

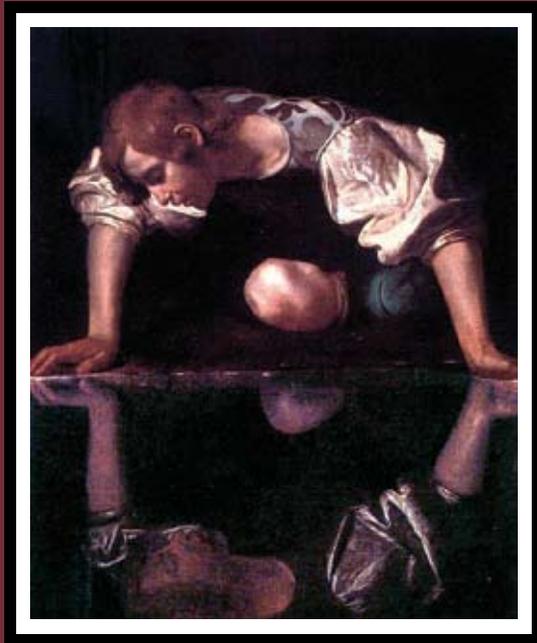
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Committed to historic Baptist principles

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BUREAUCRACY,
REFORMATION AND THE
SOUTHERN BAPTIST
CONVENTION

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The Founders Journal



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Bureaucracy, Reformation and The Southern Baptist Convention

Tom Ascol

There is a crisis in Baptist life today which cannot be resolved by bigger budgets, better programs, or more sophisticated systems of data processing and mass communication. It is a crisis of identity rooted in a fundamental theological failure of nerve. The two major diseases of the contemporary church are spiritual amnesia (we have forgotten who we are) and ecclesiastical myopia (whoever we are, we are glad we are not like “them”).¹

These words, penned by Timothy George, are as true today as they were over fifteen years ago when he originally wrote them. Granted, much good has been accomplished within the Southern Baptist Convention over the last two decades—years which saw both the height of intensity and thorough conservative victory in the so-called “battle for the Bible.” The inerrancy of Scripture is now firmly established as the convictional norm and expectation of all denominational entities and personnel.

This is no small accomplishment and should be seen by all who recognize the Bible to be God’s Word written as a significant work of reformation. It is easy to forget or undervalue how much has been accomplished over the last twenty-five years. We no longer have professors teaching in our denominational seminaries who throw the Bible into a trashcan for shock effect. We no longer have convention executives speaking equivocally about culturally acceptable sins like homosexual behavior and abortion. These and similar changes are amazing in their breadth and depth. They must never be taken for granted and we should sincerely praise God for granting them to us.

But neither must they become the ground for triumphalistic self-satisfaction among those who rejoice in them. The work of reformation is like the labor of swimming against a tide. If you stop to congratulate yourself on how far you have come you will soon be swept back out into the sea you have been trying to escape. Few people see this as perceptively as Tom Nettles, who has done all reformation-minded Southern Baptists a great service by writing his recent book, *Ready for Reformation? Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches*.

In the introduction to the book he writes,

“I assume that a genuine movement of God’s Spirit has initiated a reformation among Southern Baptists. Reformation involves much more, however, than the mere recovery of biblical authority. Reformation penetrates the deep recesses of self-perception and purposes of institutions. It involves time, patience, sacrifice, and honest self-criticism.”²

Such penetration will not take place where denominational pride and self-satisfaction prevail. Instead, bureaucratic inertia sets in and the very Scriptures for whose authority so many fought so valiantly get inadvertently pushed to the background in the zealous pursuit of noble goals. In other words, the very Bible that is now loudly proclaimed and widely recognized to be inerrant is largely ignored in areas where it speaks with forceful plainness. Let’s look at only one example to illustrate this point.

Baptists have made their most significant contributions to evangelical Christianity in the realm of ecclesiology. Our forefathers suffered, and some died, for the truth that a local church should be comprised only of believers who have been baptized as believers. The Baptist ideal of a free church in a free state was influential on the founding fathers of the United States of America. Though Baptists should not think that they alone are concerned for biblical ecclesiology, they should be unwilling to take second place to any other community of believers in such concerns. If anyone should take churchmanship seriously, it is the people called Baptists.

Article 6 of the Baptist Faith and Message says this:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts,

rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

These words accurately summarize what ought to characterize—at least partly—a local church. The members are to be “baptized believers,” “associated by covenant,” “observing” the ordinances, “governed” by the laws of Jesus Christ. When 60% of a church’s membership fails even to show up to the meetings regularly, then it miserably fails even to approximate this description.

It is tragic to stop and consider how far removed modern Southern Baptists are from the biblical teachings on the nature of a local church. We may chide our Presbyterian friends for granting church membership to “believers and their seed” but, in practice, the vast majority of our churches grant membership status to believers and their ghosts. It is a common-known, easily documented fact that the vast majority of our 16.3 million Southern Baptists show little if any signs of spiritual life. Most never even darken the doors of a church building. They do not worship with the church. They do not pray with the church. They do not serve with the church. They do not give to help support the ministry of the church. They do not witness with the church. Yet, whenever an important “business meeting” rolls around, they can show up and have their vote count just as much as the chairman of the deacons.

This all-too-typical state of affairs simply highlights the obvious: church discipline has been completely forgotten by most Southern Baptist churches. Yet, Jesus Himself commands this practice plainly in Matthew 18:15–17, verses which are cited as support to Article 6 of the Baptist Faith and Message. This is what our Lord says:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

What I do not understand is how a pastor can claim to believe in the inerrancy of Scripture and yet go on year after year refusing to obey what the Lord Jesus Himself clearly says a church must do. What good is an inerrant Bible if it is going to be ignored?

One of the quips that was used in the battle for the Bible to describe the inadequacy of the liberal and neo-orthodox views of biblical inspiration is that they see the Bible only to be “inspired in spots.” Is the willful neglect of portions of God’s Word functionally any different than this liberal malady? Perhaps we can describe those conservatives who willfully neglect church discipline as believing the Bible to be completely inerrant but only “important in places.” This error may ultimately do more damage than liberalism because it is perpetrated by those who profess loudly to “really believe” the Bible, thus teaching countless millions that one can supposedly believe the Bible while simply ignoring parts that indict our ministerial and ecclesiastical practices.

It is encouraging to see what appears to be a growing number of conservative Southern Baptist leaders speaking out about this issue over the last few years. Their voices are a welcome addition to the chorus. But one is left to wonder just how serious they are in raising concerns about our bloated denominational statistics when their own churches are complicit in padding the numbers with a large percentage of their membership rolls being “non-resident” and “inactive.” Furthermore, it is hard to take a man seriously when he decries the lack of discipline in our churches and calls our inflated statistics an embarrassment and then turns around and promotes churches and pastors who exemplify those very problems.

What is going on when conservative leaders say, “We need to see discipline reinstated in our churches” ... “Anytime you stand up and face a congregation these days in the average [Baptist] church you’re looking at 30–40% that have never been born again” ... “A church that does not practice discipline is not a true church” ... “A church that has less than 80% of its membership attending regularly is not a healthy church” ... “We’ve been more concerned about numbers to report to the denominational press than we have been about genuine conversion,” and then speak in glowing terms of churches and pastors that cannot even get 50% of their membership to show up on any given Lord’s Day?

Here is what I think is going on: reformation stalled by bureaucratic inertia. It is OK to speak boldly about church discipline—in fact, it is almost becoming chic to do so in some sectors—but when it comes to taking the necessary and inevitably difficult steps to implement it, when it comes to getting particular in our assessments and honest in our self-criticism, then it suddenly becomes impolite or disloyal to speak boldly and plainly. Bureaucracy, if safeguarded by bureaucrats, becomes impervious to the kind of reformation that “penetrates the deep recesses of self-perception and purposes of institutions.”

The need is obvious. The challenge is great. But the Lord has given us His inerrant, infallible Word which is sufficient. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, with gentle firmness and patient wisdom, reformation can continue to move forward. It must.

