

SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGY IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY



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Theological Drift—World War II–1979

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Gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Ain't gonna study war no more.

Gonna stick my sword in the golden sand
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Gonna stick my sword in the golden sand
Down by the riverside
Gonna study war no more.¹

Sweet sentiments—but when I stepped off the plane in 1990 in New Orleans, Louisiana, and was handed an invitation from Texas lawyer, Cactus Cagle, to a celebration of victory on Tuesday following the evening session of the Southern Baptist Convention, I was quite certain that the celebration was premature and that the event itself would cause the golden sand to yield its grip on swords, which would once again be wielded in denominational combat.

On the night appointed, exuberant conservatives descended on the famous French coffee shop, Café du Monde.² The aroma of café au lait and powdered sugar-covered beignets was discernible several hundred feet from the famous coffee house. That night as the convention parliamentarian led the rejoicing conservatives in singing “Victory in Jesus,” that coffee aroma was to conservatives the aroma of life unto life, but to scores of moderates who had tasted several years of defeat, it became the aroma of death unto

¹“Down by the Riverside,” traditional spiritual.

²Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 196–97. Judge Pressler describes vividly the events of the evening.

death. So monumental was the conflict manifesting itself that Cagle actually petitioned Café du Monde for permission to place a commemorative bronze plaque on the wall—a petition quietly denied. Somehow, the confrontation in the New Orleans French Quarter that night was characteristic of the previous eleven years of life in the Southern Baptist Convention and would chart the course for the next ten years. What lay behind this less than civil war in a convention that had been born out of currents leading to America's Civil War shortly after its birth?

Early American Baptists were even more agrarian than most of their neighbors in the New World. Commoners, “butchers, bakers and candlestick makers,” they by nature adapted marvelously to the spread of both civilization and the gospel to the frontier. In Texas, Baptist preachers carried along with their Bibles, swords of steel, Bowie knives, revolvers, and later repeating rifles. B.H. Carroll, the founder and first president of Southwestern Seminary, was a Texas Ranger who at fifty yards could shoot the ticks off his dog without scratching the dog. Southwestern's second president, Lee Rutland Scarborough, was a cowboy and a great personal evangelist. In 1904, two rival state paper editors, S.A. Hayden and J.B. Cranfill, staged a shoot-out in a railway car on the way to a convention. Zane Mason in *Frontiersmen of the Faith* chronicles a day in the life of Texas Baptist wilderness revivals:

That the frontier Baptists took Indian dangers as a matter of course, seems evident by an incident that took place at Weatherford, Parker County. A revival meeting was in progress at the Grind Stone Baptist Church, being held by Rev. Lee Newton. A party of fifteen mounted Indians passed in a few hundred yards of the place of worship, driving a number of horses. Some ten or more men gave chase, with at least eight men going on to the Indian camp, where “they captured four horses, two saddles, a few blankets, one hat, some quilts, etc.” The Indians fled and the men missed a fight, but felt lifted in spirit by the taking of spoils. This feeling of elation was added to the revival fires and great results were seen; namely, “Twenty-two joined by letter, five by experience and baptism, and a score or more gave unmistakable evidence of their determination to forsake the paths of sin and seek the Lord.”³

The first Baptist preacher in Texas, Joseph Bays, apparently arrived in the summer of 1820. Robert Baker describes him:

This tall, powerfully built man looked more like an Indian fighter than the first Baptist preacher of record in Texas. Born in North Carolina into a non-conformist English family, he had been

³Zane Allen Mason, *Frontiersmen of the Faith: A History of Baptist Pioneer Work in Texas 1865–1885* (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1970), 47–48.

taken as a boy to Kentucky where he was reared in the shadow of Daniel Boone. After the death of his father, his mother taught him to read and write using the Bible as a textbook. In later years, it was noted that he would quote long passages from the Scriptures rarely looking at his open Bible, having memorized the text as a lad. The religious character of his family may be glimpsed in the names given to his brothers. His biblical name (Joseph) was matched by those of his brothers, who were called John, Peter, Isaac, Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego.⁴

Two recent novels highlight this pioneer period. In the novella *A Strange Star*, B.H. Cormac is a character patterned after the life of B.H. Carroll and demonstrates vividly the life of Baptists on the frontier. The other novel, *Where the Ground Is Even: A Christmas in the Arizona High Country* by the same author, is a book that not only paints a picture of the push of the gospel to the West but also offers appropriate reading for lost men who wish for adventure but seldom look to Christ.⁵

There is much to criticize in observations characterized by rambunctious behavior, but within this limited picture is the portrait of a freedom-loving, independent, passionate people, who possessed for the most part a compelling, experiential faith given to vivid, emotional expressions. Revival fires swept across the American wilderness. Viewing their better educated, wealthier, and more sophisticated counterparts, who sometimes exhibited elitist airs, these Baptists often were suspicious of the possibly deleterious impact of formal study. Was it not enough to know how to read carefully the Scriptures?

