

## DENOMINATIONS AND THE HOPE OF EVANGELICAL RENEWAL

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“What hath Wheaton to do with Nashville?”

The sentiment behind Tertullian’s famous quotation regarding Athens and Jerusalem might well have been expressed by a number of Southern Baptists in the late 1970s and early 1980s—a time of controversy in the Convention when certain evangelical leaders (whose primary geographical center was in Chicagoland) participated in a strange dance with certain Baptist leaders (whose center was in Nashville), at times aligned in partnership, at other times keeping distance, often more than arm’s length.

The controversy between Baptist and evangelical identity came into its most clear and concise form in a debate between James Leo Garrett and E. Glenn Hinson in 1982 (later published in book form),<sup>1</sup> a time when the SBC was embroiled in bitter controversy over the nature of the Bible. Luminaries in the evangelical movement—men like Francis Schaeffer, Harold Lindsell, and Carl Henry—offered crucial support to conservatives in the SBC who insisted on the importance of believing in the Bible’s inerrancy. Concerned about doctrinal drift in the Convention, many Southern Baptists looked outside the SBC, particularly to leaders in the north, for energy and support in their “battle for the Bible.”

It may come as a surprise to younger Baptists to hear that it was Hinson, the moderate Baptist scholar, who argued against linking Southern Baptists with the evangelical movement. Hinson saw evangelicalism as a northern phenomenon with aspects that resembled fundamentalism. Garrett saw Southern Baptists as fitting comfortably within the history of evangelicalism as a renewal movement, although he believed the Southern Baptist denominational identity was crucial and not to be underestimated.

Forty years later, critics of the evangelical movement are more likely

<sup>1</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982).

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to come from the right, not the left. Pastors and leaders concerned about the doctrinal and ethical drift of many evangelical leaders and institutions argue against linking Southern Baptist identity with the evangelical movement, sometimes for good reason. In certain cases, the church growth movement has led to a focus on pragmatism that often downplays the seriousness of Christian doctrine. In other cases, doctrinal drift has marked the once-burgeoning Emerging Church movement, or recent discussions around a post-evangelical identity or deconstruction of the faith. Some theological proposals today get labeled “progressive,” when there is little to distinguish the views from mainline Protestant liberalism.

As governmental and cultural pressures on traditional Christianity multiply, and as threats to religious liberty become more common in the future, theologically conservative evangelicals who belong to smaller denominations or are part of the rise of non-denominational churches may feel the need to hoist a flag with likeminded Christians in order to bolster the strength of their defense. New coalitions are forming. Church planting movements are multiplying. Well-established evangelical publishers and institutions are reconsidering their roles in the fast-changing landscape of evangelicalism.

The question forty years ago was this: would evangelicals be part of the renewal of the Southern Baptist Convention? The question today is: will Southern Baptists be part of the renewal of evangelicalism?

In considering this question, we must widen the lens and take a broader look at the definition of evangelicalism, how it relates to the Southern Baptist Convention, and then consider the current context of churchgoing, identification, and the future of denominations, which I liken to houses in a neighborhood.

## I. DEFINING EVANGELICAL

The question of defining evangelicalism—the core features that mark this movement, as well as its boundaries—is ever-present, and the different ways of asking and answering the question lead to wildly divergent viewpoints. From a global perspective, Mark Noll can claim evangelical Christianity as “the second largest grouping of Christian believers in the world,” behind Roman Catholics, and—aside from Muslims and Hindus—bigger than all other world religions.<sup>2</sup> John Wolffe believes

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<sup>2</sup>Mark Noll, “What is an Evangelical?,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

evangelicals make up a tenth of the world's population, and although he acknowledges "the fluidity and individualism" of evangelicals can make it difficult to assess the strength and size of the movement today, he points back to a prehistory that extends to the early church and a more recent origin in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

British scholar David Bebbington is known best for his description of four major traits of evangelicalism (biblicism, conversionism, cruci-centrism, and activism). This definition played a major role in a book released a decade ago, in which four scholars ("fundamentalist," "confessional," "generic," and "post-conservative") debated the meaning of the term and the spectrum of Christians encompassed by it.<sup>4</sup> A more recent proposal comes from historian Thomas Kidd: "Evangelicals are born-again Protestants who cherish the Bible as the Word of God and who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. This definition hinges upon three aspects of what it means to be an evangelical: being born again, the primacy of the Bible, and the divine presence of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup>

