

# WHO ARE SOUTHERN BAPTISTS?

Blake McKinney\*

## I. THE DIFFICULTY OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST IDENTITY

Definitions are tricky things. One ancient tale says that Plato defined man as a featherless biped, only to have Diogenes the Cynic respond by plucking a chicken and declaring, “Here is Plato’s man.”<sup>1</sup> The engagement with a voluminous, and often heated, historiography requisite to offering a definition of Southern Baptists is in many ways more daunting than a cynical philosopher flinging denuded poultry. Baptist theologians and historians have offered a steady stream of publications arguing and counter-arguing exactly what it means to be a Southern Baptist for over a century.<sup>2</sup> These have included attempts at clarifying Baptist identity within itself and in relation to other Christian traditions.

Forty years ago, James Leo Garrett Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull offered a new work to this field of study with their, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?*<sup>3</sup> This work was commendable for the collegial discourse amidst sharp disagreement. Tull provided an introductory framework to the debate at hand, Garrett argued that Southern Baptists are “denominational evangelicals,” and Hinson argued for a strong distinction between Southern Baptists and evangelicals rooted in Baptist voluntarism. *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?* emerged four years into what is now remembered as the Conservative Resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention, or the “Fundamentalist Takeover” by others, further demonstrating that debates about Southern Baptist identity are far from

<sup>1</sup>Visoni Gilmar, “Diogenes Popularizes Cynicism,” in *Salem Press Encyclopedia* (2022).

<sup>2</sup>If the reader desires a helpful introduction without opening oneself to the deluge of books whose voluminosity demonstrates the truthfulness of Ecclesiastes 12:12, see David S. Dockery, ed. *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>James Leo Garrett Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

\*Blake McKinney serves as assistant professor of history and humanities at Texas Baptist College.

academic.<sup>4</sup> Seven years earlier William Estep had declared that Southern Baptists were in “an identity crisis” in which the SBC was “confused about its reason for being, its relationship to its past (its tradition), and what others think and expect of it.”<sup>5</sup> These questions only intensified in the years following Estep’s perceptive essay.

In the 1970s and 1980s Southern Baptist identity was a live question. A cacophony of voices offered different opinions on the SBC’s reason for being and its relationship to its past. In 1973 the SBC’s Broadman Press published a book by a Southern Baptist missionary to Nebraska titled, *Baptists: The Passionate People*. The author decried inerrantists as “extremists” who insisted, “that the only valid biblical interpretation is their view.”<sup>6</sup> He grounded Southern Baptist identity in passion for “the authority of the Bible,” “personal redemption,” “the Church,” “doctrinal principles,” “God’s Spirit,” “Southern culture,” “Christian ethics,” and “evangelism.” Foy Valentine, head of the SBC Christian Life Commission, emphatically declared to *Newsweek* “We are *not* evangelicals. That’s a Yankee word. . . . We don’t share their politics or their fussy fundamentalism, and we don’t want to get involved in their theological witch-hunts.”<sup>7</sup> That same year, Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter emerged victorious in the United States presidential race. Southern Baptist Convention annual meetings exhibited growing controversy with every election for convention president. Theological denunciations and attacks on personal character became common in Southern Baptist circles.<sup>8</sup> Hinson found himself the target of such theological concerns and delivered an impassioned chapel address at Southern Seminary in 1986 defending himself against charges of heresy by testifying to his voluntarist Baptist faith.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>For a brief history of the controversy see, Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 285-92. For larger works see, David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, the New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969-1991* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996) and Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: B&H, 2000).

<sup>5</sup>W. R. Estep, “Southern Baptists in Search of an Identity,” in William R. Estep, ed. *The Lord’s Free People in a Free Land: Essays in Baptist History in Honor of Robert A. Baker* (Fort Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976), 164.

<sup>6</sup>C. Burrtt Potter, Jr. *Baptists: The Passionate People* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth L. Woodward, John Barnes, and Laurie Lisle, “Born Again! The Year of the Evangelicals,” *Newsweek* 88 (25 October 1976), 76.