Churches and church leaders must not wait on denominational leaders to set the pace. The Bible is clear. Jesus, the Lord of the church, places the responsibility for reformation squarely on the shoulders of each congregation. Read Revelation 2 and 3. Then read them again. It matters to Jesus how we conduct ourselves in churches that bear His Name. It should matter to us, as well.

Where we have neglected clear duty, let us repent and start over. Where we have made some gains, let us not sit back on our laurels as if we have arrived. Where we need help, may we in humility seek it from those who, perhaps, have greater experience and insight to lend it. Where we have been helpfully taught, may we be willing to pass it along to those who are just learning.

Reformation must come. We must not be duped into thinking that it will do so without real costs. May that reality not make us flinch, but make us resolved to endure hardship like good soldiers, for the glory and honor of our King. ☞

Notes:

¹Timothy George and David Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 13.

²Thomas J. Nettles, *Ready for Reformation? Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 2.

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Denominational Idolatry Reproved

By C. D. Mallary

The Introductory Sermon preached before the Georgia
Baptist Convention at Columbus, Georgia

April 22, 1859

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST
PUBLICATION SOCIETY

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen (1 John 5:21).

Our text consists of three parts—a precious epithet, an important command and an emphatic prayer. We have the precious epithet in two words, *little children*; the important command in four words, *keep yourselves from idols*; and what we may regard as substantially an emphatic prayer in one word, *Amen*. Let us dwell somewhat on these three particulars.

I. A precious epithet: Little Children

This is a term which beautifully describes what Christians should be, and what indeed they really are, just as far as they deserve the name. Christ, in one of His last, tender, affectionate interviews with His disciples addresses them by this endearing term *little children*. “Little children,” said He, “yet a little while I am with you” (John 8:33). And John, the beloved disciple, who partook so abundantly of the tender spirit of his blessed Lord, found in this term something peculiarly congenial with his affectionate heart; hence, the aged disciple uses it no less than five times in the epistle from which our text is selected. *Little children*. How sweetly does the expression drop from the lips of the venerable apostle! The saints of

God should ever be as little children; and as far as they are influenced by a right spirit, they are truly little children. The Savior enforces some of His most important instructions, by referring to the well-known peculiarities of children. "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" was once the inquiry of His disciples. Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them; and said, "Verily I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." And as He proceeds to designate the truly great in His spiritual kingdom, He adds, "Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." At another time, when little children were brought to Him that he might bless them, He takes occasion to remind His complaining disciples that the kingdom of heaven is composed of childlike characters "for of such," says He, "is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no wise enter therein." The Savior would have us learn from these instructions, that the humble, teachable, guileless, confiding spirit, which we naturally expect to see in little children, should ever characterize His disciples. Pride, and arrogance, and vaulting ambition, may find favor with the foolish aspirants for earthly glory; but the special nobility of Christ's kingdom are the meek and lowly in heart. As little children should we receive the doctrines and laws of Christ; as little children should we bow to the corrections of Divine Providence; as little children should we meekly seek the gracious guidance, and confide in the faithful promises, of our Heavenly Father. With a gentle, guileless spirit, should we reprove the errors of our brethren. Nothing would do more to heal our present disorders, as a denomination, than a deep, experimental appreciation of the doctrine couched in these two precious words *little children*.

It is a primitive term. Baptists profess to be a primitive people; and of all people on earth they should feel bound to cultivate and exhibit the meek and gentle spirit of children. And on occasions like the present, we should strive to think, and feel, and speak and act like little children, keeping in view the just limitation of an inspired apostle: "In malice, be ye children, but in understanding, be men." Should we, through the operation of the Divine Spirit, be enabled to wait upon the Lord in our Conventional duties, with hearts deeply pervaded with the gentle, childlike spirit inculcated by the gospel of Jesus, what a sweetness would it give to our Christian intercourse; what a holy unction would it impart to our devotional exercises; what a conservative influence would it infuse into our discussions; what a protection would it afford against fatal mistakes; what a precious assurance

would it give of the Savior's presence and blessing! We now come to our second point:

II. We have before us an important command: Keep yourselves from Idols

Alas, alas, for our fallen humanity! When our first parents violated the law of God in Eden, they became essentially idolaters, and entailed the spirit of idolatry upon all the millions of their race. That exercise of our affections, which displaces God from his proper place in our hearts, is idolatry. Any object, interest, or pursuit, however innocent or worthy in itself, which is unduly loved, or revered, becomes an idol to the soul. One great source of idolatry has been the perversion of the religious sentiments. Human nature has ever had an irresistible bent to worship its own imaginings to serve the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. How sadly were the chosen tribes contaminated with the idolatries of Egypt!

After their wonderful escape from bondage, as they were feeding upon the miraculous manna, and gazing upon the mystic cloud, that was guiding them through the wilderness, and standing before blazing, thundering Sinai, they made a golden calf and shouted, "These are thy gods, O Israel, that brought thee out of the land of Egypt." When settled in Canaan by Jehovah's strong hand and outstretched arm, at length the idolatries of the heathen poured in upon them like a flood, and it required ages of terrible chastisement to cure the guilty nation, even of the grosser forms of idolatrous worship. And under the light and glory of gospel truth, how hard was it for many of the early converts to renounce wholly and forever their idolatrous practices! They would sometimes eat and drink things offered to idols. It became necessary for Paul to say to some of his brethren, "Neither be ye idolaters, flee from idolatry;" and John, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was compelled to say, "*Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*" And this stands for our instruction today. We would not worship a beast, or a piece of wood, or an onion; but in the best instructed regions of Christendom, idolatry sits enthroned in the carnal heart; and even in the churches of Christ it is not wholly extinct. Sacred things may be so perverted, in our mistaken judgment, and affections, as to become idols to the soul, and thus trespass upon the just rights of God.

But idolatry is not alone the perversion of our religious sentiments; any affection or sentiment may be so perverted as to lead us into that which is idolatry in the sight of God. We may make an idol of almost anything.

Covetousness is idolatry. We may make idols of our follies, our plans, our persons, our successes, our sons, and our daughters.

Our dearest joys, our nearest friends,
The partners of our blood,
How they divide our wavering minds
And leave but half for God!

In what further I have to say under this head, that I may the better adapt myself to the present occasion, I shall confine my remarks to what may be called *Denominational Idolatry*. Is there not evidently amongst men such a kind of idolatry as this? I think so; and Baptists, unfortunately, come in for their share. Through the influence of the remaining corruptions of our hearts, a kind of denominational pride and self-glorious often springs up, which is not right in the sight of God, and which involves in it the sin of idolatry. This I call denominational idolatry. And with reference to this kind of idolatry, as well as every other, the Saviour speaks to us through his servant John, *Little children, keep yourselves from idols*.

1. *We must not make an idol of our denominational sentiments*. All scriptural truth is of vast importance. Every single principle inculcated in the word of God has its own appropriate work to do in sanctifying the hearts of men, demolishing the strongholds of error, and laying the foundation, and carrying up the superstructure, of the Redeemer's kingdom on earth. None but God himself can properly estimate the absolute value of any one single truth communicated in his blessed word. If, therefore, Baptists, in the providence of God, are put in charge of the advocacy and defense of certain truths which either are wholly rejected, or slightly held by other religious denominations, God has certainly put upon them peculiar honors, and invested them with the most mighty responsibilities.¹ They must be faithful to their trust. The pulpit and the press must speak out through them in intelligible, affectionate, and earnest accents. They must not be ashamed of their sentiments. Neither through sinful timidity, nor an equally sinful man-pleasing spirit, must they fail to set forth to all the world those peculiar, important views as to the ordinances of Christ, as to the order of God's house, which the Lawgiver of Zion has committed to their keeping. But they must be careful that their sacred principles be not allowed, through the deceitfulness of sin, to minister to the idolatrous tendencies of the human heart. In an abstract absolute sense, we cannot value too highly our denominational principles: but, in the comparative view which we take of the various doctrines and duties of the Christian system,

we may unconsciously give them a prominence unauthorized by the word of God. In our denominational zeal we may break the just proportion of things. We may so dwell on the peculiarities of our order, as to create an impression on our own minds that we are better Christians than we really are that so we are thoroughly, profoundly baptistic, we have attained to the main thing. We must never forget that there are other great and important truths which demand our reverence and our zeal; and in the general, aggregate instructions which we give, we must see to it that every one receive his portion of meat in due season. Whenever our denominational peculiarities so absorb our affections and our zeal as to crowd from their due position other portions of the divine testimony, they are made to assume in our hearts, as it were, the character of idols; and in this perverted shape, by being forced to break the due proportion and boundaries of divine truth, they invade unwittingly the just rights of God, and are the occasion of dishonor to his cause. All this is wrong. This is a service which God does not require at our hands. But, in making these remarks, I do not wish to be understood as forgetting, that there may be times when God providentially calls for the special and bold discussion of our denominational doctrines; and that God sometimes raises up men whose duty it seems to be to devote a large portion of their lives and labors to the defense of these peculiar views. But in such cases, that wisdom which is from above, will teach us to be careful not to lift the Baptist element out of its true scriptural position, and that the perversion of which I have been speaking be properly guarded against by a due recognition of the other teachings of God's holy oracles.

