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AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF PREACHING
IN THE CONSERVATIVE RESURGENCE OF THE
SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

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To Jennifer,

my best friend, my beloved wife,
an incredible mother, and a godly woman,
whose constant love, counsel, and sacrifice
continue to exponentially enrich my life and ministry.

And to my parents, Dale and Penny Bonner,

who have loved me unconditionally,
modeled for me faithfulness to the gospel,
and encouraged me in all my endeavors.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BF&M</i>	<i>The Baptist Faith and Message</i>
CBF	Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
CLC	Christian Life Commission
CR	Conservative Resurgence
ERLC	Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission
IMB	International Mission Board
NAMB	North American Mission Board
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
SBTS	The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
SEBTS	Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
SWBTS	Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

PREFACE

First, I wish to express profound gratitude to my parents, Dale and Penny Bonner, who faithfully laid a biblical foundation for me in my formative years and taught me above all else to have a deep love and reverence for God and his Word. I am forever in their debt for their incredible sacrifices, unwavering support and tenacious encouragement, and for the godly example they have set for me. I also want to express my love and admiration for my brother, Aaron, whose sense of humor, encouragement, and uncanny ability to lift my spirits in the best and worst of times continues to bless me. Furthermore, I wish to convey my love and appreciation for my parents-in-law, Stephen and Rhonda Chapman, whose love and acceptance have helped me see how blessed I truly am.

Second, I wish to thank the multitude of faithful and godly men and women of the churches I have had the honor to shepherd who have taken the time and energy to mentor me and allow me to grow in the Gospel ministry. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the members of Cross Roads Baptist Church, who were so gracious to love and encourage me as I began to hone my craft as a preacher of the Gospel. I also owe much to the members of Bethel Baptist Church, who graciously allowed me to learn how to be a pastor and loved and encouraged me every step of the way. Finally, I am grateful for the dear people God has entrusted to my care at Calvary Baptist Church. It is an honor and a joy to minister the gospel among a people so on fire for the Lord.

Further, I wish to remember the many men of God who have invested in my personal life, ministry, and theological formation. Most especially, I wish to thank the late Dr. Ron Mitchell, whose guidance, direction, and instruction created in me a deep love for theology and the Word of God. I also wish to thank Dr. Joel Slayton, Dr. Thom

South, and Dr. Jesse Thomas, all of whom God used tremendously to hone my thinking in regard to both theology and preaching in the context of the local church. Also, I wish to thank Bill Fies, who recognized the gifts with which God blessed me and the call of God on my life to preach. Throughout my formative years, he was relentless in challenging me to excellence, and I will forever be in his debt for his tremendous encouragement and skillful leadership, and for providing me countless opportunities to fan into flame the gift of God. Moreover, I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude for the friendship and camaraderie of Toby Jenkins and Cade Campbell, whose encouragement, accountability, and faithfulness to the Gospel have never ceased to challenge my thinking and develop my love for God and his people and have helped me to think more pastorally.

Furthermore, I wish to thank the faculty members of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary under whom I have had the incredible privilege of studying in pursuit of my Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees. Dr. Hershael York has been incredibly influential in developing my understanding of and love for the art of preaching and has modeled for me a stellar example of the life and heart of a pastor. Dr. T. J. Betts, Dr. Bill Cook, and Dr. Bob Vogel have all been tremendously instrumental in deepening my understanding of and love for the Word of God, and have imparted invaluable pastoral wisdom for which I will be eternally grateful.

As this thesis is a treatment of the role of preaching in the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention, I also wish to remember the sacrifices of the godly men who made the conservative resurgence possible; men like Judge Paul Pressler, Dr. Paige Patterson, Dr. Adrian Rogers, Dr. W. A. Criswell, Dr. Jerry Vines, Dr. Charles Stanley, and a host of others used mightily of God to bring about the changes necessary to call a denomination back from the brink of death. It is on the shoulders of these faithful men that my generation stands.

Above all those previously mentioned, no single individual or group of people have been more supportive of my dreams, instrumental in my personal and pastoral maturity, or given me a greater desire to be a faithful man of God than my incredible wife and the love of my life, Jennifer. Her sacrificial spirit over the last eight years has blessed me immensely, and she has truly modeled the epitome of the Proverbs 31 woman. She is gracious and kind, spirited and vivacious, and an absolute joy to be around. I am honored to know her, and blessed beyond comprehension or expression to be her husband. She is an amazing mother to our son, Caleb, and it delights my soul to see her desire to raise him in the love and admonition of the Lord. Very simply, her ministry to me, both at home and abroad, makes my ministry possible.

Far above all else, my deepest thanks and gratitude belongs only to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whose selfless sacrifice at Calvary redeemed me as he bought me as his own. I truly am a chosen trophy of Another's righteousness, and I count it the highest honor and privilege of my life that God would call me to "preach the Word" to the praise of his glory. My sincerest prayer and highest hope is that he might use me to further his Kingdom for the good of his people, and the glory of his name.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention had no greater catalyst than the preaching of faithful men of God at the time God appointed. However, rare is any mention of this element of the movement with any clarity. Carl Kell claims, “Among rank-and-file Southern Baptists, there was really no interest in the matter. For most, it was a ‘preacher boy’s’ fight.”¹ In spite of this widely held view among moderates, the truth was in fact very different. This was a fight for the soul of the convention. This was a fight to save the largest Protestant denomination in the United States from the brink of death. Indeed, this was every Southern Baptist’s fight, whether they realized it or not. Furthermore, this was a fight every conservative knew was inevitable. In the vein of Judge Paul Pressler, if ever there was one, this was the hill on which to die.²

The struggle for control of the SBC was really about answering one question—Is the Word of God true? Is it trustworthy? Is it authoritative? Is it inspired? Ultimately, is it *inerrant*? Because of the importance of answering this question correctly, conservatives began to use every opportunity available to persuade the common Southern Baptist with the truth of Scripture itself. Pastors’ Conferences were flooded with the preaching of God’s Word as inerrant. Convention sermons and presidential addresses

¹Carl L. Kell and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 24.

²Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist’s Journey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002).

became increasingly important venues for the furtherance of the cause of preaching God's Word as truth. Although these positions were once held in high esteem as merely an honor bestowed upon some faithful Southern Baptist pastor as sort of a "reward" for a lifetime of dedicated service, the conservatives began to see them as opportunities to lay claim to the soul of the convention, and lay claim they did.

With this history in mind, implications for the role of preaching in bringing about such a monumental change in the nation's largest deliberative body are unmistakable. From the reformation of Southern Seminary, to the theological cleansing of the denomination's boards and agencies, the conservative resurgence owes its success in large part to the faithful preaching of God's revelation of himself as truth without any mixture of error. Indeed, Scripture does not merely contain the Word of God; it does not reveal the Word of God; it *is* the Word of God.

Familiarity with the Literature

In the years surrounding and following this epic theological controversy, numerous books have appeared which chronicle the details of the debate from virtually every possible viewpoint. From the most extreme liberal to the most ultra-conservative, many authors have done a tremendous job collecting details and artifacts of the conservative resurgence and have presented them in an easily accessible and understandable manner. Many of the best of these works will be referenced as support for this thesis.

