David S. Dockery and Timothy George have charted a wise and faithful course for Southern Baptists for the 21st Century. Their invitation to renewal is one worthy of following. I am extremely pleased and thankful for this consensus building project. I commend Building Bridges to every Southern Baptist and invite you to join us on this hope-filled, Christ-honoring journey.

MORRIS H. CHAPMAN
President and Chief Executive Officer
Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention

David S. Dockery and Timothy George are the co-editors of Baptist Theologians and Theologians of the Baptist Tradition.
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The Christian church in the west finds itself today in a titanic struggle with two great alien worldviews. On the one hand, there is radical Islamo-fascism which threatens the very existence of western civilization. Though many politicians and cultural elites refuse to acknowledge it, the fundamental convictions of Islamo-fascism are antithetical to the Gospel in every way. All religions do not lead to the same place.

On the second front, Christianity is in what we euphemistically call a culture war. We are struggling for the heart and soul of American life. The issue is truth, whether it is knowable, whether there is any authority, whether there is any basis for a transcendent understanding of the role of family and the created order in our civilization.

As the largest Protestant denomination in America, the Southern Baptist Convention has a
critical role to play. How we carry out our mission to spread the Good News and to bring Christian truth to bear in culture will have huge and lasting consequences, not only for the future of the church but for the future of western society as we know it. Most of the structures of our society have been corrupted by pervasive relativism and skepticism. It is almost as if America is asleep in the face of the two great threats to its existence. We as Christians are the ones who best understand how conflicting religious views affect public life—and have the duty to educate our fellow citizens.

How will Southern Baptists respond to this challenge? Much of the answer to that question can be found in the writings of two of the greatest thinkers I know, Timothy George and David Dockery. Their keenly insightful writings in this handy little book remind us of our own tradition, what has happened to the Southern Baptist Convention in the latter part of the 20th century; and they make a timely appeal for a new consensus, what the early church called the sensus fidelium, an agreement on apostolic teaching and how it is to be applied today, and a healthy ecumenism, in George’s words, not of accommodation but of conviction!

We as Baptists can spend our time quibbling among ourselves, perpetuating the crisis of identity that has affected us through two generations or more. Or we can lock arms; commit ourselves to the holy, authoritative word of God and to living it out in such a way that we bring a winsome and pleasing message of Christian truth to our culture.

I’m a Southern Baptist not by birth but by choice. After my conversion in 1973 I began to study the different ecclesiastical models and came to the deep conviction that Baptists best reflected the biblical model of the church. I encountered Southern Baptists who had a great heart for evangelism. I’d found Southern Baptist communities to be warm and welcoming. My memories of being ministered to by a raw-boned, Southern Baptist country preacher when I was in prison were fresh in my mind; and so in 1977, feeling welcomed and at home at Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Virginia, I was baptized.

I have never looked back nor regretted it for a moment. Not only do I believe I made the right decision biblically, but I made the right decision in terms of how my gifts could best be used in the great struggles of our day.

So I echo the call presented in these pages by my two brothers and fellow Southern Baptists David Dockery and Timothy George. These are godly men, two of the finest minds in our denomination—and in the entire evangelical world. Building Bridges is an heroic call for a recommitment to the gospel message, to the God we serve, to our own Baptist
heritage, and to the mission of the church as we pull together in the face of two alien worldviews which not only threaten us as a church but threaten the very foundations of our culture.

There is no time to be lost. This is a moment for Southern Baptists to join together and to make a powerful witness to the majestic commandments of God and the truth of a biblical view of life.

Forty thousand Southern Baptist churches across America pulling together, united in our common confession of beliefs, bearing one another’s burdens, could change the face of America and the world beyond. David Dockery and Timothy George have given us an important call to biblical obedience; may we heed it. And may you be as thrilled and motivated reading these pages as I have been.

Charles Colson
Founder
Prison Fellowship

“I echo the call presented in these pages.”

When my three grown sons were small children, we would often play with a wooden train. Because they were so young, the boys would sometimes construct a track that ended up becoming two separate sections. The train could not continue to run because it would fall off the track. It was at that point that one of them would request with excitement: “Daddy, build me a bridge.”

And so I would. The train could then run smoothly.

I am a part of a denomination that has many tracks but few bridges. And if we don’t start building some bridges quickly, God’s hand of blessing may move beyond us.

Let me share with you an example of recent days. I spoke this past February at the Baptist Identity Conference at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee. From an outsider’s perspective, one might
conclude that the crowd was like-minded. After all, it was a gathering of mostly Southern Baptists.

But I knew better. Present were five-point Calvinists and others who would not affirm all five points. Also in attendance were cessationists and non-cessationists, people with differing views of women in ministry, bloggers, and print-media writers. There were some who thought leaving “Baptist” out of a church’s name was wrong; and there were others who had already taken the denominational label out of their church’s name. The views on eschatology held by the attendees were many.

It was a diverse group of Southern Baptists indeed.

I spoke to many people before and after my formal presentation. One person commented to me, “Dr. Rainer, I better leave you before people start wondering why we are speaking with each other.” Admittedly, his comment was meant to be humorous. But it did have a sting of truth in it. The labels had already been applied. The sides had been chosen. And you had better be careful about the side you chose or the people with whom you associated.

I reject that line of thinking.

As far as I knew, everyone at that conference was my brother or sister in Christ. As far as I knew, everyone was a Bible believer. I refuse to let labels keep me from building bridges.

My six years as a seminary student were difficult. Though I met many godly men and women and professors, I also witnessed firsthand much aberrant theology. I was and still am a firm supporter of the conservative resurgence. I knew we could not continue down the path we were headed.

But it seems as if we just can’t stop fighting even though the battle for the Bible is over and won.

I understand the risk I am taking by writing these words. But silence is not an option. I must be about building bridges.

Please understand that I have no illusion that my words will start a revolution or that many will listen. But I can only be held accountable before God for my own actions.

I choose to build bridges.

Though I am a fallible and sinful person, I will seek God’s power to stay true to the following:

1. I stand firm on the inerrant Word of God. I support without reservation the Baptist Faith and Message 2000.
2. Though I may disagree with some on secondary and tertiary issues, I will not let those points of disagreement tear down bridges of relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ.
3. I will seek to join with those who will work together on the common causes of missions, evangelism and the health of the local church.
4. I will seek God’s will in prayer before I write or speak a word of disagreement against another
brother or sister in Christ or even a non-Christian. I will seek to see the plank in my own eye before pointing out the splinter in another person’s eye. I will follow the truths of Matthew 18 when I feel that I need to confront a brother or sister in Christ.

5. I will spend more time rejoicing in the Lord (Phil 4:4).

6. I will seek God’s power to have a more gentle and Christlike spirit (Phil 4:5).

7. I will pray that the lost and the Unchurched world will know me by my Christlike love. Such is my commitment.

If God so leads, I invite you to join me in building bridges. I am grateful for David Dockery and Timothy George who have joined me in this bridge building project.

