UNION UNIVERSITY
BULLETIN

Equipping Today's Church Leaders — Volume III, Issue 3

In This Issue

UNION UNIVERSITY BULLETIN

The Union University *Bulletin* is a bi-monthly publication designed to equip church leaders.

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"Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?"

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When a joke becomes cliché, it needs to be retired. But one wisecrack that just won't die is the old saw about the legendary ability of Baptists to disagree. Put two Baptists in a room, so the saying goes, and you'll get *three* opinions. Although this well-worn remark still produces an occasional chuckle, lack of common conviction is no laughing matter.

Today, Southern Baptists live in a world of breathtaking developments in the culture war. The rapid normalization of homosexuality and the very real possibility of same-sex marriage, the massive assault on the sanctity of human life in America through abortion and emerging biotechnologies, and the breakdown of the traditional family threaten the American Republic – and challenge the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ to respond.

But at the same moment our age presents us with an unprecedented opportunity to be salt and light, Southern Baptists face an internal crisis of growing proportions. Much ink and talk has already been spilled on the question, but few will deny the poignancy of the following queries: "Are we living in a post denominational age?" "Do Southern Baptists collectively possess the mutual passion for truth that will be required to confront the encroaching darkness enveloping the West?" "Are we committed to the Great Commission enough to take the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth?"

Before we too quickly and glibly give comforting answers to these questions, we need to pause for sober consideration. Recent indicators seem to forecast impending trouble. On September 23, 2003, the SBC Funding Study Committee reported to the Executive Committee that churches sent substantially less to the Cooperative Program last year in terms of percentage than they did during a comparable period during the 1980s. And as every caring Southern Baptist knows, as the Cooperative Program goes, so go our denomination's efforts to bring the gospel to the nations.

Southern Baptists would do well to embark upon a season of reflection about the doctrinal, moral, and evangelistic commitments that bind us together. They must consider which alternative they will choose: a common future together with shared convictions about how to confront the evils attending our age, or increasing fragmentation, churches isolated from one another, and a weakened cultural presence.

See BAPTIST IDENTITY on page 9

The Pre-1609 Roots of Baptist Beliefs

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Baptists have often identified their churches as "New Testament churches" and have frequently insisted that they are not a creedal people. Some have "leap-frogged" over the Christian centuries, while others have posited a "trail of blood" church succession. Thus one may be prone to assume that they owe nothing to the creeds, church councils, and theologians of the sixteen centuries prior to the advent of the Baptist movement. But that assumption needs to be challenged and tested.

Baptists have repeatedly affirmed the deity and eternality of Jesus as God's Son in a manner consonant with the Council of Nicea I's (325) stance against Arius's teaching that Jesus was a creature having a beginning and being "less than God and more than man." Baptists have also affirmed both the complete humanity of Jesus, including a human mind, unlike the Apollinarian denial, and the deity of the Holy Spirit, unlike the Pneumatomachian denial, as did the Council of Constantinople I (381). The Nestorian pressing of the two natures of Jesus to two persons with only a loose conjoining of the two, rejected by the Council of Ephesus (431), has not found support among Baptists, whereas Baptists have had an affiniity for the Council of Chalcedon's (451) formulation of two natures in the one person of Jesus, thus confronting Eutychianism. Although Baptists have customarily not recited creeds as a part of public worship, one Baptist confession of faith (1678) included the texts of the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds and enjoined their usage. Baptists seem to have appropriated Tertullian's terminology respecting the Trinity and the person of Jesus Christ and much of Augustine's thought as to sin and grace.

Some Baptists (i.e. A. H. Newman) have seen in Jovinian and Vigilantius an early anti-ascetic evangelicalism and in the Petrobrusians, Henricians, Waldenses, Taborites, Peter Chelcicky and the Bohemian Brethren, and Lollards advocates of anti-sacramentalism, biblical authority, and primitivism that stopped short of a recovery of believer's baptism.

To the magisterial Protestant Reformation, the Baptists may have been indebted while insisting that they are the truly thoroughgoing Reformers. From Martin Luther, they may have derived the supremacy of the Scriptures over all, especially late church tradition, Christ as the center of the Scriptures, declarative justification by God's grace through faith alone, and the priesthood of all believers; from Ulrich Zwingli, the Lord's Supper as a memorial or symbolic observance; from John Calvin, the doctrine of predestination; and from Martin Bucer, discipline as a mark of the true church. Among the Reformation confessions of faith, the Westminster Confession had the greatest influence on Baptist confessions.

To introduce the question of Anabaptist influence is to raise the question of Baptist origins. Here three theories have been set forth: the Jerusalem-John-River Jordan theory, whereby the Anabaptists are an essential link; the Anabaptist spiritual kinship theory, wherein the Anabaptists are even more valued; and the English Separatist descent theory, according to which the Anabaptists are outside of and only slightly influential on the Baptist story. While acknowledging the modern scholarly classifications within the diverse Anabaptist movement (especially by A. H. Newman and G. H. Williams), one finds the most probable influence on Baptists from the Swiss Brethren, the Hutterites, the South German Anabaptists, and the Mennonites, and writers such as Conrad Grebel, Michael Sattler, Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, Dietrich Philips, Menno Simons, and Peter Rideman. Anabaptist doctrinal influences on the Baptists seem most likely to have been fourfold: believer's baptism as constitutive of a gathered or truly ordered church; church discipline as necessary to the life of a true church; the elevation of the New Testament in authority above the Old Testament, especially as to ecclesiology; and the advocacy of religious freedom for all human beings and the absence of the infliction of persecution. But, likewise, the Baptist rejection of specific Anabaptist, especially Mennonite, teaching was fourfold: that Christians ought not to serve as civil magistrates; that Christians ought not to be soldiers; that Christians ought not to take civil oaths; and that the excommunicated should be shunned.

The English Baptists were undoubtedly influenced by the Separatists--those Puritans who, not willing to continue to await reforms in the Church of England, separated therefore by constituting congregations on the basis of a church covenant and congregational polity. Their teachings had been expressed in the writings of Robert Harrison, Robert Browne, Henry Barrow, John Greenwood, Henry Ainsworth, and Francis Johnson.

See ROOTS OF BAPTIST BELIEFS on page 10

The Role of Scripture in Baptist Life

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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. 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. Baptists rather consistently have rested in the principle that Scripture alone should define the church and her doctrine.

The emphasis on the Bible itself does not mean that Baptists have not been a confessional people. 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. 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.

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 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.

