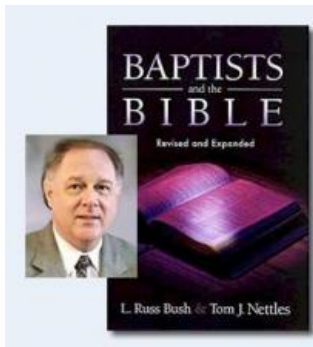


A Legacy of Conviction and Courage

Wednesday, January 23, 2008



The year was 1980 and the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention was in full force. Adrian Rogers, pastor of the Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis has been elected SBC President just the previous June — setting the stage for what became known as the Conservative Resurgence in the denomination.

The issue of biblical inerrancy was front and center. Harold Lindsell, former editor of *Christianity Today*, had diagnosed the crisis of biblical authority in his 1976 book, *The Battle for the Bible*. Lindsell had identified theological liberalism within the Southern Baptist Convention (and among others as well) and a great number of Southern Baptists were sufficiently concerned to sound the alarm and mount a movement to elect conservative leaders who would return the denomination and its institutions to an

affirmation of biblical inerrancy.

Conservatives had committed leadership in men such as Paige Patterson, then President of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas, and Judge Paul Pressler of Houston. The movement had a powerful theological voice in Paige Patterson, an organizational expert in Paul Pressler, a statesman preacher in Adrian Rogers, and a host of concerned pastors and laypersons. What is lacked was a corps of supportive seminary professors and a book that would set the record straight.

Both were badly needed. The argument against biblical inerrancy was dominant in the Southern Baptist establishment, and revisionist historians had pushed the idea that inerrancy was an essentially modern argument. This theory had been popularized in a book that was an assigned text in many seminary classrooms — *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*, by Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, published in 1979. Later, Russell Dilday, President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, would make virtually the same argument in his 1982 SBC doctrine study, *The Doctrine of Biblical Authority*.

Southern Baptists had lacked a book that would document the fact that biblical inerrancy was not a new idea at all, but the explicit affirmation of faithful Baptists throughout the Baptist experience. That book appeared in 1980 as *Baptists and the Bible* by L. Russ Bush and Tom L. Nettles — both young professors at Southwestern Seminary. Bush, a philosopher and apologist, and Nettles, a historian, documented their case and set the record straight. Their book was timely, urgent, controversial, and filled with ample documentation. It changed history — quite literally.

As Bush and Nettles argued:

This particular doctrine, the inspiration of Scripture, deserves special historical attention because of its inherent importance. Moreover, present-day Baptists have inherited the churches, associations, societies, agencies, and boards that were founded by men who held a particular, definitive view of history. Present-day Baptists, if only for the sake of tradition and historical identity, are under obligation to understand the view of Scripture that bolstered the founding of their vigorous and active institutional life. What did the Baptist forefathers mean by “the sole authority of Scripture?” Once that is determined, extreme caution should characterize any movement away from the position that has produced the basic and successful institutions of Baptist life.

Yet, Bush and Nettles offered far more than an argument from history, necessary as that argument is. They pointed to the biblical, theological, and epistemological foundations of biblical authority and biblical inerrancy.

While *Baptists and the Bible* set the historical record straight, the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention continued for well over a decade. The Conservative Resurgence in the SBC eventually led to a transformation of the denomination and its institutions. We can now see that *Baptists and the Bible* was a critical part of the movement that led to that transformation.

Bush and Nettles were courageous and deeply committed. They set themselves against a bad argument that was nonetheless ensconced within the academy as conventional wisdom. They brought controversy upon themselves and risked their academic careers. Neither could imagine back then where their careers might end. Both risked a premature end to promising ministries of scholarship and teaching.

But *Baptists and the Bible* was not the end. Nettles now serves as Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and is widely known through his writings and teaching. He continues the work of historical research and writing that was demonstrated in *Baptists and the Bible*. Russ Bush went on to serve as Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Later, he would serve as Academic Vice President and as Director of the seminary's Center for Faith and Culture.

Bush went to Southeastern Seminary when that school was in the early stages of a complete institutional transition. The Conservative Resurgence had reached Southeastern. Russ Bush served with distinction and courage. He continued his teaching and research and served with honor under three Southeastern presidents, Lewis Drummond, Paige Patterson, and Danny Akin.

Two years ago, Russ Bush was diagnosed with a life-threatening cancer. He fought bravely and provided for all a demonstration of how a Christian should face both disease and death. His faith in his Lord Jesus Christ was evident, even as his humility never faltered. He kept a brave face and refused to resign himself to a disease. He showed up at denominational meetings where healthy persons complained about boredom. He never complained.

He was seldom seen without his constant companion, Cynthia — his wife of almost 40 years. He was also seldom seen without a smile, as Cynthia cheered him and squeezed his arm.

Defining himself as a Baptist theologian, Bush had argued for a recovery 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 by Grace through Faith, the permanence of salvation, and the historicity and factual inerrancy of Holy Scripture. We baptize by immersion to symbolize the literal death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. We share the Lord's Supper in order to remind ourselves of His flesh and blood offered as a sacrifice for our sin; and we do all of this by Faith as we await His soon return. Who are the Baptists? They are God's faithful band of saints who seek above all to present Christ to the world.

Russ Bush finished his race on January 22, 2008. His death leaves Southern Baptists without his keen mind and his singular influence. He died as he lived — as a faithful disciple, minister, and apologist of the Christian Gospel.

In 2006, President Danny Akin announced the establishment of the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture. Russ Bush retired from his administrative responsibilities and assumed responsibility for the center. He kept reading, teaching, and writing.



Just a few months before his death, he published an essay on the challenge of New Age beliefs. “Things simply are not what or how they used to be,” he explained. “World population is exploding. Technology is changing our lives before our very eyes. In a fifteen-year time span the Internet literally changed the way we do business, entertainment, shopping, and socializing. What will be next? Even youth (under twenty) hardly recognize the world in which we live today compared to the world in which they lived as a child.”

His confidence? “In Christ all the wisdom of God dwells bodily. In Him alone we find the way, the truth, and the life.”

We will all miss Russ Bush, but his legacy continues in those he taught and in all those he influenced through his life and writings, including *Baptists and the Bible*. That legacy demands our attention — and summons equal conviction and courage.

Southeastern Seminary posted the following information:

Tuesday evening, January 22, 2008, Dr. L. Russ Bush, SEBTS' Academic Vice President and Dean of the Faculty Emeritus, went home to be with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dr. Bush was loved by us all at SEBTS, and by many others. God used him in a mighty way during his years of service to the Kingdom. We will be forever indebted to him. Please keep his wife and children in your prayers.

We rejoice that now he sees his Savior face to face, and we cherish the time that we had to serve along side of him.

Memorial Service: Sunday, January 27, 2008, at 3pm

Location: Binkley Chapel on the campus of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Gifts: In lieu of flowers, the family has requested that donations be made in memory of L. Russ Bush to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary for the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture.

Please mail any gifts to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Attn: Financial Development, PO Box 1889, Wake Forest, NC 27588-1889.

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