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Are Conservative Southern Baptists Fundamentalists?

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George Houghton, Th.D.

Any fundamentalist who has kept up with the conservative resurgence within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is glad for conservatives' advances and rejoices with them in their success. There are several books and articles which have been written from various perspectives about what has happened within the SBC since 1979. Perhaps one of the most significant is *The Baptist Reformation (The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention)* by Jerry Sutton, written from the conservative point of view and published in 2000 by the SBC's denominational publishing house, Broadman & Holman Publishers. The book's significance is indicated by the endorsements it has received from many of the leading Southern Baptists today, including Morris H. Chapman, James T. Draper, Jr., Kenneth S. Hemphill, Richard D. Land, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., Paige Patterson, Adrian Rogers, Jerry Vines, Ed Young, and others.

Still, fundamentalists have raised an important question: "Are these conservative Southern Baptists really fundamentalists?" The question is important, for its answer will largely determine whether those professing fundamentalism ought to embrace the SBC and its leadership. Organizations which have begun as fundamentalist in orientation, such as the Baptist Bible Fellowship International (BBFI) and the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC), are currently facing this issue. Therefore, the question is not only important, it is also timely.

Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, pastored by Jerry Falwell, has Liberty University as one of its ministries. This church is listed as both a BBFI and SBC church (see the appropriate denominational web sites), and Jerry Falwell's *National Liberty Journal* had as a front page headline, "Liberty University Officially Approved as SBC School" (December 1999, vol. 28, no. 12). The GARBC lists Cedarville University of Cedarville, Ohio, as one of its partnering agencies. Yet Cedarville has also "entered a partnership with the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio [SBC]. The partnership was formalized in November [2002] during the 49th annual session of the state convention when messengers overwhelmingly approved the agreement" (Baptist Press news, www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=14969, January 3, 2003). And the SBC web site lists Cedarville University under its category "Colleges and Universities." Even more recently Western Baptist College in Salem, Oregon, another school partnering with the GARBC, has been endorsed by the Northwest Baptist Convention and its executive board "as an educational institution that their member churches should support financially and promote as a preferred college for their young people." The Northwest Baptist Convention is associated with the Southern Baptist Convention (www.wbc.edu/news/stories/NWBCadoptsWB.html).

So the question "Are conservative Southern Baptists really fundamentalists?" is both important and timely. Six points must be made in response to the question.

I. Conservative Southern Baptists Disavow the Fundamentalist Label.

First, throughout the last 25 years of struggles within the SBC, those on the left have called themselves "moderates" and their antagonists "fundamentalists." Those on the right have called themselves "conservatives" and their antagonists "liberals." Neither side accepts the term used for them by their critics. In his book, Sutton refers to "conservatives (pejoratively and incorrectly called fundamentalists)" and states: "From a historian's vantage point, I reject the term 'fundamentalist' as not only pejorative but also inaccurate. . . . Although conservatives might share some similarities with fundamentalists, they are not identical, and to assert that they are is to misread history" (xv, 1).

II. Conservative Southern Baptists Disavow Biblical Separation.

Explaining why the conservatives don't want to be called fundamentalists, Sutton says: "Fundamentalism in religious circles has normally been characterized by separation, that is, departing from or removing oneself from a denomination. Quite obviously, conservatives stayed. . . . In actuality, the most accurate paradigm for the two sides in the SBC struggle should be *puritans* and *pluralists*. The conservatives (puritans) desired to purify the denomination from the liberal influence of the left" (1-2).

III. Conservative Southern Baptists Are Committed to "Conventionism."

There is a strong sense of loyalty to the denomination by the conservatives. When Liberty University was approved as an SBC school, Paige Patterson declared: "For the great Liberty University to be a part of our Southern Baptist Zion . . . is an answer to prayer for us all" (*National Liberty Journal*, December 1999, 1, 15). The SBC is indeed a "Southern Baptist Zion," in which funds from local churches are sent to support the official denominational program known as the Cooperative Program. SBC churches send money to their respective state conventions. At their annual meetings, each state's convention decides how much of these funds will go to support state convention projects and how much will be sent to support SBC programs on the national level. State convention projects include evangelism, children's homes, missions education, support for the establishing of new churches, funding for colleges and universities, and camping programs. On the national level the Cooperative Program

