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When We Talk About Heresy . . . Let's Be Honest

Thursday, July 16, 2009

A Response to *When We Talk About God . . . Let's Be Honest*
by R. Kirby Godsey

“Plain talk about our faith is hard to come by.” With those words Mercer University President R. Kirby Godsey launches his own theological investigation of the Christian faith—and his talk is indeed plain. The critical issue is what his plain talk represents. Is it a restatement of the Christian faith for a new generation? Or, is *When We Talk About God . . . Let's Be Honest* a refutation of historic orthodox Christianity?

The publication of this book represents a clear challenge to Southern Baptists and to all who hold to the great truths of the Christian faith. Dr. Godsey calls for honesty as he reflects upon the Christian faith and his own spiritual quest. I believe he has indeed written an honest book—and we should honor his candor and honesty.

Nevertheless, the book represents the repudiation of Christianity's most central doctrines and truth claims. Dr. Godsey does not merely restate historic doctrine in modern language and conceptuality. Indeed, he is aware that he is rejecting the theological content of these orthodox doctrines.

Scripture and Authority

A primary issue in any theological system is the locus of authority. For evangelical Christianity, authority has been recognized to be centered in the written revelation of the self-revealing God. Thus, all theological propositions are ultimately to be submitted to the test of Scripture, and Scripture alone. This is the great Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*. Clearly, *Sola Scriptura* is established upon an understanding of the Bible as the inspired, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative Word of God.

Yet, Dr. Godsey rejects the infallibility of the Bible. Indeed, he argues that “the authority for our faith should not rest on the Bible alone, or even primarily.” [50] The Reformation focus on Scripture, he explains, is “extraordinary.” [49] The Bible, he argues, is not itself the Word of God. In his words: “The simple identification of the Word of God with the Bible is a grave mistake. Far from being the principal focus of our faith, the Bible is the record of God's revelation and how people responded and interacted with God's presence in their history.” [50] The Bible is not to be seen as “a boundary of belief.” [50] More pointedly, “Believing the Bible is not the goal of faith, and it certainly should not be made a test of faith.” [50]

Further, “To ascribe infallibility to the written words of the Bible is wrong. God's light has not gone out. God is alive and speaking, and God's word is not captive to history. To treat the Bible as infallible limits God's revelation to the past.” [51] Inerrancy, like infallibility, is discarded as not only an erroneous doctrine, but as evidence of “the human sin of trying to possess God.” [52]

Clearly, Dr. Godsey does not merely reject the inerrancy and infallibility of Holy Scripture; he rejects the authority of Scripture as well. In his words, the Bible is not even to be understood as the primary authority for our faith. In this, Dr. Godsey goes well beyond most who identify themselves as “moderates” in the Southern Baptist Convention. Most “moderates” claim to acknowledge the central authority of Scripture, even when they reject infallibility and inerrancy. Dr. Godsey here sides with the perspective of historic Protestant liberalism, which sought to establish a breach between the

revelation of God in the Bible and the incarnational revelation of Jesus Christ.

Scriptural vs. Incarnational Revelation

“Jesus Christ, not the Bible, lies at the heart of the Christian revelation,” asserts Dr. Godsey. This is at least partially true. The incarnation of the Son of God is indeed the ultimate and supreme revelation of God. The writer of Hebrews affirmed this truth in these words: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoke to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.” [Hebrews 1:1-2, NASB] Nevertheless, Dr. Godsey’s statement is far more than an assertion of the centrality of the incarnation. His statement insinuates a divide between the biblical and incarnational revelation. But Christian orthodoxy has always rejected such a breach. The biblical and incarnational revelation cannot be severed. After all, how do we know of the incarnation of the Son of God, except by the revelation of God in Holy Scripture? Our Lord Himself said of the Scriptures, “it is these that bear witness of Me.” [John 5:39b, NASB]

An attempt to create a divide between the biblical and incarnational revelation is doomed to failure, for we have no independent knowledge of the facts concerning Jesus Christ, His words, His deeds, or His gospel. Our knowledge of these essential truths concerning Jesus Christ is entirely dependent upon Scripture.