The situation is complicated in the United States, where it is often humorously said "An evangelical is someone who likes Billy Graham and likes to debate the definition of 'evangelical!'" The sociological definition, based either on self-identification or on denominations associated with the evangelical movement, is often contested by those who prefer a more theologically or historically informed definition.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, some researchers have attempted to define evangelicalism by doctrinal and ecclesial commitments, discovering that many who adhere to common evangelical beliefs do not claim the label for themselves, while many who do not adhere to common evangelical beliefs wear the badge proudly, usually while going into the voting booth.

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<sup>3</sup>John Wolffe, "Who Are Evangelicals? A History," in *Evangelicals Around the World: A Global Handbook for the 21st Century*, ed. Brian C. Stiller, Todd M. Johnson, Karen Stiller, and Mark Hutchinson (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 32.

<sup>4</sup>Kevin T. Bauder, R. Albert Mohler Jr., John G. Stackhouse Jr., and Roger Olson, *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is An Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 4.

<sup>6</sup>For the former, see Ryan P. Burge, *20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 11-20. For the latter, see Ryan P. Burge and Andrew T. Walker, "Is 'Evangelical' a Historical, Theological, or Political Identity?" Good Faith Debates, Gospel Coalition video, 1:02:10, June 1, 2022, <https://thegospelcoalition.org/video/good-faith-debate-evangelical-identity/>.

It is the close association of evangelicals with the Religious Right that has caused confusion in recent years. The term has evolved from its American manifestation as a renewal project in the middle years of the twentieth century. At first, American evangelicals provided a counterpoint both to the isolationist tendencies of fundamentalists, on the one hand, and to the modernists who held unorthodox views of Scripture on the other. It was the movement's political mobilization in the 1980s that altered the landscape, leading to a present-day scenario in which a tiny percentage of Muslims and Hindus now claim the label "evangelical," most likely because they see it as a label meaning "religiously devout and politically conservative."<sup>7</sup>

Anyone addressing this question in the United States must consider whether to define evangelicals by those who identify as such, or the way political pundits do, or by core doctrinal commitments. I advocate for a variation of the doctrinal definition, but I do so with eyes wide open to the fact many more claim the label, while many who fit the doctrinal description do not want the label at all. I do not think we can dismiss self-identifying evangelicals who hold to theological or political positions we find problematic (whether on the political right or theological left). Neither can we dismiss brothers and sisters who hold tightly to evangelical distinctives and yet want nothing to do with the label.

All of this leads me to something like a two-track understanding of evangelicalism, a way of holding together an aspirational definition and a cultural one. There is evangelicalism as a renewal movement based on common beliefs and distinctives, and evangelicalism as a sociological and political phenomenon. The first is more aspirational and more closely aligned to the movement's roots (as well as its global connections), while the second is a sociological manifestation of varying traits of evangelical culture (even if the core beliefs and distinctives are no longer present).

Some wonder if we should give up the term "evangelical" because it has become hopelessly compromised in the American context. I would rather reclaim the historic meaning of the term. Just as there are Baptist churches far from where I believe true Baptists should be doctrinally (on one side Westboro Baptist Church and on the other First Baptist Church of America), it must be possible to hold both the historic definition and

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<sup>7</sup> Ryan P. Burge, "What's Up with Born-Again Muslims? And What Does That Tell Us About American Religion?", posted March 2, 2021, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2021/03/02/whats-up-with-born-again-muslims-and-what-does-that-tells-us-about-american-religion>.

acknowledge the contemporary de-formation at the same time. And, as we consider the situation globally, we must remember that evangelicalism is not solely an American reality. The word has different connotations in different contexts. It has a rich history that spans generations (even preceding the American neo-evangelical movement). It is a narrow and American-centered view of the world to allow American controversies to define the movement.

Debates over the definition of evangelicalism will likely persist into the next generation, but the good news is, we do not have to choose between preserving the best of our evangelical heritage and reforming whatever needs to change. At its core, evangelicalism is about renewal. That is the best thing evangelicals have to offer, and right now, it is something the church needs in many denominational settings.