As Bernard Weisberger put it in his critical but classic 1958 volume,

The marriage of human reason and divine guidance was something for the urban few. The country gentlemen of the old landholding upper classes remained Episcopalian, largely by habit. A few social leaders of the rising cities were willing to compromise on Unitarianism, yet even this was true only in Boston to any large extent. But a religion hugged close by patrician Boston was not an answer to the needs of the New England countryside. Lyman Beecher, when he was a Presbyterian minister in the “hub of the universe,” never missed a chance to point out that the Unitarians were aristocrats who ground the faces of the poor. He said that their control of Harvard was “silently putting sentinels in the churches, legislators in the hall and judges on the bench, and scattering everywhere physicians, lawyers and merchants.”

⁴Robert A. Baker, *The Blossoming Desert: A Concise History of Texas Baptists* (Waco, TX: Word, 1970), 14.

⁵Armour Patterson, *A Strange Star* (Fort Worth: Seminary Hill, 2008) and *Where the Ground Is Even: A Christmas in the Arizona High Country* (Collierville, TN: Innovo, 2009).

Hard-working farmers and self-taught small-town leaders were apt to share Beecher's resentment over the fact that in the contest for church members, "Unitarianism . . . had a better chance, on the score of *talents, learning, wealth* and popular favor," than the faithful.⁶

Or again,

For among the props on which revivalism rested, two were fundamental. One was the importance of emotion in religion. The other was the significance of the individual. It was his salvation that would always be the first and foremost goal.

In 1800 two of these props were being hewed out of native timber. A wild, free, singing flavor was introduced itself into religion on the frontier, flinging the gates of redemption brazenly and invitingly ajar. In the flickering light of Kentucky campfires, amid hallelujahs and handclaps, the Great Revival of 1800 was beginning to make a tradition.⁷

But there were other Baptists in the South who recognized the need for ministerial education and were convinced that this would not compromise the faith but rather accentuate and spread the faith. In the end, both groups were right. But the second group proposed that a seminary be established in Greenville, South Carolina. The seminary opened in the fall of 1859 with Professors James P. Boyce, John A. Broadus, Basil Manly, Jr., and William Williams instructing twenty-six students.⁸

However, trouble was never far away. The fifth professor was added in 1869. Crawford Howell Toy was named as professor of Old Testament. The Proverbs volume in *The International Critical Commentary* series was published in 1899 and reveals both the incalculable brilliance and the theological drift that characterized Toy. In his first semester at Southern Seminary, he revealed that he had embraced Darwinian thought as well as the Graf-Wellhausen theory on the composition of the Hexateuch.⁹ Typical of Toy's position is this observation about Old Testament books:

The name "Moses" stands for legislators of all periods; no psalm or other production ascribed by the tradition to David can be assigned him without examination of its contents; large parts of the books of Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah were certainly not written by the prophets whose names they

⁶Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact upon Religion in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 17.

⁷*Ibid.*, 19.

⁸Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People 1607-1972* (Nashville: Broadman, 1974), 201.

⁹*Ibid.*, 302.

bear, and Jonah and Daniel had nothing to do with the composition of the books called after them.¹⁰

By 1879, Toy had been dismissed by trustees, and his romance with the soon-to-be-famous missionary Lottie Moon had withered on the theological vine. Could Toy have misread Boyce and Broadus about the commitments of Southern Seminary? Were Boyce and others so enamored with the genius of Toy that they were careless in their interrogation? Neither seems likely. Whatever the case, the Toy incident presaged the future in Baptist life.

However, Baptists sequestered in the South remained virtually immune to the controversies that racked other denominations prior to World War II. Baptists in the old Confederate states may have suffered from a fortress complex; but if they did thus suffer, it only meant that their evangelistic, revivalistic, church-planting energies took a careful bead on everything inside the fort and proceeded with unparalleled success and growth. There was no paucity of controversy, but these conflicts were about what the Bible says, not about what the Bible is.