Thom Rainer is president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources and author of numerous best-selling books.

A Call for Renewal, Consensus, and Cooperation: Reflections on the SBC Since 1979

David S. Dockery

Comprised of over 16 million church members in all fifty states of the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest evangelical denomination in the country. The SBC has tended to exist separately from the rest of American Christianity because of its sectionalism, its inability to separate from Southern culture, its parochialism, and its self-sufficiency, though there are some indicators that these things are beginning to change. For almost three decades the SBC has been embroiled in controversy regarding theological issues and denominational polity. We now find ourselves asking important questions about the identity and future of Southern Baptists. To paraphrase the warning of the late Carl F.H. Henry, we must settle the identity issue, and in doing so, coalesce, otherwise we will become by the 21st Century a wilderness cult in a secular society, with no more public significance than the ancient Essenes in their Dead Sea caves.
Southern Baptist History: An Overview, 1845-1979

The SBC came together in 1845 in Augusta, GA in response to two matters:

1. The lack of interest among American Baptists for home missions in the South, and
2. Concerns over whether slave holders could be appointed as foreign missionaries.

The first was as important as the second, if not more so. The SBC traces its roots to two groups of Baptists in the South. The first was the “so-called” Charleston tradition, characterized by confessional theology, strong support for education, quasi-liturgical worship, and order. The second was the “so-called” Sandy Creek tradition, which emphasized evangelism and revivalism. They tended to be suspicious of educated ministry, and they focused on Spirit-led worship characterized by ardor.

The leadership in the early years of the Convention, including the initial faculty members at Southern Seminary and first group of Convention presidents, were more akin to the Charleston tradition, but the grassroots had more in common with Sandy Creek. Two other movements had a large bearing on the developing formation of Southern Baptists. These included both Landmarkists and Revivalists, which tended to have larger influence as

Baptists spread across the frontier from Tennessee to Texas.

While differences obviously existed, 19th Century Baptists looked to a fully truthful and authoritative Bible as a guide for beliefs and ministry as seen in Baptist: Why and Why Not, edited by J. M. Frost with contributions from T. T. Eaton, F. H. Kerfoot, and others. The early 20th Century saw rapid growth and the beginning of significant changes among Southern Baptists. During this time the SBC largely avoided the Modernist-Fundamentalist battles that characterized the denominations in the North. Yet, when pressed almost every leader sided with the Fundamentalists. Even E. Y. Mullins, longtime president of Southern Seminary, and the SBC’s most influential theologian from 1900 to 1925, contributed articles to the famous set of works called the Fundamentals.

From the early years of the SBC to the time of Mullins and W. T. Conner, Southern Baptists witnessed the diminishing influence of Calvinism, the decline of postmillennialism, the rise of revivalism, and an advancement in the understanding of Baptist origins. The first half of the 20th Century witnessed the introduction into SBC life of such matters as historical criticism, evolution, and experiential apologetics. W. L. Poteat, president at Wake Forest, helped pave the way for liberal thought to gain an initial foothold in Baptist life.
We can say that Southern Baptist thought moved from a hermeneutic of divine sovereignty with Boyce, Broadus, and Manly to one of personal revelation and experience with Mullins, and to a lesser degree with Conner. The initial inroads of evolutionary thought were met with a wide-ranging negative response resulting in a new consensus, which developed around the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message. This new confessional statement importantly affirmed that Southern Baptists “believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter…”

From 1925 to 1954 the SBC could be characterized by the growth of denominational organization and efficiency. The Cooperative Program was developed, under the leadership of M. E. Dodd, as a common fund to support education, missions, and benevolent causes in the SBC. It was probably the key entity to hold together an expanding and diverse denomination for the next 80+ years. During this time the Executive Committee was formed, which gave the “grass roots” denomination the perception of a “hierarchical” sense that it had not had before.

The growth of the Convention was fueled by the “Million More in ’54” campaign, which produced 750,000 new Sunday School members in one year. The SBC entered the second half of the 20th Century as an efficiently run and largely unified organization, but this “consensus” tended to be shaped by adherence to a unified programmatic model more so than an intentionally formed theological orthodoxy.

Pragmatism was the order of the day. In this context critical approaches to biblical studies and tendencies toward liberalism entered “under the radar”—as the focus remained on the programmatic consensus. From 1954 to 1979 the SBC was on the road to becoming yet another “mainline protestant denomination”—by this time the largest protestant denomination in the country, having surpassed the United Methodists. It seemed as if many SBC revivalistic leaders at this time were embarrassed by the convention’s revivalistic heritage. And such embarrassment was surpassed by the other aspect of the SBC’s heritage, the Calvinistic aspects of the “Charleston tradition.”

The SBC began to re-envision itself, largely ignoring the 19th Century roots. New “enlightenment” and “individualistic” models of what it
meant to be a Baptist were put forward under the umbrella of a “commitment to the priesthood of the believer” and “individual soul competency,” with the basic understanding that “Baptist means freedom.” Under this umbrella a person could read the Bible for himself or herself, influenced by higher critical conclusions while celebrating the “experience” and “freedom” of being a Baptist. The SBC institutions, publishing house, and mission boards, and many “First Baptist Churches” that dotted the landscape were often influenced by this mindset. An attempt to bring about a new and necessary consensus was led by Herschel H. Hobbs in his role as SBC President and as chairman of the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. The confessional statement reconfirmed the convention’s commitment to Scripture, though the preamble was ambiguous about the importance and normative nature of the Baptist Faith and Message itself.

**The SBC Since 1979: Paradigmatic Changes**

During the summer of 1979 in Houston, TX, the SBC took a major, and at that time unexpected, theological turn with the election of Rev. Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, as Convention president. The conservatives in the SBC began to move out of their separatist mentality accompanied by a clarion call for a commitment to the inerrancy of Holy Scripture—to reclaim the theological position so well articulated by Basil Manly, Jr., B. H. Carroll, and J. M. Frost. A position on the doctrine of Scripture in line with Manly and Carroll had been virtually absent from SBC academic circles from the ’40s to the ’80s, usually being relegated to obscurantist thought and wrongly equated with a mechanical dictation view of inspiration.

