

Baptist Identity: The Role of Scripture in Baptist Life
A Paper Presented at the Baptist Identity Conference
Union University
April 5, 2004

L. Russ Bush III
Academic Vice President/Dean of Faculty
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

II Timothy 3:16

Special bibliographical note: Documentation for the sources quoted or referenced in this paper is found in L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptist and the Bible*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999

In 1968 Bernard Ramm published a small but helpful book entitled *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Eerdmans). In this book, Ramm outlines three major ways religious groups have understood the principle of authority. Some look to experience as the controlling norm, some turn to tradition, while others adopt a scripture principle.

It is not hard to demonstrate that Baptists historically have resisted the emphasis on experience. Roger Williams was not atypical in his opposition to George Fox and Quakerism. The “inner light” cannot be trusted, and God expects us to follow His revealed truths, not make up our own. Equally, and perhaps more adamantly, Baptists have historically defined themselves over against the traditions of Anglicanism and Catholicism. For Baptists it was not simply that state churches often persecuted free churches, but it was that tradition often added elements of belief that were not found in Scripture, e.g., the veneration of Mary, and doctrines of priestly authority, purgatory, and penance, the establishment of a mediator of the Mediator, and the insistence upon sacramentalism and salvation through the graciousness of the church. Baptists rather consistently have rested in the principle that Scripture alone should define the church and her doctrine.

The Bible in Baptist Confessions of Faith

The emphasis on the Bible itself does not mean that Baptists have not been a confessional people. The Westminster Assembly in 1646 published the famous *Westminster Confession* as an expression of Presbyterian beliefs. These dissenters were resisting the establishment of Anglicanism. The Five-Mile Act and the Conventicle Act had been blatant efforts to disenfranchise Non-Anglicans. In 1658 Congregationalists at the Savoy Conference made a few changes and adopted the *Westminster Confession* as their own. In 1677 the Particular Baptists, claiming that they had “no itch to clog religion with new words,” made a few changes but then published the same document as their own confession. Republished in 1688 and officially adopted in 1689, the Second London Confession set forth the consensus view of Particular Baptists in seventeenth century England. Interestingly one of the new sentences they did add was the very first one:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience.

This is an impressive addition to Westminster's ten paragraph exposition of the doctrine of Scripture. The "rule," Scripture itself, is unique. Scripture is the *only* rule. There is no other source of religious authority: not tradition, not present "revelation," not "inner light."

Scripture is *sufficient*. The "whole Counsel of God" is either expressly set forth on the sacred pages or necessarily contained (logically implied) therein. These early Baptists confidently claimed that God had committed His revelation "wholly unto writing."

The rule is *certain*; i.e., dependable and unerring. Nothing in scripture fails to represent reality accurately.

Scripture is *infallible*, not capable of erring.

Baptists do not often include theories of inspiration in their confessions. Exactly how inspiration took place is a spiritual mystery, but the affirmation of the fact of inspiration is almost always included in Baptist confessional statements. This affirmation is as much a mark of Baptist identity as is water baptism. The witness of Scripture is a word of truth.

From the early 17th century until today, over and over again Baptists have published confessions of faith. Sometimes, as in the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*, disclaimers were added to explicitly deny the creedal status of the document, but most Baptist confessions have not had preambles like that one. It is true that Baptists do not see themselves as defined by a creed that is imposed upon them. Confessional statements express those things generally held among the churches, and these statements are revisable by majority vote if need be. Obviously the Bible is not revisable, and thus no one confuses the principle of authority. Scripture is the authority (not as a substitute for but as an expression of divine authority), and confessional statements are merely expressions of our understanding of Scripture.

A very important point needs to be made, however. If we as Baptists resist creedalism, we do not resist publishing our beliefs. Baptist confessions do set forth Baptist distinctives, but equally, if not more so, Baptist confessions express how much we stand together with other evangelical Christians in our commitments to basic Christian truths. We believe the gospel of redemption. We trust in the sovereignty of the triune God. We accept the reality of creation and judgment. We differ from many by our insistence upon believer's baptism, a gathered church, and value of lay leadership in the organized church, but we stand with many in our affirmation of Bible doctrines about the deity of Christ, and the necessity of repentance and faith, and in our hope in God's promises for a final resolution of all the important issues of life.