There is another way in which our denominational sentiments may be made the occasion of nourishing the idolatrous tendency of our deceitful hearts. In contending for them, we may be, to a greater or less extent, sinfully forgetful that they are God's truth. We may somewhat lose sight of the precious, golden link, which binds them to the throne of Jehovah. We may fight for them as our truth, our dogmas, rather than as the teachings of the Saviour. We may contend for personal victory. We may become, through the deceitfulness of the heart, intensely sectarian. We may so identify our own little mighty selves with the theme which we defend, that, to a greater or less extent, we fall to loving Baptist truth, and glorying in the Baptist cause, because these are such capital things with which to fight ourselves—Nebuchadnezzar-like—into a little notoriety in the religious world. Baptists must keep their hearts with all diligence as well as other people. The very best of them are sanctified but in part; they are still exposed to the assaults of pride and vainglory. In contending for our sacred principles, we must not unlink them from God's theme, and make an idol

of them; but, keeping them firmly bound to that throne, we must set them forth with the spirit of holy boldness, arid childlike humility, that Christ, our King, may be duly honored. As far as a mere partisan, sectarian glorying in our principles animates our zeal, and makes us forgetful of God's glory, and the inherent majesty of truth, so far the very truth itself is crucified into an occasion for displeasing God, and ministering to the flesh; and thereby we fall into the error of a certain people of old, who paid a selfish and mistaken honor to their nets and their drags, that brought them advantage. "Therefore, they sacrifice unto their net, and burn incense unto their drag, because by them their portion is fat, and their meat plenteous." Habakkuk 1:16. *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

2. *We must not make an idol of our denominational gifts.* As we are not to burden and dishonor God's precious truth with selfish glorying, so we must not vainly and selfishly glory in men, however wise and excellent they may be. The eminently wise and pious are to be highly esteemed for their goodness' sake for their works' sake; this is a Christian duty. A spirit of envy and detraction is opposed to the spirit of the gospel. Render to all their dues—honor to whom honor—tribute to whom tribute; thus speaks the word of God. Opposite to narrow-minded complaining jealousy, is another evil which the gospel equally condemns; a glorying in men—a disposition to call men our masters—a blind partisan zeal for bold-spirited leaders—a cringing subserviency to the authority of great names—an idolatrous reverence for those who, from whatever cause, may have risen to some peculiar denominational distinction. Man-worship has ever been a prominent sin amongst poor erring mortals. It was this which, amongst the heathen, lifted men to gods, and with such deities peopled the heavens. It was this spirit of heathenism that flowed over into the Christian churches when their piety became sickly, and tended to aggravate and complete their corruptions. Instead of a Juno, we soon find a deified Mary; instead of a Hercules, a feat-performing St. Patrick; instead of a Jupiter, the Thunderer, a more than Christian Jupiter, a piece of frail mortality lifted up to become Christ's vicegerent on earth, exalting himself above all that is called God sitting in the temple of God—showing himself that he is God. All this we protest against with the deepest abhorrence. And yet a little sprinkling of this heathenish, popish spirit may possibly fall now and then upon the hearts of zealous immersionists. The Baptists of Corinth had more than a sprinkling; I am for Paul, I am for Apollo, I am for Cephas, was the loud cry; and it was this glorying in men that brought upon the church much sore distress. Baptists, by their principles, are sacredly bound to resist the intrusions of such a spirit: Christ is their Lawgiver, and all the saints

are brethren. God has raised up amongst them many honored names: we thank God for this. We thank God for a Bunyan, and a Keach; a Gale, and a Gill; an Abram Booth, and an Andrew Fuller; a Carey, and a Carson; a Rice, and a Judson; a Baldwin, a Semple, a Furman, and a Mercer. These were burning and shining lights; and it is little better than sacrilege not to praise the King of Zion for such precious gifts. And, if we were permitted to speak of the living, we might point to a large number of eminent men whose names we delight to honor. But the departed great were but men; and the living great are but men. "We must faithfully test their instructions by the word of God, and follow them no farther than they follow Christ. A blind reverence for human authority, turns us aside from the proper study of the word of God; and the spirit that deifies mortals, deifies the errors and absurdities of mortals. *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

3. *We must not make an idol of our denominational successes.* For the spreading triumphs of our principles, we have a right to bless God; nay, it is our duty to do so; yet, we must be careful that for these things we are not puffed up with a vain and fleshly mind. God has greatly blessed us as a people. Let us dwell for a moment on this topic. We claim the Apostolic churches as our denominational prototypes. Church history has made a pretty fair showing that in all ages, even the darkest, there has been a people holding substantially the faith and practice which we profess.² The progress of our sentiments in these latter days has been remarkable, especially in these United States. In the early settlement of the American colonies, there were but a few scattering Baptists. In 1644, two hundred and fifteen years ago, there were but two Baptist churches in America, viz., Providence and Newport. In 1750, more than a century later, Benedict informs us that there were some 58 churches. In 1764, there were about 60 churches, and 5000 members. Thus, before our Revolutionary struggle, when strong government patronage was extended to popular sects, the Baptists increased but slowly; since that auspicious period, their progress has been rapid. In 1790, the indefatigable John Aspland reports 872 churches, including 4 in Nova Scotia; 1171 ordained and licentiate preachers, and about 65,000 members. In 1812, probable estimates run up to 2433 churches, 1922 ministers, and about 190,000 members. In 1832, there are reported 5322 churches, 3647 ministers, and about 385,000 communicants. The regular, orthodox Baptists in the United States, now number about 12,000 churches, between 8000 and 9000 ministers, and 1,000,000 of communicants.³ During the last ten years (from 1848 to 1858), the increase has been upwards of 255,000. What may be called the Baptist population of our country, may be put down, by a very moderate estimate, at 5,000,000.

In the State of Georgia, the progress of Baptist principles has been not a little remarkable. The first Baptist church (Kiskee) was constituted in 1772, 87 years ago. In 1792 (twenty years later), there were in the state about 60 churches, 79 ministers, and something over 3000 members. In 1832, there were not far from 509 churches, say 255 ministers, and about 38,382 communicants. At the present time, the Baptists of Georgia have about 1300 churches, 900 ministers, and 90,000 communicants, about as many as the whole number of Baptists in the United States 60 years ago. But, in estimating the progress of Baptist strength, we must look beyond our mere numerical increase. In promoting the cause of general education, the Baptists are performing a noble work. They have, on the whole, a pious, able, and efficient ministry. They have a learned and vigorous denominational literature. They have reared up more than 30 colleges, 12 theological schools, and are publishing about 50 periodicals. They are taking a leading part in the benevolent operations of the day. "Their missions are planted in Canada, Oregon, California, New Mexico;" the Indian territory, "Hayti; in France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway; in Western and Central Africa; in Southern India, Assam, Burmah, Siam, and China. The number of conversions from their colportage and missions last year, exceeded 4000. Total number in the mission churches, over 25,000." Income to the leading benevolent societies of the denomination in 1857, \$300,000. But this is not the only evidence of the progress of our denominational influence in our country. There is a strong Baptist under-current which, with a steady, progressive, resistless power, is moving on through other denominations, and sweeping away their paedobaptist peculiarities. This they see, acknowledge, and bemoan. Large numbers of their ministry and private members are coming over to the Baptist standard. In many of their churches infant-baptism is dying out. Some time since a Boston writer speaks as follows through the columns of the New York Journal of Commerce: "In our congregational churches we fear that there is considerable indifference and neglect in reference to infant-baptism. In one of our oldest churches in this state there had not been, a few years since, an instance of infant-baptism for the seven preceding years. Last year there were seventy congregational churches in New Hampshire that reported no infant-baptism. This year ninety-six churches, or about one-half in the state, report none. If this indifference continues, the ordinance will become extinct in the congregational churches."⁴ To such facts as these, let it be added that the number who admit the correctness of our baptism as to the mode, or action, as well as the subjects, is constantly increasing, and what a common thing it is at the present day for persons to demand immersion as an es-

sential condition of remaining quietly with their paedo-baptist friends.