In an attempt to fill this void, the conservatives not only turned to 19th Century SBC leaders, but to the new leaders in the broader evangelical world. SBC conservatives were strengthened particularly by the work of the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy. The “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (1978) and the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Interpretation” (1982) provided a helpful and timely resource. The value and influence of the early writings of Clark Pinnock, along with the thoroughgoing and illuminating theological and apologetical works of Carl F. H. Henry, Millard Erickson, and J. I. Packer cannot be underestimated. Jimmy Draper (SBC president 1982-83) called for a meeting between “conservatives” and “moderates” seeking reconciliation around a handful of basic theological agreements, including biblical inerrancy, but this proposal was rejected by the moderate leadership. A variety of books and journals attempted to deal with the key issues in the expanding controversy as conservative presidents were elected year after year at each annual Southern Baptist Convention. The first important work by two young conservative professors at Southwestern Seminary was *Baptists*
and the Bible, by L. Russ Bush and Tom Nettles. The book proposal was rejected by Broadman Press and eventually published by Moody Press in 1980. Two responses were developed to the Bush-Nettles proposal. The first came from Russell Dilday, president at Southwestern Seminary, who authored the annual convention doctrine study titled, The Doctrine of Biblical Authority. The second was a multi-authored volume, edited by Rob James, titled The Unfettered Word. Along the same lines, a key article was published in the Review and Expositor in 1986 by Roy L. Honeycutt, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Important responses were offered by the conservatives in the Criswell Theological Review, 1987, 1988.

An attempt to clarify the issues came about with a special issue of the Theological Educator in 1988. The issue, called “Polarities,” offered pro and con perspectives on a variety of key issues including the doctrine of scripture. By the early 1990s, the Baptist Sunday School Board recognized the need to offer a different perspective from the Dilday publication a decade earlier. The Doctrine of the Bible (1991) and its expanded edition, Christian Scripture (1995), were published and became the key resources for defining and understanding important issues such as biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and authority.

Beyond the Impasse?: Scripture, Interpretation, and Theology in Baptist Life published by Broadman & Holman in 1992 provided carefully written chapters on vital theological issues facing Southern Baptists at the height of the controversy. The eight contributors represented different sectors among Baptist life. The question mark in the title was important. The chapters and various responses were clarifying for many, but they failed to move the convention “beyond the impasse.” Important contributions were offered as commentaries on the “Conservative Resurgence,” “the Takeover,” or the “Baptist Reformation.” These included: Baptist Battles (1995) by Nancy Ammerman, God’s Last and Only Hope (1990) by Bill Leonard, The Baptist Reformation (2000) by Jerry Sutton, and A Hill on Which to Die (2003) by Paul Pressler.

The various articles in the 2005 issue of The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology have been extremely helpful for many to understand the period of 1979-2004 in SBC life.

The Peace Committee, a large and unwieldy committee, functioned for two years between 1985-87. It was basically a conversation between Cecil Sherman and Bill Hull from one side and Adrian Rogers and Jerry Vines on the other, with Herschel Hobbs serving as a mediator. While the Peace Committee’s conclusions sided with the conservatives, it was the 1986 Glorieta Statement
authored by the six seminary presidents that most clearly acknowledged the need for change in the SBC. The six seminary presidents recognized the theological imbalance in their faculties and made two declarations:

1. That the Bible does not err in any area of reality, and
2. They would begin to hire theological conservatives to bring balance to their faculties.

These statements, along with the 1991 Covenant Statement at Southern Seminary, began the changes that took place at every seminary and SBC entity. The needed exegetical and expositional underpinnings for the conservatives came from the publication of the projected 40 volume New American Commentary. The first volume was published in 1991 and now over thirty volumes are in print, including the most important two-volume work on *Genesis* by Ken Mathews. The revised *Baptist Faith and Message*, overwhelmingly approved at the Orlando Convention in 2000, served as a sign that the conservative resurgence was complete.

**Fragmentation in the SBC: Beyond Moderates and Conservatives**

Most people have interpreted the past three decades as battle between “conservatives” and “moderates.” While such a statement is generally true, it is probably too broad and somewhat superficial. In the late 1980s, many started recognizing at least four groups: Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, Moderates, and Liberals. Clearly, the two group model does not tell the whole story, but neither does the four group model go far enough. The reality is that those understood to be moderates included:

1. **Denominational Loyalists**,  
2. **Programmatic Pragmatists**,  
3. **Centrist Evangelicals** (many of whom identified themselves as biblical inerrantists),  
4. **Moderates**,  
5. **Liberals**,  
6. **Baptist Women in Ministry**, and  
7. **Broad Minded Ecumenicals** with connections to American Baptists and others.

Now, most all of these are disconnected from the national convention, though many have remained involved with state conventions.

Conservatives were even more diverse. They included a loose knit coalition of several groups—all of whom wanted some kind of course correction to bring about a more faithful Baptist orthodoxy. I would suggest that there were at least seven groups of conservatives, with sub-groups among each of these, which included:

“**ALL OF WHOM WANTED SOME KIND OF COURSE CORRECTION TO BRING ABOUT A MORE FAITHFUL BAPTIST ORTHODOXY.”**
1. **Fundamentalists**: hard-lined people who have more in common with “independent” Baptists than with the SBC heritage.

2. **Revivalists**: true heirs of the Sandy Creek tradition, including their suspicion of education.

3. **Traditionalists**: heirs of the Sandy Creek theology, commitment to evangelism and revivalism, but affirming of education.

4. **Orthodox Evangelicals**: An irenic group that looked to Carl Henry, Harold Ockenga, and Billy Graham as models. This group wanted a theological course correction, a commitment to the full truthfulness of the Bible, serious intellectual and cultural engagement while interacting with all who would claim the great orthodox Christian tradition.

5. **Calvinists**: A group that wanted to reclaim aspects of the “Charleston” theological tradition. Some among this group have a rather isolated mindset. They have much in common with the “Evangelical” group above, but tend at times not be as irenic or inclusive. Sub-groups include “Nine Marks,” “Sovereign Grace,” “Founders,” and others.

6. **Contemporary church practitioners**: A group of pastors who wanted to find new ways to connect with the culture, resulting in new models for doing church, including “Willow Creek models,” “Saddleback models,” “missional,” and even some “emergent church types.”

7. **Culture Warriors**: Another group of conservatives who desire to engage the issues of culture and society. This group includes a variety of approaches including “church over culture,” “church transforming culture” as well as “church and culture/social justice types.”

All of these groups were needed to rally together to bring about the theological course correction/conservative resurgence in the SBC. They all wanted a recovery of the gospel and emphasized the full truthfulness and sufficiency of scripture. There are obvious cross-overs and blurring of categories, but it is helpful to understand the complex make-up under the umbrella of SBC “Conservatives.”

Many trustees who brought about pressure for the changes came from the fundamentalists and the heirs of the Sandy Creek heritages. Most of the presidents elected to lead the SBC each year at the annual conventions have come from the Traditionalist group. The intellectual support needed to engage the various theological issues came from the evangelicals and some of the Calvinists. The models for many younger pastors have come from the contemporary church practitioners. Key resolutions and motions at the annual conventions were often initiated from the culture warriors. Now that the “resurgence” is complete, there is a need to re-establish the identity of Southern Baptists to point toward a hopeful future. What is needed is a new consensus to point us toward renewal in the 21st Century.
Many among the conservatives wanted a course correction without necessarily purging all moderates from the SBC. A call for parity was initially at the forefront of the changes. Others, like the fundamentalists, wanted a complete overhaul of the SBC. Various other perspectives can be located along this continuum. Many moderates who still relate to the state conventions continue to misunderstand these differences among the conservatives, seeing all groups as the same.