<sup>8</sup>The title of one publication about this era gives a sense of the tensions, see Randy Shepley and Walter Shurden, eds., *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>E. Glenn Hinson, “Am I a Heretic?” Chapel address delivered at the Southern Baptist Theological

This introductory article titled “Who Are Southern Baptists?” is far too limited to offer a definitive answer that properly addresses past controversies. The questions entailed in the generic question posed are numerous: What does it mean to be Baptist? Did Baptists come from John the Baptist, Anabaptists, or British Separatists? Are Southern Baptists committed to southern culture? Are Southern Baptists Protestants? Are Southern Baptists evangelicals? Are Southern Baptists political separationists or accommodationists? Are Southern Baptists Arminians, Calvinists, or something else? Does Baptist identity adhere to a coherent theology, or does it all hinge on soul-competency? Are Baptists a confessional people or fundamentally anti-creedal? Why is it the “Southern Baptist Convention” and not the “Southern Baptist Denomination”? The list goes on.

This article will focus on two aspects of Southern Baptist identity as posed by Estep in the article quoted above: Southern Baptists’ history and their “reason for being.” First, it will explore who Southern Baptists were. This will include a history of the Southern Baptist Convention told in broad strokes. A retrospective look at Southern Baptist history reveals an “untidy Baptist past” which may “function as a hedge against excessive pride and triumphalism,” while celebrating what God has seen fit to accomplish through fallen and redeemed people.<sup>10</sup> Second, it will examine who Southern Baptists are. The goal is not to define all of the competing assertions for Southern Baptist identity and assign a winner. To do so would require multiple volumes. Rather than offer a simplistic approach to complex questions, this article will examine what it is that brings Southern Baptist messengers together from thousands of churches each summer to constitute the Southern Baptist Convention. This two-fold answer itself will show that Southern Baptists today are in many ways exactly who they have been since the beginning.

## II. WHO SOUTHERN BAPTISTS HAVE BEEN

As the gospel spread in the United States during the Second Great Awakening, and Baptist missionaries were going abroad, Baptists in the United States sought a way to best support cooperative missions efforts. This culminated in the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions in 1814. Due to the

---

Seminary Louisville, KY, February 26, 1986.

<sup>10</sup>James A. Patterson, “Reflections on 400 Years of the Baptist Movement: Who We Are, What We Believe,” in *Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and the Future of Denominationalism*, ed. David S. Dockery, Ray Van Neste, and Jerry Tidwell (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 193.

agreement to convene every three years it eventually became known as the Triennial Convention.<sup>11</sup> This convention included Baptists from both the northern and southern states, with Richard Furman of Charleston, South Carolina, presiding over the first meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Triennial Convention focused on international missions whereas the American Baptist Home Mission Society was founded in 1832 to support domestic missions. Though many Baptists in America shared a commitment to missions, the Triennial Convention and American Baptist Home Missionary Society demonstrated the strong division of opinion among nineteenth century Baptists relating to the proper means of supporting missions and maintaining local church autonomy. Debates raged as to whether churches should cooperate via representatives in a convention, individuals should elect on their own to support missions societies, or if it was proper to have any missions agency beside a local church at all.<sup>12</sup> The convention model won the day for international missions support, and over the coming years many Baptist state conventions formed to facilitate statewide Baptist cooperation.

Baptist unity around missions would splinter along the same ideological and regional lines that fractured the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Although some eighteenth century American Baptists in the South had voiced unease regarding American chattel slavery, “over time most white Baptists in the South made peace with the institution, whether they owned slaves or not.”<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile many northern Baptists voiced support for the abolition of slavery. In late 1844 and early 1845 two leading Baptists engaged in public debate concerning scriptural teachings vis-à-vis slavery. Francis Wayland, president of Brown University, and Richard Fuller of South Carolina published a series of letters to one another in the *Christian Reflector*. Wayland argued against slavery as a moral evil, whereas Fuller saw slavery as sanctioned by Scripture and American law. They jointly published their work in a bound volume titled, *Domestic Slavery*

---

<sup>11</sup>For more on the relation of missions to the foundation of the Southern Baptist Convention, see W. Madison Grace II, “Beginnings: Southern Baptists, the Foreign Mission Board, and James Barnett Taylor,” in *Make Disciples of All Nations: A History of Southern Baptist International Missions*, ed. John D. Massey, Mike Morris, and W. Madison Grace II (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2021), 53-92.

<sup>12</sup>For more on the anti-mission movement, see James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Anti-Mission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>13</sup>Barry Hankins and Thomas Kidd, *Baptists in America: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 99.