## II. EVANGELICALS AND SOUTHERN BAPTISTS TOGETHER

The debate over evangelicalism as a renewal movement and its connection to the Southern Baptist Convention has taken twists and turns in recent decades. By the time Hinson and Garrett debated the relationship, the sticking point was the close identification of northern evangelicals with their fundamentalist roots, particularly on how best to articulate the nature of biblical inspiration and authority, as well as the fast-growing political mobilization of conservative evangelical churches for the Republican Party.

The framing of James Tull's introduction and Hinson's contribution warn that a restrictive reversion to fundamentalism now defines evangelicalism, which leads to the compromise of Baptist distinctives, most notably the doctrine of soul competency and anti-creedalism. Hinson shows the connection between these two beliefs, claiming the historical pedigree of E. Y. Mullins:

The lordship of Christ and the competency of the person signify that no priest, church, or earthly government has a right to interpose itself between God and the human soul. This twin affirmation involves the authority of the Scriptures, for no ecclesiastical institution has the right to interject a creed or a prescribed practice which infringes upon the right of private interpretation. It involves the belief in the "New Testament as our only rule of faith and practice."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Garrett, Hinson, and Tull, *Are Southern Baptists "Evangelicals"?*, 30.

Hinson goes further to explain why the tradition of Baptists is to reject all manmade traditions, that “the Baptist tradition” refers not to common beliefs but “the essence or spirit of a movement,” so that the tradition is to follow our ancestors in “kicking and screaming” against “efforts to impose uniformity either in worship or in faith and practice.”<sup>9</sup> Such a move would compromise the conviction that faith must be free and voluntary.

The implications of this view of Baptist identity quickly become clear, in stark form, beyond the question of biblical inerrancy. If one’s own status before God, apart from any mediator or outside authority, is a key component of Baptist identity, then who are we to claim that someone cannot be truly Baptist, even if he or she believes that Christ, “without the resuscitation of his dead body, now lives at the right hand of God, in the lives of his disciples, and works for the redemption of the world”?<sup>10</sup>

Hinson called for “a sharpening of the distinction between Baptists and other Christians,” so as to avoid the “grave danger of letting our association with evangelicals and evangelicalism of a particular type obscure and even obliterate voluntarist perceptions which stand most at the center of our life together as Baptists.” When it comes to biblical authority, Hinson warned, evangelicals assign priority to the Scriptures and to creeds as the objective Word of God, when Baptists prioritize the response of believers as a subjective Word.<sup>11</sup>

Ten years later, in 1993, Hinson clarified that he did not argue “Baptists are not evangelicals” but wanted to say that Baptists are *other than* evangelicals.<sup>12</sup> This aligned with his earlier contention, that it would be better for Baptists to preserve a sense of identity over against evangelicalism.

In his counterpoint, James Leo Garrett claimed it is accurate to situate the SBC within the evangelical movement, with the label “denominational evangelicals.” Garrett traced the development of neo-evangelicalism from the fundamentalist/modernist controversies of the early twentieth century. He defended his view by pointing to the obvious overlap between Southern Baptists and evangelicals (including a missionary impulse, a focus on forgiveness of sins through Christ’s redemptive work, and a high view of God’s revelation through Scripture).<sup>13</sup> Even if Southern Baptists must be

<sup>9</sup>Garrett, Hinson, and Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?*, 14.

<sup>10</sup>Garrett, Hinson, and Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?*, 28-29.

<sup>11</sup>Garrett, Hinson, and Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?*, 165, 169, 174.

<sup>12</sup>E. Glenn Hinson, “One Baptist’s Dream,” in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 202.

<sup>13</sup>Garrett, Hinson, and Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?*, 118.

described as “unmistakably and intentionally denominationalists,” there’s no denying the areas of doctrinal agreement on justification by grace through faith or regeneration by the Holy Spirit, the supreme authority of the Scriptures, and the deity of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Garrett believed Hinson “underemphasized the common roots which both evangelicals and Baptists have in Puritanism,” and had thus set up an antithesis unwarranted by Baptist history itself, the Baptist understanding of the authority of the Bible, the role of confessions of faith, and the Baptist commitment to religious freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Forty years later after this important debate, the context has changed. In the past few decades, we have seen an explosion of non-denominational churches across the country. Many of these are, in terms of doctrine and practice, Baptist, which has prompted the Christian comedian Tim Hawkins to joke about non-denominational Christians: “You’re not fooling anyone; you’re just a Baptist church with a cool website!” These churches are often marked by a connection to the Charismatic Movement as well. One of the biggest shifts in American church culture in the past forty years has been the rise of non-denominational churches along with new networks that act as quasi-denominations.<sup>16</sup>