The strict Calvinists tend to be the object of rejection by the fundamentalists and revivalists. The “contemporary church model” types are more and more detached from, if not apathetic toward, national convention matters. The evangelicals are disappointed because of the lack of unity. The Calvinists feel rejected and those who make up the younger generation are at times frustrated and confused as often seen among the bloggers. All of these “conservatives” relate more broadly with various groups outside of the SBC—with World Magazine, Christianity Today, Touchstone, and First Things; with the Evangelical Theological Society and the Institute of Biblical Research; with the National Association of Evangelicals; with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities; and with Saddleback, Nine Marks, Acts 29, or Willow Creek networks.

The breakdown of the cultural and programmatic consensus: Where we found ourselves at the end of the 20th century

The SBC world in which many of us were nurtured—Bible drills, GAs, RAs, Training Union, WMU, Brotherhood…, 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 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 20th Century, being a Southern Baptist had a cultural and programmatic 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 was not exaggerating when he said that Southern Baptists
were the Roman Catholic Church of the South because its identity was so intact, its 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 uniform pragmatic and programmatic expressions. But for a variety of reasons, this intactness has been challenged by the growing fragmentation.

Even without the “Controversy” the intactness had started to unravel in 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 as identified above.

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. We hardly know Lee, Rogers, Hobbs, and Criswell. If you can’t identity a Southern Baptist by a King James Bible, a uniform Sunday School lesson, a six point envelope system, a fall and spring revival, and a preaching service that concludes by singing all the verses of “Just As I Am,” which you could do in the 1950s,—then what does it mean to be a Southern Baptist in the 21st Century?

**Toward Consensus and Cooperation: Primary and Secondary Matters**

We now find ourselves at a different moment in American Christianity—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. We are victims: who now take for granted things that possibly/probably need to be questioned or re-examined. 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 Thess. 5:21 is a helpful reminder for us at this important moment in the SBC: “Test everything. Hold on to the good.” 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 seek 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 re-ignite a battle—one in which the folk 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.

### A Proposal of Renewal for the 21st Century SBC: Guidance and Hope

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 R. Albert Mohler, Jr. has recognized, “the material and formal principles constitute not only a center, but rightly understood they also establish boundaries.” 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. 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.
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 legitimating 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.

4. Defining the circumference is necessary, but we should not expect or demand uniformity, lest we impose a straight jacket 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 also clearly affirm the importance of worship, regenerate church membership, 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 re-establishment and reaffirmation of the Gospel center.

8. We must take seriously the biblical call to unity (John 17; Eph. 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 reconciliation, looking forward to a day in which a great multitude from every nation and all tribes and 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.

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 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 from His Spirit to Southern Baptist life to bring renewal to our theology, evangelism, missions, worship, education, and service. We can relate to one another in love 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 renewal and a renewed spirit of cooperation.

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I want to begin by doing something very Baptist. I want to share my testimony. After this personal prelude, I will mention three strategies for renewal within the Baptist fellowship as we move forward into the future that God has prepared for us.

**PERSONAL PRELUDE**

I was born on the other side of this state, in Chattanooga, in 1950. I never heard of Jackson, Tennessee. For us, the world stopped at Nashville. Memphis was the Far West, and anything beyond that was the Old Frontier. I came from what we would call today a dysfunctional family. My father was an alcoholic and died in the city jail when I was twelve years old. My mother suffered from polio and was not able to care for me or for my younger sister Lynda. Lynda was brought up in a Baptist Children’s Home in Cleveland, Tennessee, and I was left to be raised by two great-aunts, neither of whom
could read or write. I am the first person in my family to have received a college education. But even though my folks could not read or write, they could certainly talk, think, and argue. I am sure I received my calling as a theologian from endless hours of arguing with my Uncle Willie over the truth claims of Mormonism. Once I straightened him out, I took on the Unitarians down the street and the Roman Catholics across town!

We lived in a section of Chattanooga called Hell’s Half Acre. It was an integrated neighborhood even back in the 1950s, not because we were uppity liberals trying to make a social statement but simply because none of us, neither whites nor African Americans, could afford to live anywhere else. I would have said that we were dirt poor, but we couldn’t afford any dirt. I know what it is like to go to bed hungry, and how it feels to have kids make fun of your shabby clothes at school.

In that community there was a little Baptist church. I would call it a country church in the city, for although the church was located in the heart of the inner city, they worshipped like they were still way out in the sticks (which is where most of them came from). They would shout, and moan, and sometimes people got Holy Ghost fits. Brother Ollie Linkous preached with a holy whine and we sang old-fashioned Stamps-Baxter songs. One I remember to this day went like this:

“Here among the shadows, in a weary land.
We’re just a band of strangers passing through.

Burdened down with sorrows, fears on every hand.
But we’re looking for a city built above.”

If you had to place this church on the map of Baptist typology, it would be at the outer edge of the bubbling bilge of a rivulet washed up by the back-waters of Sandy Creek. And we were a band of strangers living in shadows, surrounded by fears. But when I later read about how the early Christians in Carthage were known to their neighbors by the love they had for one another, I knew what that meant for this church embraced me and my folks with a love that was palpable. They didn’t have much, but what they had they shared with us: picnic lunches in the summertime, and sacks of coal in the wintertime to keep us from freezing to death. There was an unfeignedness about their love that was unmistakable.

That little Baptist church taught me John 3:16, and “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine till Jesus comes.” They also taught me that I was a sinner and needed to be saved and that I couldn’t save myself and that we were saved only by grace through faith, not of works lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9), a verse that was emblazoned in my mind from earliest days. On August 6, 1961, after I had heard a sermon on Psalm 116, I asked Jesus Christ to come into my life, to forgive my sins, and to be my Lord. Soon thereafter,
I felt called to preach, and I began to preach. No one ever told me you had to go to college or seminary or anything like that. I just began to preach. I would preach to the kids at recess, I held “Lawn for the Lord” services in the neighborhood, and I became a youth evangelist. The height of my youth evangelism career came a few years later at a little congregation in Lynchburg, Virginia, called Thomas Road Baptist Church.

I am a Baptist because Sam Peek, my sixth grade teacher, a Baptist deacon, took me to an RA camp. I am a Baptist because Al Davis, a director of missions, introduced me to a Southern Baptist missionary from Ghana and explained to me how the Cooperative Program enabled Baptists to work together to fulfill the Great Commission. I am a Baptist because Sam D. Sharp, a fiery evangelist who is still going strong at age ninety-two, took me under his wing and, and though he had had no opportunity to receive a formal education himself, he said to me: “Timothy, read all you can, learn all you can, don’t be afraid of ideas. You can believe the tomb is empty without your head having to be!”