The Bible reveals to us the prophetic expectation, pre-existence, virgin birth, words, works, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and promised return of Jesus Christ. If the Bible is not our primary authority for life and faith, how are we to know of the teachings of Christ, of the truth of the gospel, or, for that matter, of the identity of Jesus Christ?

This attempted separation of biblical and incarnational revelation can only be traced to an effort to strip Jesus Christ of any or all of what Scripture attributes to Him. This is precisely the agenda, as is made clear in Dr. Godsey’s treatment of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ—Should the Word be Worshipped?

Convinced that “the message of the Christian faith is not to worship Jesus,”[ix] Dr. Godsey presents a vision of Jesus Christ which avoids seeing him as a “larger-than-life religious figure.”[117] Indeed, Dr. Godsey rejects the clear biblical testimony concerning Jesus as well as nearly two thousand years of Christian orthodoxy. The Jesus he presents is clearly human, and serves as “God’s word” to us, but should not be viewed as “a half-god disguised behind a mask of humanity.”[119] What is one to make of Dr. Godsey’s statement that we should not make the mistake of seeing Jesus as a “larger-than-life religious figure?” Are we thus to cut Him down to human scale?

The biblical understanding of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully man is, according to Dr. Godsey, a tragic misunderstanding. As he states, “The historical person to be followed was soon changed by his followers into a divine figure to be worshipped. This transformation is largely a mistake. The focus of the Christian faith should not be reconstructed into the worship of Jesus.”[120] This is, of course, a direct and undiluted rejection of Christ’s own claims and the teaching of the New Testament. As the Apostle Paul described Jesus Christ to Timothy, He is “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.”[I Timothy 6:15-16, NASB]

The New Testament is replete with references to the worship of Christ, and these references include significant passages in the gospels as well as the epistles, Acts, and Revelation. The gospels of Matthew and Luke both end with the disciples worshipping Christ. As Matthew records: “And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshipped Him.” [Matthew 28:9, NASB]

The Bible reveals Jesus to be the Word of God incarnate in human form. He was indeed not hiding behind a mask of humanity, but in the incarnation his full deity was as real as his humanity. This is the testimony of Scripture, that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This is also the testimony of the early church, which came to acknowledge and confess Jesus Christ as very God and very man, of one substance with the Father. This is at odds with Dr. Godsey’s presentation of Jesus Christ. Dr. Godsey argues that, for the Christian, “Jesus is neither a prophet or a god. Jesus is the center of our revelation.”[119-120] Put bluntly, the New Testament claims far more, and those claims must be either accepted or rejected.

Central to these claims is the claim to deity. Jesus Christ both claimed to be God and accepted worship as God. Accepting the liberals' distinction between the "Christ of Faith" and the "Jesus of History," Dr. Godsey warns that we should not make Jesus into a "divine" person.[119] In his words, "What we find in history is not the Christ of faith but a person who has all the marks of the human condition." [119] Accepting the distinction between the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History is tantamount to denying the claims Jesus Christ made of Himself, and denying that the Christological confessions of the Church—from the first century until now—have any basis in historical fact.

Is Jesus God's Only Word?

Furthermore, according to Dr. Godsey, "To say that Jesus is God's word is not to say that Jesus is God's only word." [119] Lest we miss his point, Dr. Godsey asks and answers the critical question himself: "Is Jesus God's only word? The simple answer is 'Of course not'." [133] But the Bible answers the question quite differently. Jesus himself claimed to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and asserted that no one could come to the Father, but by him. The apostles proclaimed that there is "only one name under and heaven and earth" in whom salvation is found, and that is Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John states further that the pre-existent Word who assumed human flesh and dwelled among us, is the "only begotten" of the Father.

Dr. Godsey presses his point in unambiguous statements. "The arrogant assertion that all other religious affirmations are pagan confuses our viewpoint with God's. We have no basis for such absolute judgment, and our judgments are unseemly." [136] But we do have a basis for such absolutes, and that basis is Scripture itself. Dr. Godsey wants to avoid what may now be termed "the scandal of particularity," but that scandal can only be removed by forfeiting the New Testament witness to Christ. Elsewhere, Dr. Godsey confuses etiquette and theology. He states: "The fact that Jesus is not central in other world religions does not mean that we cannot affirm the worth of those persons who confess other faiths." [137] He is correct that their worth is not at issue here. Nevertheless, they are, in biblical terms, lost without the knowledge of the one true God and the Son whom He has sent. The issue is not their worth, but their status vis-à-vis the Gospel.

