

UNION UNIVERSITY

Equipping Today's Church Leaders

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At its Memphis meeting in 1925, the Southern Baptist Convention took two vital steps that would help to shape its identity for many years to come. First, in response to a series of financial challenges, messengers approved an innovative funding mechanism called the Cooperative Program. This new venture contributed significantly to a marked programmatic coherence that Southern Baptists enjoyed for the next half-century. Second, the 1925 gathering also endorsed a new doctrinal statement known as the *Baptist Faith and Message*. In the context of a nationwide debate over Darwinism, as well as raging theological controversies in the Northern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the SBC officially went on record in favor of Christian supernaturalism. While most Southern Baptists viewed the *BFM* as a general expression of commonly held beliefs and not as an enforceable creed, it nonetheless suggested some parameters by which to clarify what it meant to be a Baptist. In addition, current IMB president Jerry Rankin has argued that E. Y.

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ENGAGING



B D I A P

The mainline denominations have been in serious decline since the 1960s. By the early 1990s, the overall cultural decline of denominations began to be felt by more conservative groups in a strange way. Even among evangelical groups that experienced numerical growth, a change of attitude by church members and pastors toward the denominations began to



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Throughout our history, Baptists have proudly and deservedly been called, "people of the Book." This label was earned by centuries of saints who sacrificially labored to ensure that Baptists remained faithful to the complete trustworthiness and authority of Scripture. Early General Baptist leaders, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, agreed on the truth and final authority of Scripture. They rejected human authority that did not agree with Scripture, encouraged their congregants to invest their lives in the study of God's Word and admonished them to give full expression to their beliefs in daily life. These seeds of faithfulness planted in the early seventeenth century provided the foundation upon which Baptist identity has been built and spawned generations of believers who have lived with an undying commitment to the authority of God's Word.

Four centuries later, we have witnessed a crisis of authority within our own ranks concerning God's Word. Many look at the Southern Baptist Convention over the last 25 years and refer to the conservative resurgence as simply petty politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. This entire episode in Baptist history resulted from the need to return our denomination to our roots as "people of the Book." For a variety of reasons, our convention had wandered away from the historic convictions about Scripture that shaped our identity as a denomination. Many pastors, church leaders and seminary professors questioned matters of inspiration, authority and sufficiency of Scripture. This trend, if left unchecked, threatened our future viability. Thankfully, a course correction was made, our convention was strengthened and our convictions renewed.

Unfortunately, the battle did not end with the seminaries and convention leadership. It simply moved to the pew. The crisis of authority still exists. Apparently, this battle will be even tougher than the last, because it reaches the depth and breadth of our convention. Thankfully, our seminaries and convention are led by trustees, administrators and faculty who affirm both the trustworthiness and authority of Scripture. Seminary students are being equipped with a thoroughly Biblical worldview. However, recent research from George Barna reports an alarming figure that only 51% of America's Protestant pastors have a biblical worldview.

Southern Baptist pastors had the highest percentage of all denominations, yet, the 71% is still cause for great concern. This research affirms that many Protestants are drifting away from viewing Scripture as authoritative and sufficient for all of life.

With such disturbing trends among pastors, it is not surprising why Barna's research indicates that fewer than 10% of born-again Christians hold to a biblical worldview. This is where the real battle is taking place. It is one thing to go through an academic exercise affirming the rightful place of Scripture. It is another to allow Holy Scripture to shape and inform our lives. Some in our convention are satisfied with the simple knowledge that conservatives "won" the resurgent efforts. An important question to ask might be, "Did we win the war or simply a skirmish?" Other important questions to ask are, "Does Scripture now hold its rightful position in our convention and church life?" or "Are you committed to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture if your belief does not determine how you live your life?" At some point, Baptists must return to our historic convictions on Scripture and reaffirm our commitment to the Word of God in both belief and practice.

Being known as "people of the Book" is indeed a compliment. It is a name that was earned not only from our high view of Scripture, but from our practice of it as well. The words of Thomas Lover in his *Practical Gospel*, *Discourse Addressed to the Brethren* calls us to "let the Scripture therefore be the rule of thy faith and practice." This challenging statement reminds us that actions do speak louder than words when it comes to matters of Christian faith and that the Living Word of God was given for more than intellectual inquiry and debate.