In many foreign lands the Baptist cause is steadily progressing. In translating the Scriptures into the languages of the East, the Baptists have accomplished more than any other denomination. Our American missionaries have given the Scriptures to the Burmans, the Karens, and the Siamese. In India, Carey, and Marshman, and Ward, and Yates, with their coadjutors, performed a work in the translation of the Scriptures, unequalled perhaps in the whole history of missions; and where the translations of our foreign missionaries go, the Bible speaks out in a clear voice the true meaning of the great baptismal word. In Europe, the Baptist cause is prosperous. Wales is a Baptist Beehive. Our brethren there are industrious, firm, fond of the honey of primitive truth, and have sent out many a precious swarm to other lands. In England, the Baptists are a strong, intelligent, pious, progressive band, though less strong than they might be, from the intermixture of open communion clay with the iron of New Testament truth. Upon the accession of William and Mary to the British throne, there were about 100 Baptist churches in Great Britain and Ireland; now, after a lapse of something more than a century and a half, in spite of all the opposition with which they have been compelled to struggle, the Baptists have reached the number of 2000 churches, and over 100,000 communicants, and have accomplished a mighty work in the spread of the gospel amongst the heathen. It is said they are now growing faster than any other religious body in England. On the European continent, Baptist truth is going forth in strength to overhaul and finish out the work which Luther left so incomplete. Amongst the Protestants in France Anti-paedo-baptist sentiments are rapidly spreading. In 1834, Onkur, with six other pious Baptists, commenced their apostolic work at Hamburg, and in the short space of 25 years, the fruits of this little beginning have extended surprisingly through central and northern Europe. In Germany, the Baptists now have about 500 missionary stations, some 80 churches, and about 8000 communicants. Discussions have been aroused upon the principles of church government and religious liberty, which are shaking to their very foundations the structures of a carnal, secularized Christianity. And in Sweden, behold what the Lord is doing. In the face of bigoted, fierce intolerance, Baptist colporteurs are traversing the land, and in a few short years, great multitudes have been converted by their instrumentality, and some 3000 probably have openly embraced the sentiments that distinguish us as a people.⁵

In these things it is our privilege, our duty, to rejoice. But, beloved brethren, let our rejoicing be in the Lord. When we listen to the rehearsal of our denominational successes, our carnal pride is perhaps sometimes

awakened, and we think to ourselves, what a great people we Baptists are getting to be! All this is wrong; it is grieving to the Spirit of God; it is making an idol of our denominational prosperity. And it may be that God allows many humiliating things to befall us as a people, that our pride may be humbled, and we may learn more profoundly the great lesson of inspiration "Not by might, nor by power; but by my Spirit, saith the Lord." *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

4. *We must not make an idol of our denominational anticipations.* The Baptists, strong in their convictions as to the correctness of their sentiments, and the power of divine truth, thought and said, long before the sentiment was uttered by a celebrated German professor, that *there was for them a future*. It is true that other denominations naturally think the same for themselves, but not always probably with the same unshaken confidence, and certainly not, in our apprehension, with the same good reason. To us as Baptists, the language of prophecy holds forth the most delightful encouragement. It assures us that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." And have we so little confidence in the strength of Baptist truth as not strongly to believe that it shall everywhere mingle with that overflowing tide? We look for a time when the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold: in that day of sevenfold light and glory, will not our sacred sentiments be clearly recognized in every land? Prophecy assures us that when the Lord shall bring again Zion, her watchmen shall see eye to eye, and with the voice together shall they sing; in accordance with prophecy is the memorable intercession of Christ that his people may be one; and we verily believe that this harmony and oneness will be sufficiently extensive and complete as everywhere to embrace those sacred principles for which, as a people, we have so earnestly contended. And then we have confidence in the power and majesty of truth, and that the great, emphatic testimony borne to the Savior's burial and resurrection in the baptismal rite, is finally to awe the nations.

And further, our peculiar denominational exposition of the word of God strikes the common mind. Can this be denied? Facts already stated, show that there is a deep, widening movement among the masses. The plain, unsophisticated mind, readily embraces our views as to the ordinance of baptism. They are simple and intelligible. Our unlettered servants comprehend readily the meaning of God's word as to these things, from the simple perusal of the Scriptures in their hearing. I will mention one single case which, no doubt, represents thousands of other similar cases. A female servant of mine, now in Dougherty county, was once a member

of a paedo-baptist church. On a certain occasion her pastor had occasion to sprinkle some individuals: he used water from a pitcher. In connection with the ceremony, he read the third chapter of Matthew, or some parallel passage containing an account of the Savior's baptism in Jordan. She went home and said to her mistress, "I must be baptized; for if Christ was baptized in a river, we ought not to be baptized out of a pitcher." She soon acted out the conviction impressed on her mind by the simple reading of the Scriptures, and was buried with Christ in baptism. More than thirty years ago an eminent paedo-baptist minister said to me in substance, that if he had been brought up in the woods, ignorant of the baptismal controversy, and a New Testament had been placed in his hands, he would naturally have understood its teachings as do the Baptists. "But," added he, "these things are only the husks of religion." Well, upon his own ground, he should have remembered that husks are very important in their place, to shield and cherish the growing, ripening corn. If, then, our teachings are true, and strike with such directness and force the common mind, when the Bible shall be universally circulated, and impartially read and studied, and that blessed Spirit which indited its heavenly truths shall everywhere be poured out abundantly from on high, we may expect our denominational views everywhere to triumph. We look for the time when all national churches, and lordly hierarchies, and organizations, that can review and overrule the decisions of individual churches, shall crumble to the dust; when plain, simple, independent, New Testament churches shall everywhere be reared up; when believers' immersion shall in all lands proclaim in symbol a buried and risen Saviour; and in symbol proclaim the washing away of sin from the conscience by the meritorious and all-powerful blood of the Lamb.

But, O, the proud Baptist heart! How hard not to make an idol of all this! "Are we not a wonderful people? and are we not to be far more wonderfully great by and by?" Ten to one, if like little children we do not lie meekly at the foot of the cross, our poor hearts will steal away into future ages, and, surveying the nations as they will then walk in the order of the New Testament Jerusalem, will exclaim, with something of the spirit of an infatuated monarch of old, "Is not this great Babylon that we have built?" Down, down in the dust, my beloved brethren; that is the place for us unworthy, blood-ransomed sinners. We may hope with strong assurance for the future triumphs of truth; and we may bless God that this bright and holy day shall assuredly come. But it will be God's work, and not ours. We should be humbled to the dust that God should condescend to use us as instruments for hastening on this glorious period. But for his sovereign,

almighty grace, which will accomplish its purposes in spite of all our follies and sins, we might well despair. *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.* And now,