The issue of universalism is raised again and again in Dr. Godsey's statements. Nevertheless, his statements are not sufficiently clear to make certain whether his position is inclusivism or universalism. That is, does he believe that persons will be saved through the work of Jesus Christ, even though they are adherents of another faith [or no faith] and do not know Him? Or, does he believe that all will ultimately be saved, with or without reference to the work of Christ at all? Both of these positions are clearly outside Christian orthodoxy, and both diminish the objective and solitary work of Christ as our Redeemer.

Refrains of inclusivism are found in statements such as this: "The light of God that has been revealed in Jesus is sufficient to enlighten the darkness of every world religion and to illuminate the shadows that linger within our own religious understanding." [137] Are the adherents of these other religions thus redeemed through this enlightenment?

Evidence of classical universalism is also found. In his discussion of heaven and hell Dr. Godsey discusses three alternative positions; dual destiny, conditional immortality, and universal redemption. Clearly, he rejects dual destiny and the notion of an eternal hell. As he states: "I believe the biblical view, including the view of God captured in images in the book of the Revelation, is that evil is subordinate ultimately to God's good presence. Though evil is real and threatens us profoundly, evil is not an ultimate challenge to God's grace." [201]

Conditional immortality—a view gaining ground in the contemporary debate—is better received by Dr. Godsey, but still not accepted. As he evaluates: "If all creation is good because it comes from God, the ultimate destruction of God's good creation leaves evil victorious over the goodness of God. Evil destroys the creation of God." [202]

What about universal redemption? "Universalism has a very high view of God. God's grace and God's love are the ultimate realities revealed in Jesus. . . . Universalism contends that God never gives up in creation. God's creativity remains a force throughout eternity." [202] According to Dr. Godsey, universal redemption solves the problems left by dual destiny and conditional immortality: "Universalism holds together the paradox of the severity and reality of judgment alongside the power and ultimacy of God's forgiveness." [203] He clearly presents universal redemption as superior to the other alternatives.

No Treacherous Theories of Atonement

The strongest argument for the presence of universalism in Dr. Godsey's system is found in his doctrine of atonement and his understanding of salvation. In a straightforward rejection of the Christian tradition, Dr. Godsey holds that salvation is not about Christ's work on our behalf, but our recognition that God loves us—and never held our sin against us. He rejects the historical theories of the atonement as “treacherous.”[140] We should note that Dr. Godsey does not reject one or more of the historic views in favor of another, but all of these views together. Most significantly, Dr. Godsey rejects the understanding of Christ's work as substitutionary.

“This notion of substitutionary atonement leaves us with the irony that God's chief concern seems to be to keep the books balanced. . . . This theory, again, gives us a picture of God that looks more like a judgmental tyrant. It winds up making God responsible for Jesus' death. God is a God who must get even. Sounds a lot like the way we do business. It has the idea of reconciliation working the wrong direction.”[141] This is the absolute and unconditional rejection of the New Testament teaching concerning the atonement. Dr. Godsey believes that reconciliation means that we discover that God holds nothing against us—not that God forgives us for our sin. Jesus Christ is merely the one who shows us God's “unfettered” love. As Dr. Godsey states, “Jesus does not come to pay off the heavy penalties for our sin.”[142]

If the Bible is clear about anything, it is perfectly clear about our sin and its result. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”[Romans 6:23, NASB] Furthermore, Scripture presents Jesus Christ as our Substitute, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”[John 1:29, NASB] Salvation comes when sinners are “justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in the blood through faith.”[Romans 3:24-25a, NASB] Virtually the entire New Testament stands as a refutation of Dr. Godsey's position.