*Considered as a Scriptural Institution* in 1846.<sup>14</sup> By the time this book was available for purchase, northern and southern Baptists had suffered an institutional fracture over “the peculiar institution.”<sup>15</sup>

American Baptists divided over slavery in 1845, which spawned the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>16</sup> Madison Grace has correctly observed, “Though tensions other than slavery have rightly been presented as reasons for the split from the General Convention, from beginning to end those reasons are all linked to the issue of slavery.”<sup>17</sup> In the early 1840s Baptists in Georgia and Alabama pushed the point of slavery upon the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS) and the Triennial Convention respectively. Georgia Baptists offered a slaveholder named James Reeves as a nominee for domestic missions, but the ABHMS avoided the question by refusing to receive the application. The board of the Triennial Convention was less circumspect when Alabama Baptists demanded an answer to the possibility of a slave-owning missionary receiving approval from the Convention. The board responded that if “any one should offer himself as a Missionary, having slaves, and should insist on retaining them as his property, we could not appoint them. One thing is certain; we can never be a party to any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery.”<sup>18</sup> Baptists from the South responded to this unequivocal repudiation by inaugurating their own missions organizations for both international and domestic missions.

Southern Baptists convened in Augusta, Georgia, on May 8, 1845, for the first Southern Baptist Convention. Southern Baptists elected the immediate past-president of the Triennial Convention, William Bullein Johnson, as their first president. He blamed the rupture as having “its entire origin” with the northern Baptists, but he averred “Northern and

---

<sup>14</sup>Richard Fuller and Francis Wayland, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution*, ed. Nathan A. Finn and Keith Harper (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup>This term derives from the political rhetoric of John C. Calhoun in the 1830s. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York: Vintage, 1957).

<sup>16</sup>This article is far too short to address the Southern Baptist Convention’s history with race. For further reading see, Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2012); David Roach, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Civil Rights, 1954-1995: Conservative Theology, Segregation, and Change* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021); and Paul Morrison, *Integration: Race, T.B. Maston, and Hope for the Desegregated Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022).

<sup>17</sup>Grace, “Beginnings: Southern Baptists,” 59.

<sup>18</sup>“Reply of the Acting Board, American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1844,” in *Readings in Baptist History: Four Centuries of Selected Documents*, ed. Joseph Early, Jr. (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 103.

Southern Baptists are still brethren. They differ in no article of faith. They are guided by the same principles of gospel order.”<sup>19</sup> Though claiming to maintain the same faith and order, Johnson and Southern Baptists divided from their northern brethren to form their own cooperative effort at worldwide evangelization.<sup>20</sup> At the first Southern Baptist Convention two mission boards were formed: the Foreign Mission Board (FMB) and the Home Mission Board (HMB). For years the Foreign Mission Board dominated SBC attention, of which Leon McBeth remarked, “one might say at first the FMB in effect *was* the convention.”<sup>21</sup>

From the beginning Southern Baptists maintained a claim to unity in Baptist faith and order with other Baptists, while pressing forward with a distinctly regional identity. For good or for ill Southern Baptists would be distinctly “southern.” The Civil War was a time of immense turmoil replete with religious interpretations and motivations. For many the war became a holy war in which “each side saw itself as a chosen people whom the Lord would crown with victory.”<sup>22</sup> Southern Baptists were prone to such rhetoric and played significant roles, such as Basil Manly Sr., who served as a chaplain to the Congress of the Confederacy and prayed at Jefferson Davis’s inauguration.<sup>23</sup> The SBC Home Mission Board limited its “home field” of missions to the Confederate States of America in 1861 but returned its proclaimed national borders to the broader United States in the postwar period.<sup>24</sup> In the Reconstruction years and throughout the twentieth century Southern Baptist churches dominated the ecclesial landscape of the South. Southern Baptist churches became such a marked feature of Southern culture that historian Martin Marty could confidently assert in the 1970s that the Southern Baptist Convention had become “the Catholic church of the South.”<sup>25</sup> During the Inerrancy Controversy in the late twentieth century, some moderates even went so far as to ground

---

<sup>19</sup>William B. Johnson, “Address Explaining Why the Southern Baptist Convention was Organized, 1845” in *Readings in Baptist History*, 112.

<sup>20</sup>For more on this see W. Madison Grace II, “Beginnings: Southern Baptists, the Foreign Mission Board, and James Barnett Taylor,” and McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 381-91.

