

AlbertMohler.com

Southern Baptists: Facing the Future from the High Ground

Thursday, July 16, 2009

Article from the *Western Recorder*, June 28, 2000

The Southern Baptist Convention made history as messengers overwhelmingly approved revisions to the *Baptist Faith and Message*, our confession of faith. In so doing, Southern Baptists linked our honored past with the promise of the future, and pledged to maintain doctrinal faithfulness as a new century dawns.

The *Baptist Faith and Message* is now 75 years old, and it is no coincidence that it shares a birthday with the Cooperative Program. Both came out of the historic 1925 Memphis session of the Southern Baptist Convention, and both have served Southern Baptists exceedingly well.

The Convention first revised the *Baptist Faith and Message* in 1963, when storms of doctrinal controversy threatened to divide the denomination. In 2000, the Convention had its eyes on the future, and a determination to fulfill the mandate given us by the Apostle Paul, who instructed Timothy: “Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” [2 Tim. 1:13-14].

The debate on the floor of the Convention was very revealing. Proposed amendments were primarily directed at the preamble and Article I, “The Scriptures.” The Convention sustained the recommendation from the special committee, but the statements made by those attempting to revise the report left an indelible impression on the Conventions memory.

The Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee released our report on May 18, in order to give the Convention ample time to read and review the proposal. The full report was available 24 hours a day on the internet, and it received remarkable interest. Our committee heard from Southern Baptists who wanted to see the historic concepts of soul competency and the priesthood of believers spelled out more explicitly. Thus, we presented our proposal to the Convention on June 14 with an added paragraph in the preamble.

The new paragraph stated, “Baptists cherish and defend religious liberty, and deny the right of any secular or religious authority to impose a confession of faith upon a church or body of churches. We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers, affirming together both our liberty in Christ and our accountability to each other under the Word of God.”

This language clarifies the meaning of these cherished concepts. Some have interpreted these principles to mean that Baptists can believe (or disbelieve) virtually anything and remain a Baptist. This is nonsense—and it is dangerous. As Herschel Hobbs, chairman of the 1963 committee, often reminded us, there are certain “definite doctrines” all true Baptists must believe. No one has the right to coerce anyone to accept these doctrines. But, at the same time, Baptists have every right to define what Baptists believe.

E. Y. Mullins, chairman of the 1925 committee saw this as well: “There are limits to the religion of Christ beyond which men may not go and claim to be Christian, and there are corresponding Baptist limits. The refusal to define limits may and often does indicate a desire to abolish all limits.”

Soul competency affirms that every soul is required to give an answer to God, and bears a duty to respond to God in

faith. Baptists do not believe in faith by proxy. Christian experience must be personal and direct in order to be authentic. Baptists believe in the priesthood of all believers because we understand the church to be an assembly of priests together. No human priest stands between the believer and the Lord Jesus Christ—our Great High Priest.

Sadly, these two precious concepts have been hijacked by some who would make them represent nothing more than autonomous individualism. Indeed, some have claimed that every believer has the right to believe anything he or she wishes, and that any doctrinal belief is as good as any other—regardless of its lack of biblical support.

Congregationalism is at the heart of our understanding of the church, and this is the necessary balance to focus on individual responsibility. Soul competency and the priesthood of believers become meaningful in the context of Baptist congregationalism and in common submission to the Word of God.

Considerable attention was focussed on our revisions in Article I, “The Scriptures.” The 1963 version stated that the Bible “is the record of Gods revelation of Himself to man.” We removed the word “record” in order to remove confusion about the nature of Gods revelation in the Bible. The Bible is not merely a *record* of revelation, it is revelation itself. The Bible is not a fallible witness to the revelation of God, it is Gods perfectly inspired Word. The *written* Word testifies of the *incarnate* Word, Jesus Christ, as our Lord Himself explained.

We stated clearly that “All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.” This replaces the language stating that Jesus Christ is “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted.” Why? Simply put, because thirty years of abuses and attacks upon the integrity of the Bible made clear that some were using this language to deny the truthfulness and authority of the Word of God.

Some who have taught in our seminaries over the past several decades claimed that this allowed them to deny the truthfulness of whatever biblical passages did not rise to their standard of Jesus intention. Professors and pastors have denied that God ordered the conquest of Canaan, tested Abraham in the sacrifice of Isaac, or inspired the Apostle Paul when he wrote about the family or roles in the church.

One messenger tragically stated that the Bible is “just a book.” Mainstream Southern Baptists—and Christians of all denominations—know better. Those who opposed the revisions adopted this year by the Convention are out of touch with Southern Baptists, out of step with the great tradition of faithful Christians through the centuries, and out of line in their intemperate language.

Southern Baptists will not retreat from the high ground of biblical authority and theological integrity. In adopting the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*, Southern Baptists are determined to face the future from the high ground of biblical faithfulness.