I am a Baptist because a Baptist preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged the racism deep in my Southern Baptist soul in name of the Christ I was taught to sing about in Sunday School: “Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white. They are all precious in his sight.” I am a Baptist because, when I was a high school student, Herschel H. Hobbs came to First Baptist Church of Chattanooga and preached a marvelous expositional sermon on the deity of Jesus Christ based on the Greek text of John, chapter one. I am a Baptist because, during seven years of graduate study at Harvard, what we used to call the Home Mission Board allowed me to serve as a church planter in an innercity Baptist congregation in Boston. I am a Baptist because all during those seven years at Harvard, Dr. R. G. Lee wrote me letters on his famous green stationary from 508 Stonewall Avenue in Memphis Tennessee, encouraging me to be faithful to the Bible, faithful to the Gospel, and faithful to the call that God had placed on my life. I was a Baptist before I knew what being a Baptist was all about because I came to know Jesus Christ through the witness of the people of God called Baptists. And in all my years of study, I have never found a more persuasive or more compelling way of trying to be a faithful biblical Christian.

Given what I have said about my background, perhaps you will not be surprised that when I moved from Boston to Louisville in that historic year 1979, I found myself a bit dazed and bewildered at the goings on in Southern Baptist life. I did not like the raucous tone and polarizing rhetoric generated on both sides of the Controversy in about equal measure, it seemed to me. But I was close enough to the center of gravity to know that there were legitimate concerns raised by conservative critics who early on in the Controversy were only asking for parity. I thought then, and I still think now, that had
our denominational leaders at the time responded to this challenge with more discernment, constructively and proactively, the rupture in our Baptist fellowship which has strained our relationship to the point of breaking could have been avoided. Instead, a strategy of denial, and stonewalling, and then counter-insurgency was adopted. Perhaps I am wrong about that, but eventually when a more realistic direction was taken by the SBC seminary presidents in the Glorieta Statement of 1986, it was too little, too late. I have written perhaps more than I should have about the Controversy, and I do not retract anything I have said or written in this regard. I am glad this denomination no longer welcomes leaders who deny the miracles of the Bible including the virgin birth of Jesus, or who argue for abortion on demand as a tenet of religious liberty, or who tout a host of other issues that are tearing apart every mainline Protestant denomination in America today. But I have also come today to say something else. We will not meet tomorrow’s challenge by forgetting yesterday’s dilemma, but neither will we win tomorrow’s struggles by fighting yesterday’s battles.

In 1990, David Dockery and I edited a volume, *Baptist Theologians*, which has been republished under the title *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*. In the preface to that book, we said this: “We believe that how we act and relate to one another within the Body of Christ is no less important than the theology we profess and the beliefs we champion. Indeed, they are inextricably linked, for true revival and spiritual awakening will only come in a context of repentance, humility, and forgiveness. We hope for the miracle of dialogue, not a raucous shouting at one another, nor a snide whispering behind each other’s backs, but a genuine listening and learning in the context of humane inquiry and disciplined thought.” That was true in 1990 and it is true in 2007.

With that in mind, I want to recommend three strategies, admittedly rather broad, grand, sweeping strategies, as we stand on the cusp of this still new century and seek to fulfill with fidelity the charge we have been given in this world of 6,574,979,990 persons all made in the image of God, most of whom have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the first time.

**Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal**

When I was a student at Harvard Divinity School, one of my professors, Harvey Cox, like me a former Baptist youth evangelist, published a book entitled *Turning East*. Harvey was then in his post-Secular City, pre-Pentecostal phase and was much enamored with Buddhism and spiritualities of the East. In that book he argued for what he called the “principle of genealogical selectivity.”
In trying to work out a viable spirituality today, he said, “there are two principal historical sources to which we should look. They are the earliest period of our history and the most recent, the first Christian generations and the generation just before us....The ransacking of other periods for help in working out a contemporary spirituality is either antiquarian or downright misleading.” Did you get that dialectic? Primitivism on the one hand (the first Christian generation), and presentism on the other (the most recent generation, my generation). This is the heresy of contemporaneity and it undergirds much of the liberalism and individualism that marks not only left of center theologians like Harvey Cox, but wide swaths of Baptist and evangelical life as well.

Against this “imperialism of the present” (as I have called it) and the ideology of self-importance that undergirds it comes the call for a Baptist retrieval of the Christian heritage as a source of renewal for the life of the church today. Retrieval for the sake of renewal—that was exactly the program of the Reformation. Ad fontes—back to the sources—was their motto. This was not a call to leapfrog over the intervening centuries back to some mythical, non-existent pristine New Testament church as though Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux, Augustine, Athanasius, and Irenaeus had never lived, as though the fathers of Nicea and Chalcedon had never struggled with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity or the person of Jesus Christ. No, what they were about, and what the English Baptists of the seventeenth century, both Generals and Particulars, were about was a critical appropriation of the Christian tradition ever subjecting itself, and themselves, to the normative authority of the written word of God. This is why the framers of the Second London Confession of 1689 identified themselves with what they called “that wholesome Protestant theology” of the Reformation, and why the framers of An Orthodox Creed, a General Baptist confession of 1678, included the full text of the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed in their statement of faith. They declared that all three of these historic documents “ought thoroughly to be received and believed...for they may be proved by most undoubted authority of Holy Scripture and are necessary to be understood of all Christians.” These were Baptists, mind you. This is retrieval for the sake of renewal.

Understanding our heritage will help us deal constructively with the issues and controversies we face today. This kind of retrieval will help us to place in perspective some of the questions that still generate more heat than light within our own Southern Baptist fellowship such as:

1. Are Baptists a creedal people?, and
2. Are Baptists Calvinists?
Let’s look briefly at each one of these.

Are Baptists a creedal people? “No creed but the Bible” was a slogan of the Campbellite movement in the nineteenth century and it has become axiomatic in many circles as a marker of Baptist identity today. Yet prior to the twentieth century, most Baptist theologians from Andrew Fuller to E. Y. Mullins, spoke very affirmingly of “the Baptist creed.” They strongly rejected the idea that voluntary, conscientious adherence to an explicit doctrinal standard was somehow foreign to the Baptist tradition.

It is nonetheless true that Baptists have never advocated creedalism. In two very important senses Baptists are not, and never have been, a creedal people, that is, a creedalist people. First, Baptists of all theological persuasions have been ardent supporters of religious liberty, opposing sometimes to the point of persecution, imprisonment, and all kinds of degradations, state-imposed religious conformity, and the attendant civil sanctions associated therewith. Believing that God alone is the Lord of the conscience, Baptists deny that civil magistrates have any legitimate authority to regulate or coerce the internal religious life of voluntary associations, including churches.

