

REFLECTIONS ON: ARE SOUTHERN BAPTISTS EVANGELICALS?

An Interview with Timothy George by David S. Dockery

Timothy George serves as distinguished professor at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and president of Evangelical Theological Society. He also serves as general editor of *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*. Editor David Dockery interviewed Timothy George regarding the relationship between Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals.

Q. You served with Glenn Hinson for a time on the faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. You share an alma mater with James Leo Garrett Jr. Given your connections with both of them, might you be able to provide insight for readers of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* regarding the context in which the original conversation between Drs. Hinson and Garrett took place?

A. It was a hot summer day in August 1979 when I drove onto the beautiful campus of Southern Seminary in Louisville. I had spent the last seven years in postgraduate studies at Harvard University and was excited to begin what I hoped would be a lifetime of teaching, research, and service at this historic seminary, whose storied history went back to 1859. I have good memories of those early years at Southern. My faculty colleagues were cordial and welcoming, and my students were bright and eager to learn. I am still in touch with a number of them after all these years. However, those first halcyon days soon gave way to the thunder and smoke of the battlefield. What came to be called the Controversy soon engulfed the entire SBC, with Southern Seminary in the eye of the storm, so to speak.

Midway through my first semester at Southern, Duke K. McCall, the president who had hired me from Harvard, invited several leading critics who represented the SBC conservative resurgence to speak in chapel, including W. A. Criswell, Adrian Rogers, Jimmy Draper, and

Paige Patterson. McCall's "stunt," as someone called it, was met with consternation by many on the faculty, but, although I knew little about SBC politics at that time, I admired his effort at reconciliation—though in retrospect, it did little to heal the breach in the SBC.

Some ten years later, when I was invited to become the founding dean of Beeson Divinity School, I made the following remarks about the kind of school I hoped we would become: "In an age of secularism and relativism, we do not declare theological neutrality. Let it be said for all posterity to hear that we stand without reservation on the total truthfulness of Holy Scripture and the great principles of historic Christian orthodoxy. On these essential values, we cannot and we will not compromise. But we also know that godly teaching must be complemented by holy living, and so we commit ourselves to the disciplines of the Christian faith, to a life of prayer and worship, to witness and discipleship, and to show compassion with justice and peace for every person made in the image of God. In the lingo of contemporary labels, we *will* be neither a haven for disaffected liberalism nor a bastion of raucous fundamentalism. We will be evangelical but also ecumenical, conservative but not irresponsible, confessional yet interdenominational."

Apart from that last word, which is a Beeson distinctive, such was my vision for Southern Seminary during the 1980s, but alas, it was not to be. Still, I welcomed the publication of *Are Southern Baptists Evangelicals?* because it seemed to elevate the discourse beyond the name-calling and rumor-mongering prevalent on both sides at the time.

Q. Can you say a word about how you became acquainted with both scholars?

A. Yes, I had met both Glenn Hinson and James Leo Garrett before I moved to Louisville. I hosted Glenn when he came to New England to lead a Baptist student retreat. He was a senior faculty member at Southern and treated me kindly as I began teaching there. Although I did not share his perspective on Baptist history, I greatly admired his work as a scholar of the early church and his emphasis on spiritual formation. Glenn introduced me to the Quaker scholar, Elton Trueblood, and the Methodist theologian, Geoffrey Wainwright. When Glenn left Southern to teach at Wake Forest University, he asked me to edit the *Baptist Peacemaker*, a journal he had launched several years prior. I did so until my Anabaptist-inspired

pacifism faded as I delved more deeply into the writings of St. Augustine. After moving to Beeson, I had limited contact with Glenn, but I did write him a letter commending his 2012 autobiography, *A Miracle of Grace*, to which he responded kindly.

In our studies at Harvard, James Leo Garrett and I shared a mentor in George Huntston Williams, one of the great church historians of the twentieth century. He had been a Protestant observer at all four sessions of the Second Vatican Council and conveyed his strong ecumenical interests to all his students. Although Baptists had no official representation at Vatican II, through his friendship with Albert Outler, Leo was invited to attend the final session, which dealt with the theme of religious freedom. He was present in 1965 when Pope Paul VI promulgated the Decree on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*). I never studied directly with Leo, but I learned much from his many writings and enjoyed a lively correspondence with him over the years. He contributed a chapter to the first book I published, a *Festschrift* for Williams, and, in turn, I was honored to write a chapter for his *Festschrift*, a collection of essays on the believers' church edited by Paul Basden and David S. Dockery.

Q. To the question of "Are Southern Baptists 'Evangelicals?'" Dr. Hinson and Dr. Garrett provided different answers and perspectives. Could you briefly describe the emphases and perspectives of each?