Nancy Ammerman's *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* is an intriguing account of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention from the viewpoint of an outsider.³ Although sympathetic to the "moderate" or "liberal" agenda, her observations are nonetheless

³Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

helpful in seeking to obtain a working knowledge of all aspects and viewpoints of the social, political, and theological issues surrounding the conflict. She provides a useful history of the convention up to the time of the controversy, which proves beneficial in understanding the changing theological winds that shifted slowly over time, ultimately manifesting themselves in the rift of the late 1970s and 80s. Possibly the most helpful aspect of this work is the extensive bibliography the author has included, which points the serious reader to very helpful resources that will be sure to further their understanding of what could arguably be called the most theologically vital period of the entire history of the Southern Baptist Convention.

David Beale's *S.B.C. House on the Sand: Critical Issues for Southern Baptists* remains a relevant resource that deals with the pertinent issues at play in the controversy between the conservatives and liberals in the Southern Baptist Convention in the middle of the twentieth century.⁴ Beale recounts the history of each of the six seminaries of the convention and spends a great deal of time calculating the importance of early Southern Baptist leaders and thinkers as well as the professors and pastors at the center of the controversy. Much of his interest in this work revolves around the questionable future of the convention in the mid-1980s and seeks to answer questions related to the intentions and effectiveness of arguments on both sides of the aisle.

Grady Cothen's *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention: A Memoir of the Controversy* is an enthralling and thought provoking resource detailing the controversial events of the conservative resurgence.⁵ As the title suggests, it is written from a clearly "moderate" position, and is overtly sympathetic to the liberal viewpoint of the controversy. Nevertheless, he provides a helpful history of the effects of the

⁴David O. Beale, *S.B.C. House on the Sand: Critical Issues for Southern Baptists* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1985).

⁵Grady Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention: A Memoir of the Controversy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993).

resurgence in the boards, agencies, and seminaries of the convention and effectively recounts the events that led up to the showdown in Houston, Texas in 1979. The most valuable aspect of this resource is Cothen's recollection and response to the issues from a moderate viewpoint, which helps one understand the controversy from all sides and helps draw the lines between the issues most important to both conservatives and liberals.

David Dockery's *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future* is a resource about much more than merely the conservative resurgence.⁶ It provides a wonderful framework for understanding the controversy in light of the entire history of the Southern Baptist Convention. The book is a compilation of essays from various authors at high levels of involvement within the denomination, all of which are immanently qualified to speak to the issue. The authors do a stellar job accurately detailing the identifying marks of a true Southern Baptist from a conservative viewpoint, as well as describing what it means to be a Southern Baptist in the modern era. They identify the key doctrines and practices they believe must be upheld in years to come in order to see the convention continue to thrive and carry the gospel to the nations.

Robert Ferguson's *Amidst Babel, Speak the Truth: Reflections on the Southern Baptist Convention Struggle* is an interesting resource from a clearly liberal position on the conservative resurgence, or as they would call it, "the fundamentalist takeover."⁷ It is a collection of essays written by a plethora of liberal authors who obviously feel they have been wronged through the process of bringing doctrinal fidelity back to the heart of the Southern Baptist Convention. For example, they make statements such as "the more fundamentalist leaders were interested in far more than simply getting Southern Baptists to acknowledge the authority of the Bible. They wanted agreement with their particular

⁶David Dockery, *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009).

⁷Robert U. Ferguson, Jr., *Amidst Babel, Speak the Truth: Reflections on the Southern Baptist Convention Struggle* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993).

interpretation of the Bible. In fact, fundamentalists could not distinguish between the authority of the Bible and their interpretation of that authority.”⁸ These views and many others contribute to what could only be called a very interesting interpretation of events, but nevertheless views that are helpful in understanding the reasons for the sharp divides in the controversy.

Carl Kell’s *Exiled: Voices of the Southern Baptist Convention Holy War* seeks to make the case from a largely moderate viewpoint that many people in high positions within the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention were forcibly removed through “questionable tactics” and denied the positions of power and authority they had supposedly “worked their entire lives to earn.”⁹ This resource contains a compilation of interviews from those on the moderate side of the aisle who felt they had been wronged by conservatives, or as they would call them, dishonest fundamentalists. It is nevertheless a good resource for the purpose of understanding the hostility and high emotion from those who opposed the reformation of the largest non-Catholic denomination in the United States.

Paige Patterson’s *The Southern Baptist Conservative Resurgence: The History, The Plan, The Assessment* is an unparalleled resource chronicling the conservative resurgence from the viewpoint of one of the key players personally active in reforming the denomination.¹⁰ Patterson does an excellent job describing the political, social, and theological climate of liberalism and compromise surrounding the Southern Baptist Convention from the time of World War II through the late 1970s. In seeking to describe the conservative resurgence, Patterson states that his experience attending a university in

⁸Ferguson, *Amidst Babel, Speak the Truth*, 5.

⁹Carl L. Kell, ed., *Exiled: Voices of the Southern Baptist Convention Holy War* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006).

¹⁰Paige Patterson, *The Southern Baptist Conservative Resurgence: The History, The Plan, The Assessment* (Fort Worth, TX: Seminary Hill Press, 2012).

the west taught him that “roping and riding the whirlwind is not just formidable—it is clearly impossible. Yet, this is precisely what conservative Southern Baptists were attempting in June, 1979.”¹¹ Furthermore, Patterson makes abundantly clear in his short but comprehensive history that this impossible reformation of the world’s largest Protestant denomination would not have been possible without the guiding hand of God himself. For the true student of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention, this resource is a must read.

If there is a definitive resource detailing the concerns, convictions and commitments of the conservative movement behind the reformation of the Southern Baptist Convention, it must be Paul Pressler’s *A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist’s Journey*.¹² One of the most factual and compelling accounts of the events surrounding the conservative resurgence, the book comes from one of the men directly behind the efforts to transform the heart of the Southern Baptist Convention and whom God used to radically redirect its theological and political path forever. In addition to presenting factual information, the book will pique the interest of any person seeking the truth behind the inner workings and details of this world-changing event from a conservative viewpoint.

Walter Shurden’s *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement* is an interesting and compelling account of the conservative resurgence from the viewpoint of some of the most influential moderates involved in the conflict that ultimately led to the showdown in Houston, Texas, in the summer of 1979.¹³ The book is clearly and unashamedly written from a liberal stance, and any reader should expect to detect the disgust and vitriol in the words of those who

¹¹Patterson, *The Southern Baptist Conservative Resurgence*, 19.

¹²Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die*.

¹³Walter Shurden, ed., *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993).

feel they have been wronged and robbed by those on the conservative side of the aisle. In spite of this fact, this resource remains helpful in seeking to understand the whole story behind the conservative resurgence, or as the authors of this resource call it, “the fundamentalist takeover.”

In Jerry Sutton’s *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, the author seeks to break down the political, social, and theological issues surrounding the conservative resurgence.¹⁴ His writing style is effective and informative, and he does a tremendous job showing how the liberal drifts of the denomination had affected the mission boards, seminaries, and other agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention to the point that some change of course was required if the denomination was to become a relevant force for gospel change around the world. He employs interviews with past presidents of the convention and examines the cultural shifts that led to the deep divisions within the denomination. This resource is riveting, revealing, and should be required reading for anyone who desires a helpful, detailed understanding of what could possibly be the most important religious event of the twentieth century.