Without a creed, Baptists must at least agree on the Scripture principle, for without that, Baptists have little hope of unity. The most recent confession produced by a major Baptist group was the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. It included a very strong affirmation of biblical authority, and

it followed earlier confessions in its emphasis upon Scripture as the true center of Christian union:

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

Baptists and the Bible

The Philadelphia Association in 1761 wrote to the church in Oyster Bay: "The Holy Scriptures we profess to be our full, sufficient, and only rule of Faith and Obedience, and we caution all to be aware of every impulse, revelation, or any imagination whatever, inconsistent with, or contrary to, the Holy Scripture under the pretense of being guided by the Spirit."

For these early Baptists, Scripture was an unerring rule of belief, a sure word of prophecy, the oracles of divine truth. They are the *Holy* Scriptures.

Early Baptists recognized that the purpose of Scripture was to reveal God's work in the world and to make salvation known to mankind; but in no uncertain terms, these Baptists refused to separate the historical from the theological. The Bible was true, because it always spoke the truth about the way things actually were in reality. This was so central that it is an essential part of the doctrinal identity of Baptists of the 18th century and in the years to follow.

John Buyan, Benjamin Keach, and Roger Williams strongly defended the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. William Carey believed the way of progress out of pagan darkness would be unswerving fidelity to the Bible as the Word of God. Adoniram Judson added that "the Bible, in the original tongues, comprises all the revelation now extant which God has given to this world."

J.P. Boyce had no hesitation about the Bible's historical claims. When Crawford Toy drifted to the left and began to question the historicity of Genesis, Boyce acted to secure the Seminary from such higher critical influences. Toy had to go, despite the personal friendship that was obviously there.

J.R. Graves affirmed the plenary verbal inspiration of the Bible. Every word of the Bible is true. None of the words are there as a result of human oversight or human error. The words of the Bible are human words and yet all of them are God's word's, he said.

Charles Spurgeon properly reminded us that the authority of scripture rests not in the letter of Scripture alone but in Christ Jesus dwelling and ruling in the conscience and reason of Christian men by and through the Scriptures.

A.H. Strong argued that we should define inspiration not by its method but by its results. Inspiration may have been dynamic, but it was plenary. For Strong, inspiration applied to the message of the Bible rather than to grammatical details. That may be true, but most Baptists have not found textual variants and linguistic minutiae to be real problems for their understanding of biblical inspiration.

As A.T. Robertson put it, "The help of the Holy Spirit in the utterance of the revelation extends to the words." This is the conclusion of Southern Baptists' greatest linguistic scholar.

B.H. Carroll was another of the greatest minds our Baptist people ever knew. He invented Southwestern Seminary and established it in the heart of Texas Baptists. The Bible for Carroll was ideas from God in human words. But the claim that the Bible only contains the word of God mixed in with non-inspired words of men, he said, was silly talk, fool's talk. There can be no inspiration of the Book without the words of the Book. These inspired declarations were written as infallible truths. The copy or the translation is not the text that is infallible, but an accurate copy or translation accurately conveys the inspired meaning. What the Scripture says is what God wanted it to say. Not all parts are of equal importance, but no part is unimportant. The Bible, Carroll said, is either true or false. There is no half-way ground. True science, he said, is and has ever been in harmony with the Scriptures. We are entitled to no liberty in these matters. It is a positive and very hurtful sin to magnify liberty at the expense of doctrine. Carroll declared, "I solemnly warn the reader against all who depreciate creeds or who would reduce them to a minimum of entrance qualifications into the church." According to Carroll, "the longest creed in history is more valuable and less hurtful than the shortest."

Baptist Identity

It is often said that there is no Baptist doctrine that is unique to Baptists. This may be so, and if there were, we might need to be very suspicious of that unique doctrine. But that does not mean that Baptists do not have distinctives. Baptists uniquely blend the reformed faith with a lay oriented free church tradition that follows a non-sacramental interpretation of the ordinances and a congregational polity that assumes that all members of the church are believers. All of this grows out of a Scripture principle that finds religious authority in the Bible alone and not in a priestly class of leadership or in traditions and ceremonies that are supposed means of grace.