What, then, is the Gospel? Dr. Godsey states that “We are tempted to conceive of Jesus as a formal act of God, calculated to save people from their sin.” This is a “temptation?” It is indeed the heart of the Gospel, as Jesus revealed to Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world, that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life” [John 3:16 NIV]. To deny Jesus as the Savior, the Redeemer, through whose shed blood we have been redeemed, is to deny the Gospel itself. But Dr. Godsey states that “Atonement is not something God has done for us in the sense that God has made Jesus take our place so that the books would be balanced.”[142]

The death of Christ is not of critical importance to our salvation, according to Dr. Godsey. The cross, as described by Paul is “the power of God.”[I Corinthians 1:18b] As Paul argues, “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”[I Corinthians 1:23-25, NASB]

But to Dr. Godsey, “The cross is not the central or final revelation of God.”[144] Further, “I believe that we can understand the cross only if we are willing to see that Jesus did not die to appease an angry God. Jesus did not die to satisfy some abstract penalty for sin.”[143] Beyond this, the death of Jesus was not the gracious act of a sovereign Lord, the Good Shepherd who gave His life willingly for His sheep.[John 10:11] Nor is the cross the focus of God's redemptive plan. As Dr. Godsey argues, “Jesus died because people chose to kill him.”[143]

Furthermore, “The gospel is that our sins do not make us unacceptable to God.”[114] Where is the biblical warrant for such a conclusion? This is directly contrary to the gospel as presented in the New Testament. The biblical teaching is that Jesus bore our sins on the cross, and thus paid the penalty for our sin. But this is precisely what Dr. Godsey rejects, for: “The crucifixion is not the saving act of God.”[124]

How is this rejection of Christian truth possible? Given that he rejects the Bible as the primary authority for our faith, he is freed to reject what he does not like and to accept what is pleasing to him. Liberated from submission to Holy Scripture, virtually any theological position is as good as any other. We can all create and construct whatever theory of the atonement we would like—and left to ourselves, we are unlikely to start with the fact that we are sinners under the curse of sin and without hope apart from the work of Christ. Nevertheless that is where the New Testament directs us. It tells us the truth about ourselves, and the glorious truth about the sufficient work of Christ on our behalf. Dr. Godsey's position is an anti-gospel, for it is a rejection and refutation of the gospel as presented in the New Testament. As Paul warned the Galatians, “But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received, let him be accursed.”[Galatians 1:8-9, NASB]

Theological Truth vs. Historical Fact

What about the Virgin Birth? In a strange passage, Dr. Godsey states that “The Virgin Birth is more truth than fact.”[120] We are to focus on Jesus rather than the Virgin Birth, asserts Dr. Godsey, for “Its status as an actual historical fact is unimportant.”[120] Well, according to Matthew and Luke, its status as an actual historical fact is important indeed. Dr. Godsey continues: “When we focus on defending the facts rather than conveying the truth, we are making more of the Virgin Birth than the earliest records made, and we are making less of the importance of the truth that God is with us.”[121] This strange distinction between truth and facts can only mean that, for Dr. Godsey, truthfulness and factuality can also be separated. For the Christian Church, however, the Virgin Birth is not true, if it did not happen.

With these statements Dr. Godsey joins the ranks of liberals who for two hundred years have attempted to rid Christianity of its supernaturalism. Gone is the biblical understanding of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Left is a gifted (but obviously deluded) religious teacher, who nonetheless stands, by Dr. Godsey’s testimony, as the center of his faith. Jesus, writes Dr. Godsey, was known to the earliest church “as a simple and plain person who brought the reality of God down to earth,”[120]—not one to be worshipped. But the documents of “earliest Christianity” are the New Testament documents themselves. And the New Testament claims much more for Jesus Christ than Dr. Godsey’s reconstruction will allow.

After all, in the synoptic gospels Jesus is progressively revealed as the Son of Man and the Son of God, the Messiah whom God has sent. The Gospel of John begins with the revelation that Jesus is the pre-existent Logos, the One who was with God, and was God. All things were made through Him. To Nicodemus Jesus is revealed as the Son of God as well as the Son of Man. To the woman at the well, Jesus identifies Himself as the Messiah. He claims equality with God and dares seven times to refer to Himself with the “I Am” formula of deity. In the Book of Acts, Peter’s sermon—the earliest Christian sermon recorded—identifies Jesus in this way: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”[Acts 2:36, NASB] Paul, the Great Apostle of the early church, bore testimony to the divine Christ throughout his New Testament letters to the churches. In his letter to the Colossian church, Paul warned: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form [Colossians 2:8-9, NASB] This hardly sounds like the “simple and plain person” Dr. Godsey presents as the sum of the New Testament.