A. Hinson and Garrett began with different questions, proceeded from different presuppositions, and, not surprisingly, ended up with different conclusions. Hinson's main concern is to show who the (true) Baptists are and how this movement has been hijacked by mean-spirited fundamentalists. Garrett, on the other hand, recognized Baptists as part of a wider evangelical reality which he described historically as encompassing the apostolic faith and the early church (including its creeds and councils), the medieval and Reformation developments, and the various renewal movements coming out of the era of awakenings. Hinson regards evangelicalism as an alien intrusion into Baptist life, a stalking horse or, perhaps better, a trojan horse with its weighty baggage of doctrinal orthodoxy, confessions of faith, theological strictures. For Garrett, Southern Baptists needed to reclaim their evangelical identity through their rediscovery of "the authority of the Bible, the Christocentrism of the gospel, and the coessentiality of witness by word and witness by life." The real question

is: “Will Southern Baptists be in reality conformed to the present age or be transformed as pilgrim people on their way to the City of God?” In other words, will we live for ourselves, in ease and comfort, or will we be “stewards for the billions of the earth for whom Jesus died and rose again?”

Q. The answer to this question seems to be an obvious “yes” to most of our readers in 2023. Why was this a significant disagreement forty years ago?

A. The major significance of the Garrett-Hinson exchange was to show how two mature, well-trained SBC scholars could engage seriously with the underlying issues that were at the very same time ripping apart their denomination. While this exchange did little to stop, or even slow down, the transformation of the SBC already underway, it did inaugurate a new era of fellowship, witness, and mutual exchange between Southern Baptists and the wider evangelical world. Foy Valentine’s oft-quoted quip, “We’re not evangelicals. That’s a Yankee word!” reflected the kind of self-imposed parochialism of the SBC from the 1930s through the 1970s. Whatever broadening influences there were, and there were some, the usual outcome for denominational elites was a one-way ecumenism to the left. Billy Graham, Carl F. H. Henry, and Chuck Colson—all three both evangelicals and Southern Baptists—helped to break through some of these barriers as did movements such as Evangelicals and Catholics Together, which always included Southern Baptists, publications such as *Christianity Today*, which over the past three decades has given wider coverage to Southern Baptists, and the Evangelical Theological Society, which was formed in 1949 of “Yankee evangelicals” almost exclusively, but now is replete with Southern Baptist scholars from a variety of institutions.

Q. Why do you think that Southern Baptists for the most part remained disconnected from major sectors of North American evangelicalism in the middle decades of the twentieth century?

A. Baylor historian Barry Hankins addressed this issue in an important article: “Southern Baptists and Northern Evangelicals: Cultural Factors and the Nature of Religious Alliances” (*Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7:271-298). Southern Baptists and northern evangelicals, he claims, were prevented from forming a fruitful alliance

during the middle decades of the twentieth century because of two factors: (1) Northern evangelicals almost always found their enemies on the left, while Southern Baptists were preoccupied with pesky fundamentalists like J. Frank Norris on the right; (2) Southern Baptists dominated the culture of the South whereas northern evangelicals struggled for recognition and standing as a sequestered minority. This analysis holds true for much of the twentieth century, but everything began to come loose in the 60s. Prior to *Roe v. Wade*, the abortion mentality was embraced, albeit mildly, by SBC officials. But long before Ronald Reagan took up the pro-life cause at the national level, non-Baptist evangelicals such as Francis Schaeffer, D. James Kennedy, and others had put the horror of wholesale abortion on the evangelical agenda. Thus, by the time the Garrett-Hinson exchange took place, Southern Baptists and evangelicals were already forming an alliance that would be transformative for both groups.

Q. You have often affirmed the importance of Southern Baptists being both Baptist and evangelical. Might you help us understand what Dr. Garrett means by his approach to denominational evangelicalism?

A. Garrett and Hinson alike affirmed historic Baptist distinctives such as regenerate church membership, religious freedom, and the non-coercive character of faith. For Hinson, however, the essence of the Baptist tradition can be summarized in the word “voluntarism.” The key theological influence on doctrine-averse libertarian theology, an influence not limited to Baptists, was Friedrich Schleiermacher. He replaced the objectivity of divine revelation with Christian self-consciousness as the starting point for theological reflection. In the end, he decided that certain doctrines could be “entrusted to history for safe keeping,” which meant that much of the orthodox tradition, including the Trinitarian and Christological consensus of the early church along with the great soteriological axioms of the Reformation, could be rendered obsolete for modern/postmodern persons. Although not often mentioned in Baptist debates, another important figure in this development was Ralph Waldo Emerson, a true individualist who found even the strictures of his own unitarian denomination too stifling. Emerson is the forerunner of the nones, the constituency of spiritual but not religious which makes up about 30 percent of the U.S. population. E. Y. Mullins is often cited as belonging to this same trajectory, but a close reading of his works makes this a hard argument to press. Mullins

formulated the concept of soul competency and spent much of his presidency thwarting the fundamentalist advance in his day. Yet it was Mullins, not J. Frank Norris or John R. Rice, who declared before the Southern Baptist Convention in 1923:

We record again our unwavering adherence to the supernatural elements in the Christian religion. The Bible is God's revelation of himself through men moved by the Holy Spirit, and is our sufficient, certain and authoritative guide in religion. Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit. He was the divine and eternal Son of God. He wrought miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead. He died as the vicarious, atoning Saviour of the world, and was buried. He arose again from the dead. The tomb was emptied of its contents. In his risen body he appeared many times to his disciples. He ascended to the right hand of the Father. He will come again in person, the same Jesus who ascended from the Mount of Olives. We believe that adherence to the above truths and facts is a necessary condition of service for teachers in our Baptist schools (*Annual*, Southern Baptist Convention, 1923).