These new networks have often led to pressures on older denominations and institutions, as it can be difficult for established groups to match the nimble nature of the newer forms and networked abilities. In addition to the rise of new networks, society’s embrace of expressive individualism has fueled the rise of something cultural observer Tara Isabella Burton calls *intuitional* religion, as opposed to its traditional, institutional forms. She describes it as follows:

a new, eclectic, chaotic, and thoroughly, quintessentially American religion. A religion of emotive intuition, of aestheticized and commodified experience, of self-creation and self-improvement, and yes, selfies. A religion for a new generation of Americans raised to think of themselves both as capitalist consumers and as content creators. A religion decoupled from institutions, from creeds, from metaphysical truth-claims about God or the universe of the Way Things Are, but that still seeks—in various and varying ways—to provide us with the

<sup>14</sup>Garrett, Hinson, and Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”*?, 126.

<sup>15</sup>Garrett, Hinson, and Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”*?, 122.

<sup>16</sup>Frank Newport, “More U. S. Protestants Have No Specific Denominational Identity,” Gallup, July 18, 2017, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/214208/protestants-no-specific-denominational-identity.aspx>.

pillars of what religion always has: meaning, purpose, community, and ritual.<sup>17</sup>

This is not only a description of the religiously unaffiliated, but also of many people in more established religious communities. We see a spiritual fluidity where many church-going Christians believe things that are fundamentally incompatible with orthodox Christian doctrine.

Several developments strain the evangelical consensus: the explosion of non-denominational churches and new networks, the benefits and drawbacks of the church when tightly connected to political parties, the rise of intuitional spirituality in place of institutional authority, and the cultural pressures evident in sexual revolution ideology and identity politics. Not surprisingly, some leaders, churches, and denominations historically associated with evangelicalism have drifted from biblical authority, leading others to wonder if an ever-enlarging evangelical tent is sustainable. Today, the Southern Baptists most likely to fret about the evangelical ethos making headway in the Convention are those on the right, who believe evangelicalism as a movement has strayed from sound doctrine. For reasons opposite of Hinson forty years ago, some Southern Baptists believe we need to reestablish our Baptist convictions over and against a wider evangelical movement that has gone astray.

### III. THE PLACE OF DENOMINATIONS IN EVANGELICAL RENEWAL

If the situation forty years ago was one where Southern Baptists needed help from evangelicals, today we wonder the reverse: are ailing evangelicals in need of help from Southern Baptists?

The only way this question makes sense is if Southern Baptists are doctrinally sound and spiritually healthy enough to provide support and ballast to a drifting evangelical movement, and if denominations will be part of evangelical renewal in the first place. Considering the rise of new networks and non-denominational churches, why would we consider a role for denominations in the future?

We could begin with the objection to denominations, or at least the concern that these visible divisions are in direct disobedience to Christ or contrary to His expressed will. “Christendom has often achieved success by ignoring the precepts of its founder,” wrote H. Richard Niebuhr nearly

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<sup>17</sup>Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 2-3.



a hundred years ago.<sup>18</sup> “Denominationalism in the Christian church is... an unacknowledged hypocrisy. It is a compromise, made far too lightly, between Christianity and the world,” he wrote. He continues, “The division of the churches closely follows the division of men into the castes of national, racial, and economic groups.”<sup>19</sup>

For Niebuhr, it is too simplistic to think that denominations can be explained merely by creedal differences. On the contrary, many churches and groups are divided by color and class. The creedal differences, while important, are often a respectable gloss on a more scandalous reason for contemporary divisions.<sup>20</sup>

Since the Reformation, church history offers many sad examples that buttress Niebuhr’s thesis. Perhaps the most notable example is in the birth of the Black Church tradition, when Richard Allen, a former slave who learned to preach under Methodist leader Francis Asbury, walked out of St. George’s Methodist Church in 1787 with his associate Absalom Jones and several other black people who were accosted after kneeling in new pews that had been reserved for whites. That walkout was the beginning of Bethel Church, known as “Mother Bethel,” and the seeds were planted that would blossom into the African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>21</sup> This is a clear example of a denominational identity that began, not due to doctrinal differences, but to racial and class differences due to the assumptions of white supremacy at the time.