Other Issues

Beyond the issues discussed above, many other doctrinal issues are raised by Dr. Godsey’s book. Among these is the doctrine of creation. Dr. Godsey sets his position clearly: “The biblical revelations about humankind and all of creation have no standing as science.”[82] At this point he again raises a distinction between two kinds of truth. This time, the distinction is not between “truth” and “fact,” but between truth with a capital “T” (biblical revelation) and truth with a little “t” (science). The problems with such distinctions are too numerous to consider here. Suffice it to say that such formulations are trouble—with a capital “T.”

Creation, states Dr. Godsey, reveals that “we are kin to God.”[82] This is, to say the least, a quaint manner of stating the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*—the image of God in human beings. Turning nearly two centuries of Christian theology on its head, he asserts that this notion that we are kin to God and born of God “provides the foundation for affirming that people are essentially good.”[83] This would, of course, be a surprise to those who believe that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”[Romans 3:23, NASB] How are we to understand David’s lament and prayer for pardon in Psalm 51? “Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, And done what is evil in Thy sight, So that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, And blameless when Thou dost judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.”[Psalm 51:4-5, NASB] Did David misunderstand his problem? Did he need forgiveness, salvation and rescue from his sin? Or, did he need merely to discover that “God’s forgiveness lies within us”?[145]

What about our response to the gospel? Dr. Godsey states that “Our faith does not claim that Jesus has either said something or done something that you and I must accept or reject.”[117] But the Lord said, speaking of Himself, “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”[John 3:18, NASB] Further, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of

Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock.”[Matthew 7:24, NASB]

Repentance and confession of Christ are also depreciated: “Any conditions, religious or moral, that preempt the priority of grace distort the radical simplicity of the Christian gospel. The church is not the basis of salvation. Repentance is not the basis of salvation. Accepting Jesus is not the basis of salvation. Jesus came to say that we are saved No conditions, no prerequisites, no plans to follow—grace is not a conditional affirmation.”[145] Jesus stated otherwise: “Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”[Luke 13:2-3, NASB]

Though no developed doctrine of God is evident in the book, some glimpses of Dr. Godsey’s understanding are evident. Most importantly, Dr. Godsey rejects the divine omnipotence: “God is not the omnipotent one, coldly looking down on our trauma and pain. There is a higher truth. God is the suffering one who creates new worlds within our pain. The notion that God is the all powerful, the high and mighty principal and heaven and earth should be laid aside.”[98-99]. Providence is thus redefined in terms of this limited, non-omnipotent deity.

God’s wrath is merely “another face of love.”[73] As Dr. Godsey states, “Wrath that does not operate as an instrument of love cannot be identified with the character of God that we know in Jesus.”[73] Lest we misunderstand his point, Dr. Godsey goes on to argue that “God does not judge in order to condemn. God judges in order to redeem.”[75] Thus, there is no dual destiny, and no dual judgment. All are judged accepted, but Dr. Godsey has already told us that this is so.

Sin, according to Dr. Godsey, is not so much wrong-doing, as “distorted living from which we need to be free.”[101] Missing is the biblical understanding that sin is rebellion against a holy and righteous God.

Satan is also redefined as a “powerful and dramatic symbol.”[103] Further, “The persistent symbol of Satan simply underscores in a dramatic and symbolic way that irrationality and chaos are unyielding parts of the world in which we live.”[103]

An additional problem is Dr. Godsey’s use of language such as the following: “. . . we are in God and God is in us”[ix]; “I believe that God lives within us”[54]; “God lives within us—within every one of us.”[68] What are we to make of this? Is this new age spirituality or old age confusion? This is not the biblical teaching concerning the *Imago Dei*.