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. Without a creed, Baptists must at least agree on the Scripture principle, for without that, Baptists have little hope of unity.

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. 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, for 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 an ongoing 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 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

See THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE on page 10

Are Southern Baptists in Danger of Losing Their Identity? A Historian's Perspective

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Baptist Identity Before the Twentieth Century

For most Baptists prior to the twentieth century, Baptist identity derived almost entirely from the shared belief and practice of their churches. Their common theology and church polity made their churches Baptist. Before there was a Cooperative Program, before there were mission boards, before there were any conventions at all, Baptists held that their churches constituted one denomination.

Many groups were Baptist in the sense of practicing believer's baptism, but they did not all belong to the orthodox or regular Baptist denomination. Most Baptists did not recognize the Seventh Day Baptists, General Baptists, Free Will Baptists, Tunkers, Mennonites, and Brethren, as having authentic Baptist identity. But the Separate Baptists and Regular Baptists in the South believed the same things in essential areas and declared their denominational identity based on a common confession of faith and practice.

Baptist churches expressed their commitment to unity of faith and practice as the source of Baptist identity by disfellowshiping those who departed from Baptist doctrine. Baptist churches excluded members who embraced fundamental errors of faith or practice.

Texas leader B. A. Copass summarized the Baptist position: "To withdraw fellowship from one who differs in matters of faith is not an attempt to stifle freedom, but only getting rid of one who does not belong to that body. Why should the body tolerate in its fellowship one who is teaching heresy?"

When modernism or liberalism began to spread among Baptists in the late nineteenth century, most Baptists asserted that liberals were not legitimate Baptists. When Kansas City pastor J. E. Roberts began preaching modernism in the 1880s, the editors of Virginia's *Religious Herald* replied that Baptists "stoutly insist that those who wear the Baptist name shall maintain the Baptist doctrines."

But to the consternation of orthodox Baptists, liberal Baptists generally sought to remain in fellowship. One important reason that that they sought to remain was because they developed a different view of Baptist identity. For them, being Baptist was not about doctrines but about commitment to a formal principle inherent in religious experience, the principle of individual freedom. In their new understanding of Baptist identity, they could reject the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, and much more, and still be authentic Baptists.

Baptist Identity in the Twentieth Century

This new understanding of Baptist identity bloomed in the twentieth century as progressive leaders and cultural trends promoted the redefinition. Progressive Baptists subordinated doctrine and practice to some spiritual principle or eternal essence which they generally called the "Baptist idea" or the "Baptist principle." They embraced historical idealism as a way to rescue Christianity from the assaults of scientific empiricism. The new religion they constructed is generally known as Liberal Christianity. The essence of Christianity, liberals argued, was not in its doctrines and practices, but in its lived experience. Underneath its various historical forms was an abiding essence which was the life and experience of religion. Doctrines were only temporary expressions of religious experience. Belief was extrinsic.

For Baptist progressives, this meant adapting the traditional beliefs to accommodate the new learning represented by the historical criticism of the Bible and by Darwinism. True Baptists altered their doctrine to keep up with the times. Thus Baptist modernists could modify their beliefs without ever losing their Baptist identity.

Progressive Baptist leaders concluded that the essence of Baptist identity was individualism. Individualism meant freedom from extrinsic authority in all matters of the heart and mind, especially religion. This was Baptists' gift to the world. This was their genius. This was what it meant to be Baptist.

Progressive pastor George A. Lofton argued that "the Baptist idea" was "personal freedom in all matters of religion." Progressive editor A. J. S. Thomas held similarly that freedom is "the very soul of the Baptist faith."

Since "the Baptist Principle is . . . Individualism," progressive editor J. W. Bailey argued, doctrine was not the basis of Baptist identity. "Their Principle, not their doctrine, marks them." Baptists could not therefore exclude any for doctrinal error. Charles S. Gardner, professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued that since "liberty is of the very essence of Baptist polity and life," then "hard and

See A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE on page 11

Is There A Future for Baptist Identity? A Theologian's Perspective

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Southern Baptists in recent days have received an unusual amount of pubic attention. The adoption of the new family amendment to the *Baptist Faith and Message* created quite a stir. New state conventions have been born in protest over actions adopted by existing state conventions. A November 1998 edition of *Newsweek* sought to interpret President Bill Clinton's sex scandal in light of his Baptist beliefs. For good or bad, the beliefs and struggles of Southern Baptists have at times been the center of media attention.

These and similar conflicts contain complex issues that are unique to each situation. Yet, inherent within each of these is a common core issue: the perceived reliance upon Baptist distinctives. These events represent the ongoing struggle of Southern Baptists to articulate a theological identity that is both Christian and distinctively Baptist. These struggles could be called, to borrow a phrase from theological studies, "the quest for historical Baptist distinctives."

The Problem's Complexity

What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The seeming simplicity of this question often disguises the complexity of the answer. Ask any Baptist this question and you may receive as many answers as there are Baptists. Baptists usually agree that they have a distinctive theological identity. They disagree, however, over the nature of this distinctive identity.

The question typically occurs within debates over Baptist distinctives. Many different beliefs are cited as true "Baptist distinctives." Some stress broad principles such as the priesthood of all believers, believer's baptism, a regenerate church membership, the primacy of the Scriptures, or congregational autonomy. Others call attention to religious freedom, soul competency, or the lordship of Christ as defining criteria. A popular answer often heard in pulpits is that Baptists believe in "the Book, the blood, and the blessed hope."

Another common approach to identifying Baptist distinctives is the appeal to Baptist precedent. Statements such as "Baptists have always believed this" are often cited as the undisputed truth that will bring immediate resolution to the debate. One Baptist leader is fond of saying, "Mama taught me that this is what Baptists have always believed." With all due respect to his mother, she may not be right. Although these appeals are intended to support a certain position, what is offered as Baptist "precedent" is often tainted by personal agendas and ignorance of Baptist history and theology. Such emotional claims of historical continuity bring only confusion rather than clarification.

A Contemporary Test Case

The discussion of Baptist distinctives will ultimately be influenced by one's perspective on Scripture. Some Southern Baptists argue that the Bible, as the authoritative standard, should serve to interpret, guide, and shape our individual and collective experiences as Christians and Baptists. Other Southern Baptists contend that the Bible should be interpreted in light of our experiences as Christians and Baptists.