The world expanded rapidly with the fall of Germany and the surrender of Japan. Southern Baptists invaded the world with the gospel and were in turn infiltrated by the same world. This infiltration first became evident in changes in perspective within the colleges and universities operated by state Baptist conventions. Mercer University in Georgia, Stetson University in Florida, Wake Forest University in North Carolina, The University of Richmond in Virginia, Samford University in Alabama, and the big tuna, Baylor University in Texas—to name a few—began a steady drift to the left, often under the oversight of an orthodox president and board. In this departure from the faith of their founders, they followed the pattern already well established in America at Yale, Harvard, Brown, etc.

By comity agreement, Baptist colleges and universities were operated by state Baptist conventions, while the national body, the Southern Baptist Convention, was responsible for distinctively theological education through the work of six seminaries regionally located in Louisville, Kentucky; Fort Worth, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; Wake Forest, North Carolina; Kansas City, Missouri; and San Francisco, California. Professors in the seminaries began, after World War II, to travel abroad for study, and the seminaries began hiring teachers from beyond the usual fishing ponds, SBC churches.

The reasons for abandonment of the vision of the founding fathers in four of these seminaries is more complex than what I have stated here, but it was abandonment with the two exceptions of Southeastern and Midwestern, which from their inception were to the left of most of their Southern Baptist constituency. Moderates (a strange concoction of classical liberals, neo-orthodox, and self-styled denominational loyalists) sought the high ground in the media by calling the conservative renaissance in the Southern Baptist

¹⁰Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1977), xix.

Convention a “takeover” movement.¹¹ While this accusation is generally suspect, the moderates had a point in the latter two institutions, which today employ only those who are advocates of biblical inerrancy.

The inevitable followed. First Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia, the founding location of the Southern Baptist Convention, together with First Baptist Church of Charleston, South Carolina, perhaps the single most influential church in the developmental days of the Southern Baptist Convention, both shifted away from their conservative base. Meyers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, with its colorful and well known pastor, Carlyle Marney, joined with Texas churches, such as First Baptist Church and University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, in adopting postures similar to those visible in the United Methodist Church. The flagship churches of the denomination gradually became First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas; Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee; First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida; and others.

Evangelicals outside of Southern Baptist life were cognizant of the drift. They knew the drill—loose the denominational boat from the moorings of its founders, and, stripped of rudder and locomotion, the gradual journey of riding the contemporary currents would take the boat to a new home somewhere downstream. John R. Rice turned the torch of *The Sword of the Lord* on Southern Baptists. Sometimes he was not fair, but cleverly cobbled together with sermons on “soul-winning” and reports of revival, the reports of Southern Baptist apostasy had a general ring of truth. And while Southern Baptist leadership either excoriated their former associate or else desperately attempted to ignore this now Independent Baptist hornet, in the days of my youth I went into few offices of Southern Baptist pastors who did not have the latest issue of *The Sword*. Rice graduated to heaven never knowing, I suspect, the extent of his impact on the denomination he had left.

The Evangelical Theological Society was beginning to expand, but Southern Baptist participation was limited to ten or fewer. Hallway discussions of Covenant Theologians and Dispensationalists alike decried the apparently helpless condition of Southern Baptists, and no one seriously anticipated a day when these country cousins would crash the ETS party. Dallas Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary became increasingly the home of Southern Baptist students who held to *sola scriptura*.

As the “seamless robe” of Southern Baptist life began to exhibit signs of fraying of the fabric, reform efforts were launched. In the sixties, William “Bill” Powell with associates Gerald Primm, Calvin Capps, M.O. Owens, and Robert Tenery marshaled an effort to rectify the waning orthodoxy of the Southern Baptist Convention.¹² Some would adjudicate this venture a

¹¹See for example, Robison James and Gary Leazer, eds. *The Takeover in the Southern Baptist Convention: A Brief History* (Decatur, GA: Baptists Today, 1994).

¹²Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die*, 77–78. See also Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation:*

failure, but a more prudent conclusion would be that these were all tremors contributing to the seismological shift that would reshape the Southern Baptist Convention landscape beginning in 1979.