This does not mean that Baptist moderates and liberals have no claim on Mullins as a prophet of progressivism which in some respects he was. However, it does show how, in that era, even progressives like Mullins were committed to a view of Baptist identity with a solid doctrinal core.

Q. What can we learn from Dr. Hinson about understanding Southern Baptists in 2023? What can we learn from Dr. Garrett about understanding Southern Baptists in 2023?

A. My favorite definition of theology comes from the puritan William Ames whose book *The Marrow of Sacred Theology* was the first textbook adopted at Harvard College in 1636. "Theology," he said, "is the science of living in the presence of God." Though their methods, conclusions, and reconstructions of Baptist history differed in significant ways, this quotation embraces the life and witness of both of these distinguished

scholars. It is sometimes difficult to separate theology from polemics and at points the Garrett–Hinson exchange crosses over from the former to the latter. However, in the brief preface they jointly wrote to the book, they declared their intention: “These pages consist of a fraternal debate which has as its purpose the clarification of who Southern Baptists have been, are, and ought to be. It’s purpose is not to divide or disrupt but to enlighten and strengthen.”

What can we learn from E. Glenn Hinson about how to do this? Hinson’s most enduring contribution to Baptist life and thought, I believe, will be in three areas. First, his revitalization of early church history and patristics as a necessary field of study. At a time when Baptist patristics scholars were hard to find anywhere, Hinson forged a new field of study among Baptists. His 1981 book, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire*, remains a classic study of the early church. Second, when Hinson began to teach at Southern, the field of spiritual formation was practically unknown among Protestant seminaries. Now, it is included among the accreditation standards for all seminaries. Hinson’s course on “Classics of Christian Devotion” and his many writings in this area have contributed richly to the study of spirituality as a theological discipline. Third, his commitment to Christian unity and his contributions especially to conciliar ecumenism were pioneering efforts, especially among Southern Baptists.

Two years after the publication of the Garrett–Hinson exchange, Hinson published another scholarly essay with a slightly different perspective: “One Baptist’s Dream: A Denomination Truly Evangelical, Truly Catholic, Truly Baptist.” In this paper, he sets forth a more elastic construal of evangelicalism, one capacious of Southern Baptists shorn of the more acerbic features of fundamentalism. He is not optimistic that the SBC will be able to accommodate such a vision, but he seems to entertain a measure of hope that it might be so. Southern Baptists can, and ought to be “truly” evangelical, just as they can and ought to be “truly” catholic, and “truly” Baptist. Such a vision might come closer to reality if it could be recognized that the real problem with fundamentalism is not so much what it affirms as what it leaves out—its reductionism. To be “truly” evangelical is to move beyond debates over several controverted points to affirm the Great Tradition of Christian believing and living that has marked the people of God at their best ever since Jesus declared that “upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt 16:18).

Now that James Leo Garrett has left this world for a better one, we can

begin to evaluate his many theological contributions, including his probing and affirming of the evangelical character of Southern Baptist witness. Garrett presented the lectures which would form his contribution to *Are Southern Baptists Evangelicals?* in November 1979, one year before Hinson presented the lectures that would constitute his rejoinder. Garrett seemed surprised, perhaps even shocked, that anyone would question whether Southern Baptists were evangelicals. He asserted that, prior to 1980, no responsible Baptist scholar had ever done so! Certainly E.Y. Mullins, whom Hinson cites in support of his perspective, referred to himself and the Baptists he served as evangelical. But for Garrett, this question was not merely about semantics. It had to do with the deeper roots of the Baptist heritage which certainly included religious freedom and liberty of conscience but which reached back much further to the Trinitarian and Christological faith of the early church, the Protestant doctrines of justification by faith alone and the *supremacy* (a word Garrett appropriated from the first article of the *New Hampshire Confession*) of Holy Scripture, as well as the vigorous missionary and revival movements which have extended the evangelical faith to the ends of the earth.

In some ways, the debate of 1983 seems antiquated and musty today as both Southern Baptists and American evangelicals face different and more urgent challenges. But it is good for us to stop, listen, and learn from two of our ablest scholars at a critical juncture both in their careers and in the life of the people of God called Baptists.