

AlbertMohler.com

Confessionalism: The Past Meets the Future in Georgia

Wednesday, November 17, 2010

Well, it looks like Georgia Baptists had a debate worth having. Associated Baptist Press reports that the Georgia Baptist Convention voted to separate itself from a church that has called a woman to serve as co-pastor. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the recommendation that the convention oust the church, but the debate must have been interesting.

Meeting November 15-16 at Albany's Sherwood Baptist Church, the GBC took the action in keeping with its adoption of the *Baptist Faith & Message* as its confessional basis. That confession of faith, adopted as revised by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000, states: "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

The church, Druid Hills Baptist Church in Atlanta, is one of the most venerable congregations in the state convention. For decades, it was the very epitome of the GBC establishment. Louis Newton (1892-1986), who served as president of both the GBC and the SBC, served for decades as the congregation's pastor, beginning in 1929. Now, the church is considered no longer in fellowship with the GBC on the basis of its violation of the confession of faith. The recommendation to remove the church came from the GBC Executive Committee.

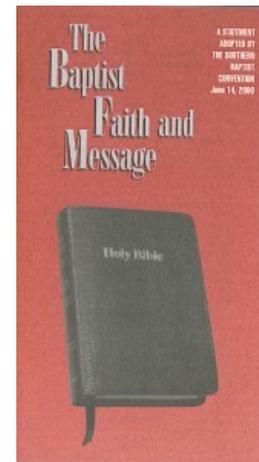
The debate, as reported in the press, got to the most basic and urgent issues. Michael Ruffin, pastor of First Baptist Church in Fitzgerald, argued that the GBC was practicing "selective creedal application" of the *Baptist Faith & Message*. In his words:

There are many, many, many more provisions in the Baptist Faith and Message . . . I don't want the GBC to become even more creedal in its application of the Baptist Faith and Message than it has on this one score. We really should consider the arbitrariness of such an application. I think we also ought to consider the possibility that if we get serious about holding every Georgia Baptist Convention church accountable to every line in the Baptist Faith and Message as we are this one, we'll soon have no churches left.

It appears that Michael Ruffin is right. This is an example of selective creedal application. The GBC removed another church, First Baptist Church of Decatur, for the very same reason just last year. The issue of a woman serving as pastor has been the only issue on which the GBC has taken such an action in recent years.

But, is selective creedal application wrong? The answer to that has to be both yes and no. No denominational body is equipped to deal with every issue in every meeting. The issue of a woman serving as pastor is a public statement that presented the GBC with an unavoidable decision. It would either stand by its own confession of faith, or it would, in effect, decide to abandon its own confessional identity.

Dr. Ruffin was honest in arguing that even as the GBC was undertaking a "selective creedal application" of the *Baptist Faith & Message*, he did not want the convention "to become even more creedal in its application of the *Baptist Faith & Message* than it has on this one score." His argument is well recognized as stating the case against any regulative application of the confession of faith. His argument did not carry the day, nor should it have, but he presented his



argument with consistency and honesty.

The truth is that denominational bodies *will* have to be more expansive in applying their own confessions of faith, or they will inevitably find themselves to have become an amalgamation of churches that are no longer standing together in common beliefs and doctrines. That would be a tragic abdication of responsibility.

The reality is that even greater challenges are certain to come. Doctrinal deviation is a real and present danger, as Southern Baptists have learned over the past half century and more. The future will require all Christians, Baptists included, to be more clear about our beliefs and common confession, or we will lose our theological integrity and Gospel faithfulness.

The application of confessional accountability undertaken by the Georgia Baptist Convention this week is a reminder of how Baptists hammered out their understanding of confessionalism in times past — and a sign of things even more difficult sure to come.

Bob Allen, "[Georgia Baptists Oust Second Church with Woman Pastor](#)," Associated Baptist Press, Tuesday, November 16, 2010.

[The Baptist Faith & Message](#), Adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, June 14, 2000.
<http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