Other seismic rumbles included two major controversies regarding publications of the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay) of the SBC. Both, perhaps predictably, focused on the historicity of the early portions of the Genesis narrative. On January 10, 1962, K. Owen White, highly esteemed pastor of the First Baptist Church in Houston, published an article in the *Baptist Standard*, the state Baptist oracle for Texas, provocatively entitled "Death in the Pot."¹³ This essay, based on the incident from the life of Elisha (2 Kings 4:38–41), fingered a recent publication by a Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Old Testament professor, Ralph Elliott, entitled *The Message of Genesis*, which, White alleged, contained serious theological error. One observer put the matter as follows.

If White's immediate target was the work of Elliot [*sic*], his article was received enthusiastically by many Baptists in Waxahachie, Texas; Yazoo City, Mississippi; Soddy Daisy, Tennessee; Lizard Lick, North Carolina; and hundreds of other towns. Its ramifications extended to feature the entire superstructure of Southern Baptist Convention denominational institutions and agencies as a seething, noxious pot for which no healing pinch of flour from a prophet's hand had been forthcoming. This perception included two general features: a general distrust for the pot itself (the bureaucracy), and the suspicion that someone had visited Deutschland and returned with a "Tubingen gourd" and poisoned the life-giving gospel stew that the pot was supposed to be warming.¹⁴

The second major controversy involved the first volume of the *Broadman Bible Commentary*, edited by noted neo-orthodox scholar Clifton J. Allen and published by the denomination's publishing house. Other volumes of the commentary would also come under fire, such as Roy Honeycutt's work on Exodus. But G. Henton Davies' assessment of Genesis created a Vesuvian eruption on the floor of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting

The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 62–77.

¹³Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation*, 8. Less known but equally important is Sutton's dissertation at Southwestern entitled "A Comparison Between the Down Grade Controversy and Tensions over Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention," 1982. The dissertation, while perceptive, was almost denied because faculty and administration recognized that the comparison with the Down Grade Controversy would likely further undermine the "moderate" hegemony of Southwestern in the Southern Baptist Convention. They were correct.

¹⁴Paige Patterson, *Anatomy of a Reformation: The Southern Baptist Convention 1978–2004* (Fort Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004), 1.

in June of 1970 in Denver. The debate resulted in a decision by Broadman to reissue the volume on Genesis to be written by well-known scholar Clyde T. Francisco, perceived by many to be one of the more conservative professors at Southern Seminary and in the Southern Baptist Convention. However, most conservatives did not trust him and were not pacified. When Ralph Elliott published his memoirs in 1992, he was unable to conceal his antipathy for Francisco. He considered the latter to be nothing more than a shrewd politician, an accomplished practitioner of rhetorical “doublespeak.”

“Doublespeak” has become an insidious disease within Southern Baptist life. Through the years, the program at Southern Seminary has acquainted students with the best in current research in the given fields of study. Often, however, this was done with an eye and ear for the “gallery” and how much the “church trade” would bear. Professors and students learn to couch their beliefs in acceptable terminology and in holy jargon so that although thinking one thing, the speaker calculated so as to cause the hearer to affirm something else. When I taught at Southern Seminary years ago, we often said to one professor who was particularly gifted at this “doublespeak” game, that if the Southern Baptist Convention should split, he would be the first speaker at both new conventions. . . . It is my personal belief that this doublespeak across the years has contributed to a lack of nurture and growth and is a major factor in the present problems. The basic question is one of integrity rather than the gift of communication.¹⁵

These public controversies were blazing infernos stoked by a plethora of smaller but nonetheless convincing campfires in the Southern Baptist forest. To mention just one as an example, the faculty of Southern Seminary on August 26, 1976, approved a revealing master’s thesis by Noel Wesley Hollyfield Jr., entitled “A Sociological Analysis of the Degrees of ‘Christian Orthodoxy’ Among Selected Students in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.” Readers who approved this thesis were G. Willis Bennett, Henlee Barnett, and E. Glenn Hinson, the latter of whom became one of the major figures in the controversy. Bill Powell of the conservative *Southern Baptist Journal* discovered the thesis, appended an explanatory sheet to the front of the document, and distributed the treatise widely in the Southern Baptist Convention.

¹⁵Ralph H. Elliott, *The “Genesis Controversy” and Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992), 33–34. This memoir by the embattled professor was intended as a rebuke for conservative Southern Baptists, but the consequence of the volume was to confirm that the conservatives were in a target-rich environment when searching for liberalism in the SBC. As such, it remains one of the eight or ten most important assessments of the era.