<sup>21</sup>McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 413.

<sup>22</sup>George Rable, *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 68. See also, Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup>For more on Southern Baptists and the Civil War, see Hankins and Kidd, *Baptists in America*, 117-48.

<sup>24</sup>Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 389.

<sup>25</sup>Martin E. Marty, “The Protestant Experience and Perspectives,” *American Religious Values and the Future of America*, ed. Rodger van Allen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 40.

Southern Baptist identity in its affinity with southern culture rather than “theological uniformity.”<sup>26</sup> Simple identification of the Southern Baptist Convention with Southern culture came under significant reconsideration in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century due to the waning cultural isolation of the South, the continued extension of Southern Baptist influence throughout North America, and the Inerrancy Controversy.<sup>27</sup>

While Southern Baptists were unquestionably identified as “southern” until recent years, what it meant to be a Southern *Baptist* went through various controversies since the inception of the Southern Baptist Convention. One of the first major controversies to face the Southern Baptist Convention also contributed to its cultural isolation in the coming years—Landmarkism. Landmarkism is often remembered dismissively for its dubious claims of organic succession tracing an unbroken line of true Baptists all the way back to John the Baptist, but Landmarkism as an ecclesiological movement did much to shape Southern Baptist faith and practice. Landmarkists argued that Jesus instituted local churches (i.e., Baptist churches), not a universal church, and they strove for radical independence of local churches. Landmarkist leaders sought to stake boundaries of the true Baptist church against the threats of compromise including “alien immersion” (e.g., Pedobaptists and Campbellites), pulpit exchanges, and open Communion. Three men are most associated with mid-nineteenth century Landmarkism: James Robinson Graves, James Madison Pendleton, and Amos Cooper Dayton. Graves played the most visible role in the movement through his controversial editorship of *The Tennessee Baptist*, but Pendleton played the more lastingly influential role through his widely used *Church Manual*.<sup>28</sup> Graves’s acerbic writings and bellicose character undermined his influence within the SBC, but Landmarkist emphases on the autonomy of congregations and the importance of properly administered ordinances continued to impact Southern

---

<sup>26</sup>Bill Leonard argued that SBC denominational unity was “based less on elaborate theological uniformity than on denominational and Southern identity.” Bill Leonard, “Southern Baptists and Southern Culture,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 4 (1985): 201. Potter identified “A Passionate Concern for Southern Culture” as one of 8 hallmarks of Southern Baptist identity. Potter, *Baptists: The Passionate People*.

<sup>27</sup>See several essays in David S. Dockery, ed., *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues* (Nashville: B&H, 1993).

<sup>28</sup>For more on J. R. Graves and Landmarkism, see James A. Patterson, *James Robinson Graves: Staking the Boundaries of Baptist Identity* (Nashville: B&H, 2012). James Madison Pendleton, *Church Manual: Designed for the Use of Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1867).

Baptist faith and practice.

Landmarkism caused controversies regarding the nature and function of the church, but the most pressing Southern Baptist theological controversies of the next century concerned the nature of Scripture. In the 1870s at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary—Southern Baptists’ lone seminary until the founding of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1908—a popular professor spurred controversy that presaged theological controversies for decades to come. His name was Crawford H. Toy.<sup>29</sup> After the Civil War prevented his missionary aspirations, Toy pursued a career in academia. He adopted historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation while studying in Berlin. For a time he sought to balance commitments to historic biblical orthodoxy with an approach to Scripture that presupposed falsehoods in the biblical text, but in so doing “he held that the Bible was wholly true because it was true in its ‘real’ spiritual intent, even though its historical human assertions were in error.”<sup>30</sup> His faculty colleagues endeavored to win him back to biblical orthodoxy, but after anonymous denunciations in the denominational press, Toy offered an impassioned defense in a resignation letter that he was surprised to see accepted. Toy went on to teach at Harvard and eventually became a Unitarian. He was the first of many Southern Baptist seminary professors to draw ire for their approaches to Scripture.