Niebuhr’s point is well taken: As denominations and groups develop over time, the doctrinal distinctives that may have had a supporting role in one era begin to take on a greater contrast in another. The same can happen in reverse, with doctrinal differences fading to the background and other aspects of culture and class coming to the forefront. Still, we must grapple with the distinctive groups as they are today, not as we might want them to be. What is the best way to look at different denominations within evangelicalism?

1. *The House and the Neighborhood*. A healthy way of looking at the presence of different denominations today would be to think of

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<sup>18</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1929), 3.

<sup>19</sup>Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 6.

<sup>20</sup>Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 12-14.

<sup>21</sup>Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

inhabiting a house in a friendly neighborhood.

First, consider the house itself. A house must have walls and structures. Some of those walls and structures are loadbearing. You remove them at your peril and may damage the integrity of the house or lead to its collapse. A beautiful home contains furniture. Some of the furniture may give the house a sense of character and personality.

Great houses are often big, with many rooms, and larger denominations often have subgroups that live comfortably in the home, in one wing of the house or another. More than a decade ago, David S. Dockery categorized Southern Baptists in this way: fundamentalists, revivalists, traditionalists, orthodox evangelicals, Calvinists, contemporary church practitioners, and culture warriors.<sup>22</sup> We might tweak the description of those groups a little today, based upon new debates and challenges, but even now, these disparate groups with various emphases can inhabit different rooms and live comfortably within the same structure.

A house with history also comes with stories and narratives. I recently had the opportunity to spend some time in the home of one of my literary heroes, G. K. Chesterton. Not only is the house interesting from an architectural standpoint, with its own integrity and protection as a notable house with government restrictions on the owners, but it also shines with stories—the notable people who passed through to visit, the plays that went on in the built-in studio theater, the study where Chesterton would write his great works and then steal out into the garden to cut heads off flowers, and the morbid yet comical picture of a group of men, shortly after Chesterton's death, trying to get his massive coffin down a tight spiral staircase.

Great houses come with stories of heroes and narratives of key moments, and the same is true of denominations. The story of past successes and failures, conviction and compromise, heroes and role models—all of these are vital for a house to feel like a home.

Consider also the presence of a neighborhood. Why is it important for those of us who live in the Baptist house to recognize the other homes nearby? Because we are not alone. And our roots go deeper than the current home in which we reside.

First, we share common ground. Creation is the stage upon which redemption plays out. In this shared realm—in which we all benefit from

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<sup>22</sup>David S. Dockery, ed., *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 11.

the sky and sun, wind and rain—we recognize this solid earth beneath our feet connects us to the rest of the world, and to other churches, and it is here we exercise Luther’s four callings: family, church, workplace, and community.

Second, we share a common creed, in that we adhere to the Nicene Faith. We recognize the specific contributions of our own home, but as part of a larger tradition that goes back to the apostles. As the Center for Baptist Renewal has put it: “We affirm the distinctive contributions of the Baptist tradition as a renewal movement within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. These contributions include emphasis on the necessity of personal conversion, a regenerate church, believers’ baptism, congregational governance, and religious liberty.” At the same time, “We encourage a critical but charitable engagement with the whole church of the Lord Jesus Christ, both past and present. We believe Baptists have much to contribute as well as much to receive in the great collection of traditions that constitute the holy catholic church.”<sup>23</sup>

Third, we can make common cause with believers who reside in other homes. Because we believe the gospel is public truth, not a private revelation, we recognize that all believers offer the world some sort of public witness, whether they realize it or not. We can partner with and benefit from believers in other denominational homes who provide a faithful witness to Christ in areas of art, science, education, politics, sports and entertainment, business and entrepreneurship, etc. Making common cause reminds us of the importance of considering not only the reputation of our house, but the entire Christian neighborhood.