III. In the third place, we come to the short, emphatic prayer: Amen

By this expression the Apostle would, I suppose, set his seal to the whole of the foregoing epistle. Be it all so; let everything said in this inspired communication have its due effect. Especially may we suppose that he wishes well to his last appeal *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.* Brethren, our hearts must yield a sincere amen to the teachings of the text. These things must not be held as matters of idle, superficial speculation; but our hearty amen must go with them. Is there any heavenly doctrine in the words *little children*? Amen to this. Be it so. Let us cultivate the spirit of little children. Is there divine force in the command, *keep yourselves from idols*? Amen, a loud, a heart-felt amen to this also. Let it be so. Let the divine injunction fall deep into our souls, into the hearts of all the people of God. Let us exalt God and truth; let us abase ourselves. Let us beware that we do not mount the stilts of denominational pride. A poor fool-hardy creature recently walked across the Niagara river, on slender iron stilts, a few hundred yards above the falls; he was successful, and got the proffered wager from the gazing crowd. We may mount our stilts, and try the flood; this we can do; but let us not, in our presumptuous vanity, look for success. The current will prove too strong for us; God's displeasure will sweep us over the precipice; and in confusion and shame shall we bemoan the fleshly vaunting of our hearts. In contending for those sacred principles committed to our keeping, let us beware that we do not sacrifice to a mere denominational net; and burn incense to a mere denominational drag. Let us love and defend the truth for Christ's sake, with an humble, self-forgetful spirit, merging all in the glory of God. If there is to be any strife, let it be that we may surpass others in the pure love of truth; in love for souls; in a gentle, child-like, holy walk. Holiness must be our great strength. If we have with us more truth than others, let our more consecrated lives, let our more free and abundant sacrifices for the spread of the truth amongst all nations, prove the sincerity of our professions, and the superior sanctifying power of a superior faith. This will excite the attention of all thoughtful people. They will respect and honor us. Respecting us for our zeal and piety, they will inquire into our principles. And as they inquire into these things, they will see more and more of their New Testament simplicity; they will join

us in our struggles for Zion's enlargement, and in our orderly gospel walk to heaven. It is in this way, more than in any other, that Baptists are to prosper. They must cast away all their idols. They must conquer themselves; their pride, their self-glorying, their passions, their covetousness; and by the example thus afforded of the power of truth, and the triumphs of grace, they will win and conquer the hearts of thousands all around them. *Little children, keep yourselves from Idols. Amen.* ☪

Notes:

¹A believer, the only scriptural subject for baptism; immersion, a scriptural essential to the ordinance; and a regenerate church membership, a fundamental requirement of the New Testament, are principles for which Baptists have ever contended with uncompromising firmness. To this may be added, they have ever adhered, with unwavering zeal, to the great principle of church independency; and by American Baptists especially, restricted, or close communion, i e, that the privilege of partaking of the Lord's Supper is restricted by the word of God to orderly, immersed believers, has ever been regarded as a matter of great importance to the protection and prosperity of the churches.

²As specimens of what Pseudo-baptist historians are pleased to say of us, one or two short extracts are here introduced. MOSHEIM, as translated by Maclain, says: "The true origin of that sect which acquired the name of Anabaptists, is hid in the remote depths of antiquity, and is consequently extremely difficult to be ascertained." [A peep into the New Testament, however, removes this difficulty.]

A few years ago, Dr. Dermont, chaplain to the King of Holland, and Dr. Yp-eij, theological professor at Groningen, received a royal commission to prepare a history of the Reformed Dutch Church. Listen to their testimony concerning the Baptists: "We have now seen that the Baptists, who were formerly called Anabaptists, and in later times Mennonites, were the original Waldenses, and have long, in the history of the church, received the honor of that origin. On this account the Baptists may be considered the only Christian community which has stood since the Apostles, and as a Christian society, which has preserved pure the doctrines of the gospel through all ages."

³The above estimate, it will be noticed, has special reference to what we call regular, or orthodox Baptists. There are various sects who hold to believers' immersion, that on some points differ among themselves, and from the regular Baptists. If the number of such be added, the whole number of immersionists in the United States at this time will be found to be not much less than a million and a half.

⁴Whoever wishes to pursue this topic more extensively would do well to consult Prof. Curtis's invaluable work on "The Progress of Baptist Principles in the Last hundred years." It is worthy of the careful perusal of every thoughtful Baptist and Paedo-baptist in the land. Prof. Curtis is of opinion that the decrease of paedo-baptism is greater amongst the Methodists than in any other denomination.

It is evident to all who have given much thought to the subject, that a very large portion of their members refuse, or neglect, to have their children sprinkled. Prof. C. makes a pretty strong showing that amongst the Presbyterians of the United States, infant-baptism has decreased about one-half in twenty years. In our country infant-baptism is now the exception, where it used to be the rule. Out of twelve infants born in the United States, eleven probably go unbaptized. One hundred years ago the proportions were nearer the reverse. The Baptist element, with other causes, has then, as to infant-baptism, eaten up eleven parts out of twelve; in fifty years more, if things go on at this rate, this unauthorized practice will make but a poor showing. The truth is, it has not the least particle of Scripture for its support, and its grasp upon the consciences of men is getting more and more feeble.

⁵In making out the above sketch, the author has been much assisted by consulting the American Baptist Register for 1852; the American Baptist Almanac for 1859; and the Baptist Family Magazine.

News

On June 13, 2006 we will meet at the Southern Baptist Convention in Greensboro, NC for the **Founders Fellowship Breakfast**. The breakfast will begin at 6:30 a.m. in Imperial Ballrooms A/B/C on Level One in the Sheraton Four Seasons. Mark Dever, Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington D.C., will speak on “Election, the Gospel and Evangelism.” Space is limited so register early! Deadline for registrations is June 5, 2006.

Registration is only available online: www.founders.org/conferences/ffb/

The national **Southern Baptist Founders Conference** is scheduled for July 11–14, 2006 and will be hosted by Bethel Baptist Church in Owasso, OK. The theme will be “The Gospel of the Grace of God.” Speakers will include Sam Waldron and Ray Ortlund, Jr.

Online: www.founders.org/conferences/

The **Heartland Regional Founders Conference** will be held March 30 – April 1, 2006 at Providence Baptist Church in Ponca City, OK. The theme will be “For the Sake of the Name—Reaching the Lost with the Gospel.”

Online: www.founders.org/conferences/sbfc_heart.html

A **Church Leaders’ Conference** in Singapore will be hosted by the Shalom Church April 18–20, 2006. The theme will be “Perfect in Converting, Sure in Making Wise.” The keynote speaker will be Pastor Conrad Mbewe of Kabwata Baptist Church, Zambia. To register or for more details contact the Shalom Church. Online visit: www.shalomrb.com/

Denominational Integrity: A Plea from a Younger Pastor

By Joe Thorn

I am a 33 year-old pastor of a Southern Baptist church. I am comfortable calling myself a Southern Baptist, but not because I grew up as one. In fact, I did not grow up in church at all. I became a Christian in 1990 at the age of 18. As I read Scripture and good Christian literature, I embraced Reformed Theology. Later I became convinced of credo-baptism and Baptist ecclesiology, and only then did I choose to be a part of a Southern Baptist church. What drew me to a Southern Baptist church was first, the local church's doctrine and character, but I also liked that the SBC had theological origins that matched my own convictions, and I was impressed with their missionary enterprise. Since that time I have attended a Southern Baptist seminary, pastored in three Southern Baptist churches, and was commissioned as a missionary through our North American Mission Board to plant a church 44 miles west of Chicago, Illinois. That church has constituted and is itself an involved Southern Baptist church. I have also had the opportunity to serve the Convention at both the local and state levels. I put all of this on the table to explain that I am an involved Southern Baptist. In the past year a new label has become popular which applies to me as well. I am a "younger leader" in the SBC.

As one of the so called "younger leaders" within our Convention I am very interested in both where we have come from and where we are heading as cooperating Baptists. Like many others, I am simultaneously encouraged and concerned by much of what I see. Because of Dr. Jimmy Draper's efforts to dialogue with younger leaders while he was president of Lifeway, and because of the popularity of blogs, most know that we younger leaders have concerns. But don't believe all the hype.