A recent event in Southern Baptist life illustrates how the relationship between biblical perspective and Baptist distinctives impacts contemporary ministry. A Texas Baptist church, associated at that time with the SBC, called a woman to serve as senior pastor.[1] The move sparked controversy among Southern Baptists. Several interesting questions surfaced in discussions over the event. For example, is a woman serving as pastor of a church faithful to the biblical revelation? Is the "woman-as-pastor" an issue of biblical authority or biblical interpretation? Is it "baptistic" for a church to call a woman to serve as pastor? Do Southern Baptists churches that have women pastors embody the essence of Baptist life and thought? Does the Baptist distinctive of Christian experience permit a Southern Baptist church to call a woman as pastor? These are only some of the questions often asked whenever this topic is discussed. Biblical teaching on the issue is crucial to this discussion and has been examined admirably in another article.[2] Our attention is focused on the issue of faithfulness to the Baptist distinctives. Are Southern Baptist churches that call women to serve as pastors being true to historical Baptist distinctives?

See A THEOLOGIAN'S PERSPECTIVE on page 12

New Dimensions in Local Church Leadership

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Every church is different. Every church leader faces unique challenges. Ministering in a tradition-rich First Church presents different challenges than leading a new church plant. A rural or small town church is very different than a suburban mega-church. Yet, every church leader faces the same realities of limited resources, personal limitations, the need for more and better leaders, and the need for the power of God.

Baptist local church leaders, living in the beginning of the 21st century, face some unique challenges. I will mention six.

The Challenges

1. The challenge of multiple generations in one church.

The church I serve is composed of at least four different generations: Builders (born before 1946), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1964-1982) and Gen Y (1982-present). The challenge is to affirm, honor, and minister to an older, church-experienced, modern generation, and at the same time, reach out to and disciple a younger, church-inexperienced, post-modern generation. It is the challenge of 3-4 generations of believers joyfully worshipping together as one body.

This challenge is like that of the first century church, where Jews and Gentiles gathered together - people on the same planet, but living in different universes.

2. The challenge of a spiritually hungry but pagan culture.

The success of *The Passion of the Christ, The Purpose-Driven Life*, and *The Da Vinci Code* suggest that many people are on a spiritual quest. Interest in spirituality, however, does not translate into commitment to Christ, the church, or even morality.

It is commonplace to hear musicians and actors give credit to God or Jesus at awards ceremonies, often after performing a song that either demeans women, promotes violence, or glorifies sexual promiscuity.

How can we convert this rising tide of spiritual interest into solid commitment to Jesus Christ, his Word and his church? How do we move people from pop-spirituality that favors a God so loving that anything goes to a solid grasp the God of the Bible?

3. The challenge of spiritual formation.

After the death of four Southern Baptist missionaries, I asked my congregation, "What kind of church produces martyrs? What kind of Sunday School teaching? What kind of youth group?

How does a church help its members develop a Christian worldview that influences everyday decisions in areas such as truth-telling, sexuality, marriage, parenting, integrity, and business ethics?

I am haunted by the opening sentence of Jim Peterson's book, *Lifestyle Discipleship.* "Thirty years of discipleship programs, and we are not discipled."[i]

How is it possible that 84% of adults claim to be Christians, and three out of five say they believe the Bible is totally accurate in all that it teaches, and at the same time, the moral foundations of the nation are crumbling.[ii]

4. The challenge of racial reconciliation and harmony.

How does a local church begin to address the sin of racism? How do church leaders of different ethnic backgrounds move past superficial politeness into deep and trusting friendships? How does a pastor teach his people that Jesus is end of racism?

5. The challenge of denominational identity and involvement.

A recent visitor spoke to me about membership in our church. She confessed, "I love this church, but I can't see myself as a Baptist. Can I be a member here and not be a Baptist?"

One of our lay leaders, a life-long Baptist, asked a similar question, "Pastor, what is the advantage to being Baptist? We don't have to be Baptists to believe the Bible and send missionaries and practice immersion. I catch far more grief for being a Baptist than I do for being a Christian. It seems to me that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages."

What does it mean to be a Baptist in a post-denominational age? Are Baptist distinctives really distinctive? Is there a Baptist "way of doing church?"

Can a church be committed to its Southern Baptist roots and be "seeker-sensitive?" Does the sign in front of the building dictate or predict what happens inside? How important is it to retain the name "Baptist?"

Does being a Baptist imply a specific theological

See NEW DIMENSIONS on page 14

Baptist Identity: A Free Church in a Free Society

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Baptists have, in almost all places, in almost all times, given unwavering commitment to the full authority and accuracy of Scripture. However, what separates us from most of our Christian brethren and has separated us from the beginning is our doctrine of the church.

"A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ"[1] is the way the *Baptist Faith and Message* begins its article on the church. When you define the church as a New Testament institution, you have done a radical thing in the Reformation Era.

Our forefathers went to jail and sometimes worse telling both their Catholic and Protestant persecutors they would not be bound by proof texts fetched from the Old Testament. They lived in the New Covenant—a New Testament in the blood of Christ, and the manual for faith and practice for believers in the New Covenant was the New Testament.

The phrase "…an autonomous local congregation…"[2] separates us from all of those who have synods, bishops, and presbyteries. Further, the phrase "…of baptized believers…"[3] separates us from the Congregationalists and many Bible churches. This radically biblical definition of the church is what has always made us the "Baptist" kind of Christians.

The *Baptist Faith and Message* also deals with the issue of the church and the state in Article XVII, Religious Liberty: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and He has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are contrary to His Word or not contained in it. Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others. Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God. The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work."[4]

This is in reality a three-fold issue—the church, the state and the society. The last thing we should ever want is government-sponsored religion. Like getting embraced by a python, it squeezes all the life out of you until you fall over dead. Just look at the empty cathedrals of Europe. It is our privilege, our duty, our obligation, and our responsibility, not the government's, to preach, teach and spread the Gospel.

When we as believers win people to Jesus and we disciple them and they begin to come to a new core set of values and to understand from a new spiritual perspective the truths and values of life and what should be done in society, they have a right and we have a right as citizens to bring such convictions to bear on public policy.

We have seen what Baptists say about the church. We have seen what Baptists say about the church and the state. What do Baptists say about the church and society? That subject is addressed in Article XV, "The Christian and the Social Order":

"All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ."[5]

These are the three pillars—the church, the state, and society—upon which Baptist identity is founded. The beginning point is the Baptist understanding of the biblical nature of the church and ultimately its relationship to the state or the civil magistracy. Beginning in the 16th century with the Swiss Brethren, later known as the Anabaptists, they struck at the very foundation of Western Civilization for over a thousand years when they separated church membership from membership in the society. The Constantinian Synthesis had so warped the Western Christian understanding of the church and its relationship to the state that even spiritual giants like Calvin and Luther and Zwingli could not comprehend the church and state not being in tandem and unison together.