Second, Baptists are not creedalist in that they have never agreed that any humanly constructed doctrinal statement should be elevated to a par with Holy Scripture, much less placed above it. As Baptist confessions themselves invariably declare, the Bible alone remains the norma normans for all teaching and instruction, “the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried.” Unlike Eastern Orthodoxy which elevates the conciliar decisions of the first seven ecumenical councils to an infallible status, and the Roman Catholic Church which does the same thing with all twenty-three ecumenical councils, as they count them, including Vatican II, Baptists have never “canonized” any of their confessions. Rather we have held them all to be revisable in the light of the Bible, God’s infallible, unchanging revelation.

It must also be admitted that within the Baptist family there is a minority report on confessions, a libertarian tradition represented in colonial America by John Leland who rejected the use of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith by saying, “We need no such Virgin Mary to come between us and God.” Yet when such a confession became a means of uniting the Regular and Separate Baptist of Virginia, even John Leland, perhaps the most anti-confessional Baptist in colonial America, could allow the usefulness of such a document so long as such a statement was not placed on the level of the Bible nor “sacredized” by those who adopted it.

Still, for all of their value, confessions must be used with great wisdom and care. Confessionalism, like creedalism and traditionalism, can stultify and choke as well as undergird and defend. When
matters of secondary and tertiary importance are elevated to a level of primary significance, and placed right next to the doctrine of the Trinity or justification by faith alone, then we are veering away from orthodoxy to orthodoxyism, from tradition, which Jaroslav Pelikan famously defined as the living faith of the dead, to traditionalism, which is the dead faith of the living. Retrieval can lead to reversal as well as to renewal. If the Baptist Faith and Message becomes a grab bag for every problem or issue that comes on to the horizon, then it will cease to be a consensual statement of Baptist conviction. S. M. Noel, a Kentucky Baptist of the nineteenth century, has words of wisdom for us here. Our confession, he said, “should be large enough to meet the exigencies of the church by preserving her while in the wilderness, exposed to trials, in peace, purity, and loyalty. And it should be small enough to find a lodgment in the heart of the weakest lamb, sound in the faith.”

And now, an even briefer word on “Are Baptists Calvinists?” Historically and empirically, the answer to this question is: some are and some are not, and it has been thus among Baptists for nearly 400 years. Now I am not neutral about this subject. I was born an Arminian, as everyone is. I came only slowly, through much study and reflection, to a Reformed understanding of the doctrines of grace as taught by such notable Baptists as John Bunyan, Benjamin Keach, Roger Williams, John Clarke, Isaac Backus, Andrew Fuller, William Carey, Richard Furman, Jesse Mercer, James P. Boyce, John A. Broadus, B. H. Carroll, Charles H. Spurgeon, John L. Dagg, R. B. C. Howell, Patrick Hues Mell, and Augustus Hopkins Strong, to go no further. I know of nothing that has happened in the history of salvation since these great Baptist theologians wrote about God’s grace, that makes what they said outdated or irrelevant to our contemporary concerns. I commend their theology to my fellow Baptists today, not because it is theirs, or mine, but because it seems to me to reflect the underlying and overarching storyline of God’s redemptive love revealed in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. But brothers and sisters, we need not kill one another over such issues today! I like what our SBC president, Dr. Frank Page, has said about this matter. Our differing opinions over the details of Calvinism is a family discussion and should not be a source of division and acrimony among us.

I don’t know who does more damage to our Baptist fellowship, the rabid anti-Calvinists who slander and stereotype all Reformed theology as hyper-Calvinism, or some of the Calvinists who want to tweak the leaves of the tulip so tightly that in their desire to defend the doctrines of grace, they have forgotten to be gracious. At Beeson Divinity School this year we have offered a course both on John Calvin, and one on John Wesley. Baptists have something to learn from both of these great leaders, but we are bound to neither.

I have a word of caution to my friends who lean in an Arminian direction. Beware lest your exalting of human capacity lead you past Arminianism
into rank Pelagianism. Arminianism is an error; Pelagianism is a heresy. And it will surely lead us, as H. Richard Niebuhr pointed out some years ago, to a truncated view of “a God without wrath bringing men and women without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross.” John Wesley would doubtless turn over in his grave to see what passes as Arminianism in some circles today!

And I also have a word of caution to my friends who lean in a Calvinistic direction. Beware lest your exalting of divine sovereignty lead you into the heresy of real, as opposed to merely alleged, hyper-Calvinism. The original founders of the Southern Baptist Convention were well aware of this danger for the anti-mission movement was red hot at the time the SBC was organized in 1845. They established this denomination to be a missionary and evangelistic enterprise, committed to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with everybody everywhere in the world. What passes as Calvinism in some circles today would make Andrew Fuller turn over in his grave and even John Gill take a spin or two!

So, I have a proposal: let us banish the word “Calvinist” from our midst. It has become the new n-word for some, and an unseemly badge of pride for others. It does us no good. A Calvinist in the strict sense is a person who follows the teachings of John Calvin and, while John Calvin was surely one of the greatest theologians who ever graced the Christian church, no true Baptist agrees with Calvin on infant baptism, or presbyterian polity, or the establishment of the church by the state, however much we may learn from him in other respects.

Let us confess freely and humbly that none of us understands completely how divine sovereignty and human responsibility coalesce in the grace-wrought acts of repentance and faith. Let us talk about these matters and, yes, let us seek to persuade one another, but let this be done with gentleness and respect as we are admonished in 1 Peter 3:15. Let us speak the truth to one another in love for truth without love is not really truth. It is rather a perverted form of puffed up pride, just as love without truth is not really love, but mere mushy sentimentality. Above all, let this discussion not hinder our joining hands and hearts to work together as evangelists and as Baptists across our theological differences. Let us join together with Charles Haddon Spurgeon, perhaps the greatest Baptist preacher who ever lived, in his open, unfettered appeal to the lost, as seen in his wonderful sermon on John 6:37, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”

“Him that cometh to me: that is the character. The man may have been guilty of an atrocious sin, too black for mention; but if he comes to Christ he shall not be cast out. I cannot tell what kind of person may have come into this hall tonight; but if burglars, murderers and dynamite men were here, I would still bid them come to Christ, for He will not
cast them out. No limit is set to the extent of sin: any ‘him’ in all the world—any blaspheming, devilish ‘him’ that comes to Christ shall be welcomed. I use strong words that I may open wide the gates of mercy. Any ‘him’ that comes to Christ though he comes from slum or taproom, boarding room, or gambling hall, prison or brothel—Jesus will in no wise cast out.”

Any him, and if Spurgeon were preaching that sermon today, he would also add, any her. Anyone, anywhere, anytime, anyway—any him, any her! Jesus will in no wise cast out. That is the tone we need, whether you lean in one way or another on the decrees of God and how they are ordered from all eternity. Let us get this right and then when we get to heaven we can spend a few thousand years in the theology seminar room up there sorting through the details, and we will understand it by and by.