While such statistical evaluations suffer from acknowledged limitation, there was more than sufficient grist for conservative mills in Hollyfield's work. In a word, not a few denominational fence-straddlers, with one foot firmly dangling on the "denominational loyalty" side of the fence and the other on the side of the integrity of Scripture, were zapped right off the fence and into the burgeoning conservative renaissance because of the distribution of this thesis. Among a host of other startling revelations, Hollyfield, who himself was no conservative, demonstrated that the longer a student remained at Southern Seminary, the less likely he was to embrace the position of Christian orthodoxy. Just as a sampling, asked if they believed that there is life beyond death, 89% of first-year students acquiesced; but, for those in their final year, only 42% could affirm this belief. Among first-year students, 87% had no doubts about the deity of Jesus, but only 63% of third-year students held this view.¹⁶ The deterioration of orthodoxy continued and escalated among doctoral students.

However much Southern Seminary professors of that era were isolated in their carrels on Lexington Road, could they have been blissfully unaware of these developments among the students? There is no evidence that Hollyfield's findings elicited any chagrin among the seminary's trustees, administration, or faculty. Had Powell not made the matter public, the thesis would doubtless have suffered the fate of most such Herculean efforts—months of diligence issuing in a product read by three academes and then confined to a crypt in a vertical cemetery to await a resurrection that would likely never come. As it developed, many a common laborer from Georgia to California read the only master's thesis he had ever seen. Smoke signals wafted from the Georgia mountains to alert members of the Baptist tribe all over America to the fact that whatever was rotten in Denmark was also failing the theological sniff test at Southern Seminary.

Among conservatives, one could hear hallway chatter like, "Southern Seminary is the mother of all harlots [spiritually and theologically speaking] in the earth, and Midwestern and Southeastern are her daughters, who have exceeded their mother in harlotry." The non-mention of New Orleans, Southwestern, and Golden Gate was no "get out of jail free" pass, but only a general acknowledgment of the relative seriousness of the problem.

About this time, Clayton Sullivan, then professor of philosophy at University of Southern Mississippi, delivered what he undoubtedly hoped would be a devastating kick to the conservative solar plexus. This monograph took the form of an autobiographical interpretation of his journey from Mississippi College to Southern Seminary to an abortive attempt to serve as a pastor bereft of the benefit of much more than a social gospel message denuded of any certainty about the voice of God in sacred literature. Conservatives

¹⁶William A. Powell, *Seminary Approved "Orthodoxy" Thesis*; pamphlet published by Southern Baptist Journal, n.p.

can perhaps be forgiven for believing that God had “confused the counsel of Ahithophel” (2 Sam 15:31).

This rollicking, sad, and gripping account of 1985 confirmed in a single life all that Hollyfield had alleged in his statistical study. In Sullivan, numbers became incarnate as the audience listened to the colorful philosopher.

As a seminarian I was fortunate because in the 1950s a remarkable cluster of teachers composed Southern Seminary’s faculty, persons of intelligence and ability. Duke McCall was the seminary’s president. T.C. Smith, Henry Turlington, and Heber Peacock were professors of New Testament. Estill (“Pistol Pete”) Jones taught Greek and T.D. Price and Hugh Wamble lectured in church history. Wayne Ward, Dale Moody, and Eric Rust were professors of theology. Henlee Barnette and Guy Ranson taught ethics. Bill Morton and Morris Ashcraft were in archaeology, while Clyde Francisco and J.J. Owens were professors of Old Testament. Wayne Oates excelled in psychology of religion. There were others.¹⁷

The results were as follows.

As a seminarian, still in my mid-twenties, I found myself baffled. I was more certain of what I *didn’t* believe, Southern Seminary had destroyed my biblical fundamentalism but it had not given me anything viable to take its place. That’s the weakness of historical-critical method: its power to destroy exceeds its power to construct. The historical-critical method can give you facts and hypotheses but it cannot give you a vision.¹⁸

And the finished product of the brewer’s art can now be stated.

This anticlericalism was due, in part, to my professors’ ignorance of what it means to be a preacher. Most professors under whom I studied at Southern had no prolonged experience in the pastorate. That was unfortunate because they had no appreciation of the role the church plays in the lives of common people. They had no real understanding of what ministers do in relating to folk in the crises of life when sickness, divorce, tragedy, and death come. Maybe if all my seminary teachers had each conducted a hundred funerals the administration-faculty conflict I am relating would never have taken place. But in any case, because of their anticlericalism and denominational hostility some members of

¹⁷Clayton Sullivan, *Called to Preach Condemned to Survive: The Education of Clayton Sullivan* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 72.