When Roger Williams founded Providence Plantations (now Rhode Island), he founded the first government anywhere in the Western world for over a millennium in which citizens were free not only to worship as they pleased without fear of penalty but free to stay home and shuck peas on the front porch on Sunday morning without fear of government interference.

Yet even then the victory was not won. Even in the American colonies, two-thirds of the original 13 states had tax-supported official state churches. None of them were

See FREE CHURCH on page 15

Baptist Distinctives in a Postdenominational World

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The mainline denominations have been in serious decline since the 1960's. By the early 1990's, the overall cultural decline of denominations began to be felt by more conservative groups in a strange way. Even among evangelical groups that experienced numerical growth, a change of attitude by church members and pastors toward the denominations began to appear. The old loyalty and support that could once be taken for granted from an older generation was missing from the new generation of pastors and church members. It was the Christian version of postmodernity. The experts call it postdenominational Christianity.

Postmodern people have no interest in joining organizations. In Southern Baptist life, pastors have observed that people may visit their church for months before they ever join. Large numbers of people may move in and out of the popular contemporary services without ever affecting the overall offerings in a significant way. In denominational life, younger pastors show little or no inclination to get involved with the association. A recent study group of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention brought a pessimistic report about the future of Cooperative Program giving. The president of the International Mission Board has voiced concern about mission giving.

Rather than rely upon the Southern Baptist church program to provide for their curriculum needs, many conservative as well as moderate churches of the SBC have begun to use resources such as the AWANA program in place of RA's and GA's, even though AWANA is not a missions education program. Promise Keepers have replaced the Brotherhood in many churches even though Promise Keepers is not a missions support organization. Women's Ministry has replaced the WMU in many churches, even though Women's Ministry is not a missions support organization. In many churches, the old infrastructure that promoted the significance of the denominational relationship no longer exists.

Another feature of postmodernity is its focus on ME. Postmodern people are concerned with what they are concerned with. Their churches may be vibrant and attracting people to worship, but they do not attract people to the denomination. They may have an active missions program that involves a number of opportunities for members to be involved in "hands on" ministry during the year, but the phrase "charity begins at home" governs their attitude toward the broader work of cooperative missions. Larger churches may run their own missions program and tend to see no point in sending a significant amount of money to the denomination when they do not seem to get anything back in return.

Postmodern people follow a pragmatic philosophy concerned with what works. Little attention is given to broader value issues. Pragmatism drives the postdenominational churches as well. A postdenominational church may change its organizational structure, its polity, its name, its style of worship, its educational program, and its approach to missions based on what worked at a famous church. Postdenominational churches have abandoned revival meetings, visitation, discipleship training, and music more than twenty years old because it does not work like it once did. Postdenominational churches may drop "Baptist" from their name for fear that it will keep people away. Even denominational agencies that monitor major cultural trends may drop "Baptist" from their public identity in order to appeal to the broader postdenominational world that shops around for Christian services and resources.

Are any of these trends a cause for alarm? Will these trends advance the cause of Christ? What are the implications of these trends for the future of Baptist identity in general and the Southern Baptist Convention in particular?

When I was young, the great preachers used to say that the Southern Baptist Convention was not a denomination. They took great pride in the unique voluntary association of autonomous local congregations that made up the Southern Baptist Convention. When I first became a young pastor and realized that my association did not elect representatives to serve on the state executive committee, I was shocked. I had entered the ministry after a brief career in politics, and I thought that Baptist life was organized the same way as the government. An old pastor took me aside and explained that the association and the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention are all independent of one another. All they have in common is that the same churches may belong to all three groups.

As much as we talked about not being a denomination, we were probably prouder of our denomination than any

See BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES on page 15

BAPTIST IDENTITY... continued from page 1

On Monday and Tuesday, April 5-6, 2004, Union University hosted a forum for this very conversation to take place. Many of our foremost denominational leaders attended to consider various aspects related to one central theme: "Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?" The speakers include R. Albert Mohler, Jr., Morris Chapman, Richard Land, James Leo Garrett, David S. Dockery, Russ Bush, Stan Norman, Greg Wills, Sam Shaw and Voddie Baucham. Their task was to remind us of the historic convictions that have strengthened and sustained our denomination for decades. Baptists have a concrete reservoir of theological content that, if drawn upon, reinforce our belief that the brightest days for Baptists are still to come.

The results of the conference met virtually every expectation. Hundreds of participants from the mid-South region and beyond made their way to Union to see what Baptist life together might look like in the coming years. Contrary to the caricature that Southern Baptists cannot agree, the presenters at this conference displayed a remarkable unity. Three words describe content delivered during the presentations: clarity, conviction, and charity.

Clarity. In the first three lectures, James Leo Garrett of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Greg Wills of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and L. Russ Bush of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary looked to Baptist history in order to gain insights for the present. Garrett outlined how Baptists have, in the main, always been unafraid and unashamed to make public their theological confessions. Building upon that central theme, Wills divulged its correlate: not only did Baptists have theological confessions, they also made them tests of fellowship. If a person or church failed to exhibit like doctrines and practices, Baptists have historically been willing to say, "If you cannot agree with us on these central beliefs, then you are not a Baptist." Russ Bush reiterated this theme by detailing how our fathers in the faith were faithful because they kept themselves lashed to the mast of the authority of Scripture.

Conviction. Following the historical perspective, David Dockery, Morris Chapman, Stan Norman, and R. Albert Mohler underscored the importance of Baptist conviction for cooperation in the future. David Dockery, President of Union University, confirmed that Baptists are always at their best when their core doctrinal beliefs about the Godhead, Scripture, and work of Christ square with the ancient orthodoxy of the early church. Only such fidelity will give the Baptists the verve they will need to meet oncoming cultural challenges. For his part, Morris Chapman, President of the Executive Committee of the SBC, exhorted his hearers that Southern Baptists must return to a strong connection between the churches on theological grounds. Only such robust associationalism will offer the collective courage that we will need to bear witness to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Stan Norman, of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, concurred with the conclusions of the conference, and outlined the core axioms which make the name "Baptist" a distinct theological identity. Ultimately, R. Albert Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, summed up the mood of the entire conference. Pointing to the conservative resurgence in the SBC, Mohler stated that Southern Baptists had been given a "second chance" to be a great denomination once again. "Southern Baptists," he asserted, "must embrace the challenge of confronting these issues not merely defensively, but rather, as a process of using contemporary debates on present issues to frame a theological reality that is in constant conversation with the apostles, with the [church] fathers, with the reformers, with the evangelicals."