Our concerns are not about "having a place at the table." We are already sitting there next to our brothers and sisters. Nor are our concerns about positions in the Convention, recognition by the Convention or being heard. All of the younger leaders I know are primarily concerned about the local church and how our Convention affects them. We are concerned that at times the tail is wagging the dog. We are troubled that loyalty to our Convention and traditions sometimes eclipses the *missio Dei*. We wish

there was an easier way to put a face on missions, instead of merely supporting a program. How can we promote missionaries and the mission over a program? We do not like our inflated numbers or our obsession with numbers. We are concerned about the open hostility toward orthodox, evangelical, historic Baptist Calvinism. We are uncomfortable with our tendency to major on the minors. In light of concerns like these I would make an appeal for denominational integrity based upon two principles.

Need for Confessional Identity

First, I am convinced that the future of our Convention is connected to a confessional identity. It is not that we don't have a confession. Baptists of every theological stripe have used confessions from the beginning, and the SBC is no exception. My concern is that the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 seems to have little use. Confessions are critical to cooperation because they establish the common ground on which we stand. They can set boundaries while allowing a certain amount of freedom for all who would join us. A confession serves as the doctrinal standard by which we evaluate participating churches and missionary personnel. Yet, despite all the work that has gone into formulating the BFM2K, it does not occupy a central place in our denominational life. Churches need not affirm its content to be a part of our Convention. All that is required is a financial contribution to Southern Baptist causes and a spirit of cooperation. It appears that many of our churches have forgotten our confessional history, and have themselves birthed churches that have never known the place and importance of confessions.

While I am a Reformed pastor/theologian I do not believe the answer to this problem in our Convention is forcing Calvinism, nor adopting the Second London Confession as our Convention's statement of faith. I do not think the answer is to be found in electing a Calvinist president. I do believe that central to denominational health and integrity is reclaiming a truly confessional identity. A confessional identity protects churches from being marginalized because of differences in theology that fall outside the confession. It allows for healthy diversity and an evangelical spirit of cooperation. If I am honest, I must admit that I pray for a day when all of our Southern Baptist churches reflect Reformed theology, but I believe the answer to that prayer will only come about through God's reviving and reforming influence. In short, I am not interested in making the Convention Reformed as much as I hope to see our Convention characterized by Reformed thought due to our churches being blessed by the Spirit of God.

Need for Missional Character

A second plea for denominational integrity is that our Convention would have a truly missional character. To be missional means that we recognize ourselves, as the people of God, to be a sent people, the mission of God and the presence of Christ in the world. It means that we see our congregations as not only sending churches, but sent churches themselves. It means that churches, while sharing the same basic theology (confessional identity) will look different from one another because of context and culture. A missional character would not encourage the expectation that every church must look and function the same way. We are better at this on the international mission field than we are here at home.

A church in the inner-city should look different from those in the rural counties. In some cases they will address the same issues with the gospel, but in many others the gospel will be worked out redemptively in different ways to different issues. Instead of relying on one-size-fits-all programs and church models, it is necessary to allow the kingdom of God to present itself to the community through the church in ways needed by that community. This is not an abandonment of truth, doctrinal standards or biblical ecclesiology. It is the church moving forward with all of that to become what God intends us to be in each new place. A confessional identity allows for this, it even pushed for it with confidence that the confession around which we unite is enough.

Lest anyone think I am merely whining, or that I take pleasure in only offering criticism—a charge often laid against “younger leaders”—let me say that I have never personally found resistance to my ministry because of my Reformed theology, my open desire to “do church” differently than what has come to be the traditional Southern Baptist model, and engage the culture up close and redemptively. In fact, the Convention has been very supportive of our church plant and has helped to make it a success. Of course, this has not been everyone’s experience, and I have spoken with many who have found great frustration and resistance because our Convention often operates without a clear confessional identity or missional character.

Always Reforming

As you can see, I am not suggesting that the answers to these concerns are easy, nor am I claiming to have those answers myself. Like most South-

ern Baptists I sense the need for things to change. While the solution to the problems I see may not be simple, I and other younger leaders are not passively waiting for things to change on their own.

Despite the charges, younger leaders are not merely complaining, nor are we waiting for something to be done for us. We are actively involved in the change we would like to see.

What are we doing?

We are talking. This really is a valid part of the whole process of change. Conversation helps us in our learning. Through discussion online and in person I have seen people (including myself) change direction. For a people that place great emphasis on words/preaching, the use of words should be understandably valuable.

We are reworking how discipleship is done. It is unfortunate that many of us do not use LifeWay products. Much of what is produced does not fit our approach and/or theology, forcing us to use other resources. We are pushing discipleship beyond the “classroom” setting and into homes. We are building it into actual relationships because we believe this is more biblical and more productive. We are pushing community, serious theology and emphasizing the experience of truth. We are also talking to LifeWay, letting them know what we want, praying for products that can help us make disciples.

We are approaching evangelism differently. We have moved away from canned presentations, easy believism and sacramental, saving prayers and toward a more dialogical/relational model of evangelism that involves spiritual diagnosis beyond “lost” and “saved.” We view evangelism and discipleship as organically connected to one another and the local church.

We are participating in the SBC at every level. We are present at the annual meeting, working with our local and state associations, and taking positions within when nominated. Though most of us would rather have more time with family or the church, we serve in these roles because we believe God has called us to do so. We participate because we believe God can and will use the Convention, and because we want to partner together with others for the glory of God.

We are reforming churches. Theologically, operationally, structurally—many of us are laboring within established churches to see reformation and revival. We are seeking to be faithful to God and His people by leading His people to change wherever necessary no matter what the cost. We under-

stand that this takes time, patience and humility and have been blessed to learn from the many pastors who have set examples for us to follow. We are seeking to be faithful to the task of *semper reformanda*.

We are also planting churches. Many of us are re-imagining and starting new churches that are theological and missional and therefore breaking many of our traditions in the process. This is not only a move forward with change, but a move backward as well. We are seeking to return to a 1st-century model where we can, while incarnating that ideal in the 21st century.

This is part of what we are doing. Some of it fails and by God's grace some of it works. But the effort flows out of an awareness of needed change, and the desire to glorify God, follow Jesus Christ and partner together with our brothers and sisters in the Southern Baptist Convention. The truth is, my concerns and the efforts of many of our "younger leaders" mirror the concerns and work of those who have served the Convention for decades. In the end, most Southern Baptists I know want to encourage denominational integrity. Without it our Convention will be characterized by irrelevance and ineffectiveness, and we may find ourselves working to simply save a sinking ship, rather than serve the interests of Christ's kingdom. 🙏

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The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church

By David F. Wells

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I came to America twenty-five years ago, a newly minted doctor and ready to begin a teaching ministry. Today I look back on this quarter of a century with immense gratitude. America is, indeed, a land of milk and honey and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve Christ during these years and for the nourishment which I have received from the Church during this time.

This quarter of a century has been a time of many bright highlights, but if I am not mistaken it is also a time of lengthened shadows in our evangelical world. We have been transformed from being an inconsequential religious player to one of some consequence during this time, but the costs are now becoming plain.

Twenty-five years ago, evangelicals were outside the religious establishment. That establishment was made up principally of the mainline denominations. But today evangelicals have become the religious establishment, however informally. But despite this, I believe that today we are in some peril. We have a fight on our hands and what we're fighting for is our evangelical soul, for it is possible for us to gain the whole religious world while losing our own souls. I do not say this because I am one of those who thinks that the best is always what is in the past, that we are always in a state of decline, and that if we want to think of a golden age we have to think of something behind us. I do not think that way at all. In some ways we, today, are better off than we were twenty-five years ago. Perhaps a lot better off. And yet in spite of that, I believe there are matters within the evangelical world today which are seriously amiss.

So what I would like to do in the time that I have is to look, first, at some of the great surface changes which have taken place during this time and, second, I want to try to look beneath the surface of those changes, and then, third, I want to begin sketching out ways in which I think we might seek to change some directions. So what is the peril I see happening?