The Fundamental Importance of Truth

Given that this is a book which purports to deal with honesty and truth, Dr. Godsey reveals a very strange notion of truth itself. As he states very early in the book, “When it comes to honest talk about God, there are no right answers.”[4] Any responsible theologian must admit not only the possibility of error, but its assured appearance in our very best efforts. We are finite and sinful beings, and we are prone to error and limited in knowledge. This is why the authority of Scripture is so central and essential in the theological task Scripture is our corrective.

Nevertheless, we know that God is a God of truth, and that He has given us right answers to the most critical issues of our faith and life. Our task is to bring our thinking in line with the biblical revelation.

But Dr. Godsey argues that there are no right answers. He does not argue that we are finite and limited, but that truth is outside our grasp. For this reason, Dr. Godsey is unconcerned about orthodoxy and heresy—and the very notion of doctrinal soundness. As he states, “Believing should never be equated with doctrinal soundness. Doctrinal soundness is arrogant theological nonsense.”[17] Belief itself is questioned: “Our culture of belief generates an ocean of bad religion where people are manipulated and abused in God’s name.”[27]

So, to avoid the “culture of belief” and relieving himself of concern for “doctrinal soundness,” Dr. Godsey is free to establish his own theological system without the constraints of Scripture, tradition, confessions of faith, or even the existence of truth as objective or knowable. At the end of this road, theology is nothing more than therapy. Theological considerations are mere reflections of inner considerations and emotional energies.

And yet, truth is central to Christianity. The Christian faith stands or falls on the truthfulness of its central claims. If these biblical claims to truthfulness are false, the faith is a fantasy. For, “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.”[I Corinthians 15:14, NASB] This doctrinal evasion is not only corrosive of the faith, its

destruction is absolute.

Conclusion: A Test Case for Truth

The great liberal quest of the last two centuries has been to establish Christianity without a divine Christ, an atoning Savior, or a reigning Lord. With the publication of this book, Dr. Godsey casts his lot with those who have departed from biblical faith of the church and have remade the faith into a spiritual search fully compatible with modern secularism. Indeed, this review indicates that Dr. Godsey's theological system is precisely described by H. Richard Niebuhr's summary of liberal theology: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment though the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."⁽¹⁾

The release of this book may well represent a crucial learning opportunity for Southern Baptists. It will certainly present Southern Baptists with an inescapable challenge. For Dr. Godsey has not merely joined the ranks of liberal revisionists of the last two hundred years; he has placed himself squarely with the heretics of Christianity's first centuries.

Heresy is the explicit rejection of a doctrine central and essential to the Christian faith. As theologian Harold O. J. Brown reminds us, "In the early church, heresy did not refer to simply any doctrinal disagreement, but to something that seemed to undercut the very basis for Christian existence."⁽²⁾ This is a serious charge, and our judgment must be careful, responsible, and prayerful. But the concerns raised by Dr. Godsey's book are not matters of simple doctrinal disagreement—his statements deny the very heart of the Christian faith. He has not rejected doctrines on the periphery—lamentable as that would itself be—he has rejected the central doctrines of the Christian faith.

Heresy is a serious charge, and it must never be made lightly or without evidence. Some theologians and church leaders have argued that heresy is an outdated issue—a part of the Christian past gladly left behind as we move into a new century. But heresy and orthodoxy are the perennial concerns of the true Church, and it cannot be otherwise. The Church cannot take assaults upon the truth lightly, whether in the name of doctrinal accommodation or personal considerations. This is a matter too important to be sidelined into mere church politics or surrendered because of powerful personalities.

The Church is charged to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."^[Jude 3] This is not an elective responsibility; rather, it is one of the defining characteristics of the true Church.

Over the past century, Baptists have grown increasingly uncomfortable with notions of orthodoxy and heresy. We have been increasingly captivated by the culture of rugged individualism and personal autonomy. Some have even come to accept relativistic notions of truth and nihilistic conceptions of doctrine. We are a people in deadly danger of forfeiting the faith.

At the root of this danger is our doctrinal timidity. Southern Baptists have accepted so many obvious errors in our midst that we demonstrate little ambition to secure and defend the truth. We are afraid of the controversy and opposition which will surely come if heresy is addressed.