helps fund the appointment and support of missionaries (both home and foreign), the six recognized Southern Baptist seminaries, and organizations such as The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the Annuity Board, the Southern Baptist Foundation, and the Baptist World Alliance (see the sbc.net web site, "Cooperative Program"). This approach to denominational cooperative support is very centralized and stresses the funding of its various programs. It fosters a loyalty to the organization and its programs rather than the support for people and their specific ministries which is characteristic of a more decentralized approach. Historically, it is this type of convention setting from which fundamentalist Baptists withdrew because of the strong emphasis placed upon denominational loyalty combined with little specific accountability to local churches by the individuals and institutions being funded. The Convention's approach puts pressure on local churches to conform to the denominational programs.

IV. Conservative Southern Baptists Still Tolerate Great Theological Diversity.

During the years of conservative/moderate struggle, the key factor which conservatives relied on was the annual election of a president of the Convention who not only believed in the Bible's inerrancy but who would also facilitate the election of trustees for the various denominational agencies who would also hold to inerrancy and who were willing to make it an issue. Previously, nominees for the Convention presidency had been largely unopposed, but during the years of struggle there often were two or more nominees—one endorsed by the conservative leaders and one who was willing to be more inclusive, tolerating doctrinal diversity. Although the conservatives were very clear about the theological issues involved, votes for the conservative candidate ranged from only 50 to 60 percent of the total votes (1979: 51%; 1980: 51.67%; 1981: 60.24%; 1982:57%; 1984: 52.18%; 1985: 55.3%; 1986: 54.22%; 1987: 59.97%; 1988: 50.53%; 1989: 56.58%; 1990: 57.68%; 1992: 62%; 1994: 55%).[1] Those who did not vote for the conservative candidate—a very significant minority—did not necessarily deny the Bible's inerrancy, yet they apparently were willing to tolerate those who did. Some of these pastors and churches have formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and of this group some have left the SBC. Due in part to the ingrained loyalty to the denomination, however, the majority has remained in the Convention.

On the national level the SBC controls its six officially-recognized seminaries, all of which are under conservative leadership today. The national SBC, however, does not own or control any colleges or universities. They are controlled by the various state conventions, many of which are willing to tolerate doctrinal diversity at their colleges and universities. For example, the sbc.net web site (the official web site of the Southern Baptist Convention) lists under the category "Colleges and Universities" such schools as Baylor University, Mercer University, Stetson University, the University of Richmond, Wake Forest University, and William Jewell College. These schools are not known for a strong conservative doctrinal position, yet they are identified as Southern Baptist institutions. Further, a number of the colleges and universities have established their own seminaries or graduate schools for theological education and ministerial training, thus rerouting students away from the recognized SBC's conservative-controlled seminaries. Some examples would be the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Campbell University's Divinity School, Gardner-Webb University's M. Christopher White School of Divinity, Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology, Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, and Wake Forest University's Divinity School. It should be noted that the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship also lists the above-mentioned alternate schools on its web site, along with some others, and indicates that they provide financial support for these schools. What is happening on the state convention level and in many of their schools is very problematic for the SBC conservatives.

V. Conservative Southern Baptists Endorse Doctrinal Latitude in Some Areas.

Issues such as the length of the "days" of creation week or the extent of the Noahic flood are not officially addressed in the SBC's doctrinal statement, *The Baptist Faith and Message*. In addition, the uniqueness of the Church as including only believers from the present age, the emphasis upon God's kingdom with any Jewish significance in the future, and a premillennial, dispensational, pretribulational representation of "last things" are actually excluded. This exclusion does not mean that there are no Southern Baptists who hold these doctrines, but the following excerpts from the *Baptist Faith and Message* demonstrate the SBC's doctrinal latitude:

> VI. The Church—The New Testament speaks of the church as "the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages."
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> IX. The Kingdom—"The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King. Particularly the Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ. Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth. The full consummation of the Kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age."
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> X. Last Things—"God in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord."

These statements reflect non-premillennial and non-dispensational attitudes. Sutton further states, "Fundamentalism also is characterized according to some scholars as blindly loyal to premillennial dispensationalism. Although some early on attempted to explain the Conservative Resurgence in these terms, the charge did not stick" (Sutton 1). At any rate, the SBC doctrinal statement is incongruous with that of the GARBC.