American Christianity featured numerous conflicts across the Protestant landscape in the early twentieth century in what has come to be called the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy.<sup>31</sup> Due to a variety of factors Southern Baptists played only a small part in the broader turmoil. Southern Baptists were according to some “sixty years behind the evangelicals” when the inerrancy controversy exploded on Southern Baptist life in the second-half of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> The 1960s witnessed two major publishing scandals relating to historical-critical scholarship published by the SBC’s Broadman Press. In 1961 Broadman Press published Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Old Testament professor Ralph Elliott’s *The Message of Genesis* that denied the historical reliability of the creation and

---

<sup>29</sup>For an analysis of the Toy Controversy, see Gregory A. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859-2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 108-49.

<sup>30</sup>Wills, *Southern Seminary*, 116.

<sup>31</sup>See George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup>See David S. Dockery and James Emery White, “Introduction,” in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals*, 25.



flood accounts and questioned the veracity of other supernatural occurrences in Genesis.<sup>33</sup> Within the next two years Elliott lost his position at Midwestern and the SBC approved an updated *Baptist Faith and Message* (1963) that retained the proclamation that the Bible “has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.” In 1969 the *Broadman Bible Commentary* featured analysis of the book of Genesis by a British Baptist named G. Henton Davies whose position was in many respects similar to Elliott’s earlier work. A firestorm of controversy spread within the SBC. W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, published a sermon titled “Why I Preach that the Bible is Literally True,” which was countered by the dean of the School of Theology at Southern Seminary William Hull’s “Shall We Call the Bible Infallible?”<sup>34</sup> Whereas the Toy Controversy of the 1870s flamed large and then sizzled, the debate about the Bible in the Southern Baptist Convention raged for three decades.

Beginning in 1979 and continuing into the 1990s theological conservatives committed to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy enacted a plan to take control of SBC bureaucracy in order to rid SBC seminaries and entities of those who denied inerrancy. This successful campaign that achieved consecutive SBC presidential elections for over a decade brought about an institutional transformation within the Southern Baptist Convention. This era was contentious. A strict dichotomy of “liberals” vs. “conservatives” was employed from opposite sides of the debate, but this dichotomy was overstated. David S. Dockery and James Emery White provide a helpful four-fold breakdown of the spectrum within the inerrancy debate listing, “(1) fundamentalists, (2) conservatives, (3) moderates, and (4) liberals.” Although all were present to varying degrees, they observed that the SBC by the early 1990s was “composed primarily of conservative and moderate evangelicals.”<sup>35</sup> In the end, many who identified as SBC moderates left the SBC to form the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and many non-inerrantist academics left SBC seminaries to work in other Baptist colleges or to found new academic institutions. In 2000 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message*, which declared, “all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy” and changed the BFM 1963 language of Scripture being “the record of God’s revelation”

<sup>33</sup>See Ralph Elliott, *The Message of Genesis* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961).

<sup>34</sup>For more on controversies of the 1960s see Wills, “Progressive Theology and Southern Baptist Controversies of the 1950s and 1960s,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7 (2003): 12-31.

<sup>35</sup>Dockery and White, “Introduction,” in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals*, 4, 9.

to a clear statement that Scripture “is God’s revelation.”<sup>36</sup>

The history of Southern Baptists has not been a single unbroken sequence of controversies. Southern Baptists came together for missions, and have always been at their best when cooperating to spread Christ’s Kingdom. In 1925 as other denominations were being torn asunder by the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy, Southern Baptists came together in Memphis, Tennessee, and paved the way for the future of the SBC. The SBC had its own voices sowing division, like J. Frank Norris, but the 1925 annual meeting saw Southern Baptists come together around a shared confession and a shared mission. The Southern Baptist Convention adopted its first official confessional statement—the *Baptist Faith and Message*. They also approved a plan that launched the Cooperative Program. The vision was for cooperative giving through the Cooperative Program that would then be allocated efficiently “to send and support missionaries, equip pastors and church leaders, enable educational institutions, and address benevolent, social, ethical, and moral concerns.”<sup>37</sup> The Cooperative Program greatly simplified the administrative costs compared to the old system of fundraising agents for each entity. For nearly a century the Cooperative Program has brought Southern Baptists together in their cooperative efforts to reach the world for Christ. McBeth observed, “*Cooperative* is the right word to describe this stewardship program, and it shows the near canonization of both the word and the concept among Southern Baptists.”<sup>38</sup> Southern Baptists in the twentieth century cooperated in funding missionaries through the Cooperative Program. Furthermore, Southern Baptists engaged in a shared experience of Southern Baptist programs.