Void in the Literature

Amidst the available literature chronicling the forces and voices at work behind the scenes of the historic conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention, lost is any evaluation of the importance and effects of the role of preaching. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that the driving necessity of the conservative resurgence rested upon the propagation of a weak and liberal theology and a willingness by moderates to compromise on the inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture. To make this void even more glaring is the fact that there is no

¹⁴Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

greater place where theology meets the common Southern Baptist as in the preaching of God's Word. In addition to this, Baptists have been known throughout the years as "the people of the Book," and with such a designation, one would certainly assume a centrality and high priority to be given to the preaching of that Book. Thankfully, that assumption has been right in the vast majority of cases. Furthermore, one cannot look honestly at these practical connotations without understanding the vital role of preaching in this remarkable movement. Therefore, the void in the literature is in regard to the role of preaching in the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Thesis

The conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention would not have been possible apart from the influential preaching of God's Word. It was through the "foolishness of preaching" that the convention was called back to theological fidelity, and it was through the strategic working of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of godly men, who were committed to a high view of Scripture and a high view of God, and were faithful to preach the eternal truths presented in God's Word that brought about such a monumental change. Three of the best examples of this type of preaching during that time are Adrian Rogers in his sermon, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," W. A. Criswell in his sermon, "Whether We Live or Die," and Jerry Vines in his sermon, "A Baptist and His Bible." These sermons clearly articulated the necessary affirmation of biblical inerrancy that called the denomination back from the brink of death. Furthermore, these sermons present profound implications for the Southern Baptist Convention as a denomination as well as for local Southern Baptist congregations due to the insistence by conservative minds that the Scriptures must be exactly what they claim for themselves: the inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God himself. Therefore, if this thesis is properly demonstrated and supported, these three sermons can be viewed as having significant influence on the advance and widespread support of the conservative

resurgence in the hearts and minds of the majority of Southern Baptists. The benefits of this thesis are its emphasis on the preaching of God’s Word as absolute truth and the demonstration of such preaching through the analysis of the aforementioned sermons. Furthermore, this thesis will show the essential truth for preaching: “my word . . . shall not return unto me void” (Isa 55:11 KJV).¹⁵

Methodology

This thesis will take an analytical approach to three “watershed” sermons preached by prominent conservative Southern Baptist leaders during the years of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention. Further, the effects of these sermons and the ideas that prompted them provide significant insight into the necessity of the movement itself and establish for the historical student a framework by which a clear understanding of the arguments made by those on both sides of the issue may be ascertained. The consequences of such an analytical work will result in implications from the conservative resurgence for the Southern Baptist position on biblical inerrancy, the current health of the SBC, and the effects of this movement on the agencies of the convention. Furthermore, it will show the impact this debate has had on global missions and evangelism efforts and will reveal the level of indebtedness the present Southern Baptist generation owes to those who have gone before, especially those who fought the battles of the conservative resurgence.

Summary

In summary, this thesis will (1) analyze the three aforementioned sermons and their impact and influence upon the denomination as a whole, (2) discern the practical implications for those sermons and the effect they had on the convention, (3) communicate selective implications for the current generation of Southern Baptists who

¹⁵Unless otherwise noted, all references to Scripture are from the English Standard Version.

must obey the Great Commission through global missions and evangelism, (4) and recognize the debt of gratitude the present Southern Baptist generation owes to the men and women who stood firm on the Word of God during this historic denominational crisis.

CHAPTER 2
THE DECADE OF DECISION AND
THE DOORS OF DESTINY

Introduction

The summer of 1979 was a monumental turning point in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention. With the election of Adrian Rogers as the first in a successive line of conservative presidents, the denomination saw the dawning of a new day and a bright future. Although Rogers was never a man with political aspirations for denominational leadership, in 1979 he felt compelled to what he later called the “holy duty” to be the point man of the conservative resurgence.¹ Prior to his election as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, during a sermon at the 1979 Pastor’s Conference, Rogers said he believed the Southern Baptist churches doing evangelism and reaching people with the gospel were “Bible-believing churches” with pastors who “believe in the inerrant, infallible Word of God.”² Rogers believed liberal churches were not winning people to Jesus because they did not believe the Book that told them about Jesus in the first place. Furthermore, speaking on the necessity of doctrinal fidelity, he stated, “inerrancy is not the only ingredient, but it is the basic ingredient.”³ Based on these statements, Rogers understood the issue of inerrancy to be the fundamental and foundational theological catalyst for the successful evangelistic ministry of both the local

¹Randall Balmer, “Churchgoing: Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis,” *The Christian Century* (May 5, 1993): 486.

²Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die: One Southern Baptist’s Journey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 77-84.

³Adrian Rogers, quoted in James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Dallas: Criterion Publications, 1986), 66.

church and the SBC.⁴ This understanding of the necessity of inerrancy set the tone for years to come.⁵ In 1981, Baily Smith reaffirmed this point when he said, “If the Bible is the Word of God at all, it is the perfect Word of God, because God would not give a word of flaws and mistakes.”⁶

This chapter will examine Rogers’ presidential address entitled “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” which was given on June 10, 1980 at the SBC annual meeting held in St. Louis, Missouri. It will take into consideration the political and theological climate of the denomination at the time of his service, as well as the theological content of his sermon. Special attention will center on the impact of this sermon and others like it on the conservative resurgence, in addition to Rogers’ influence on the SBC as a whole, especially his three terms in office as convention president.

Summary of the Sermon

Text and Purpose of the Sermon

For the text of the sermon to be preached as the presidential address of the 1980 SBC, Rogers chose Revelation 3:7-8.⁷ In this section of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, the author addresses the people of the church in the city of Philadelphia (Rev 3:7). He goes on to commend the church for their commitment because although they had, “but little power” they had “kept my word and . . . not denied my name” (Rev 3:8 KJV). Interestingly, this church was only one of two in Asia Minor about whom the author had nothing “against” (Rev 2-3).

⁴Johnny Derrick Yelton, “The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 55-56.

⁵Carl L. Kell and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 57.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Adrian Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, presidential address, St. Louis, MO, June 10, 1980).

Prior to 1980, the presidential address was primarily ceremonial in nature, but with the election of Adrian Rogers, that tradition began to change.⁸ Rogers' primary purpose in this sermon was to call the convention to reach the nations with the gospel. At the beginning of his address he stated that, "Southern Baptists have accepted a challenge to take the gospel to every creature on the face of the earth by the turn of the century."⁹ Based on that assertion, Rogers sought to encourage the convention to take courage and be bold in their mission thrust by relying fully on the power of God's inerrant Word. He argued this boldness was to be found in the understanding that the church is not called to speak its own truth, but rather to speak the truth God has already spoken.¹⁰ He accomplished this purpose in a number of ways, not the least of which was his defense of the inerrancy of Scripture, denouncement of the destructive forces of higher criticism, and declaration of the spiritual destruction caused by humanism and liberalism.¹¹

Major Arguments of the Sermon

The old guard of the SBC had dismissed the election of Adrian Rogers as little more than a fluke due to a momentary storm stirred up by a few from the radical fringe.¹² However, they would soon learn their opponents outnumbered them, and in time they would find this conservative resurgence had struck a chord in the hearts and minds of the majority of Southern Baptists filling pews every Sunday. Among conservatives the issue at stake in the battle for the soul of the convention was very clear: whether or not the

⁸William Stanley Stone, Jr., "The Southern Baptist Convention Reformation, 1979-1990: A Social Drama" (Ph.D. diss., The Louisiana State University and Agriculture and Mechanical College, 1993), 95.

⁹Rogers, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," videotape.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Stone, "The Southern Baptist Convention Reformation, 1979-1990," 95.

¹²Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 174.

Bible was true, without any mixture of error, regardless of whether those supposed errors were historical, scientific, or theological in nature.¹³ As the first conservative to lead the convention in decades, Rogers was prepared to pull no punches and to waste no time in stating his belief that the Word of God indeed was true and every word was to be trusted.