2. *The Necessity of Institutions.* Of course, some question the need for houses altogether. Are they not cumbersome? Do not old houses need constant work of renovation and repair? Wouldn’t we be better off to throw together mini-houses, or live in RVs, or find a place in one hotel or another? Perhaps some Christians might choose to live this way, eschewing denominations in favor of independent congregations, and yes, choosing to be “renters” rather than “owners” does allow for a level of mobility you might otherwise miss.

But there is something to be said for denominations, just as there’s something to be said for houses. Those who decide to stay unaffiliated—to

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<sup>23</sup>Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and Lucas E. Stamps, eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), 353.

rent rather than put down roots—often find it necessary to draw from the benefits of stronger ecclesial connections. Even fiercely independent congregations naturally gravitate toward some kind of communion or network with other likeminded churches. It is true that denominations all have limitations—certain strengths and weaknesses—but there are many possibilities for collaboration and mutual strengthening.

We live in an age that is (often rightly) suspicious of institutions, and there is narrative drama in being “anti-institutional” in some way, the startup versus the established. But institutions are inevitable at some level. As Ray Ortlund has pointed out:

An institution is a social mechanism where life-giving human activities can be nurtured and protected and sustained. Some aspects of life should be unscheduled, spontaneous, random. But not all of life should be. What an institution does is structure a desirable experience, so that it becomes repeatable on a regular basis. Institutions are not a problem. But institutionalization is. An institution is meant to enrich life. But institutionalization takes that good thing and turns it into death. How? The institutional structure, the mechanism, takes on its own inherent purpose.<sup>24</sup>

A healthy denomination, much like a healthy house, does not exist for its own sake. It is open for the benefit of others, and it serves a purpose for those who live there, to be a place of refreshment and empowerment for the larger mission of God. It is when the people who live in a house become overly focused on the structure itself, rather than its purpose, that institutionalization squeezes the life out of the movement that led to its construction in the first place. As Ed Stetzer said a decade ago in reference to the SBC: “Being consumed with the machine of the denomination distracts us from the mission of the church. The goal is joining God on His mission, and denominations are merely a tool to that end. But we often turn tools into rules, and our focus becomes the machine instead of the mission. A denomination should exist to help us live sent rather than maintain a structure.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ray Ortlund, Jr. “Is Your Church an Institution?” Gospel Coalition, May 23, 2017, <https://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/is-your-church-institution/>.

<sup>25</sup>Ed Stetzer, “Denominationalism: Is There a Future?” in *Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and the Future of Denominationalism*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 40.

The problem we face today is an institutional crisis. We have hollowed out the ability for our institutions to deliver the weight of the expectations we put upon them, as Yuval Levin has pointed out.<sup>26</sup> In an individualistic world, we tend to think of freedom as the escape of institutional constraints, rather than the need to be formed and molded by those who have gone before us, or the community in which we are present. The renewal of evangelicalism will not take place apart from institutional forms, whatever those forms might take. Denominations will be a critical part of that future.

3. *The Importance of Cooperation.* If we look at denominations as houses, the question might arise: why not live alone? Why is the house necessary?

In the past, most denominations have answered this question by pointing to the mission and the essential nature of cooperation in fulfilling that mission. The point of being a homeowner is not merely to renew the house and take on various renovation projects, but to establish a home base from which to venture out into the world. And so, a good neighbor may agree to help better and beautify other homes in the neighborhood, just as leaders and pastors in one denomination may benefit from or contribute to the growth of leaders and pastors in another.

When J. B. Gambrell in 1901 answered the question of why Baptist churches unite in the form of a Convention, he said, the purpose was “to promote cooperation in matters of common concern.”<sup>27</sup> As Southern Baptists are fond of saying today, “We can do more together than we can apart.”

But the decision to live together—the agreement to take up rooms in the house and to come together for common mission—requires us to focus on the purpose, not the process. As Gambrell wrote:

Boards are channels, not fountains. They are means, not forces. The churches use them to convey their contributions as men turn a thousand streams into one channel to carry their united volume of water to arid plains that they may be watered and become fruitful fields. To elicit, combine and direct the energies of willing workers for the carrying out of the will of Christ is the function of a convention,

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<sup>26</sup>Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

<sup>27</sup>J. B. Gambrell, “Why Conventions of Baptist Churches,” in *Baptist Why And Why Not*, ed. J. M. Frost (Nashville: The Baptist Sunday School Board, 1901), 286.

and this it does, not by authority, but by persuasion and the influence of intelligent piety.<sup>28</sup>

Cooperation matters when it comes to churches within the same denomination (just as people inhabiting different rooms in a mansion will come together for common cause), but cooperation also matters when it comes to churches from different denominations. The neighborhood is stronger when the various strengths on display in different homes are mutually available. We can trust that the Spirit is at work in other churches, and we believe He is active in nourishing, empowering, restraining, and enabling other believers. The Spirit is the common bond and unity for all believers, no matter which denomination, much like all the homes in a neighborhood are connected to a common water supply and electrical grid.