¹⁸Ibid., 79.

the faculty were not primarily interested in Southern Seminary as a service to the Southern Baptist Convention, as a preparatory school for working pastors. They wanted it to be a divinity school—the Harvard of the evangelical world, with a hyperintellectual approach to the Christian faith. They placed it in a world somehow “above” the Southern Baptist Convention and its fried-chicken-eating churches, a Laputa for Protestants alienated from their roots.¹⁹

And again.

I think I would have been a better preacher in Tylertown if I had been aware of Eastern faiths and of alternative religious experiences. Maybe I would not have gotten so upset over the “fallen sparrow” problem. For the Christian faith provides no rationale for the savage injustices we see around us and for the differences in talents, opportunities, and circumstances that exist among people. But if religions like Buddhism are right in contending we live not one life but many lives, experiencing human existence from different angles, then life’s injustices and vagaries might be endowed with meaning or purpose that otherwise is impossible.²⁰

Another volume that circulated influentially was *The Long Way Home*, John Jewell’s story of loss and recovery of faith.²¹ Though not set in a distinctively Southern Baptist setting, Jewell began his wilderness sojourn at William Jewell College, a Missouri Baptist school related to the Southern Baptist Convention. He continued at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School and ended his journey in personal and family disaster. This was just another chapter of a sad book Baptists kept reading.

Moderates attempted several parries, one of which was to feature themselves as supporters of the Cooperative Program of Southern Baptists while intimating that the conservatives lacked commitment. Although this was sometimes an accurate analysis, it rankled the conservative fur, and the backlash came in an infinite variety of forms. My wife found a wolf in sheep’s clothing figurine while shopping on the square in Santa Fe and bought it for me. To my shame I confess that I had a green Southern Seminary pin on it and preeminently exhibited it. With the dawning of the Mohler era at Southern and the better judgment of antiquity, I removed the Southern pin and keep it now as a cogent admonition to myself never to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing but to put first the flock of God to whom I owe so much.

¹⁹Ibid., 86.

²⁰Ibid., 180.

²¹John P. Jewell, *The Long Way Home* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

To summarize, the golden years of rapid Southern Baptist expansionism are chronicled well in a little known volume by Charles S. Kelley Jr., the current president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary—an account recording how the denomination of backwoods revivalists called Southern Baptists was catapulted into a position of increasing prominence in America. Isolationism gave way to mission efforts in all fifty states and Canada. Kelley notes in *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism*:

The genius of Southern Baptist evangelism is not in a particular methodology. It is in the development of an integrated process that finds unchurched people, exposes them to the gospel, bonds them with people in the church, and offers them a logical opportunity to commit their lives to Jesus Christ. Born in the rural South, Southern Baptists were able to glean from the farm a paradigm for evangelism. The paradigm was not the work of a taskforce and it has never been officially adopted and promoted as the way that Southern Baptists do evangelism. This is a paradigm for evangelism that gradually emerged as an expression of Southern Baptist life and theology. You will find it expressed, often unconsciously, in most Southern Baptist churches. The whole, not the individual parts, helped Southern Baptists become the largest Protestant denomination in America.²²

T.A. Patterson, my father, noted in 1971 prior to the outbreak of the 1979 revolution, the following:

America is still the stronghold of evangelical Christianity. The work of the Lord is being done by men and women with convictions and not by those who are blown about by every wind of doctrine. Those who compromise, tone down, or deny the fundamental truths of God's Word are in no position to help anybody. The Christians of the first century were victorious because they had convictions worth living for and worth dying for. The greatest contribution to world peace is being made by the messengers of the cross of Christ.

