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The Southern Baptist Reformation—A First-Hand Account

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Was it worth it? That is one of the crucial questions addressed by Paige Patterson in his essay, *Anatomy of a Reformation: The Southern Baptist Convention 1978-2004*. Published in booklet form, Patterson’s analysis offers an invaluable insider’s perspective on the Southern Baptist controversy and its meaning. Patterson, now president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, was one of the key architects of the plan to change the direction of the Convention. Born to Southern Baptist aristocracy, Patterson was the son of T. A. Patterson, a prominent Texas pastor who later became executive secretary of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Surrounded from boyhood by Baptist preachers, theologians, and denominational leaders, Patterson quickly gained both an intuitive and an educated understanding of Baptist identity.

Later, Patterson was to attend New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, from which he received a doctorate in theology. After serving as a pastor in Arkansas, he was elected president of the Criswell Institute for Biblical Studies, later the Criswell College. That college, closely identified with its namesake, Dr. W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, provided Patterson with a national platform and unquestioned Baptist credentials. Both of these would prove crucial in the ensuing conflict.

In *Anatomy of a Reformation*, Patterson tells the story from the vantage point of his own involvement. He dates his understanding of a need for denominational reformation to when he was a “nineteen-year-old Bible major at a state-operated Baptist university in West Texas.”

An early signal of coming controversy was issued by Houston pastor K. Owen White, who as president-elect of the Southern Baptist Convention directed his attention at a recent book written by a professor at one of the Southern Baptist Convention’s six seminaries. Ralph Elliott, a professor of Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, had written *The Message of Genesis*, a book that had been published by the denomination’s official press. As Patterson explains, the book “had employed historical-critical assumptions, conclusions, and methodologies, which led the professor to question the historicity of some of the narrative portions of Genesis.”

As an observant college student, Patterson was surprised that his Baptist religion professors supported Elliott and dismissed White’s concerns. Patterson summarizes the faculty response: “First, educated and intelligent people virtually all had arrived at similar conclusions with Elliott. Second, in any event, if there were minor shifts away from orthodoxy, ‘the Convention’ (which in actuality was ‘the bureaucracy’) would make the necessary corrections. Third, having accepted the first two premises, the average Southern Baptist should trust the system, remain silent and give his tithe—a hefty portion of

which would be passed along through the Cooperative Program lifeline to continue funding the bureaucracy.”

To know Paige Patterson is to know that there is no way he could remain silent in the face of heterodoxy. Indeed, when Houston attorney Paul Pressler visited the campus of New Orleans Seminary in order to meet conservative students who could be supported through a new scholarship funded by Houston business leaders, he was directed to Paige Patterson. Their meeting would change history.

Pressler, whose organizational understanding and legal expertise led him to see a mechanism for recovering the denomination, and Patterson met for conversation at the Café du Monde in New Orleans and discussed their mutual hope for denominational reformation.

Patterson recalls, “As the evening wore on, several convictions that were repeatedly confirmed across the years began to take shape. First, a large number of Southern Baptists were skeptical about many of the leaders in the denomination. Second, Baptist ecclesiastical polity made possible a popular movement to correct errant trajectories. Third, many such efforts had been attempted but had uniformly failed because they were launched either by little-known leaders or else by isolated individuals who knew little of the value of organization or political process. As such, they were novices playing in a league with experienced professionals whose political prowess and, when necessary, determined ruthlessness rendered the efforts of rookies useless. Fourth, the Convention constituency was comprised of at least four groups, which eventually began to be designated as: ‘movement’ conservatives, ‘intuitive’ conservatives, denominationalists, and liberals.”

Patterson suggests that the liberal group consisted mostly of “neo-orthodox professors and leaders who had imbibed deeply at the wells of historical-critical scholarship.” This was certainly true in the beginning stages of the controversy. Nevertheless, by the time the controversy gained full steam, a significant group of seminary professors had moved far to the left of neo-orthodoxy.

The number of “movement” conservatives was relatively small, Patterson conceded. The vast majority of Southern Baptists fell into his designation as “intuitive” conservatives. These Southern Baptists were driven by a basic confidence in the Bible as the word of God and the Gospel as the only means of salvation. Furthermore, their basic theological and moral instincts were deeply conservative. As Patterson describes these conservatives, they were “sweet believers who embraced the best about everything.” They believed that every word of the Bible is true, that all the miracles happened, that abortion is murder, and that Jesus is the only way of salvation—and they were a hard group to convince that the denomination was in deep trouble. After all, Southern Baptists were understood to be conservative Christians who would be deeply resistant to encroaching theological liberalism. They were soon to learn otherwise.

In tracing the history, Patterson takes his readers back to the fall of 1978, when a group of determined pastors and laymen met at a hotel near the Atlanta airport in order to launch “the controversy.” Pressler and Patterson understood that electing the president of the Southern Baptist Convention was the key to redirecting the entirety of the denomination. Through his appointive powers, the president eventually influences who will be elected as trustees of the various denominational agencies and seminaries. Driven by a sense of doctrinal urgency, the Atlanta group determined to elect Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, as president of the Convention.