Charity. The addresses by Dockery, Chapman, and Mohler left the conferees looking outward to the cultural mandate that frames our responsibility in the future. The three final addresses by Sam Shaw, Richard Land, and Voddie Baucham outlined a concrete action plan for the Baptist future. Sam Shaw, Pastor of Germantown Baptist Church in Germantown, Tennessee, discussed the boldness and vibrancy that must accompany the local church's witness if it would reach an increasingly pagan culture. In this context, pastors must lead the way with courage and prepare their churches to meet the needs of local communities that no one else is meeting. Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission of the SBC, reminded his listeners that it was the Baptist vision for a free church in a free society that has contributed to the robust Christian faith that has undergirded the core values that have made the American experiment great. Finally, Voddie Baucham, the impressive apologist/evangelist from Houston, preaching from John 13, informed a standing room only chapel filled with pastors and Union University students that the meaning of being a Christ-follower is defined by service. Jesus, Baucham said, knew who he was as Son of God, and this confidence freed him to be the servant of sinners.

In retrospect, the Baptist Identity conference was a high watermark event for the Union University community. Those who were present will remember that in the Spring of 2004, preeminent Baptist theologians, historians, and institutional leaders found common ground to discuss, as E. Y. Mullins once put it, "the dangers and duties of the present hour." Southern Baptists must take decisive action to build unity within our denomination if our efforts to embody the Great Commission are to be effective. These actions must be thoughtfully determined. If we give ear to the words of our conference presenters, our forward focus will begin with a recommitment to the theological convictions that shaped our historic identity. This theological framework coupled with a genuine Christ-honoring love for mankind must be the foundation upon which we build our identity and embrace a promising future.

Note: The addresses for the Baptist Identity Conference are still available via streaming audio at http://www.uu.edu/audio/.

ROOTS OF BAPTIST BELIEFS... continued from page 2

Separatist influence on Baptist life can be seen in the reliance of the framers of the 1644 (First London) Particular Baptist confession on a Separatist document, A True Confession (1596). Theologically that influence seems to have centered in humanity's Adamic disability, the Bible as the rule of faith and practice, the royal priesthood of all Christians, and congregational polity. But early Baptists also rejected specific Separatist teachings: double predestination, double reconciliation, the power and duty of civil magistrates to suppress false religions and establish the true religion, and the Separatist retention of infant baptism.

English Independency, from which the earliest Particular Baptists were derived, affirmed Dortian Calvinist rather than Arminian theology, had a more irenic and less hostile attitude toward the Church of England than the Separatists, and practiced congregational polity. Undoubtedly, Independency's Dortian Calvinism left its impact on the early Particular Baptists.

This study of the pre-1609 roots of Baptist beliefs is offered as historical foundation for any restatement of Baptist identity and any probing of or questing for a future Baptist identity.

THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE... continued from page 3

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. 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, or some thought the truth was found in human wisdom rather than in Scripture.

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.

At the second Ridgecrest Conference on Biblical Interpretation, 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 idea-crafters 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.

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. By all standards, 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) 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. Moderate leadership no longer rules in Southern Baptist life. 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.

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

See THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE on page 11

THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE... continued from page 10

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.

A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE... continued from page 4

fast lines can not be drawn" and no one could "mark out the limits of our fellowship."

The Emergence of Southern Baptist Ethnicity

This new understanding of Baptist identity fit well with an additional source of identity that emerged powerfully after the Second World War. Postwar Southern Baptist leaders succeeded in enlisting the majority of Southern Baptist churches in establishing and maintaining uniform Baptist programs. The proliferation of these programs combined with the rapid growth of Southern Baptist churches in the postwar period produced a powerful Baptist subculture in the South. The wide participation in the programs of the Southern Baptist Convention now combined with efforts to subordinate doctrine to experience and resulted in what can only be called an ethnic or tribal source of identity.

In the postwar period such Southern Baptist programs as Sunday School curricula, Baptist Training Union, and the graded programs of the Woman's Missionary Union proliferated widely and produced a powerful Southern Baptist subculture that fostered tribal identity.

Many moderate leaders have acknowledged the tribal sources of their Baptist identity. Cecil Sherman said that he was Baptist because his parents were. Donna Forrester considered her Baptist identity a birthright: "I could no more be a Methodist than I could be from Wisconsin." Nancy Sehested said that she "was born into the tribe of Baptists . . . My siblings and I were all schooled in the tribal ways from the Texas branch of the house of Southern Baptists." Cecil Staton summarized the experience of so many postwar Southern Baptists: "I am Baptist born and Baptist bred. . . . it would be almost impossible for me to be anything other than a Baptist." They were nurtured in an ethnic tradition, a distinct Southern Baptist vision of life, values, and society.

For much of the twentieth century this Southern Baptist ethnicity was the glue that held the denomination together while our growing diversity pushed us apart. Like the strong nuclear force that holds an atom's protons and neutrons together despite the fact that the protons naturally repel each other, ethnicity held Southern Baptists with differing doctrines and identities together.

Reflections on Current Trends

Although the progressives made extraordinary progress, they found it tough sledding. Most rank-and-file Baptists rejected unbelieving historical criticism and Darwinism. Conservative Southern Baptists felt that being Baptist must include commitment to certain fundamental doctrines like the inerrancy of the Bible, substitutionary atonement, and salvation only by personal faith in Christ.

Conservatives have nevertheless absorbed some of the ideas of the progressive leadership of the convention in the twentieth century. Moderates wrote the books that told us our history, our doctrine, and our identity and taught us how to function as churches, associations, and conventions. In some areas we continue in the ways that they taught us.

Perhaps the most obvious area in which we have departed from true Baptist identity is the Bible's teaching on the church. Regenerate church membership is endangered, for we barely preach a gospel that discriminates clearly between the saved and the lost, and we think it uncharitable to judge the evidence of conversion. The result is that in our churches there has been an overproduction of professed Christians. Our membership rolls, with their extensive lists of inactive members, testify against us in this area.