Rogers' primary concern in preaching this sermon as a presidential address was to cast a vision for the denomination for the foreseeable future. He effectively established goals for the SBC to work towards as the end of the twentieth century drew ever closer. His biggest concern and most heavily emphasized argument was that if Southern Baptists were to accomplish the goal of reaching all nations with the gospel by the end of the century (or at all), they were going to have to reaffirm their belief in the authority of God's Word in all areas of faith and practice.¹⁴ It would not be enough to merely give lip service to the accomplishment of this goal. Rather, an extreme change in theological direction would be required. For example, when speaking of the defining characteristics of the Philadelphian people he noted, "they were dominated by the Word of God."¹⁵ He said, "Southern Baptists must ever be a people of the Book. We have no creed because we have a Bible, and who can improve on that? But without an infallible word from God we have nothing but a holy hunch, and that will not do."¹⁶ Rogers went on to assert that if Southern Baptists were to have open doors before them for the successful implementation of the denomination's long-range plan for growth in the SBC titled "Bold Mission Thrust," then they too must be dominated by the Word of God.¹⁷

¹³Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 80.

¹⁴Jerry Rankin, "FIRST PERSON: 21st-Century World May Look Dismal, But Future of Missions is Bright," May 15, 2001, accessed April 30, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/10893/firstperson-21stcentury-world-may-look-dismal-but-future-of-missions-is-bright>.

¹⁵Rogers, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," videotape.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

The second major argument Rogers made in this sermon was to state his conviction that higher critical methods of examining and interpreting Scripture were a destructive force at work in the liberal wing of the SBC, and that he had no intentions of leaving that problem unaddressed. He firmly believed this issue was not merely a matter of well-intentioned Baptists having friendly disagreements, but rather a fundamental difference in understanding what beliefs were truly necessary for one to be considered orthodox. Again, speaking of the domination of the Philadelphian people by God's Word, he asked,

Are there those who would like to lead us down the pathway of destructive higher criticism of the Scriptures? We dare not go and we will not go. Speaking of destructive higher criticism, Sidlow Baxter has said, "In the space of a century, it has turned protestant Christianity into a graveyard. A graveyard of former glad certainties and soul-saving verities, of expired beliefs and perished hopes, of lost faith and vanished assurance, of buried ideals and murdered morals."¹⁸

One final major argument worthy of note here is Rogers' conviction of the spiritual destruction caused by humanism and liberalism. He states this belief in a number of different ways at numerous points throughout the sermon. When speaking of the irrevocable nature of the Word of God he says, "Men have laughed at it; men have scorned it; men have ignored it; men have perverted it, but it stands, irrevocable. It is altogether pure."¹⁹ Rogers went on to quote John Wesley who said, "If there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that Book, it did not come from the God of truth."²⁰ Toward the end of his sermon, he identified the enemies of inerrancy,

There is the hurt of humanism and liberalism, led by an educated, polished, but juiceless and spiritually anemic brand of preachers. Americans are dying of spiritual malnutrition. These bland leaders of the bland have substituted rationalism

¹⁸Rogers, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," videotape.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

for revelation, and they've turned once lion-like denominations into domesticated housecats, drinking the cream of self-satisfaction.²¹

These types of comments and quotations served as a prophetic call to the denomination that if it did not change course theologically, there would be a high price to pay, namely, the doors of greatness, grace, and glory would not be open to Southern Baptists and they would not be used by God as a part of calling all nations to himself. Basically, his contention was that if the SBC did not change course theologically, they would pay the price of not having doors open in the future for ministry and missions. Rogers' affirmed this conviction at the beginning of his message. He said,

Bold Mission Thrust will be accomplished. It is not up for debate. It is already settled in the council halls of eternity, for Jesus said, "This gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached among all nations, and then shall the end come." Jesus said it shall be done, and that settles it. The burning question is, for us as Southern Baptists, will we be the tool that a righteous and a holy God can use?²²

General Reception of the Sermon

According to Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, at the time this sermon was delivered the convention was still sharply divided.²³ When asked whether or not Rogers' address had much significance for the conservative resurgence he said,

Well, it did and it didn't The moderate's response was largely, "Oh my goodness, that man has the ability to sway audiences. We've got to do something to counteract there." So theirs would not have been a positive reaction, but it was, I suppose, something of respect anyway. On the other hand, conservatives . . . heard Adrian Rogers affirm in classical Rogers parlance exactly what they deeply believed but probably couldn't have put that well themselves, and so it would have been a very encouraging sermon to all Bible-believing people. To those who were afraid of him, it probably confirmed their worst fears.²⁴

²¹Rogers, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," videotape.

²²Ibid.

²³Paige Patterson, telephone interview by author, April 23, 2015.

²⁴Ibid.

Although conservatives were jubilant about their victory in the SBC presidential election of 1979, not much else went their way in Houston.²⁵ Beale notes,

Although Rogers won the presidency on the first ballot, the messengers elected the liberal Baylor University president Abner McCall to the office of first vice president Conservatives would soon receive other unwelcome news—Adrian Rogers did not plan to do a single thing to purge Liberalism from Southern Baptist institutions.²⁶

To many conservatives, this came as confusing, if not depressing, news. They knew their president believed in the inerrancy of Scripture, but immediately following his election, Rogers informed a packed news conference, “I don’t want any witch hunt to purge the seminaries.”²⁷ Fortunately for the conservative resurgence, it was not a witch-hunt that was needed, but a liberal first vice president could not do much to stop the necessary conservative nominations by Rogers.²⁸ In spite of these concerns, many times throughout his sermon he was forced to pause long enough for the applause of his supporters to die down as he reaffirmed his commitment to biblical inerrancy. The reception of conservatives toward Rogers’ message was one of resounding approval and elation and possibly a sigh of relief. Although many conservatives were concerned following the presidential election of 1979, they now had a renewed hope and vigor for the battle that lay ahead and a courageous determination to face the difficulties with zeal and commitment.

Moderates, on the other hand, presented quite a different perspective. They continuously touted themselves as defenders of the Baptist ideal of freedom of belief. In fact, one moderate author went so far as to call inerrancy “heresy.”²⁹ When the moderates

²⁵David O. Beale, *S.B.C. House on the Sand: Critical Issues for Southern Baptists* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1985), 153.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 154.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 9.

²⁹*Ibid.*

began to realize the conservatives presented a serious threat to their control of the SBC, agency heads began to declare “holy war” on the movement. Undoubtedly the most notorious of these attacks came from Roy Honeycutt, then president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, in his fall 1984 commencement address. Jason Allen puts this attack in proper perspective:

In courts of law, the old saying, “If the law is on your side, argue the law. If the facts are on your side, argue facts. If neither are on your side, attack your opponent” is often practiced. For the moderates, they had neither the confessional nor legal standing to their advantage, thus they were forced from the beginning into defensive positions and rear-guard actions. As long as the focus was on the inerrancy of the Bible, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, and the *Abstract of Principles*, the moderates were forced to play a losing hand. These realities were probative, and, when coupled with the convention’s legal ownership of the entities and the concurrence of the vast majority of Southern Baptists, were decisive.³⁰

The irony of this address is that Honeycutt’s sermon became a rallying cry for moderates and characterized conservatives as “Judaizers” while at the same time calling for unity.³¹

Another such attack came from Randall Lolley, past president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, in his 1990 sermon titled “Lest a Bramble Rule Over Us,” in which he referred to the conservative movement as “dinosaur rhetoric of the past regarding biblical authority.”³² Moderates were also known to stage symbolic protests, such as ripping up resolutions in front of the Alamo, and some were even known to go as far as wearing armbands and buttons to express their disgust.³³

Therefore, the general reception of this sermon could not have been more politically and theologically divided. The conservatives were clearly ecstatic that “their

³⁰Jason K. Allen, “To Your Tents O Israel: A 30-Year Retrospective on Roy Honeycutt’s Holy War Sermon,” September 22, 2014, accessed September 24, 2014, <http://www.jasonkallen.com/2014/09/tents-o-israel-30-year-retrospective-roy-honeycutts-holy-war-sermon>.