**Particularity in the Service of Unity**

Several years ago I was going through my daily mail when (to my surprise) I found a personal letter from Rome, Italy. I looked a little more closely for I do not get letters from Rome everyday, and lo, and behold, it was marked from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which used to be called the Inquisition! I thought they were after me! But I opened it up and there I found a personal letter signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who now, of course, is Pope Benedict XVI. A few months before I received this letter, Ratzinger had issued a very controversial document called *Dominus Iesus* which created something of an uproar within the ecumenical world. In that document, Ratzinger not only asserted that Jesus Christ is the world’s only Redeemer against certain pluralizing trends within Roman Catholic theology, but he also reasserted the traditional claims of the Roman Catholic Church against other Christian groups referring to their view of the church as “seriously deficient.” Contrary to almost everyone else who commented on the document, I had written a little piece commending it, saying that it represented the kind of candid ecumenism we needed more of—an ecumenism that did not paper over serious differences but faced them honestly in a common quest for truth. Ratzinger wrote to say that he appreciated my comments, and that I had indeed understood what he was trying to say.

What I advocated was an ecumenism of conviction, not an ecumenism of accommodation. This is what I mean by particularity in the service of unity. Yes, it is much easier to ignore theological differences and downplay doctrine, but that approach to Christian unity also results in a shallow, superficial togetherness that will not long endure. On this issue, I stand with Cardinal Ratzinger—I am a Benedictine. Theology matters because truth matters. Yes, we must speak the truth to one another in love, but speak the truth we must. I have
always liked the statement from Simone Weil from her little book, Waiting for God. “Christ,” she wrote, “likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.”

So, is Jesus a Baptist? Some people in our tradition have thought so, pointing out that Jesus was not baptized by John the Methodist, or John the Presbyterian, and certainly not by John the Episcopalian, but by John the Baptist. But surely, as they say in French, this is un question mal posée. The question is not: Is Jesus a Baptist?, but rather: Are Baptists Christian? Jesus did not found a denomination; he did establish a church. In the broadest New Testament sense, the church of Jesus Christ includes all of the redeemed of all of the ages, as Hebrews 12:22 makes clear: “You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to myriads of angels in festive gathering, to the assembly (ecclesia) of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven.” This is the Church with a capital “C,” the Ecclesia with a capital “E,” the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church outside of which there is no salvation, as our historic Baptist confessions have all confessed. It is indubitably true that the vast majority of uses of ecclesia in the New Testament does refer to local, particular congregations, and this means something very important and very precious for Baptist Christians. But the New Testament also refers to church in a universal, general sense. Jesus did it when he said, “Upon this rock I will build—not my churches but—my church.” Throughout the book of Ephesians, Paul consistently presents the Church in a universal sense as the Building, the Body and the Bride of Christ.

Yet here on earth, as St. Augustine reminds us, the church is on pilgrimage living amidst the vicissitudes of history, flawed, fallen, ever attacked from without, and divided within. And yet this church, the visible church, and for Baptists that means local, particular congregations of covenanted, baptized believers, this church is called to pray for, work toward, and embody the unity for which Jesus prayed to the Heavenly Father in John 17. Not some overarching, one world church organization that Carl McIntire and other ecumophobes have screeched against for decades but the new Testament confession of one faith, one Lord, and one baptism.

Why is this important? Why am I arguing for particularity in the service of unity? Not just so we can all get together, hold hands, and be nice, but so that our witness to the world will be credible. “May they all be one,” Jesus prayed to the Heavenly Father. “As you are in me and I am in you. May they also be one in us so the world may believe you sent me” (John 17:21). Jesus himself links Christian unity with world evangelization.

A year or so ago, my friend John Woodbridge and I published a book entitled The Mark of Jesus: Loving in a Way the World Can See. It is dedicated to the memory of Kenneth Kantzer and Francis Schaeffer,
great evangelical leaders both of whom had a great influence on both of us. One of the last things Francis Schaeffer wrote before he died was a little book called, *The Mark of the Christian*. It was an exposition of Jesus’ words in John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Dr. Schaeffer said that in that verse Jesus gave the world the right to decide whether or not we are true Christians based upon our observable love for one another. When I first read that, I thought “Surely this can’t be true?” But I read the text in John again, and I discovered that Dr. Schaeffer was exactly right. Jesus gives the world—unbelievers—the right to decide whether or not we belong to him based upon our observable love for one another. “By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” How else are they going to know? They cannot peer into our souls, or know what is in our hearts. But they can listen to our lips, and look at our walk, and see how we treat one another within the Body of Christ, including those brothers and sisters in the Lord with whom we do not see eye to eye.

But Baptist ecumenism? Isn’t that like talking about a pregnant rooster or a married bachelor? As the old country preacher said when confronted with a biblical teaching that he didn’t like, “Well, it may be Bible, but it sure ain’t Baptist!” But is that really true? Now, if you don’t like the word ecumenism, throw it out the window. I have no interest in defending it, although, unlike Calvinism, it is a New Testament word which we encounter every time we read the Christmas story in Luke 2: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the entire world (oikumene) should be enrolled.” Ecumenical simply means universal, the whole inhabited world. But forget the word, what about the reality it represents?

The world Protestant missionary movement began when an English Baptist shoemaker turned small-town pastor, William Carey, encouraged his fellow Calvinistic Baptists to establish a society for “the propagation of the Gospel among the heathens.” By 1793 Carey had arrived in India to begin his remarkable career, which included the planting of churches, the building of schools, the organization of an agricultural society, the establishment of India’s first newspaper, a protest against the burning of widows and the translation of the Scriptures into some forty languages and dialects. Now Carey was a Baptist, indeed a rather strict one, but in his missionary labors he worked with the Anglican missionary Henry Martyn, with Methodists, and Presbyterians, and even, God bless them, Arminian Baptists, in the interest of extending the witness of the Gospel to the peoples of India and the East.

In 1810, Carey set forth what has been called the “most startling missionary proposal of all times” by calling for a coordinating strategy for world evangelization. “Would it not be possible, he asked, to have a general association of all denominations of Christians, from the four corners of the world,
held once in about ten years? I earnestly recommend this plan. And I have no doubt but that it would be attended with many important effects.” Exactly one hundred years later, in 1910, the first great International Missionary Conference was indeed held in Edinburgh, Scotland. However much we may deplore the fact that the modern ecumenical movement has been hijacked by advocates of a liberal left-wing agenda, which it certainly has been in many respects, we should never forget that it was born on the mission field and that a Baptist missionary was the midwife.