Baptists, however, seem to be facing a crisis of identity today. In England and in Northern Europe, many Baptists have embraced an ecumenism that does not require a public profession of faith and subsequent baptism by immersion as the prerequisite to membership. They seemingly want to find some common ground with the dominant churches in the region, and I do not wish to deny that personal convictions are also involved, but in any case they have begun describing the ordinances using the more common language of sacramentalism. The main exponent of this

view seems to be Paul Fiddes of Regent's Park, Oxford. Paul read a paper to this effect to the Doctrine Commission of the Baptist World Alliance when it met in Havana, Cuba. You might imagine the consternation of the Cuban Baptist representatives who were present. I was sitting by Millard Erickson at the table, and we had an opportunity to ask a few questions and interact a bit with this sacramental view. After I clarified the view and was sure I did not misunderstand what was being said, I ask Paul if he considered this to be a Baptist view. He strongly affirmed "YES!" But I had to say in that public forum that I hoped he understood why some of us would eventually be unable to recognize his view (and the churches that follow it) as belonging to the Baptist world. Sacramentalism in my view (though not in his view) is a loss of Baptist identity.

Baptists who have participated in the Baptist World Alliance all realize that we have some diversity among Baptists from different parts of the world; and the most notable element of the diversity is the opposition to confessional statements and to identity statements. If that continues to be the case, the future is bleak for the people called Baptists. We may as well be called "Dunkin Punkins." Anyone who cannot articulate their identity is likely to lose their identity.

There is good news, however. God still has His faithful ones who know who He has called them to be. There has been and is ongoing a remarkable rebirth of Baptist identity in the world. We are mission minded believers who read the Bible as God's truthful Word. We follow the teachings of Jesus, baptizing new believers by immersion. We gather to remember His atoning death, and we seek to implement the principle of the priesthood of every believer.

Southern Baptists in the 21st Century

Southern Baptists are the largest group of Baptists in the world. Through their mission efforts, Southern Baptists have touched almost all parts of the Baptist world community. Within Southern Baptist life, a conservative resurgence since 1970 has reversed a trend that threatened to destroy the theological identity of the Southern Baptist Convention. Our history over these past years has revealed several important facts.

The first is that there is no longer any doubt that some involved in the Southern Baptist controversy of the 1980's and 90's did in fact reject the inerrancy of Scripture. Even given the hermeneutical latitude of acceptable qualifications as to what constitutes an actual error, they still would assert that Scripture has errors. These errors come in the form of supposed contradictions between two accounts of the same event in the Gospels or Old Testament narratives; or some claimed that the views of God's character and nature in one part of the Bible were inconsistent with or contrary to ethical ideas in another part; factual mistakes of various kinds were supposedly identified; and even theological ideas addressed by biblical authors were said to be mistaken because some biblical writers were supposedly still in bondage to their culture. Those claiming that the Bible contained errors generally saw themselves as able to correct those erroneous biblical teachings by referring to some other (better) biblical teaching. Some thought the truth was found in human wisdom rather than in Scripture.

Walter Shurden, in 1996, expressed his opinion that the claim of biblical fallibility should have been openly taken from the beginning by the so-called Moderates.

Moderates got tongue-tied in their nonresponses to the theological oversimplifications of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists spoke in spades; moderates could not speak in spades. They honestly knew the subject was too knotty and ambiguous for that kind of sleight of the theological hand. . . . Moderates did not say soon enough or loudly enough or simply enough what Cecil Sherman wrote in italics: *Inerrancy is not the truth*. In their address to the public in 1990 the interim steering committee of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship asserted that “the Bible neither claims nor reveals inerrancy as a Christian teaching.” That candor early in the controversy would have been a better offense for moderates than always being forced into theological defensiveness {*Going for the Jugular*, p. 274}

Shurden’s reference was to a revealing essay by Cecil Sherman, “An Overview of the Moderate Movement” in Shurden’s *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC* (1993). Sherman wrote: “All of the Bible is culturally conditioned. Parts of the Bible are so trapped in time and culture that they have been bypassed in God’s continuing stream of self-revelation. . . . I don’t believe [the doctrine of] inerrancy because the biblical text will not support the assertion. *Inerrancy is not the Truth*. That’s the Moderate position. We ought to tell the truth about the Bible” (pp. 29-30, italics original).