Changes on the Surface

What has changed most dramatically, I believe, in this last quarter of a century is that when I first arrived here we were at the end of the post war period when evangelical faith was being *doctrinally* framed and today, for the most part, it is not. Or at least, not obviously so. What shaped the Church then, far more than it does now, was theological conviction about its character and purpose. What shapes it now, far more than it did then, is a *marketing ethos*. In one sense, this should not surprise us at all. Americans are nothing if not consumers, consumers of images, of relationships and of things. You perhaps will have seen some of these figures that have been assembled in recent years. We have 7% of the world's population but we consume 33% of the goods and services. Every year in America, 12 billion catalogues are sent out to see if some unwary consumers can be attracted. The average child watches 20 thousand advertisements on television every year and on an average day you should see 1,600 advertisements. Our whole society has been transformed into a consumer's heaven and we are nothing if not a nation of buyers, thoroughly at home in, and thoroughly a part of, the life of commerce. We move in and out of it much like fish do through water. It is in this commerce that we live and move and have our being. So the Church's willingness to adapt to the marketing model for thinking about itself really is not remarkable.

But in adapting itself to this culture, the Church, far more than was the case twenty-five years ago, is having its character, and its purposes, and the way it functions, defined for it. There's nothing wrong with commerce *per se*, but I am going to argue that there is something profoundly wrong in trading Christ, or in thinking that religion is the commerce of the soul. Now this adaptation to this kind of culture I see taking place in three very important ways in the evangelical world.

First, the churches, in larger and larger numbers, are adapting themselves to felt needs in their congregations much as a business might adapt its products to a market. In other words, the Church is sanctioning the idea that when someone comes in its doors its okay to view that person as a consumer, somebody who is going to attempt to hitch up a product to their own felt needs. The products in question, of course, are activities, the

experiences, the amenities, and the message of the Church. However, what people who are coming in these church doors today are thinking about, and what they want, is not primarily personal salvation. What they want is a sense of *personal well-being*, however momentary and fragmentary that personal sense of well-being is and our churches are beginning to cater to this. I have no doubt at all that they are going to become very successful. Indeed, some are successful already and they are going to become more successful because marketing in America is what makes the wheels go around. They are, in other words, simply doing what Pepsi has done, what self-help groups have done, the auto makers, the makers of jeans, the makers of movies, and what Madonna herself has done. So why shouldn't churches do this, somebody might ask? Why shouldn't they want to be successful in the same way that Pepsi and Madonna are?

The answer is that marketing will produce success but not necessarily the kind that has much to do with the Kingdom of God. To start with, the analogy between the business world and the world of Christ's Kingdom is a completely fallacious analogy. Consumers in the market place are never asked to commit themselves to the product they are purchasing as a sinner is to the Christ in whom belief is being invited. Furthermore, the consumers on the marketplace are free to define their needs however they want to and then to hitch up a product to satisfy those needs, but in the Church the consumer, the sinner, is not free to define his or her needs exactly as they wish. It is *God* who defines our needs and the reason for that is that left to ourselves we would not understand our needs aright because we are rebels against God. We are hostile both to God and to His law and cannot be subject to either, Paul tells us. Now, no person going into the marketplace, going to buy a coffee-pot or going to buy a garden hose, engages with their innermost being in the way that we are inviting sinners to do in the Church. The analogy is simply fallacious.

Furthermore, we would be wise to remember that it was the Liberal Protestants who equated cultural success with the Kingdom of God. In their case, they equated cultural success with the place where the Kingdom of God was coming into being in *high* culture. We are wanting to equate marketing success with the place where the Kingdom of God is coming into being in *popular* culture. Our immediate forebears in the faith, however, those who pioneered evangelical faith after World War II, resisted this connection between the Kingdom of God and success. We would be wise if we did the same. For what succeeds in this world is not necessarily what is true or what is right. Indeed, much that is false and decadent succeeds. A Church, if it is really true to itself, is never going to be a worldly success. Its gospel is stupid. Many, we know, are called but few are chosen.

Much seed is sown, but only a little produces a rich harvest. And when Christ returns is He going to find faith on the face of the earth? Is it right, then, for the Church to prostrate itself obsequiously before the world in this sorry quest to become a going and successful enterprise? Is it right to allow sinners, hostile in their nature both to God and His Law, to define how the Church is going to do its business? I think not. So this is the first place where I see our habits as consumers entering into our world and defining how we function.

There is a second place that the intrusion of the market ethos into the life of a church is having a profound effect on the way that the ministry is understood and practiced. During the last fifty years in particular, the ministry has become increasingly *professionalized*. Indeed, It is not coincidental that during this time, when the social status of ministers has declined, the need for them to see themselves as professionals has increased. By professionalization, I simply mean that ministers are being driven to understand themselves as specialists, those who have a special kind of knowledge, the same way lawyers and physicians and chemists do. In these other professions, specialized knowledge is used in the pursuit of acquisition and aspiration. That is to say, professionals typically have careers, projectories of accomplishment for which planning and maneuvering are indispensable. Where this enters the Church and where ministers begin to think of themselves in these terms, an ethos results which I believe is extremely harmful to the real interests of the Church. What happens, amongst other things, as ministers begin to nourish and pursue private careers is that the older virtues that were once thought to be essential to the ministry are replaced by some new virtues. The importance of theology is eclipsed by the clamor for management skills, biblical preaching by entertaining story-telling, godly character by engaging personality, and the work of the ministry by the art of sustaining a career. I believe that these are all unhappy exchanges.

There is a third place where the market ethos is entering. The recasting of religion in terms of the market is giving entrepreneurs a field day. In 1970, apart from the National Association of Evangelicals and *Christianity Today*, some missions organizations, some colleges and seminaries, and the religious presses, there were virtually no evangelical organizations at all. Today, if you consult Melton's *Directory of Religious Organizations in America*, you will be dumbfounded to find that probably between 40% to 50% of all religious organizations are evangelical and virtually all of them have started since 1970. They are now outflanking the churches and denominations. It needs to be said immediately, of course, that many of these organizations are exercising very fine ministries and many are doing the work

that the churches have not been able to do. At the same time, however, where the market principle is at work, there you will get entrepreneurs and though entrepreneurs have great ability in getting things started, it is also the case that sometimes if entrepreneurs are not careful what they build is also their own personal fiefdoms. And some of the noise that you hear in the evangelical world today is the noise of competing personal empires. This is what shocks Christians who come from the Third World. It shocks them! This was the theme that came up repeatedly at Lausanne II, the International Congress on World Evangelization that was held in Manila in 1989. They could not understand how we tolerate this. Competition fuelled by personal ambition destroys the cooperation that should grow from our common ownership by Christ. 'It is a jungle out there,' we say of the corporate world. It is also a jungle out there in the evangelical world.

So, let me sum it up. The market, as I understand it, is affecting both the internal ethos in the Church and its external organization. Internally, it is inclining us to think of sinners as consumers and it is driving ministers to think of themselves as professionals who have personal careers to nourish, so they are not slow to pick up their belongings and take to the road to find better opportunities. And the market is changing the external structures of evangelicalism, most obviously by encouraging us to think that religion provides us with a field of opportunity. As significant as these things are, however, they are just the surface changes and it is what lies beneath this that is of rather more interest to me.

Changes below the Surface

In 1993 a very interesting study was done which revisited George Gallup's figure of 32% of adult Americans who claim to be reborn. What this study did was to add just a few modest tokens of commitment as additional tests. In addition to asking, "are you born again?", they also asked, "Do you go to church with some regularity, do you pray with some regularity, and do you have some minimal structure of formal Christian belief?" When those tests were added, the figure of 32% dropped to 8%. And if we were to probe just a little bit more, and if we were to ask: first, 'Are you regenerate?'; second, "Do you have a sufficiently cogent worldview to make a difference in society?"; and third, "do you have a sufficiently formed Christian character to want to do so?", based on some ongoing research I have seen, my guess is that the figure may be no more than 1% or 2%. What this means, my brothers and sisters, is that we may have been living in a fool's paradise. When Gallup produced his figures in the 1970s, and has repeated them every year ever since, it seemed like evangelicals were on a role with

such wide popular support and with churches that were growing. It looked as though we were on the verge of sweeping all of our religious and cultural opponents before us. That was why these figures stirred such alarm in the secular media, why they created some heartburn in the mainline Protestant denominations, and why they produced just a little power-mongering amongst evangelicals. But it has turned out to be an optical illusion. The reality that we have to face today is that we have produced a plague of *nominal evangelicalism* which is as trite and as superficial as anything we have seen in Catholic Europe.