On the Lord's Supper, we are disorderly and seem to reject the Scripture's clear teaching. In the New Testament baptism is prerequisite to participating in the Lord's Supper, but in many churches we invite unbaptized professing believers to take and eat—indeed, in some churches, we invite all persons, including any unbelievers who are present. We are inviting them eat and drink judgment on themselves (1 Cor. 11:27-30). And shall we escape judgment also?

Many of our churches have abandoned or want to distance themselves from congregational church government. Moderates taught us that we are congregational because of our commitment to freedom and autonomy. Baptists once believed that congregationalism was Scriptural (Mt. 18:15-17, 1 Cor. 5:5, 12-13, 2 Cor. 2:6).

Our churches have largely abandoned scriptural church discipline. Moderates and our individualist culture have taught us that it ought not and can not be done. But Baptists once thought otherwise. Christ still commands it. Shall we who know our Master's will refuse to do it?

Baptist associations traditionally expelled member churches that departed from the beliefs and practices that the churches of the association professed as the foundation of their fellowship. Some of our associations have done this, but in many associations disorderly churches remain in good standing. To permit them to remain constitutes an

See A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE on page 12

A HISTORIAN'S PERSPECTIVE... continued from page 11

endorsement of their errors. We seem to agree with the moderates that such action violates the autonomy and independence of the churches. It does not. Churches are free to embrace heresy and immorality; associations are no less free to withdraw fellowship from them.

True Baptist churches will not walk together with churches that discount the authority of the Holy Scriptures or deny the deity of Jesus Christ or who give false hope of salvation apart from faith in Christ. Agreement on fundamental principles is necessary to fellowship. Let us recover our Baptist identity, a fully Biblical Christian identity.

A THEOLOGIAN'S PERSPECTIVE... continued from page 5

Those few Southern Baptist churches that call women as pastors declare that they are remaining true to historical Baptist distinctives.[3] The Baptist distinctive of Christian experience is the reason often cited which permits Southern Baptist churches to affirm the idea that God can call a woman to be a pastor. The reasoning runs something like this: God calls and gifts many people for various forms of Christian service, one of which is pastoral ministry. God's calling is sovereign and indiscriminate -- that is, He may call whomever He chooses to be a pastor. God may choose to call and gift either a woman or a man to be a pastor of a Baptist church. If such a person testifies that he or she has experienced such a call, who are we to judge whether or not this call is valid or invalid. If that person claims to have "experienced" God's call for pastoral ministry, then we must accept that call as true to God's character and God's Word.

This illustrates to a degree the struggle in which many Baptists, particularly Southern Baptists find themselves. One group of Southern Baptists says that the Bible should serve as the absolute and normative standard for interpreting various "callings." That is, since the Bible teaches only men may serve as senior pastor, and since the Bible prohibits a woman from serving as such, a woman's "calling" to ministry must be interpreted in this light. Other Southern Baptists, however, would argue that a woman's "calling" to serve as pastor is valid; therefore, those passages that appear to contradict her calling should be reinterpreted in other ways.

Admittedly, the issue is more intricate and complex than this. However, it accurately illustrates the broader, theological issue that exists among Baptists. Some Southern Baptists stipulate that the core, or primary, "Baptist distinctive" is the authority of the Bible for all matters of faith and practice. Other Southern Baptists argue that Christian experience is the core "Baptist distinctive." These distinctions are very real and have been with Southern Baptists for most of this century.

Two Distinctive Traditions

Over the past four years I have spent a great deal of effort collecting, critically examining, and categorizing all forms of writings that claim in some measure to be writings on Baptist distinctives. The process revealed these two understandings, or "traditions," of Baptist distinctives within Southern Baptist life. Both of these traditions have existed side by side in Southern Baptist life throughout most of the twentieth century. In recent years, however, the differences between the two have grown so great that they no longer appear able to coexist.

These differences exist because of how a "core" distinctive impacts the development of theological identity. Works on Baptist distinctives that affirm the primacy of biblical authority as the core distinctive will develop and interpret the other distinctives in light of this core.[4] This method reflects the Protestant Reformation tradition. In fact, many of the authors of writings on Baptist distinctives believed that the Baptists and their distinctive theology were the logical outcome to the Reformation assumption of the preeminence of biblical authority. Those distinctive works that affirm the primacy of biblical authority can be categorized as "Reformation Baptist distinctives."

Writings on Baptist distinctives that affirm Christian experience as the core distinctive embrace the Enlightenment assumption of individual autonomy.[5] This profound emphasis upon the individual is often expressed in terms of individual freedoms, individual rights, and individual morality. This strand of distinctives can be called "Enlightenment Baptist distinctives." This tradition was birthed in Edgar Young Mullins' *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*.[6] As indicated by the title, Mullins intentionally sought to redefine the existing "Reformation Baptist distinctives" tradition. He wanted to stress that both Christian experience and biblical authority are equal and necessary for developing Baptist distinctives. He did not, however, achieve this balance. His understanding of Christian experience overshadowed his understanding of biblical authority. Christian experience became for Mullins the core distinctive that shaped his understanding of biblical authority. Baptist distinctives that evolved in conjunction with this tradition continued this theological emphasis.

Writings on Baptist distinctives have a unique ordering that affects the theological process. The Reformation tradition first asserts the primacy of biblical authority. These works construct a Baptist doctrine of the church based upon biblical authority. Christian

See A THEOLOGIAN'S PERSPECTIVE on page 13

A THEOLOGIAN'S PERSPECTIVE... continued from page 12

experience in its various expressions is a necessary by-product of having a New Testament church built upon biblical revelation. The Reformation distinctive tradition affirms the role of individual accountability and responsibility. It does so, however, within the broader scope of the overall life and teachings of the church.

The Enlightenment distinctive tradition has over a period of time inverted this view. Following Mullins, the distinctive tradition moved from a core distinctive of biblical authority that shaped church life and Christian experience interpretation to a Christian experience core distinctive that shaped biblical authority and church life. The defining distinctive in this tradition became a form of Christian experience. On this foundation, a doctrine of the church was constructed that strongly emphasized the individual, sometimes to the neglect of the corporate life of the church. The Bible became a repository of information for individual spiritual blessings, individual Christian living, and individual freedoms rather than an authoritative revelation for a community of born-again believers working together for the extension of God's kingdom. Biblical authority was no longer the core distinctive that interpreted the other Baptist distinctives. Instead, Christian experience became the shaping distinctive.

In the earliest stages of Baptist life, the only tradition that existed was the Reformation Baptist distinctive tradition. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, the Enlightenment Baptist distinctive tradition was birthed. These two traditions initially shared similar theological convictions. Over time, however, the two distinctive traditions grew further apart in their convictions and emphases.