Second, some, who did not at first consider themselves inerrantists because of an unnecessarily narrow view of the concept, found that they, in fact, did agree with inerrancy as defined in the mainstream of evangelical literature. This has been a welcome turn of events. The SBC likely would have lost much of its strength if these true believers had not remained loyal to the denomination.

Third, many Moderates finally accepted the idea that the controversy was indeed theological, even if they remained theologically unconvinced of Conservative positions. The Ridgecrest Conference on Biblical Inerrancy sponsored by the SBC seminary presidents in May of 1987 brought key spokesmen from both sides into dialogue, and the issues debated there were clearly theological and hermeneutical. In “The Roots of Conservative Perspectives on Innerancy,” a paper delivered at the conference, L.Russ Bush offered an analysis of the Sandeen, Rogers/McKim hypothesis, showing how Baptist theology historically has been clearly committed to the doctrines of biblical inerrancy and infallibility and yet is significantly independent of the theological traditions created by revisionist historians.

The SBC Peace Committee (with both Moderate and Conservative representation), after many months of investigation and analysis, reported to the Southern Baptist Convention in June of 1987 that differences in theology indeed marked the division between traditional Conservatives and denominational Moderates. According to the Peace Committee Report, the points in dispute included:

Some accept and affirm the direct creation and historicity of Adam and Eve while others view them instead as representative of the human race in its creation and fall.

Some understand the historicity of every event in Scripture as reported by the original source while others hold that the historicity can be classified and revised by the findings of modern historical scholarship.

Some hold to the stated authorship of every book in the Bible while others hold that in some cases such attention may not refer to the final author or may be pseudonymous.

Some hold that every miracle in the Bible is intended to be taken as an historical event, while others hold that some miracles are intended as parabolic.

A second Ridgecrest Conference on Biblical Interpretation was held in 1988. Many Moderates shifted the argument from seeing inerrancy as a cover-up for a social and political agenda to seeing it as a cover-up for specific “narrow” interpretations of Scripture. Perhaps it did not occur to these Moderates that their refusal to accept inerrancy, even when carefully and appropriately defined, was interpreted by Conservatives as their attempt to cover up doctrinal aberrations and as their justification for the rejection of certain central biblical truths.

*Fourth, interest in the study of Baptist history has greatly increased over the past 25 years. How often the subject of biblical authority has occupied Baptist energies in the past is remarkable! The large number of deeply thoughtful monographs produced on this subject by Baptist ideacrafters in previous generations makes it possible to argue that the Baptist heritage bequeaths to us a particular and valuable way of thinking about the Bible. This awareness of history at least helps us ask the right questions when we are passing the torch to the new generation. Important volumes that helped to set these issues in perspective were James Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (1991); *Beyond the Impasse?* edited by Robison James and David Dockery (1992); and *Has our Theology Changed?* edited by Paul Basden (1994).*

*Fifth, the New American Commentary series was commissioned by trustees of the Sunday School Board in 1987. The series was (among other things) intended to demonstrate the range and quality of conservative Baptist scholarship. Moderate leadership at the Board opposed the publication. A new commentary was unnecessary, said Lloyd Elder, and no confidence was expressed in the ability of the Conservative editors to find a satisfactory list of potential authors. By all standards, however, the NAC is an exceptionally fine commentary, far exceeding the quality and the impact of the older *Broadman Bible Commentary* series. All of the authors were asked to affirm the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1963) and the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. As a Baptist “theological exposition,” the NAC has sold exceptionally well throughout the evangelical world. Conservative Baptist scholarship seemingly has finally come into its own.*