Now, why is this? Well, I would like to suggest that it begins with the crumbling of our theological character. I have spoken of this in my book, *No Place for Truth*, in terms of the “disappearance of theology.” It is not that theological beliefs are denied, but that they have little cash value. They don’t matter. I likened the situation to that of a child who is in a home but who is ignored. It is not that the child has been abducted; the child is still there. The child is in the home, but has no legitimate place in the family. And, again, research which I have had conducted strongly points to the fact that where this kind of theological character is crumbling, there the centrality of God is disappearing. God now comes to rest lightly and inconsequentially upon the Church. This however, is just our own private, evangelical version of what we see more generally in the culture. In the broader culture we learn that 91% of people say that God is very important to them but 66% go on to say that they do not believe in moral absolutes, and 67% do not believe in absolute truth. So God rests inconsequentially upon their lives.

An evangelical faith that is not passionate about truth and righteousness is a faith which is a lost cause. All that it will then be living for is simply its own organizational preservation. Last century William James saw this same sort of mindset at work. The entire modern deification of survival, he said, “with the denial of any semblance of excellence in what survived, except the capacity for more survival still, is surely the strangest intellectual stopping place ever.” Stanley Fish, the radical deconstructionist, in his latest book says that since there is no such thing as truth, all that we have left is power, politics and persuasion. Given his premise, he is right and I can tell you that if we do not recover our theological character and our sense of truth, in the same way, all that we are going to have left is power, politics and persuasion. Those will be the only means we will be left for survival. If this is an accurate analysis, where are we going to start in finding some new directions?

In a recent book, *The Churching of America: Winners and Losers in the Religious Economy*, Fink and Stark developed an interesting thesis. Just as

there is commercial economy, they say, so there is a religious economy. That is to say, there are cultural circumstances which encourage the success of some religious movements and discourages the success of others. I think that they are right. However, there is one small section of that book that seems to have been overlooked. What they say here is that regardless of how much success the culture bestows upon a religious movement, it will never survive long term unless it has what they call, “a vivid other worldliness.” Without looking at evangelicals directly, they have in actual fact put their finger on our Achilles heel. For amidst all of the abundance in our world, all of the accoutrements that go with a successful movement, a vivid other worldliness is often conspicuous by its absence. If we cannot reverse ourselves at this point, we are headed towards the oblivion of irrelevance before God. So how are we going to recover a vivid other worldliness? Perhaps it consists in many things, but I single out just two which I think are central.

The Lost Word

First, we must recover the lost Word of God. The problem is not, of course, that the Bible itself has disappeared. There are, in fact, enough Bibles in America to put one in every home. No, the problem is that we are not *hearing* the Word of God. It does not rest consequentially upon us. It does not cut. And it is surely one of the great ironies of our time that in the 1970s and 80s so much effort was put into defining inspiration and looking at what were the best words to express and protect it. And while all of that work was going on, unnoticed by us, the Church was quietly unhitching itself from the truth of Scripture in *practice*. Biblical inspiration was affirmed but its consequences were not working out for our preaching, our techniques for growing the Church, our techniques for healing our own fractured selves. These all happened largely without the use of Scripture. It is as if we think that while the Bible is inspired, it is nevertheless inadequate to the tasks of sustaining and nourishing the twentieth-century Church! It is almost as if God, when He inspired the Word could not see what was coming in the late twentieth century! The result of this divine myopia is that He has left us with something that is inadequate to the great challenges that we face today.

If we do not recover the sufficiency of the Word of God in our time, if we do not relearn what it means to be sustained by it, nourished by it, disciplined by it, and unless our preachers find the courage again to preach its truth, to allow their sermons to be defined by its truth, we will lose our right to call ourselves Protestants, we will lose our capacity to be

the people of God, and we will set ourselves on a path that leads right into the old discredited liberal Protestantism. We have to recover a vivid otherworldliness by making ourselves once again captives to the truth of God regardless of the cultural consequences. So that is the first thing.

The Lost Vision

Second, it will be impossible to recover a vivid otherworldliness without recovering a fresh vision of God as *holy*. We, today, are actually on the verge of a fresh theological discovery of a very different kind. It is that God is centrally love and that He is only peripherally and remotely holy. And in so doing we are on the verge of standing Scripture on its head. No, the holiness of God is not peripheral. It is central, and without this holiness our faith loses its meaning entirely. As P. T. Forsyth declared a century ago, “sin is but the defiance of God’s holiness, grace is but its action upon sin, the cross is but its victory, and faith is but its worship.” And so without a compelling vision of the holiness of God, worship inevitably loses its awe, the truth of God’s Word loses its interest, obedience loses its virtue, and the Church loses its moral authority. And it is precisely here that modernity, which is more or less synonymous with “the world” in the New Testament, has made its deepest intrusion into the life of the Church. Modernity has rearranged our appetites.

Because of our therapeutic culture, we favor relational matters over those that are moral, the consequence of which is that God’s holiness is pushed into the background and His love is brought into the foreground. Mysticism then flourishes and cognitive conviction retreats. Self-surrender is devalued and self-fulfillment is prized. Preoccupation with character fades and fascination with personality and self-image advances. The God in whom love has replaced wrath produces a Christianity that is appealing for its civility, but one that has no serious Word for a world which is racked by evil. It is a form of belief that is sympathetic but not searching, that lends its ear but not its revelation of the Holy One. Without the holiness of God, sin is just failure—but not failure before God! It is failure without the presumption of guilt, without retribution, indeed without any serious moral meaning at all. And without the holiness of God, grace is no longer grace. It is not grace from God, grace from the God who, against His own holy nature, has reconciled sinners to Himself in Christ. And without justification there is no gospel, and without the gospel, there is no Christianity. So if we lose sight of the holiness of *God*, we lose sight of entire faith and we lose the right to call ourselves Protestants in any recognizably historical sense.

Until this is seen afresh, until it enters the very innermost fibers of our being, our virtue is going to be without seriousness, our believing without gravity, our practice without moral pungency, our worship without joyful seriousness, and our preaching without power. And without these virtues, these virtues of an historic Protestant faith, the Church today is simply going to become just one more special interest in a world that is awash with special interests. Modernity will not have its power to rearrange our inner lives destroyed. What is most lost is what most needs to be recovered. It is the unsettling, disconcerting, moral presence of God in our midst. He can no longer be the junior partner in our religious enterprises and He can never be just an ornamental decoration upon our Church life. It is because God now rests so inconsequentially upon the Church that the Church is free to plot and devise its success in its own way. That is why so many of our forebears in the faith would scarcely even recognize us as their children today.

Today, the evangelical world is bleeding. We have lived off the accumulated capital of those who worked so hard in the post-War years and we have not renewed it. Fifty-one years ago, Harold John Ockenga addressed the National Association of Evangelicals when it was very much in its infancy. He spoke of the crisis in Western civilization and of the responsibilities evangelicals had. Let me quote from his address: "this nation in its maturity," he said, "is passing through a crisis which is enmeshing western civilization. Confusion exists on every hand. We are living in a very difficult and bewildering time, but few people realize what tremendous change we are undergoing." And he continued, "The hour has arrived when the people of this nation must think deeply or be damned. We must recognize that we are standing at the cross-roads and that there are only two ways that lie open before us. One is the road of the rescue of Western civilization by a re-emphasis on the revival of evangelical Christianity. The other is a return to the dark ages of heathendom, which powerful force is emerging in every phase of our lives today." Those were prophetic words and if I am not mistaken, we, today, despite all of our prosperity, have little left of what it takes to impact our secular world. That is the irony of our success!

And so may God give us the willingness to repent where we must and may He give us again the desire to think large thoughts of Him and His truth. And may He enable us to disengage our faith from the culture in order that we might freshly re-engage the culture out of a passionate concern for truth and righteousness. This is a time when we can seek again the grace of God to these ends. Let us seek His grace so that the evangelicism that we leave behind, that which the coming generation sees, is one that is filled with the excellence of the knowledge of God. Amen. ☪

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