A Contemporary Assessment

These two distinctive traditions still exist today. The Reformation tradition continues to demonstrate theological stability and historical continuity. The Enlightenment Baptist distinctive tradition has in recent days experienced a loss of theological stability and historical continuity. The exaggerated emphasis on individual Christian experience makes theological cohesiveness almost impossible. Further, the Enlightenment distinctive tradition appears to be fragmenting within itself. Writings in this tradition not only have decreasing similarities with the Reformation tradition, but they also have fewer similarities with other works in the same Enlightenment tradition.[7]

These divisions within Baptist distinctives explain, to a degree, the current controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. Those who are often described as "conservatives" tend to represent the Reformation tradition emphasis of biblical authority. "Moderates," or those who are more comfortable with some form of Christian experience as the foundational distinctive, tend to represent the Enlightenment distinctive tradition. Although these two distinctive traditions cannot account for all the divisions within the controversy, they help us understand a major source of the controversy.

Based upon its past historical continuity and theological stability, the Reformation tradition of Baptist distinctives will likely continue to flourish and to formulate a distinctive theological identity for many Baptists in the future. The Reformation tradition provides a large segment of Baptists with a theological connection to their past and strong theological identity for the future. If the past is any indication, this tradition of Baptist distinctives will enjoy a bright and meaningful future in the promotion of the kingdom of God.

The prospects are not so bright for the Enlightenment tradition of Baptist distinctives. Based upon its growing fragmentation, this tradition will likely either digress into theological oblivion, or birth a new theological perspective, continuing its drift from an historic Baptist identity. It will either eventually reject any connection with Baptists, or further try to redefine a distinctive identity of Baptists in "un-baptistic" terms. However, such a redefinition would eliminate any historical or theological claim to the name "Baptist." Only time and Baptists will reveal what the future holds for this tradition.

[1]For purposes of this article, the term "pastor" will be used to describe the ministerial office of "senior pastor."

[2]Richard R. Melick, Jr., "Women Pastors: What Does the Bible Teach," *SBC Life*, May 1998, 4-6.

[3]It should be noted that many Southern Baptist churches that call a woman as senior pastor usually do not remain within the SBC.

[4]The category of "biblical authority" would include those writings on Baptist distinctives, which argue for the entire Bible or the New Testament as the sole or supreme source for faith and practice.

[5]The category of "Christian experience" would include those writings on Baptist distinctives, which define experiential concepts in categories such as: soul competency, religious freedom, individual autonomy, the lordship of Christ, and the experience of believer's baptism, to list but a few.

[6]Edgar Young Mullins, The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1908).

[7]Examples of two such works include Walter B. Shurden, The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms (Charlotte, NC: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), and Alan Neely, ed., Being Baptist Means Freedom (Charlotte, NC: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988).

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NEW DIMENSIONS... continued from page 6

position on eschatology, election, spiritual gifts or the role of women in ministry? How should limited missions dollars be allocated? How should a local church be governed?

6. The challenge of maintaining spiritual passion

A friend put it succinctly in an email to me earlier this year. "It seems the complexity of pastoral leadership increases with every year. I'm burning out and feel trapped, and don't know what else to do." My friend's remark is not unusual. Psychiatrist Louis McBurney reports that low self-esteem is the number one problem pastors face, with depression as a close second.[iii]

What is the fuel which will sustain ministry over the long haul? What motivates and drives a revived church? What enables a pastor to finish well?

Addressing the Challenges

It is an interesting time to be a Baptist pastor. The job is difficult, and complicated. It is also a glorious work and a time of tremendous opportunity. I would suggest several ways to address the challenges listed above.

1. Challenge yourself and your church to radical God-centeredness.

A vision of the greatness and glory of God is the fuel for sustaining creative and effective ministry. The greatest need of our people is to know and treasure the infinite value of God. The hunger of our culture can not be satisfied with anything less than an authentic experience with the true God.

To say it another way, "What we need from our leaders and our churches is not new principles, new ideas or new buildings. What we need is a renewed dependence on God, to be renewed in the person, presence and power of the Holy Spirit."[iv]

To say it yet another way, nothing is more important than the vitality of spiritual life of the leader. It is from our inner world that "streams of living water flow."

2. Think like a missionary.

Missionaries understand the culture. They realize that all people - modern, pre-modern, and post-modern - have the same basic human needs. We all want to be accepted. We all want to know we are loved. We all long for purpose, for spiritual fulfillment and meaning. We all long to know our Creator. This means Jesus will be the only answer for human longing.

Missionary thinking recalls that the early church was birthed into an environment of many spiritual cults and religions. We are not facing anything new.

Missionaries pray for the courage to stay true to the Scriptures while radically rethinking the way they do ministry. Missionary thinking means asking questions such as, "Why are we here? What is our mission? Who are we seeking to reach? Why did God bring this church into existence and what does he want us to accomplish?"

3. Provide or support multiple venues for worship.

Many churches have found that importing new worship styles into existing services ends up pleasing no one. As a result, some churches have created several distinct worship venues – traditional, contemporary, gospel, etc. Others have provided smaller age-group-targeted services, each with a different worship format.

Most churches cannot staff multiple services. Every church can plant a new church or partner with a new church start or provide space for church planters or encourage young entrepreneurial pastors with a fresh vision and the willingness to risk. One-size-fits-all is not the only option available.

4. Focus on small groups

How does a church produce candidates for martyrdom? How are disciples made? What are the catalysts for spiritual formation? If spiritual growth requires teaching, relationships and experiences, where does such growth take place? Where does one find accountability, encouragement, transparency and caring? The answer is small groups.

Everything necessary for life-change and spiritual formation potentially happens in small groups. Leadership is developed and community is deepened. This is hardly a revolutionary statement. It has been the genius of the lay-led, staff-equipped Sunday School for many years. Affirming small group values such as community, accountability and personal ministry, and training in small group dynamics can revitalize many traditional Sunday School classes.

5. Be involved with bold Baptist causes

Being a Baptist means I have a partnership with Christians who are committed to the full authority and complete trustworthiness of Scripture. Baptists have clear positions on the great moral and ethical issues of our time. Baptists are committed to taking the message of Christ to the entire world. We have a noble and Christ-exalting heritage as Baptists. Association and involvement with bold and visionary Baptist causes provides synergy for fulfilling the Great Commission.