For decades Southern Baptist churches engaged in shared Southern Baptist programming including enrolling their children in Royal Ambassadors and Girls in Action and then the Baptist Training Union, learning from uniform Sunday School lessons from the Sunday School Board, tithing through the six-point envelope system, and singing from

---

<sup>36</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message*, 1963 and 2000. For more on the Inerrancy Controversy and the *Baptist Faith and Message*, see James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 491-513.

<sup>37</sup>David S. Dockery, “Hopefulness, Expansion, Disappointment, and Retrenchment: Paving the Way for the Next Generation of Southern Baptist Foreign Missions, 1915-1933,” in *Make Disciples of All Nations*, 161. For more on the Cooperative Program, see Chad Brand and David Hankins, *One Sacred Effort: The Cooperative Program of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: B&H, 2005) and Daniel Vestal and Robert A. Baker, *Pulling Together: A Practical Guide to the Cooperative Program* (Nashville: B&H, 1987).

<sup>38</sup>McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 622.

the ubiquitous Baptist Hymnal.<sup>39</sup> Southern Baptists celebrated Christmas together through contributing to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and they remembered domestic missions every Easter with the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. Gregory A. Wills has argued “these programs produced a powerful Southern Baptist subculture that fostered tribal identity” in which Southern Baptists were “born into the group, nurtured in the rituals and practices of the group, and completed the certified rites of passage.”<sup>40</sup> McBeth wryly remarked that this programming contributed to Southern Baptist isolation in that “we have not associated much with others partly because we have not had time.”<sup>41</sup> These shared life experiences were common to conservative and moderate Southern Baptists alike. Thus, while the Inerrancy Controversy was undoubtedly about the inspiration of Scripture, it was also about what it truly meant to be Southern Baptist.

As the Inerrancy Controversy waned and conservatives began to exercise sole leadership in the SBC, Southern Baptists continued to consider what it meant to be Southern Baptist. Many feared that Southern Baptists had spent so much time fighting each other that they had lost the Great Commission vision that had brought them together in the first place. Nathan Finn remarked in 2009, “Perhaps the most pressing issue facing the SBC in the early twenty-first century is whether or not all the varieties of Convention conservatives can continue to cooperate together.”<sup>42</sup> Calls emerged for Southern Baptists to enact a Great Commission Resurgence. Messengers to the 2009 Southern Baptist Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, overwhelmingly approved a motion calling for the appointment of a Great Commission Task Force to bring a report and recommendations to the 2010 annual meeting in Orlando, Florida. The Great Commission Task Force called the SBC “to make an unconditional commitment to reach the nations for Christ, to plant and serve Gospel churches in North America and around the world, and to mobilize Southern Baptists as a Great Commission people.”<sup>43</sup> Two years later the Executive Committee brought a recommendation allowing “churches, entities and those organizations in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention”

<sup>39</sup>Leon McBeth remarked, “Perhaps more than any book except the Bible, this hymnal shaped the beliefs and worship of Southern Baptists.” McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 689-90.

<sup>40</sup>Wills, “Southern Baptist Identity: A Historical Perspective,” in *Southern Baptist Identity*, 78-9.

<sup>41</sup>McBeth, “Baptist or Evangelical: One Southern Baptist’s Perspective,” in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals*.

<sup>42</sup>Nathan A. Finn, “Priorities for a Post-Resurgence Convention,” in *Southern Baptist Identity*, 258.

<sup>43</sup>Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the 2010 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: SBC, 2010), 78.

who did not want to use the name “Southern Baptists” to be allowed “to indicate their relationship with each other and their involvement” with the SBC with the name “Great Commission Baptists.” This sparked debate and passed by only 314 votes.<sup>44</sup> Concurrently a controversy arose about the relationship of Calvinism to traditional Southern Baptist faith and practice, which itself gave rise to a Calvinism Advisory Committee that issued a report to the 2013 SBC annual meeting.<sup>45</sup> In 2021, the Southern Baptist Convention convened under the theme “We are Great Commission Baptists.” While Southern Baptists remain ambivalent about proposed name changes, it is clear through cooperative giving, evangelism, and church-planting that Southern Baptists are Great Commission Baptists.