³¹Trey Moss, “Pictures of the Conservative Resurgence and Southern Seminary,” *The Towers of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* 12, no. 10 (June-July 2014): 20.

³²Walter B. Shurden and Randy Shepley, *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 252.

³³*Ibid.*

man” had begun the long but necessary process of reforming the convention, and moderates saw all of this as nothing more than a charade easily dealt with by electing “their man” to the presidency. However, unbeknownst to anyone at the time, that would never come.

Analysis of the Sermon

Homiletical Style of the Sermon

Adrian Rogers believed there were three basic types of sermons: topical, textual, and expository.³⁴ He defined a topical sermon as a message that does not take its outline or points from a single verse or passage of Scripture. He also explained such a sermon may indeed be very biblical, but begins with a topic or issue from which several verses are eclectically selected from the Bible which deal with that topic.³⁵ According to Rogers’ definition, a textual sermon is basically very similar to an expository sermon, except the textual sermon is based on only one or two verses of Scripture, which forms the basic foundation upon which the outline for the sermon is based.³⁶ Finally, Rogers identified the expository sermon as a message based upon an extended passage of Scripture. Unlike the textual sermon, he explained the expository sermon takes its points and sub-points from a paragraph, a chapter, or an entire book of the Bible.³⁷ Rogers readily admitted his preferred style of preaching was expository, but there were also situations that called for a topical or textual approach. Working from these definitions, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny” is a classic textual sermon. He was certainly chained to the text throughout the course of his message, and all of his points

³⁴Adrian Rogers, “The Sermon’s Exposition,” in *What Every Pastor Ought to Know* [DVD-ROM] (North Palm Beach, FL: The Adrian Rogers Pastor Training Institute, 2011), disc 4, session 6.

³⁵Yelton, “The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers,” 68.

³⁶Rogers, “The Sermon’s Exposition,” disc 4, session 6.

³⁷Ibid.

came from only two verses of the third chapter of Revelation, but he also was speaking on the specific topic of “Bold Mission Thrust” and the future opportunities the SBC would have to see “doors of destiny” opened or closed based on their commitment and faithfulness to God’s Word.³⁸

Organization of the Sermon

Rogers viewed sermon preparation as both a science and an art. According to Rogers, the scientific aspect of preaching is related to the established rules of hermeneutics and homiletics, and the artistic feature is related to the skill and creativity of the preacher in his presentation and application of biblical truth.³⁹ Illustrated by his own comparison of the organization of a sermon to the construction of a beautiful building, Rogers said,

Preaching is not merely gathering materials that are truth. It is like someone said of architecture. Good architecture is not the arrangement of beautiful materials; it is a beautiful arrangement of materials Preaching is not simply saying I have these facts. I am going to the building supply and build a homiletical house. It is how you put things together. That is the art form that makes the difference.⁴⁰

Furthermore, he firmly believed any sermon must have a solid foundation, and the only reliable and acceptable foundation is a biblical text. The entire sermon should always be built from that text.⁴¹ Finally, he explained the outline of the sermon is not simply to inform the listener, but must be organized in such a way as to motivate and stir the heart of the listeners to some kind of decision and action to the glory of Christ.⁴² In

³⁸Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

³⁹Yelton, “The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers,” 76.

⁴⁰Michael Pete Montalbano, “A Critical Comparison of the Preaching of Robert G. Lee, Ramsey Pollard, and Adrian Rogers” (Th.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993), 147.

⁴¹Yelton, “The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers,” 77.

⁴²Montalbano, “A Critical Comparison of the Preaching of Robert G. Lee, Ramsey Pollard, and Adrian Rogers,” 147.

Rogers' mind, an outline was simply to be used to keep the preacher on track, and the words he spoke must move people to action.

Rogers was well known for his propensity to employ assonance and alliteration in his sermons. Many preachers use these methods to be clever or cute, and it just comes across in a wooden and unnatural manner. Usually a few points make sense textually, but then it appears as if they have settled for a word that simply makes their outline look good, but sacrifices the meaning the text presents. Not so with Rogers. He tailored sermons for the ear, not the eye. Consequently, he was able to better engage his audience through the use of these literary devices.

This sermon employed these methods with great skill and expertise. Rogers' outline effectively laid bare the meaning of the text while appropriately applying it to the situation into which he was speaking. He began by speaking of "The Keeper of the Keys" in verse seven of his text.⁴³ He noted the righteousness, rightness, and resources of the "Keeper."⁴⁴ He then drew the audience's attention to verse eight and "The Philadelphian People," and pointed out that they were dominated by the Word of God, dedicated to the Son of God, saturated with the love of God, and activated by the Spirit of God.⁴⁵ These first two points are expositional in nature, as Rogers simply described for the audience the meaning of the text. He certainly made appropriate application throughout these two points, but the major thrust of his discourse during those two sections revealed the importance of the text and how it applied to the current situation in SBC life at that time.

The third point however, transitions into the topical component of the sermon. Rogers spoke there of "The Doors of Destiny," and skillfully applied three topical points (the door of greatness, the door of grace, and the door of glory) to the life of the

⁴³Rogers, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," videotape.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

denomination.⁴⁶ When speaking of the “door of greatness,” Rogers unashamedly noted the dangerous and heretical adversaries used by Satan in an effort to derail the church from its true mission. He spoke specifically of the curse of cultism, militant paganism, the hurt of humanism and liberalism, the menace of materialism, the cancer of Communism, and the problem of moral pollution in relation to the destructive forces they have proven to be for the church to take the gospel to the nations.⁴⁷ Yet, he noted that when God opens the door, “These adversaries will be like a crate of eggs in the face of a red hot cannon ball.”⁴⁸ He went on to say, “It is possible that every person on the globe can be given an opportunity to respond to the gospel by the year 2000. When Jesus Christ, who alone can open the doors, does it, barriers of language, law, culture, customs, sin, and indifference will be broken down.”⁴⁹

Although Rogers delivered this sermon as a presidential address to the SBC, it was still a sermon preached by one of the greatest preachers and denominational leaders of the twentieth century, and it bore his classic signature. Ultimately, whether speaking as a pastor to his church, or as a president to his convention, Rogers was most concerned with lifting high the name of Jesus. He had a message for the hour, and he was so concerned that the message touch the hearts of his audience that he spoke to them from the truth of God’s Word, because he knew that was the only way true and lasting change would ever be effected in the SBC.