Sixth, in an unprecedented turn of events, the Southern Baptist dispute was “won” by the Conservatives, though in Baptist history such issues are seemingly never finally settled. Truth must constantly and consistently be defended. Nevertheless, from 1979 (the election of Adrian Rogers as SBC president) through the 1998 SBC meeting in Salt Lake City (where Paige Patterson was elected), and continuing on into the 21st century with the elections of James Merit and Jack Graham, the SBC Conservatives won every presidency and, thus, influenced the nomination of trustees for every convention agency and institution. The trend of SBC Cooperative Program giving has been up, even with the loss of some significant Baptist churches to the breakaway Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In 1987, Southeastern Theological Seminary’s Moderate President Randal Lolley resigned in protest of policies for faculty selection set by his Conservative trustees. He was replaced by Lewis A. Drummond in 1988. Richard Land, for a time Paige Patterson’s academic dean at Criswell College, was elected to lead the Christian Life Commission in 1988. The Convention voted to defund and, thus, separate itself from the Moderate-controlled Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in 1990. James T. Draper, a former associate pastor with W. A. Criswell at FBC, Dallas, became the president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville in 1991. The SBC Executive Committee in 1992 elected as its president, Conservative leader Morris Chapman. In 1992, Paige Patterson moved from Criswell College to the presidency of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, which has since experienced record growth. Roy Honeycutt retired and was replaced as president at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1993 by R. Albert Mohler, who openly stated that he was firmly committed to the theology of the seminary’s founders. Russell H. Dilday was fired by his trustees in 1994, and was replaced with Kenneth S. Hemphill, an outspoken Conservative with a pastor’s heart. Midwestern Seminary selected Conservative spokesman Mark Coppenger as President in 1995. Paige Patterson’s brother-in-law and professor of evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Seminary, Chuck Kelly, became President of NOBTS in 1996. In 1997, O.S. Hawkins, W.A. Criswell’s successor, resigned from the pastorate of First Baptist Church, Dallas, to become the president of the SBC Annuity Board. The mission boards (home and foreign) were also led by conservative statesmen: Larry Lewis (1987-97) and Bob Reccord (1997-) at the North American Mission Board in Atlanta, and Jerry Rankin (1993-) at the International Mission Board in Richmond, Virginia. In 2001 Phil Roberts moved from the North American Mission Board to the Presidency of Midwestern Seminary. In 2003 Paige Patterson left Southeastern to become the president of Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, and in 2004 Daniel Akin became president at Southeastern and Jeff Iorg became president at Golden Gate Seminary. Moderate leadership no longer rules in Southern Baptist life.

At the dawn of a new millennium, giving was up, baptisms were up worldwide, and the number of volunteers for missions were up as well. The Conservative sweep was virtually complete at the national level, though Moderates retained some measure of strength in a few of the various state conventions. Nevertheless, respect for leadership must be earned, and only time will tell whether the Conservatives will wisely use the trust our Baptist people have given them.

Finally, throughout the last twenty years of the twentieth century, the definition of inerrancy has undergone such intense scrutiny, and the concepts which accompany its affirmation are now so well documented, that no one should any longer be able to profess confusion over the term. The body of Baptist literature unearthed from the past gives such richness to the affirmation of full biblical truthfulness in Baptist theology over the years, that none ever again need quibble over the presence or absence in the historical literature of the specific word “inerrancy.” The doctrine of biblical truthfulness has always been there. It is one essential mark of Baptist identity.

Concluding Summary

Baptists are and have always been a people of the Book. Others make this claim as well, but Baptists have consistently implemented their claim by following the biblical model for the church while at the same time reaching out in world-wide mission endeavors. The rapid shift to elder-led congregations is the most serious threat to Baptist identity in our day, but that is a subject for others to develop.

Who are the Baptists? We are a Bible-believing people who teach the New Birth, the priesthood of every believer, religious freedom, the gathered church, the sovereignty of God, salvation by Grace through Faith, the permanence of salvation, and the historicity and factual inerrancy of Holy Scripture. We baptize by immersion to symbolize the literal death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. We share the Lord’s Supper in order to remind ourselves of His flesh and blood offered as a sacrifice for our sin; and we do all of this by Faith as we await His soon return. Who are the Baptists? They are God’s faithful band of saints who seek above all to present Christ to the world.