As Patterson remembers, he was doubtful the plan would work. In contrast, Judge Pressler exuded confidence that Baptists would recognize the problem and respond with a determination to return the Convention to its conservative roots. Patterson had observed Baptist controversies for most of his life, and he had seen the Convention’s bureaucracy triumph again and again. Nevertheless, Pressler and Patterson, along with a corps of determined pastors and laypersons, were determined to put their reputations and careers on the line to attempt the reformation.

“In the final analysis, we did not attempt a reformation movement because we thought it would succeed but because we sincerely believed that we were right about the inerrancy of the Bible and because we did not want to tell our children and grandchildren that we had no courage to stand for our convictions,” Patterson recalls. “Above all, the conviction that the continued drift of the Southern Baptist Convention could spell eternal doom for hundreds of thousands of people was the principle compelling motivation.”

The hard lessons of experience had taught Pressler and Patterson that symbolic actions would not be sufficient. The Convention had adopted resolutions opposed to theological liberalism in years past, but these had been largely deflected

by the denominational machinery.

Why did the plan work? Patterson acknowledges the ultimate explanation is “the intervention of God.” Nevertheless, certain factors were clearly at work. In the first place, Southern Baptist polity allowed the grassroots of the denomination to have its say through the participation of “messengers” who would attend the Southern Baptist Convention and make their will known. As Patterson explains, “The genius of the system is in leaving elected messengers in ultimate control, while extending to the elected president considerable influence, if he makes his appointments carefully. Since even two-term trustees on the various boards serve no more than ten years, the election of presidents committed to a renewal agenda each year for ten years, in theory, should redirect the entire system.”

In the end, that is exactly what happened. The election of Adrian Rogers in 1979 was followed by an unbroken succession of other conservative presidents. Each appointed conservatives, who in turn appointed other conservatives, who nominated the trustees, who elected the agency heads and institutional presidents.

Patterson also acknowledges the effort of leading preachers in defining and supporting the controversy. He cites sociologist Nancy Ammerman, who observed that the public leaders of the conservative resurgence “were preachers of remarkable ability, able to stir crowds with their words, able to evoke response in their hearers.”

Last, Patterson also points to the conservatives’ decision to focus primarily upon the reliability and inerrancy of the Bible. “There were a host of other concerns,” Patterson acknowledges, “but the issue of the nature of Scripture was chosen for two essential reasons. First, if the epistemological issue were resolved, then the basis for resolving all other issues was in place. Second, most Baptists believe the Bible was every whit true.”

All this came together in a powerful movement to hold the denomination and its institutions accountable. “Believing that heaven and hell are the only destinies and that everyone alive will spend eternity in one or the other, and further that Jesus and His atoning death provides the only way to avoid hell and inherit heaven, conservatives were determined to prevent the slide of Baptists into the labyrinth of formerly-effective denominations whose evangelistic zeal and missionary fervor had been stripped by rising doubts about the veracity of Scripture. The goal, then, was to keep the denomination close to a reliable Bible for the sake of evangelistic and missionary outreach.”

In the remainder of this work, Patterson takes his reader through many of the twists and turns of the controversy, revisiting such seminal moments as the adoption of the final report issued by the “Peace Committee” in 1987. Looking back almost twenty years later, he now acknowledges the strategic role of that report in defining the doctrinal differences that separated Southern Baptists on opposing sides of the controversy.

Anatomy of a Reformation is an important resource for understanding the Southern Baptist controversy and the future of the Southern Baptist Convention. After his years as president of the Criswell College, Patterson would become president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, where he would build a powerful institution and influence a generation of future Southern Baptist pastors and missionaries. The respect in which he is held by this generation of Southern Baptists was reflected in the fact that he was twice elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Now, he presides over one of the largest theological seminaries in the world and has become the dominant Baptist figure in his native state. Now among the heavenly assembly, T. A. Patterson is smiling.

“There are regrets,” Patterson reflects. He points to vocational disruption, hurt, sorrow, and disrupted friendships as evidence of the price controversy inevitably exacts. “No one seriously confessing the name of Jesus can rejoice in these sorrows,” Patterson acknowledges. “I confess that I often second guess my own actions and agonize over those who have suffered on both sides, including my own family.”

In the end, it was Paige Patterson’s willingness to put his own future at stake, and his own reputation on the line, that explains how the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention succeeded. More than any other individual, Paige Patterson was the man who put all at risk for the sake of what he so profoundly believed. Confronted by a looming denominational disaster, and aware of what this would mean to the cause of the Gospel, Paige Patterson threw himself into the controversy, defined the issues, mobilized an army, educated a denomination, and paved the way for a new generation to continue the work he so boldly began.

Those of us who now hold positions of leadership and influence in this denomination owe this opportunity to Paige

Patterson and those who with him stepped out in faith for the cause of truth. Now, Paige Patterson can look across a denomination and see a generation of young pastors, missionaries, and leaders who are mobilized for the cause of the Gospel and who are driven by the very convictions Patterson sought to defend. Not a bad legacy for a man who didn't think the plan would work.

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