Functional Elements of the Sermon

One of the notable aspects of Rogers’ preaching was the organization of his sermons, which are easy to follow primarily because of the functional elements he

⁴⁶Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

includes in them. According to Rogers, the functional elements of a sermon are: explanation, argumentation, illustration, and application. Rogers stated that these elements of the sermon serve to answer crucial questions in the mind of the listener. Explanation seeks to answer the question of “What?” Argumentation seeks to answer the question of “Why?” Illustration seeks to answer the question of “How?” Finally, application seeks to answer the question of “What then?”⁵⁰ Rogers firmly believed all of these elements are essential for motivating the listener to action and thereby fulfilling the objective of the message.⁵¹

As aforementioned, Rogers believed the purpose of any sermon should be to move the listener to action. Furthermore, he contended because the Word of God is living and active, it alone has the power to change lives. In fact, when asked about the functional elements of a sermon, Rogers replied, “Good preaching is not to inform but to transform.”⁵² If he had any purpose in preaching “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” it was to move the SBC to action. Moreover, he certainly sought to transform the mood of the convention from one of distrust to one of trust, and from an attitude of hatred toward those on the opposite side of the important issues to one of love. Rogers demonstrated this in the third sub-point of his second point when he spoke of the Philadelphian people being a congregation that was known for their love for one another.⁵³ In fact, he even identified the meaning of the word “Philadelphia” as “brotherly love.”⁵⁴ Although there were many on both sides of the aisle at that

⁵⁰Adrian Rogers, quoted in James A. Smith, Sr., “Rogers to Pastors: ‘Live with Integrity, Learn to Preach,’” *Florida Baptist Witness*, November 17, 2005, accessed September 17, 2014, <http://www.gofbw.com/news.asp?ID=>.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Adrian Rogers, “The Sermon’s Preparation,” in *What Every Pastor Ought to Know* [DVD-ROM], disc 5, session 7.

⁵³Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

⁵⁴Ibid.

convention (conservatives and moderates), Rogers sought to use his address as a means of encouraging the denomination toward cooperation for the cause of seeing the gospel taken to all nations by the end of the century, evidenced by his continual references to the accomplishment of the “Bold Mission Thrust” initiative.

According to Rogers, one of the priorities of biblical preaching is for the preacher to explain the truth of God in its biblical context. The most important reason to “set the text in its context” is not only that it forces the preacher to stay chained to the text, but it also allows the audience to understand the central meaning of the passage being preached.⁵⁵ As was true of almost all of his preaching, Rogers spent considerable time in this sermon explaining the meaning of the passage and setting the text in its context. He makes sure to note his text was a letter to the ancient church in the city of Philadelphia in Asia Minor.⁵⁶ He also notes it was a church of “little strength,” but that God chose to use them because of their commitment to his Word.⁵⁷ Furthermore, he gives explanation as to his choice of title for the sermon by commenting on the fact that the Philadelphian church came to be known as “the church of the open door.”⁵⁸ Finally, he explained the tie between the ancient Philadelphian church and the opportunities before the SBC in 1980.

As Broadus argues, “Once the preacher has clearly stated his point, he should then begin to argue the point logically, reasonably, and passionately.”⁵⁹ Because Rogers frequently preached to large crowds, he sought to anticipate various questions that might

⁵⁵Adrian Rogers, quoted in Joyce Rogers and Julie-Allyson Ieron, *Love Worth Finding: The Life of Adrian Rogers and His Philosophy of Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 202.

⁵⁶Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 4th ed., rev. Vernon L. Stanfield (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 54-58.

be raised in the minds of his audience.⁶⁰ In this sermon, he appropriately addressed the cultural issues that had arisen over the preceding decades that had led to the theological decline of the SBC. Issues such as evolution, humanism, materialism, communism, and liberalism had all crept into the hearts and minds of many on the moderate side of the aisle in the denomination, and as these would have naturally been objections they would have raised (at least in their minds, if not vocally), Rogers directly addressed them in his sermon as a way of answering the questions and notifying the audience he was indeed aware of the pertinent issues of the day which were such a threat to belief in biblical inerrancy.

Rogers' common practice was to use supporting Scripture references to clarify or prove a point in the argumentation phase of his message.⁶¹ When asked about this habit, Rogers explained,

I make use of extensive Scriptural cross-references throughout my exegesis of the text. It is a beautiful thing to bring many other Scriptures that strengthen the truth of your text. Cross-referencing Scripture with your text creates an upside-down pyramid. Your text is where the point of the pyramid rests. Then as other Scripture references are brought to bear on the text, it gets broader as you move up to the inverted pyramid. Cross-referencing Scripture aids the preacher in illustrating and illuminating the truth contained in the sermon text.⁶²

As the heat of the debate in the convention was concentrated on the most basic of theological issues, Rogers' use of inerrant Scripture to bolster support for his argumentation about the inerrancy controversy was as much appropriate as it was necessary. At multiple times throughout this message Rogers modeled his own advice by pointing his audience to multiple passages of Scripture that supported his claims. This commitment became both a source of comfort to conservatives and a thorn in the side of liberals.

⁶⁰Yelton, "The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers," 88.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Rogers, quoted in Rogers and Ieron, *Love Worth Finding*, 200.

To illustrate his points throughout this sermon, Rogers used a variety of methods to make the biblical truth come alive to the audience in St. Louis that day. For example, he used the theme of the 1980 SBC, “That We May Boldly Say,” to illustrate for the audience from Hebrews 13:5-6 their boldness was inextricably linked to what God had already said.⁶³ He also used quotes from such notable people as Corrie ten Boom to illuminate the vast resources of Heaven to accomplish the plans of God.⁶⁴ One of the most memorable illustrative moments in the sermon came when Rogers said “There is a forgotten statistic on death. One out of every one persons dies!”⁶⁵ This classic sense of humor made the preaching of Adrian Rogers unforgettable, and this sermon was certainly no exception to that rule.

Rogers’ emphatically considered the application element of the sermon to be the most important in his preaching ministry. No matter the passage he was preaching, Rogers always expected the audience to apply the text to their lives.⁶⁶ As an explanation of his thoughts on the application element of his sermons, Rogers stated, “Preaching is more than the dissemination of truth. It is not primarily information, but transformation. It is not so much filling a bucket, as lighting a torch. The preacher is attempting to accomplish something in the hearts and minds of people.”⁶⁷ In light of the events surrounding the 1980 SBC, and for that matter, every convention meeting of the entire decade, Rogers was certainly concerned with making sure the audience was clear as to the application they should make from his sermon, namely, they must believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of God’s Word.

⁶³Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Yelton, “The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers,” 91.

⁶⁷Rogers, quoted in Rogers and Ieron, *Love Worth Finding*, 202.

For Rogers, application was not an element to be left until the end of the sermon. Rather, his application began at the very beginning of his sermon, saturated the entire address, and was brought to a climax near the end.⁶⁸ The best example of this dedication to application came near the end of his message, where he said, “The sands of time are running out for this generation. We need to be living in keeping with the urgency and emergency of the hour. We need to live as though Jesus died yesterday, rose this morning, and is coming back this afternoon. Opportunities are fast passing away. Doors that are open now may not always be open.”⁶⁹ Through this passionate application of biblical truth, Rogers effectively called the denomination to rally around the Great Commission, give their lives and ministries to it, and to spend every last breath they had getting the gospel to the nations.

Overall Effectiveness of the Sermon

Rogers maintained the aim of good preaching is not merely to haphazardly disperse information, but to intentionally motivate the listener and move them to action or change.⁷⁰ He certainly accomplished this goal through his message. He offered many facts from Scripture as well as from personal experience to support his claims, but he did not stop at a mere recitation of facts to the messengers of the convention. Instead, he used the text and his supporting facts to call the denomination to biblical fidelity, theological fervency, and intellectual faithfulness. He did not simply settle for telling his audience the condition of the hour; he passionately pleaded with them to stand on the truth of God’s Word, even in the face of opposition, scorn, and ridicule.