Lest the position of Baptists be misunderstood, this additional word is in order: Baptists have always recognized and fought for the right of others to be free in their worship of God. They are glad for anything that others may achieve in bringing glory to God's name. They will make common cause with all other groups on a moral issue so long as no compromise of their

²²Charles S. Kelley Jr., *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (Covington, LA: Insight, 1993), 117.

convictions is involved, but they will not turn away, if they know it, from teachings of the Holy Scriptures.²³

The sunny optimism reflected in the judgments of my kinsmen was beginning to erode. The slippage chronicled above, as well as the new prominence of Southern Baptists snatching them as it were from the relative safety of their southern briar patch, all contributed to both internal tensions and external exposures, which would lead to the confrontation of 1979. My denominationally loyal but theologically conservative and pacifistic father had observed the first indications of blackening Southern Baptist skies signaling the advent of the storm. Counseling his then young preacher son, he warned,

Son, like the mainline denominations, Southern Baptists are drifting from the vital faith of the New Testament. In your lifetime, you will face difficult days and excruciating choices. When that hour comes, you must find out where Jesus and the Bible stand, and it is there that you must rivet your feet—whatever the cost. But you must “keep your heart diligently,” because even if you stand where you should, if you do so in lovelessness and bitterness toward even your most implacable enemy, God will withhold His blessings from your life and ministry.

Though my father’s words were the prophetic and perceptive observations of a real man of God and a seasoned pastor and denominational statesman, I do not think that he envisioned the extent of the problem, the range and intensity of the battle, the agony of injury sustained on all sides, or the long-term implications of the outcome. Not until he was already in declining years and, in reality, on his final couch did he know the degree to which his own son would be involved in his prophecy. Thankfully, death shielded him from a merely earthly perspective of all that was to come.²⁴

²³Thomas Armour Patterson, *Dear Dr. Pat* (Dallas: Crescendo, 1971), 146.

²⁴My father did live long enough to enter the struggle as Sutton points out in his assessment of the 1970 Denver convention. Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation*, 14–15. His assessment of the Denver convention is attached as an appendix.

Appendix

T.A. Patterson, "Did SBC Over-React?" *Baptist Standard*, June 17, 1970.

In the recent meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention a great deal of time was given to the discussion of Volume I, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, published by the Sunday School Board. Criticism focused on the first part of the volume, a commentary on Genesis prepared by G. Hinton Davies, a British writer and teacher. The vote requesting recall and revision of the volume was 5,394 to 2,170—a decisive margin.

Did the convention over-react?

No doubt a small minority would answer affirmatively. Still others would regard the whole episode as "a tempest in a teapot." The opinion of the majority was indicated by the ballot.

The messengers with whom I talked did not believe they had over-reacted. Among the reasons they gave for their point of view were the following:

For several years, they said, efforts have been made by individuals and small groups within the convention to minimize, if not erase, the distinctive beliefs cherished by most Baptists. Statements appearing in books and assorted periodicals clearly were designed to erode the distinctive doctrines for which Baptists have stood.

Comments, particularly by a few professors, were further confirmation of a disturbing trend. The embattled messengers saw in all this a dangerous drift away from the Word of God. The real point at issue, in their minds, was the integrity of the Holy Scriptures. Feeling that parts of *The Broadman Commentary* were in conflict with the affirmation of Baptists on the inspiration of the Bible, they thought it time for the convention messengers to assert themselves in unmistakable terms.

The aroused messengers had also observed the high esteem in which many modern theologians have been held in some academic circles despite the fact that their one point of agreement is that the Bible is a human production filled with errors. Davies, the author of the commentary on Genesis, appeared to mirror this trend of thought.

The messengers, sated with this fare, saw a chance to express their feelings about theological liberalism.

Convinced that a major factor in the decline of other denominations has been the persistent gnawing away of confidence in biblical infallibility, the messengers did not feel that they should stand idly by while it happened to Baptists. The contrast in Baptist churches that have been characterized by a dynamic and effective ministry when they exalted the Scriptures as God's inerrant Word was far from lost on the observers.

Messengers were irked by those who insisted that the Davies' commentary reflected mature scholarship. By implication those who disagree are shallow, superficial exponents of the Scriptures.

To many, such an evaluation denotes intellectual arrogance and pride. This was even more objectionable in light of the fact that among those who protested the commentary were able, well-trained preachers and teachers.

The messengers knew they could speak for no one except themselves, but they wanted to say to their fellow Baptists and to the world, “This is where we stand.” *The Broadman Commentary* afforded the opportunity to express what had built up in their hearts over a period of years. Finally the silent majority became vocal. They believed their action was justified and that it was not overdone.

Noteworthy in the eye of the observer was the cosmopolitan nature of the no longer silent majority. When the standing vote was taken, evidence was unmistakable that the majority was constituted of a cross section of pastors, teachers, laymen, women—in short, those who make up the membership of the Baptist churches of many states.