### III. WHO SOUTHERN BAPTISTS ARE

“Southern Baptists are Great Commission Baptists” has a nice ring to it, but what does it mean? Most recent records show that 47,614 churches reporting 13,680,493 members comprise the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>46</sup> Now over one-fifth of Southern Baptist churches are in areas outside of the South.<sup>47</sup> Recent years have exhibited many tensions and controversies.

Theological, political, and ideological divisions have been evident in competing resolutions and motions proposed at annual meetings, and special interest groups clamoring for influence have arisen as well. How can one define such a large assortment of autonomous local churches that convene via messengers once a year for two days? Is it even possible?

In a sense there are as many different possible definitions of what constitutes a Southern Baptist as there are Southern Baptists. Yet, it is possible to identify a two-fold essential core of Southern Baptist identity. According to the Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention, churches are considered to be “in friendly cooperation with the Convention” which have “a faith and practice which closely identifies with the Convention’s adopted statement of faith” (i.e., the *Baptist Faith and Message*), have formally approved their intentions “to cooperate” with the SBC, have “made

---

<sup>44</sup>Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the 2012 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: SBC, 2012), 80.

<sup>45</sup>Michael Foust, “Calvinism committee issues report, urges SBC to ‘stand together’ for Great Commission,” Baptist Press, May 31, 2013.

<sup>46</sup>*Annual of the 2022 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 2022), 122.

<sup>47</sup>*SBC Annual 2022*, 124.

undesigned, financial contribution(s)” through the Cooperative Program, Executive Committee, and/or another Convention entity in the previous fiscal year, do not “act in a manner inconsistent with the Convention’s beliefs regarding sexual abuse,” and do “not act to affirm, approve, or endorse discriminatory behavior on the basis of ethnicity.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Southern Baptist churches subscribe to the core of Southern Baptist convictions as found in the *Baptist Faith and Message* and cooperatively support shared Southern Baptist entities through the Cooperative Program. These two traits form the core of modern Southern Baptist identity.

1. *Southern Baptists’ Faith and Message*. Baptists have always been a confessional people.<sup>49</sup> From Thomas Helwys’s 1611 “A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining in Amsterdam in Holland” to the 1689 *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* to the 1742 *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* to the 1833 *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* to the three iterations of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1925, 1963, 2000), Baptists have subscribed to confessions that spelled out Baptist faith and practice. Mullins, who advocated for soul-competency as the preeminent Baptist quality, helped craft the original *Baptist Faith and Message* approved by SBC messengers in 1925. In the twentieth century many Southern Baptist moderates appealed to soul-competency (or soul freedom) as the primary marker of Baptist identity, which conveniently rendered critiques of unorthodox theology un-Baptist.<sup>50</sup> It may have come as a surprise to many who appealed to soul-competency as antithetical to confessions and creeds that Baptist luminaries like J. P. Boyce, B. H. Carroll, and Mullins actually “used the word ‘creed’ in a positive sense and often spoke in an affirming way of ‘the Baptist creed.’”<sup>51</sup> After decades of debate about the role of confessions in Southern Baptist cooperation, Southern Baptists adopted an enlarged *Baptist Faith and Message* in 2000, which now serves as the official statement on Southern Baptist faith and practice.

The *Baptist Faith and Message* is not an exhaustive statement of theology, nor is it a barebones creedal statement of essential Christian doctrine. It encapsulates essential Christian doctrine as well as those doctrines that distinguish Baptists (e.g., the ordinances and ecclesiology). Furthermore,

---

<sup>48</sup>“Constitution,” in *Annual of the 2022 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 2022), 6-7.

<sup>49</sup>See Timothy and Denise George, eds., *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville: B&H, 1996) and William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969).

<sup>50</sup>See Wills, “Southern Baptist Identity: A Historical Perspective.”

<sup>51</sup>George, *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, 3.

the *Baptist Faith and Message* expresses shared Baptist views relating to the “Christian and the Social Order,” “Peace and War,” “Religious Liberty,” and “The Family.” It is around these shared beliefs that Southern Baptists cooperate in gospel ministry. The *Baptist Faith and Message* identifies the core of Baptist doctrine, but it allows for freedom of conscience in non-essential viewpoints. Divergent viewpoints on soteriology and eschatology are present (and welcome) in the Southern Baptist Convention. The *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* provides a robust, Baptist, evangelical confession that lays the foundation for cooperative gospel ministry.

