments about homosexuality that rely on scriptural teaching would be ruled out of bounds—if not silenced altogether. How will Southern Baptists react to the legal sanction, social ostracism, and prejudice that will soon be heaped upon us?

FINANCIAL ISSUES

The final issue to consider is our denomination’s financial challenges. Other matters we have discussed are far more important, but the questions surrounding our denomination’s finances also demand some attention. From 1987 to 2002, church receipts in the SBC grew 120 percent to a high of \$9.5 billion. During that same period, the missions budget grew only 55 percent—about half the growth of total receipts. Similarly, giving to the Cooperative Program grew only 49 percent—less than half the total budget. The percentage of undesignated receipts given from local churches over the last fifteen years fell one-third from 7.85 percent to 5.3 percent. On a straight-line projection, that means the Cooperative Program would die in thirty years. Of course, such a scenario is unlikely, but it is clear that we are renegotiating the way we finance the work of this denomination and its entities, and once again, the churches are driving that change.

Two considerations are especially important in this matter. First, the rise of an American investor class means that patterns of giving are remarkably different at the local church level than they have been in the past. People are no longer looking forward to pensions established on a guaranteed benefit plan. Instead, they have to invest, and their future is dependent upon the protection of that money. Therefore, people are no longer giving out of accumulated wealth, but are increasingly waiting to give a portion of

their estates after they die. If a 55-year-old man makes a major estate gift to Southern Seminary right now, we would thank him heartily for the gift. But actually speaking, that gift probably will not come to Southern Seminary for another thirty years. Thus, a great deal of the wealth transference upon which Christian churches and Christian organizations have always depended is now being delayed for years and even decades—a reality that will make the next twenty or thirty years a significant financial challenge for churches and Christian institutions.

Another sobering statistic is that in the metropolitan sectors of America, the average couple in their thirties is living on 115 percent of their annual income, which means they simply do not have much money to give. These economic realities immediately impact the bottom line. Is this a spiritual issue? Of course it is. Is it a stewardship issue? Of course it is. But the problem will not be reversed quickly. As Christians in the twenty-first century, we must entirely rethink the way we look at wealth, retirement, income, and materialism.

CONCLUSION

For all the challenges we will face in the future, this is a great time to be a Baptist. We now have the opportunity to recover our nonconformist roots. That is where we began. We were outsiders, not insiders. In fact, Baptists are always better when we are outsiders. When Baptists are forced to be nonconformists, we are forced to go back home. We have an opportunity now to think more clearly about what it means to be a Baptist, to be a covenanted community, and to be a Christian in communion with like-minded, Christ-professing, mutually accountable believers.

We have an opportunity to rekindle the Baptist vision of the church. Baptists have always understood Christianity in the context of the congregation. There can be no lone rangers, no theme of personal autonomy. Baptists understand that we are mutually accountable to each other. For it is in the context of the covenanted community—where Word and Spirit come together by the preaching of the Word and the nurture of Christian fellowship—that the Holy Spirit conforms us to the image of Christ.

We have an opportunity to reestablish our commitment to the *consensus fide*. Baptists are different from every other Christian denomination—and yet the same. We must remember that sameness as we stand together with others in the faith, even if they are not members of our own covenanted communities.

We have an opportunity to recommit ourselves to the confessionalism that was the high-water mark of the Baptist experience. The confession of faith was never an excuse or an invasion. It was simply a way of saying, "This is who we are, and this is how we intend to communicate what we believe both to the world and to each other."

We have an opportunity to restore church discipline in the congregation. Without discipline, we have a half-covenant, not a whole one. In the same way, we must reenergize evangelism, recognizing the challenge we face in ethnic, metropolitan, and urban realities. This is the challenge of a national denomination with an international mission.

Lastly, we have an opportunity now to reach out to a world desperately in need of hope, help, and the gospel. We are the vessels of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Missions is the heartbeat of our denomination, precisely because we believe that "whosoever will may come," and that "all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." We believe that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ, and therefore we go, for without a preacher they will not hear.

When John F. Kennedy was running for president in 1960, N. Y. Stevens, who carried the Democratic banner from 1952 to 1956, advised him concerning religion. He said, "Senator, a politician's best refuge is a vague faith strongly held, or a strong faith vaguely held." What God requires from Southern Baptists, however, is a strong faith strongly held. That alone points the way to the Baptist future.