Conclusion

I cannot think of a more strategic and challenging time to be a pastor. Like David, we serve the purpose of God in our generation (Acts 13:36). In a post-modern culture, our confidence is in the sovereign God who works in and through culture to build his church.

[i] Jim Peterson, Lifestyle Discipleship (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1993), 13.

[ii] http://www.barna.org

[iii] Quoted in Fisher, David, The 21st Century Pastor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 8.

[iv] Dodd, Brian, Empowered Church Leadership (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 29.

FREE CHURCH... continued from page 7

Baptist. In New England, they were Congregational. In the South, they were Episcopal. And in the middle colonies, they tended to be Presbyterian. Indeed, in the ten years prior to the American Revolutionary War, we have documented over 500 Baptist preachers who were thrown in jail by the Episcopal government authorities of Virginia for "disturbing the peace." Now that's not the worst definition of preaching I've ever heard—disturbing the peace—but what the authorities meant was they were preaching without a license from the government.

In spite of many of the hardships, the Baptist view triumphed at the federal level in the American Constitution. You know well the story of John Leland and the Baptists and their role in the ratification of the Constitution. The Baptists, in spite of persecution, had gained the balance of power in several states, particularly Virginia. Leland cut a political deal—that's right, a Baptist evangelist cut a political deal. He would withdraw his opposition and do what he could to get Baptists to vote for ratification; James Madison promised that the first Congress would pass an amendment to the Constitution that would guarantee that Congress shall make no law affecting an establishment of religion nor interfering with the free exercise thereof. And that's what happened.

The First Amendment is really the codification and the triumph at the federal level of the Baptist view of the church and its relationship to the state. The government will not impose a national establishment of religion, nor will it interfere with the free exercise of religion. Please note that all the restrictions in the First Amendment are on the government, not on Christians, not on churches. It is the government that is restricted in the sphere of religion in the First Amendment, not the people and not religion.

At the time the First Amendment was ratified, the religious, cultural, and political situations were completely different than they are today. The great depth and diversity of religious conviction and belief in the early days of the federal republic produced the First Amendment because, as Michael McConnell, a constitutional scholar, has said, "every religion was a minority religion" in some part of the new United States of America.[6] The First Amendment's clauses "were not intended as an instrument of secularization, or as a weapon that the non-religious or anti-religious could use to suppress the effusions of the religious. The Religion Clauses were intended to guarantee the rights of those whose religious practices seemed to the majority a little odd."[7]

The First Amendment's religion clauses were there to protect religious minorities of which Baptists were one in most parts of the country at the time of the ratification. The majority may not trample upon the minority's right to religious expression and freedom. It was never intended by our first founding fathers to be freedom from religion, but freedom for religion.

Unfortunately, the society in which we are called to live is much more hostile to religion than the 18th century. We have a judicial establishment that has done its best to say that the First Amendment means freedom from religion, the right of Americans not to hear religious opinions they don't want to hear.

Here's the way it's supposed to work. We have the right to preach the Gospel. When people get saved and their lives get changed and their attitude and their understanding get changed, they have the right to bring their religious convictions to bear on public policy as private citizens. And if we convince enough of them that we're right, we have the right to make those moral convictions law. That's not called a theocracy. It's called the democratic process and the other side had better get used to it because we're not going away.

I believe this is the Baptist moment. America and the world will not get the proper balance of separation of church and state right without our articulation of our heritage as Baptists. And I believe that if we are willing to be the salt and the light that we've been commanded to be by the Lord Jesus Christ, I believe that it is possible that we can turn this culture around.

[1]The Baptist Faith and Message, adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, June 14, 2000. Article VI, "The Church."
[2]Ibid.
[3]Ibid.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Michael McConnell, "Taking Religious Freedom Seriously," in Terry Eastland Ed. *Religious Liberty in the Supreme Court* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center and Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's, 1995), 499.
[7]Ibid.

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES... continued from page 8

other Christian group in America. We were big and self-sufficient. We had the largest seminaries, the largest mission force, and the largest Christian publishing enterprise in the country. Our people were involved in Christian education from the cradle to the grave. They came out on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. There were more Baptists than people in the old South. Baptists were taught to tithe, and each church contributed a significant portion of its budget to advance the common mission and Christian education goals of the annual meetings of the association, state convention, and Southern Baptist Convention. In a sense, the Southern Baptist Convention only existed for the three days a year that the meeting took place. In the meantime, independent agencies with their own independent boards carried out their missions. Despite its bigness and success, what people called the Southern Baptist

See BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES on page 16

BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES... continued from page 15

Convention was actually a number of para-church ministries funded by a single missions convention in which only members of Baptist churches could participate. The churches did not even have delegates to the meeting. The churches sent the money freely and the messengers who attended the meeting decided what to do with the money.

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

During the "Golden Age" of the Baptist program between 1925 and 1975, Baptist identity gradually shifted away from the theological distinctives upon which the Baptists were founded and moved more toward the structures and methodologies that characterized organized Southern Baptist life. The Baptists began because of deep seated theological convictions about Scripture, the nature of the church, the ordinances of the church, and the role of the individual believer within the church. While they shared many convictions in common with the Reformation understanding of salvation, they were committed to establishing "believers' churches" composed only of people who had confessed Jesus Christ as savior after reaching the age of accountability and were baptized by immersion according to the New Testament pattern. As Baptist identity focused more on denominational affiliation and the Baptist program, the founding distinctives became less well known and of incidental importance to the average church member. It is not unusual to hear pastors of larger churches in suburban areas to say that their church members come from many different church backgrounds and do not know anything about Baptists. Without common theological and ecclesiological convictions, Baptist churches have no particular reason to restrict their missions and educational ventures to Baptist institutions.

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

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

One could almost get depressed if Jesus Christ were not head of the church. But he is. It is not too late for any church to introduce a strategy to cover all the bases for both youth and adults. Methodologies come and go, but the objectives that they were originally created to serve remain. Evangelism, discipleship, ministry, missions, worship, prayer, and fellowship were necessary ingredients of the church after the Day of Pentecost and they continue to be. Pastors cannot expect the hesitant attendee to commit to permanent relationship to a church when the pastor is not interested in relationship to other churches. Denominational leaders should not expect churches to be supportive of the cooperative work of a fellowship of churches if the denomination does not want to associate with other Baptist groups in the world. Why would Christ bless self-interest? Satan cannot touch the church, but Christ can. The first step toward reversing the postdenominational tendencies in the Southern Baptist Convention is to remember whose churches they are and how big the world is that he wants to reach.