In recent years, a new term has been added to our vocabulary resulting from conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other places. It is "friendly fire." This occurs when people who are fighting the same enemy fire upon and sometimes wound each other. It is perhaps one of the most tragic realities of war. Unfortunately, friendly fire is not limited to the battlefields around the world. Sometimes, it is present within denominational struggles. Our academic conversations about Scripture are essential. However, we need to be

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were probably prouder of our denomination than any other Christian group in America. We were big and self-sufficient. We had the largest seminaries, the largest mission force, and the largest Christian publishing enterprise in the country. Our people were involved in Christian education from the cradle to the grave. They came out on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. There were more Baptists than people in the old South. Baptists were taught to tithe, and each church contributed a significant portion of its budget to advance the common mission and Christian education goals of the annual meetings of the association, state convention, and Southern Baptist Convention. In a sense, the Southern Baptist Convention only existed for the three days a year that the meeting took place. In the meantime, independent agencies with their own independent boards carried out their missions. Despite its bigness and success, what people called the Southern Baptist Convention was actually a number of para-church ministries funded by a single missions convention in which only members of Baptist churches could participate. The churches did not even have delegates to the meeting. The churches sent the money freely and the messengers who attended the meeting decided what to do with the money.

The old Baptist confessions of faith did not discuss the relationship between autonomous churches. The early Baptists formed themselves into associations of churches to carry out evangelism, start new congregations, and promote doctrinal faithfulness among the Baptist churches. In those days, it was a privilege to be accepted into the fellowship of an association and allowed to contribute to the joint effort of doing more together than any single congregation could accomplish on its own. This non-compulsory commitment to a common mission eventually led to the establishment of the great mission agencies and institutions of Baptist life. The organizational structures, agencies, and institutions were never what made Baptists distinctive, but they were the means through which Baptists carried out their distinctive understanding of the Christian faith.

During the "Golden Age" of the Baptist program between 1925 and 1975, Baptist identity gradually shifted away from the theological distinctives upon which the Baptists were founded and moved more toward the structures and methodologies that characterized organized Southern Baptist life. The Baptists began because of deep seated theological convictions about Scripture, the nature of the church, the ordinances of the church, and the role of the individual believer within the church. While they shared many convictions in common with the Reformation understanding of salvation, they were committed to establishing "believers' churches" composed only of people who had confessed Jesus Christ as savior after reaching the age of accountability and were baptized by immersion according to the New Testament pattern. As Baptist identity focused more on denominational affiliation and the Baptist program, the founding distinctives became less well known and

of incidental importance to the average church member. It is not unusual to hear pastors of larger churches in suburban areas say that their church members come from many different church backgrounds and do not know anything about Baptists. Without common theological and ecclesiological convictions, Baptist churches have no particular reason to restrict their missions and educational ventures to Baptist institutions.

When churches had revivals just once or twice a year, they focused their evangelistic preaching efforts on reaching unbelievers during those brief periods. Since Southern Baptist Churches have abandoned revivals, however, they have moved toward the "contemporary" service as a norm which caters to the unbeliever. Southern Baptists also once had a weekly evangelistic service. At the end of the nineteenth century, many churches added a Sunday evening service as an outreach effort to people who did not normally come to church. The service was informal, and the songs tended to be of a more popular nature that dealt with personal experience. These were the gospel songs people like Fanny Crosby composed. Sunday evening became the evangelistic service. It was the equivalent of today's contemporary service. Today many churches have moved the function of the Sunday evening service to Sunday morning and eliminated the traditional service designed to strengthen the church in the apostles' teaching. The result is that the congregations are bereft of doctrinal preaching designed to build up the body. There is nothing wrong with moving the evangelistic service from Sunday night to Sunday morning just so long as the rest of the ministry continues. Preaching that only addresses the felt needs of people neglects the unmet needs. If churches go a generation or more without teaching theology in the context of worship, it is not surprising that postdenominational trends should begin to appear among Southern Baptists.

In a remarkable way, many conservative churches have become functionally liberal by ignoring aspects of the faith. We may assume too much about what people know and understand. One of the great strengths of the old Training Union/Church Training/Discipleship Training program was its six year rotation through the basic doctrines of Christian theology, church history, missions, and ministry. During the six years of junior high and high school, a teenager would gain a solid foundation in the faith. Today we have the amorphous "youth group" that follows the idiosyncrasies of the youth leader who does not stay around very long. Very few youth groups have a systematic approach to Christian growth and little or no continuity from one youth leader to the next. Is it any wonder that today's youth graduate from high school and graduate from church?

One could almost get depressed if Jesus Christ were not head of the church. But he is. It is not too late for any church to introduce a strategy to cover all the bases for both youth and adults. Methodologies come and go, but the objectives that they were originally created to serve remain. E-0.012iJT bo, d(ecr)9..d gat they