Tertullian of Carthage, one of the towering figures in the early church, wondered why Christians would fight fever in the human body, but accept heresy in the Body of Christ. "Faced with fever, which we know to be evil in its purpose and power," he observed, "it is not surprise we feel, but loathing; and as it is not in our power to abolish it, we take what precautions we can against it. But when it comes to heresies, which bring eternal death and the heat of a keener fire within them, there are men who prefer to be surprised at their power rather than avoid it."⁽³⁾

Those who reject the notion of heresy, also deny the reality and the value of orthodoxy. They are in an insupportable position, from which the only refuge is the sort of relativism indicated by Dr. Godsey. Jaroslav Pelikan, perhaps the most influential church historian of this generation, argues that those who reject the reality of heresy cannot claim to be orthodox. As he states: "The objection to the concept of heresy is in reality an objection to the concept of orthodoxy. Short of a dogmatic agnostic relativism about both doctrine and morality—which, as has been pointed out hundreds of times, would, if consistently maintained, undercut the passion and conviction with which such relativism is usually held and espoused—it is difficult to imagine a worldview in which there is no place for the concept of heresy."⁽⁴⁾

This "dogmatic agnostic relativism" is precisely the position staked out by Dr. Godsey—but it is not the position he

maintains. For, he goes far beyond the denial that truth can be known. He actually—and in conflict with his declared intentions—denies specific doctrines of the faith. He proceeds directly from agnosticism to heresy, and heresy of the most serious sort.

We should thank Dr. Godsey for his honesty. His book raises the most critical issues central to Christianity, and, in a remarkable way, his book offers believers yet another opportunity to affirm biblical truth even in the face of its rejection. The liberals who have for two centuries attempted to transform Christianity by accommodating to the modern age did not seek to destroy the faith but to save it, as it were, from itself. But the Christian Gospel does not need to be transformed, but to be proclaimed. As from the beginning, the cross of Jesus Christ is foolishness to some, and a stumbling block to others, but to those whom God has called, Christ is known to be the power and the wisdom of God [see I Corinthians 1:22-24].

This case presents an unavoidable challenge to all those responsible for maintaining the integrity of the Church, of the denomination, and of the faith itself. In a very significant way, this is an historic test case for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Established in an explicit effort to avoid dealing with doctrinal issues, and adopting no confession of faith, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has nevertheless claimed to be “concerned with truth.”(5) Mercer University and Dr. Godsey have been identified with the CBF from its inception. Furthermore, CBF Moderator Hardy Clemons, pastor of First Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, appeared to join Godsey in Christological revisionism. Defending Dr. Godsey, Dr. Clemons reflected: “Jesus said, ‘I am the door.’ I interpret that to mean ‘I am the door to God.’ I don’t think you go to that door and worship the door. You go through the door to where the door leads.”(6)

In a very real sense, this is a testing time for all Baptists. The issues are clear and unavoidable. The real question is whether Baptists retain sufficient conviction to face untruth and heresy in our midst.

The believing Church confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ remains the great good news of salvation. As Jesse Mercer—for whom Mercer University was named—himself said, “The standard of truth is in the God of truth.” As the great hymn of the Reformation resounds, “God’s truth abideth still.” And that—in all honesty—is the faith of the faithful church.

Endnotes:

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1956), p. 193.
2. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1984), p. 2.
3. Tertullian of Carthage, “Why Heresies Arise,” in *Readings in Christian Thought*, 2nd. Ed., ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 39. Tertullian lived c. 160 to c. 220.
4. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.17.
5. From “An Address to the Public,” adopted by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, May 9, 1991. Found in *The Baptist Identity* by Walter B. Shurden (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), p. 99.
6. From “CBF-related Leaders Asked for Views of Godsey Book,” *Baptist Press*, Friday, November 1, 1996. Responding to accusations that Dr. Godsey holds a low Christology, Clemons responded: “I think that’s an unfair characterization. It makes me wonder if that person read the book.” Given the overwhelming nature of Dr. Godsey’s denials, this is a strange statement. We should note that former Southwestern Seminary president Russell H. Dilday, also identified with the CBF, did criticize Dr. Godsey’s “weak Christology.” [see same news release]