Particularity in the service of unity. Yes, by all means, let us maintain, undergird, and strengthen our precious Baptist distinctives—our commitment to a regenerate church membership, believers’ baptism by immersion in the name of the Triune God, our stand for unfettered religious liberty, and all the rest—but let us do this not so that people will say how great the Baptists are, but rather what a great Savior the Baptists have, what a great God they serve! May they be able to say, “Just look at the those Baptist Christians, see how they love one another! See how they work together with other believers. See how they put others ahead of themselves. Ya’ know, I think I’ll give a listen to what they are saying about all this Jesus Christ stuff.”

**Humility in the Presence of the Holy**

Retrieval for the sake of renewal, particularity in the service of unity and humility in the presence of the Holy. These remarks will be brief. I want to begin with two caveats. The first is simply to acknowledge how difficult it is to speak or preach about humility because once you think you have got it, you have already lost it. I don’t know of any seminary in the Association of Theological Schools that teaches a course on Humility 101. Well, we couldn’t find any professors to teach it if we did. And, if we found a professor who was qualified to teach it, we couldn’t find any students who wanted to take it!

Humility is not a virtue to be cultivated. It is a by-product of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5, we read that the fruit of the Spirit is love, meekness, gentleness, goodness, kindness, perseverance, patience, all of these many manifestations. One fruit, and if I may put it this way, the fragrance of the fruit of the Spirit is humility. Others are more likely to recognize it in us than we ourselves.

The second caveat I want to add is a somewhat contrarian word about the very theme of this conference. Is there not something a bit narcissistic about our focusing so intently on Baptist identity? Now, you could say, “Wait a minute, Dr. George. You’ve been talking for more minutes than you should have about that very thing.” Retrieval for the sake of renewal. And that is what our conference has focused on to a very great extent and much of it has been very wonderful and good. I don’t know anything
really that has been spoken in this conference that I would disagree with. And yet I want to say to us that there is a fine line between retrieval for the sake of renewal and the projection of a Baptistocentricity, a denominational egocentricity, a perspective that is self-absorbing, self-justifying, and self-gratifying.

Now I am not preaching to anybody unless it is to myself, but I think this is something that needs to be said. Do you know what the corrective for this malady is? It is to get a vision of this world in which we live, the world for which Christ died. The most important book I have read in the last decade—if you haven’t read it, go out and buy it and read it—is Philip Jenkins’ *The Next Christendom*. Jenkins points out the balance, the shift in the balance of the world Christian population, from the Northern to the Southern hemisphere. This has become almost a cliché, and yet there is increasing evidence to back up what he says. China....God is doing an amazing thing in China. Much of it is not denominationally focused. But who can say that God is not at work in an extraordinary way in those churches, underground and overground and in all kinds of places. And to think about China for just one minute more, and realize that in the smallest province of Western China, there are more Muslims today than there are Southern Baptists in the whole world. I am simply saying let us keep this in perspective. And when we talk about humility in the presence of the Holy, let us beware lest we all fall into this temptation to think of ourselves more highly than we should.

Several years ago, my wife Denise and I edited a series of twelve books for Broadman and Holman called *The Library of Baptist Classics*. Most of these volumes are still in print today. One of those books was called *Treasures from the Baptist Heritage* and we included in that volume a sermon preached on May 26, 1843, by Jacob R. Scott to the Portsmouth Baptist Association of Virginia which convened in 1843 in the Baptist church at Mill Swamp. In his address to that Association, Jacob R. Scott preached a sermon on “The Dangers of Denominational Prosperity.” I will quote a few lines of it. Two years before the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention, he said this:

“And when we, my brethren, show symptoms of elation, in consequence of the great prosperity with which the Lord has crowned us, when we, as a denomination, or as separate churches, begin to boast of the great numbers in our ranks, the wealth, the talents, the respectability, the influence, that have been added to our communion, when we begin to lose that spirit of simple, lowly, unsophisticated piety, which characterized us in the days of our fewness and contempt, it will be high time for us to begin to tremble also. We may expect the withering frown of Jehovah, and the tide of our prosperity will be turned backward. We may rejoice indeed, that the Lord has blessed us; and let us be glad; but let us exult only because in our success, we see the advancement of truth, which is the cause of God, and essential to the enfranchisement, the glory,
and the felicity of our race. It cannot be doubted, brethren, that with the enlargement of our denomination, there has come a tendency to this vain-glorying. I say it with regret, I fear the indications of this tendency have already made their appearance. What means the boastful parade so often made in our publications, or our superiority in numbers over other denominations? And especially of any inroads we may chance to have made on their ranks? Let us beware of this spirit. Let us see to it that we be not puffed up with arrogance. The devil cannot be better gratified than to witness this. Let us take heed lest we make shipwreck here, and it be left for us merely to furnish a beacon to some remoter generation, who, thus warned of the rock on which they are most likely to split, shall safely bear the holy trust now in our hands, into the port to which we had had the honor of bearing it but for our folly.”

I commend that to your consideration. Humility in the presence of the Holy.

This last Fall at Beeson Divinity School we had a birthday party. We celebrated with many other guests and friends who came from around the world, the eightieth birthday of Dr. J. I. Packer, who is not a Baptist, but a great theologian to whom all faithful Baptists are deeply indebted. Well, some years ago, they had another eightieth birthday party for the theologian Karl Barth. And then they asked him to get up and make a speech and this is what he said.

“If I have done anything in this life of mine, I have done it as a relative of the donkey that went its way carrying an important burden. The disciples had to say to its owner: ‘The Lord has need of it.’ And so it seems to have pleased God to have used me at this time, just as I was, in spite of all the things, the disagreeable things, that quite rightly are and will be said about me. Thus I was used. I just happened to be on the spot. A theology somewhat different from the current theology was apparently needed in our time, and I was permitted to be the donkey that carried this better theology for part of the way, or tried to carry it as best I could.”

Dear brothers and sisters, that is all we are. Just a bunch of donkeys, a guild of donkeys that happened to be on the spot at the right time and who are called in the providence of God to carry a burden for a while. But what a precious, invaluable, infinitely glorious burden it is. This is our job, we donkeys, to carry this burden, to carry Him who took upon himself the burden of our sins on the cross. To carry Him faithfully, steadily, humbly, proudly, unashamedly, joyfully, along that treacherous path which leads finally to Calvary.

Humility is not a virtue we can cultivate, it is a gift which comes to us as we focus on the object of our vision, on the precious cargo we are permitted to carry for a little while. I quoted H. Richard Niebuhr earlier. Let me close with another quotation from his brother Reinhold Niebuhr.
“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.”

These are the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. When we get to heaven, we will not need faith anymore, we will have sight. We will not need hope anymore, we will have the thing hoped for. But even in heaven, we will still need love. Love is the one thing we can experience in this life that will last forever and ever, in the eternity of God. This, I submit, is a summons to humility. It is also the implicit covenant of all our dialogues and, in its fullest sense, it is the vocation to which you and I, we Christ-bearing donkeys, have been called.

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