The *Baptist Faith and Message* (Article 14) encourages this kind of cross-denominational cooperation. A good homeowner extends the hand of fellowship to like-minded neighbors, which is why we should seek to strengthen the growing number of coalitions, encourage gospel-proclaiming denominations, and cheer on various church-planting movements. Conservative evangelicals need strength and support in their efforts to reclaim the center of evangelical identity.

Cooperation always comes with a risk. Cooperation can lead to the watering down of conviction or doctrinal distinctives. It is not wrong for some Southern Baptists to feel threatened by what this sort of evangelical networking might mean for the future of the Convention. There are some who feel that the purity of Southern Baptist identity will be polluted if we join coalitions or encourage other networks. This was the view of Hinson from the moderate side forty years ago, and it is often the view today from some on the right in Southern Baptist life.

But the cooperative spirit, when buttressed by security in what we believe and why, should cause us to bring others into the house who agree with our basic beliefs rather than causing us to pull up the drawbridge, hunker down on our hill, and refuse temporary shelter for the evangelical homeless. David S. Dockery is right:

Denominations that thrive will remain connected by conviction to Scripture, the gospel, and their tradition, while working and exploring ways to partner with affinity groups

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<sup>28</sup>Gambrell, "Why Conventions," 288.

and networks moving out of their insularity and seeking to understand better the changing global context around us. Learning to work afresh in cooperative ways will be important, with denominations no longer seeing themselves as rivals with either the networks or other denominations, looking instead for commonalities while working together with other special-interest groups.<sup>29</sup>

4. *The Need for Clear Boundaries, but Not Impenetrable Walls.* A healthy house has clear and visible structures. Imagine a neighborhood with distinct homes perhaps even with a fence, but the gate is unlocked, so as to provide easy access to people from other homes, and to allow people who live there to freely visit others. A vibrant neighborhood is a place where people feel a sense of camaraderie, where it is not a threat to spend time outdoors, to enjoy the occasional block party, to get together to watch fireworks, or to share a common pool.

In the same way, a well-established house and yard need not become a prison for the people inside, or a compound designed to keep people out. Paradoxically, one of the best ways to ensure that people in one home can visit another is by making clear the distinctions between homes. Vibrant denominations have clear lines of distinction.

In one of the first books published by the Baptist Sunday School Board, in 1900, J. M. Frost edited a series of contributions under the title *Baptist Why and Why Not*.<sup>30</sup> Many of the chapters explained why one would be Baptist *and not* Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, Campbellite, etc. Later chapters explained the “why” behind key doctrinal distinctives, such as why “close communion and not open communion,” and why the insistence on “a converted church membership.”

A strong foundation, walls, and rooftops are essential to a healthy house. But even here, with these clear lines of distinction, with a fence erected around the yard, there remains a sense of openness, a welcome to visitors who may occupy other houses in the neighborhood, as long as they share the same bedrock conviction of submitting to Scripture and living under its authority, while adhering to the essentials of the Christian faith as articulated in the great Christian creeds and as witnessed by the global

<sup>29</sup>Dockery, “So Many Denominations: The Rise, Decline, and Future of Denominationalism,” in *Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and the Future of Denominationalism* (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 25.

<sup>30</sup>J. M. Frost, ed., *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1901).

Christian church through the ages.

Denominations that compromise their convictions often try to enlarge the house so much that it eventually loses its integrity in trying to accommodate everyone and everything. We ought instead to be okay with blessing someone out of our fellowship and waving at them as they move to a different house, if their beliefs have shifted into better alignment elsewhere. This is best for denominational integrity.