[1] See Sutton, pages 99, 113, 115, 121, 125, 142, 147, 161, 178, 188, 196, 198, 214, 224.

VI. Conservative Southern Baptists Are Sympathetic to Aspects of the New Evangelicalism.

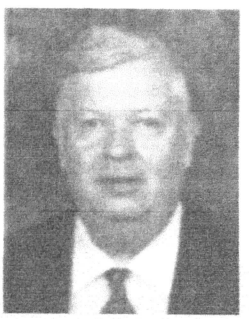
A call for a new evangelicalism was issued in the late 1940s by those dissatisfied with aspects of fundamentalism, a sentiment which is well represented in the broad evangelicalism of our day. An anti-separatist attitude is particularly noted in the cooperative policy of Billy Graham in his ecumenical evangelistic campaigns. This cooperative policy has been highlighted since his 1957 New York City meetings. Yet Billy Graham has been identified as a Southern Baptist and has been endorsed by the conservative SBC leadership. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, served as executive chairman for Graham's 2001 Louisville, Kentucky, crusade, and the seminary offered academic credit to students who were involved in the crusade.[2]

The 2003 SBC's annual meeting messengers were addressed by a broad spectrum of leaders from within evangelicalism (some by videotape, some in person) such as James and Shirley Dobson of *Focus on the Family*, John MacArthur, Franklin Graham, Charles Colson, Hank Hanegraaff, Jim Cymbala, Joseph Stowell, Greg Laurie, Stephen Olford and Anne Graham Lotz, Billy Graham's daughter, who spoke "at a Sunday morning worship service June 15 sponsored by the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists" (*Ohio Baptist Messenger*, July 2003, 2, 6). The SBC leadership can cooperate with whomever it wishes, but fundamentalists historically have not cooperated with these kinds of new evangelical leaders.

Conclusion

Clearly the answer to the question, "Are conservative Southern Baptists fundamentalists?" is "No." This answer does not mean that Southern Baptists are not good people who genuinely want to serve the Lord or that the conservatives have not made advances within the Convention. Rather, the answer reveals that the conservatives are not going in the same direction as fundamentalists. Organizations which have been historically identified as separatist and fundamentalist need to decide whether they are willing to partner with conservative Southern Baptists and thus depart from their historic direction. If they are willing to do so, they should drop the fundamentalist identification. The GARBC Partnering Network Questionnaire asks such questions as, "Have you read and do you concur with the enclosed article describing the GARBC position on separation?" (Question 19). That article is "Biblical Separation—Does it Matter?" by Dr. Paul R. Jackson. This historic article spells out God's principles of separation by stating: "God has commanded that we should not partner in the ministry with unbelievers," and "God commands that we separate from our brothers when they walk in disobedience." Conservative Southern Baptists are our brothers, but they are not fellow fundamentalists.

See reverse for list of upcoming seminary modules.



Dr. George. Houghton, Th.D.

Dr. Houghton is the Vice President for Academic Services for Faith Baptist Bible College and the Adjunct Professor of Historical Theology for Faith Baptist Theological Seminary. He received his B.A. from Bethel College, his B.D. from Central Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, and his Th.M. and Th.D. from Dallas Theological Seminary.

[2] Incidentally, the Cedarville University's *Torch* magazine says on page 15 of the Spring 2003 issue that "Mohler is also a veteran speaker on Cedarville's campus. His most recent visit was as speaker at the University's annual Charter Day observance on January 26, 2003." The *Baptist News* report on "Cedarville and Southern Baptists," January 6, 2003, noted, "Cedarville, located in southwestern Ohio, is one of the top feeder schools for Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky." On page 4 of the June 2003 *Ohio Baptist Messenger*, the paper published by the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio (the SBC state convention), is an ad for a training conference at Cedarville University, and right next to it is an article on Billy Graham's May 2003 campaign in San Diego, with an accompanying picture of Dr. Graham. Cedarville may not necessarily endorse the campaign, but shared publicity is the price paid for partnering with the Ohio Southern Baptists. Liberty University has also used Billy Graham as a major speaker on campus, and even honored him by conferring a doctoral degree on him.