Garrett rightly identified Southern Baptists as “denominational evangelicals.”<sup>52</sup> Today Southern Baptists constitute the largest denomination in evangelicalism.<sup>53</sup> The past thirty years have witnessed increased Southern Baptist engagement with broader evangelicalism, including Southern Baptists playing leading roles within the Evangelical Theological Society.<sup>54</sup> Theological boundary staking is important, and the *Baptist Faith and Message* spells out what Southern Baptists believe. Yet, it is ultimately Christ’s call to make disciples of all nations that brings Southern Baptists together, and they do so through the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program.

2. *Southern Baptists’ Cooperative Program.* In many ways “cooperation” defines what it means to be Southern Baptist. Garrett wrote that defining Southern Baptists begins with, “saying that Southern Baptists are members of churches that contribute to the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention,” and McBeth referred to the “canonization” of cooperation among Southern Baptists.<sup>55</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention website defines the SBC as “a body of like-minded local churches cooperating together to reach the world with the Good News of Jesus Christ.”<sup>56</sup> The SBC exists to take the gospel message to the ends of the earth.

Southern Baptists cooperatively support a variety of entities meant to support the spread of the gospel. The International Mission Board (IMB)

<sup>52</sup>Garrett, Hinson, Tull, *Are Southern Baptists ‘Evangelicals?’*, 126.

<sup>53</sup>For more on the SBC and evangelicalism, see David S. Dockery, “Southern Baptists, Evangelicalism, and the Christian Tradition,” in Matthew Emrson, Christopher Morgan, and Lucas Stamps, eds. *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H, 2020): 267-92.

<sup>54</sup>See David Roach, “ETS meeting: ‘Southern Baptists everywhere.’” *Baptist Press*, November 21, 2014; and Ashley Allen, “Faculty, students represent Southwestern, TBC at annual ETS meeting,” November 18, 2022. <https://swbts.edu/news/faculty-students-represent-southwestern-tbc-at-annual-ets-meeting/>

<sup>55</sup>James Leo Garrett, Jr. “Are Southern Baptists ‘Evangelicals’? A Further Reflection,” in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals*, 221, and McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 622.

<sup>56</sup>“Meet Southern Baptists.” <https://www.sbc.net/about/>.

and the North American Mission Board (NAMB) represent Southern Baptists' longest collaborative endeavors. Both were founded at the first Southern Baptist Convention in 1845 as the Foreign Mission Board and Home Mission Board respectively. Today Southern Baptists are able to collectively support over 6,000 full-time missionaries who never have to fundraise.<sup>57</sup> As of June 2022, 91 percent of IMB missionaries were engaging unreached people groups across the globe, and the IMB has set a goal of increasing "the number of frontline missionaries by 500 over the next five years." IMB personnel reported over 144,000 new believers professing Christ in 2021.<sup>58</sup> In cooperation with NAMB, Southern Baptist churches planted 600 new churches in 2021, provided disaster relief through Send Relief, and supported church revitalization efforts across the United States.<sup>59</sup>

The Southern Baptist Convention does not ordain pastors—Southern Baptist churches do. Yet, for over 160 years Southern Baptists have cooperatively supported theological education for the sake of better equipped ministers in Southern Baptist churches. Today the SBC oversees the work of six seminaries spread across the United States with over 25,000 students.<sup>60</sup> All six Southern Baptist seminaries boast faculty committed to the truthfulness of Scripture who affirm the *Baptist Faith and Message*. Not only do Southern Baptists cooperatively support the training of Southern Baptist ministers, they support all stages of church ministry through Lifeway Christian Resources' educational materials, Guidestone Financial Resources' investment and retirement resources, and the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's cultural interpretation and public policy engagement.

Southern Baptists are at their best when they come together for the sake of the gospel. Southern Baptists have had their fair share of controversies and divisions, but this does not define them. Southern Baptists are committed to the spread of Christ's Kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel. They unite around shared beliefs as found in the Baptist Faith and Message so that they may cooperate to see the Great Commission fulfilled. Southern Baptists are denominational evangelicals committed to cooperation for the sake of fulfilling the Great Commission.

---

<sup>57</sup>*SBC Annual 2022*, 123.

<sup>58</sup>*SBC Annual 2022*, 169-70.

<sup>59</sup>*SBC Annual 2022*, 200-9.

<sup>60</sup>*SBC Annual 2022*, 262.