I recall a small Baptist church a few years ago that wrestled with admitting a Presbyterian family into membership without undergoing baptism by immersion after a confession of faith. When I counseled the church, I told them that—should their church go in this direction—they would, in effect, cease to belong to the denomination of which they were part. They would be more akin to the Evangelical Free Church of America, which receives as valid infant baptism (though believer's baptism remains the norm). The church decided against this move, choosing to happily stay in the home they had started in. My point was not to decry or diminish the wonderful churches that belong to the EFCA. It was simply to say that *this is a question of identity, and if you make a decision in this way, you are effectively moving from one house to another.*

One cannot endlessly move the boundaries of the house without eventually harming the structure. A house with no walls is not a home. It is not unloving or uncharitable to insist on denominational integrity, just as it is not unloving or uncharitable to recognize the structure of its home and surrounding yard.

5. *Appreciation for Denominational Gifts.* Perhaps the opposite danger of broadening and extending the house is feeling threatened by the existence of neighbors. The denomination that becomes insecure in its convictions and biblical interpretation often compensates by throwing up additional walls and fences, turning the house into something more like a compound, as if everyone in the house needs to be protected from the neighbors. This is often the danger most associated with a neo-fundamentalist mindset—the need is for additional walls, not gates or bridges.

As mentioned above, it is right and proper to insist on denominational integrity. But this can be done in a way that is not hostile toward other homes in the neighborhood. One of the ways we remain good neighbors is by recognizing that we have gifts that others in the neighborhood might benefit from, and that other homes may have strengths that would



strengthen us.

Healthy homes can also give courage and protection to other homes in the neighborhood. Throughout history, we can trace among various denominational traditions a pattern of God using believers from one tradition to warn others about dangers from inside and outside the church. Perhaps this would be the “neighborhood watch” element of a healthy community. Yes, we look to ensure the wellbeing of our own home, but we also notify neighbors when dangers threaten another house.

Relating to people in the denominational neighborhood allows us to work together on certain projects, shave the rough edges off each other, and learn from one another’s strengths and weaknesses. It is myopic to assume that the Holy Spirit is exclusively or primarily at work in only one of the homes in a neighborhood. It would be better to extend the application of the Apostle Paul’s reference to the church as the body of Christ and to recognize distinctive gifts in different communities. Thus, Presbyterians may have something to learn from Baptists in the field of outreach and personal evangelism, and Baptists may have something to learn from Anglican stalwarts of theology, like John Stott and J. I. Packer. The charismatics may be strengthened by another home’s insistence on being tethered to the Word, while denominations that emphasize preaching and Bible study may learn something from the intercessory prayer of those in the Assemblies of God.

My point is not to relativize these homes, to claim they are all equally valid or scripturally the same. It is merely to recognize that each group has a specialty. God is at work in different groups in different ways, and if you visit other homes in the neighborhood, it is very likely that you will enrich your own home because of your experience and common commitment to Christ. As Nathan Finn has written: “Southern Baptists should humbly confess that we are only part of the visible body of Christ and that our own interpretations of numerous doctrines have been influenced by the catholic confessional consensus. We should acknowledge that we have much to learn from other Christian traditions, even as we earnestly and often times prophetically contend for our unique Baptist distinctives.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Nathan Finn, “Priorities for a Post-Resurgence Convention” in *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future*, ed. David Dockery (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 262.

#### IV. EVANGELICAL RENEWAL

If the neighborhood of evangelicalism is in disrepair, with some nearby homes showing cracks in the foundation, the best way Southern Baptists can serve our brothers and sisters is by ensuring that our home is as healthy and robust as it can be. This health will come from both a recognition of our convictions and spiritual gifts, and a willingness to glean from the Spirit's gifts on display in other fellowships.

By renewing our own home, we make the house a place for others to find refreshment and empowerment in engaging in God's mission. We also free ourselves up to strengthen the homes of others, to encourage the faithful to remain tied to sound doctrine, engaged in outreach and evangelism, and committed to the full authority of the Scriptures. I do not see an avenue of evangelical renewal that does not also include the renewal of particular denominational homes. The health of the neighborhood depends in large part on the health and charity of the individual homes. To that end, we ought to see ourselves not as Southern Baptists over against other evangelicals, but as Baptists *among and for* other evangelicals, rooting for our neighbors, conscious of God's work and hopeful in his promise to his church in the future.