Little more than a cursory glance at the transcript of this sermon is necessary to recognize the biblical foundation upon which it rests. Not only does Rogers base the

⁶⁸Yelton, “The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers,” 91.

⁶⁹Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

⁷⁰Yelton, “The Evangelistic Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers,” 72.

entire sermon on a biblical text, he continuously uses supporting Scriptural references throughout the sermon to bolster his arguments and give credibility to the entire message. Further, considering the construction of the message, Rogers' outline is simple and easily understood by the listener. As to the third consideration, the sermon is certainly personal in its concern, as Rogers spoke with the conviction of a president who dearly loved his Savior and dearly loved his convention. His personal concern comes through at every turn in the message. Much of Rogers' effectiveness as a preacher rested in his winsomeness in the pulpit. Here, he did not stumble over his words, but was well prepared and engaged the audience as one of their own. Incredibly, much of the effectiveness of this sermon stems directly from Rogers' unwillingness to compromise on the issue of sin. At multiple points during the address he called out specific sins of the convention and called for repentance and restoration in the finished work of Christ.

If ever a man preached with energy and zeal, that man was Adrian Rogers. Every moment of his address to the SBC was saturated with expectancy that God would open doors of opportunity for the denomination to walk through as they faithfully obeyed the command of the Great Commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. When Rogers was asked if a preacher should expect results from his preaching, he exclaimed, "Not only should a pastor expect results from the pulpit ministry, but expectation should be the general tone of the pastor's ministry. A man who preaches the gospel should expect results because based upon the evidence following the resurrection of Jesus Christ there is not a negative note in the New Testament."⁷¹ Finally, as to the issue of the preacher's complete reliance upon the Holy Spirit, Rogers frequently shared in his testimony that as a young man he prayed alone one night after struggling with the call of God on his life and while lying prostrate on a football field with his face in the dirt, pleading with God to fill him with the Holy Spirit and make him an effective preacher of

⁷¹Rogers, quoted in Rogers and Ieron, *Love Worth Finding*, 161.

the gospel.⁷² He also admitted his dependency upon the Holy Spirit had waned after seminary, but that God used the death of his infant son, Philip, to bring him back to a renewed intimacy and filling with the Holy Spirit in his entire life and ministry.⁷³ He said at one point, “I would rather die than preach without the conscious anointing and assurance of the Holy Spirit speaking through me. I am nothing without God’s Spirit.”⁷⁴ Throughout the entirety of this sermon, the power of the Holy Spirit upon Rogers’ life was on display.

Assessment of the Sermon

In his book *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, author Graeme Goldsworthy asserts, “While there is much in the Bible that is strictly speaking not the gospel, there is nothing in the Bible that can be truly understood apart from the gospel All preaching to be true to the biblical perspective, must in some sense be gospel preaching.”⁷⁵ In the theological climate of the SBC during the 1960s and 70s, much misunderstanding pervaded the convention about the gospel’s call and command because many Southern Baptist scholars were no longer operating from a biblical perspective, but had instead chosen to walk down the path of liberalism and higher criticism. Therefore, it became necessary to call the denomination back to its foundation of biblical fidelity. This sermon did not win that battle single-handedly, but it stands as a tremendous example of the type of preaching that was happening in the pulpits of conservative SBC churches all over the nation, which provided the fuel and impetus needed to sustain conservative presidential elections for the remainder of the decade.

⁷²Rogers, quoted in Rogers and Ieron, *Love Worth Finding*, 156.

⁷³Ibid., 159.

⁷⁴Adrian Rogers, *Unveiling the End Times in Our Time: The Triumph of the Lamb in Revelation* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 278.

⁷⁵Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 95.

Exposition of the Passage

One of the reasons this sermon was so popular with conservatives and well received by the audience was due to its faithful exposition of a biblical text by a preacher who was nothing if not firmly committed to the inerrancy of the Word. Rogers certainly had the topic of the spiritual health and biblical faithfulness of the SBC on his mind, but he began, continued, and ended with a Word from the Lord. He proclaimed God's Word, and in so doing, applied the condition and situation of the Philadelphian church to the SBC while sharing his concern for doctrinal faithfulness in the denomination. Furthermore, Rogers exposition of Revelation 3:7-8 had direct bearing on the subject of the conservative resurgence and its implications for the long-term future of the denomination.

Rogers brought out for the audience an exposition from the passage of the character and resources of Jesus Christ. The verse states, "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth, and shutteth, and no man openeth" (Rev 3:7 KJV). Rogers developed three exegetical points from this verse, namely, "He that is holy" (the righteousness of the Keeper of the Keys), "He that is true" (the rightness of the Keeper of the Keys), and "He that openeth, and no man shutteth, and shutteth, and no man openeth" (the resources of the Keeper of the Keys).

Rogers continued his exposition of the text in Revelation 3:8, which says, "I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" (KJV). From this one verse, Rogers drew four points for the audience to apply to their lives, families, and ministries. The first point of application was the domination of the Philadelphian church by the Word of God ("thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word").⁷⁶ He noted the believers in Philadelphia both believed and behaved God's Word,

⁷⁶Rogers, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," videotape.

and that they were so committed to God's will they were willing to do whatever they could for God, however he told them to do it, no matter how little they had, and no matter how much it cost them personally.⁷⁷ He further asserted one could not call Christ "Lord," while failing to keep his Word.⁷⁸

The second point Rogers noted from this verse was the dedication of the Philadelphian believers to the Son of God ("and hast not denied my name").⁷⁹ He stated, "It is not enough to affirm the written Word. We must proclaim the living Word. We should not primarily preach theology. We should use theology to preach Jesus."⁸⁰ Next, Rogers moved to his third point, that the Philadelphian believers were "saturated with the love of God," and asserted,

It seems to me that the Holy Spirit chose the church named "Brotherly Love" to teach us a lesson about open doors. Don't talk to me about your orthodoxy or denominational loyalty if your heart is the headquarters for hate. Whatever problems Southern Baptists have, they will be settled in a context of love, or they will not be settled.⁸¹

Finally, Rogers concluded the expositional portion of the message with a fourth point from verse eight, in which he commented that the Philadelphian church's domination, dedication, and saturation led them to be activated by the Spirit of God.⁸²

Application of the Passage

If one trait characterized Rogers' preaching, it was the way he made application to his audience. His habit of beginning application in his introduction and

⁷⁷Rogers, "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," videotape.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

continually making application throughout his sermons was effectively modeled here. He began the applicational element of the sermon in the introduction with the words, “In this letter to the church at Philadelphia in Asia Minor, there are some significant truths for Southern Baptists as we face our future together. This was the church of the open door.”⁸³ He continued into his first point about the righteousness of Christ by saying of the SBC, “Without holiness of life, we will face iron-barred doors.”⁸⁴ He went on to speak of the rightness of Christ and stated unequivocally, “His truth and our boldness are inseparably linked. Standing on His Word, we need not stammer. He is true!”⁸⁵ Furthermore, when speaking of the dedication the Philadelphian believers had toward Christ, Rogers applied this truth to the denomination when he said, “Southern Baptists must address themselves to all the problems of human hurts. We cannot turn a deaf ear to the staggering needs in the area of increasing hunger and massive starvation. We can and must respond with wisdom, compassion, and sacrifice. But at the same time, we must preach Jesus.”⁸⁶ This helpful reminder exemplifies Rogers’ entire life and ministry. His concern always related to people coming to saving faith in Jesus.

As aforementioned, Rogers’ entire third point of the sermon was applicational for the SBC. He began by quoting 1 Corinthians 16:9 and spoke of “the door of greatness” that would swing open for opportunities of ministry as the adversaries to the gospel were defeated.⁸⁷ He continued by mentioning “the door of grace,” which he noted was essential to believers having an opportunity to minister the gospel to the world. Finally, he concluded his point on “The Doors of Destiny” by alluding to “the door of glory” and

⁸³Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Ibid.

reminded the convention that everything done here on earth must be done with an eye toward eternity.⁸⁸ Rogers closed the sermon with a poem by Bessie Porter Head, in which he passionately urged the audience to cry out to the Lord to stir them into action.⁸⁹

Relevance to the Conservative Resurgence

The relevance of this sermon to the conservative resurgence cannot be overstated. If the election of Rogers at the 1979 convention was “the shot heard round the convention,” then this sermon stands as the first public declaration by the conservatives about their serious intentions to reform the denomination. Since before its inception in 1845, the purpose for churches cooperating together in what would become the Southern Baptist Convention was to advance the cause of the gospel around the world through missions. In fact, the founding documents of the International Mission Board (formerly the Foreign Mission Board) say the convention was organized as “a plan for eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort, for the propagation of the Gospel.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, as Humphreys notes, “It is not an exaggeration to say that the Convention has had no sufficient reason to exist apart from missions.”⁹¹

This commitment to missions was ultimately the driving catalyst behind the entire conservative movement. It should be noted this was not the first address to the SBC centering on the inerrancy and infallibility of God’s inspired Word, nor would it be the last. At one Pastors’ Conference, Bailey Smith maintained, “I don’t like anything that puts a question mark over the Word of God. Do you know why? Because watered-down

⁸⁸Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Albert McClellan, *Meet Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1978), 29-30.

⁹¹Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means to Us All* (New York: McCracken Press, 1994), 64.

penicillin never cured anybody.”⁹² Another warrior on the front lines of this controversy was Richard Lee, who said, “Let’s put the blame where it belongs [for the drop in baptisms]. It’s puny preaching from powerless pulpits by men who don’t believe the Word of God.”⁹³ Moreover, the grandfather of the conservative resurgence in the SBC, W. A. Criswell, gave this scathing report: “It is very apparent why the decline [of membership] in other denominations. The curse of liberalism has sapped the strength of their message Liberals today call themselves moderates. However, a skunk by any other name still stinks.”⁹⁴ Rogers clearly had a firm grasp on the importance of reclaiming the soul of the SBC.

In his book, *What Every Christian Ought to Know*, Rogers affirms his concerns about the overt spiritual war on the Bible. He asserts,

The devil hates this book and would like to destroy it. Some despise the Bible; others just deny it; still others distort it and have warped, misused, and abused it. But I believe the greatest enemy of the Bible is the so-called Christian who simply ignores the Bible or disregards it. He gives only lip service to it. “These hath God married and no man shall part: Dust on the Bible and drought in the heart.”⁹⁵

He continues by giving four reasons that belief in the truth of God’s Word is so important: (1) Salvation depends on understanding the gospel message of the Bible.⁹⁶ (2) Assurance depends on resting in the truth of the Bible.⁹⁷ (3) Spiritual growth depends on living by the principles of the Bible.⁹⁸ (4) Power in witness depends on the confidence in

⁹²James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1991), 68.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Adrian Rogers, *What Every Christian Ought to Know: Essential Truths for Growing Your Faith* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 7.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

the Word of God.⁹⁹ In reality, these assertions explain the relevance of this sermon to the conservative resurgence, and the vital importance of the conservative resurgence to the faithfulness and mission of the entire denomination. Without a firm conviction of the inerrancy of Scripture, Southern Baptists would have no firm foundation upon which to base their “Bold Mission Thrust,” and Rogers knew that simply would not do for a convention of churches entrusted with the truth and given the opportunity to take the gospel around the world. Therefore, this sermon represented the type of bold assurance in the power of God’s Word needed to accomplish the Great Commission.

The Sermon’s Impact on the Conservative Resurgence

As the first presidential address of the conservative resurgence, this sermon had considerable impact on the entire movement. For the purposes of this study, the influence of this sermon on the conservative resurgence will be limited to the theological, missiological, and strategic results that were brought about through this type of biblical preaching.

Theological Impact

The disastrous assumption is often made that because the Scriptures originated in the church (as the church is merely another name for the true people of God), those in the church ought to have authority over the interpretation of said Scriptures. This faulty reasoning was part of the problem that led to the theological downgrade in the SBC in the first half of the twentieth century. In an interview about the conservative resurgence when asked why the conservative movement was worth the fight, Pressler stated,

If we have no standard by which we judge things, then there’s no solid basis of belief. And if I didn’t believe the Bible was true, why should I believe Jesus was virgin born? Why should I believe he died a penal substitutionary death on the cross to pay for my sins? Why should I believe he’s coming again? Why should I believe there’s victory in Jesus if it’s just somebody else’s idea? The Bible is the

⁹⁹Rogers, *What Every Christian Ought to Know*, 7.

basis of what I believe. And, therefore, if people come out of our schools and go into our churches teaching doubt, then we are not going to have conviction preached from the pulpit. The Episcopalians are dying, the Methodists are in bad shape and the Presbyterians are dissolving, and we'd be in the same place. But you preach the Word and God blesses. So that's why I wrote my book entitled *A Hill on Which to Die*, because I'm not going to die over women's ordination It's not a primary issue; it's a secondary issue. But there are two primary issues as far as I'm concerned: one is the inerrancy of Scripture, and two is the blood atonement. And if you're right on those two issues, you're not going to be wrong on much else.¹⁰⁰

Mohler asserts concerning the on-going effect of the conservative resurgence, “the conservative movement set a course for continuing reform.”¹⁰¹ As aforementioned, this address by Rogers was by no means the definitive word on the inerrancy controversy, but it indeed stood as a clarion call to Southern Baptists to wake up to the evils of liberalism before them and to once again make a firm theological stand on the authority, inerrancy, and infallibility of God's inspired Word.

In this vein Patterson notes, “What everybody missed is the overwhelming advantage conservatives enjoyed in the pulpit. And it was the inability of the moderate faction to produce preachers that could swim with conservatives . . . that really as much as anything else fueled the popular expression of the conservative movement.”¹⁰²

Theologically speaking, this result was inevitable, as the majority of Southern Baptists at the time firmly believed in the truth of God's Word, and the conservatives stood unequivocally and unapologetically in their camp.

Missiological Impact

Although theological issues were at the heart of the conservative resurgence, serious missiological implications fed the controversy as well. On the surface, the

¹⁰⁰Paul Pressler, quoted in Aaron Cline Hanbury, “Seven Questions with Paul Pressler about the Conservative Resurgence,” *The Towers of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* 12, no. 10 (June-July 2014): 15.

¹⁰¹R. Albert Mohler, Jr., quoted in Aaron Cline Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention,” *The Towers of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* 12, no. 10 (June-July 2014): 17.

¹⁰²Patterson, interview.

conservative resurgence appeared concerned with little more than superficial intellectual differences of opinion of two opposing views of the culture.¹⁰³ However, according to Mohler, the controversy ran much deeper and was much more important than that. He argues, “The great motivating issue for the thousands of Southern Baptists who showed up to vote was not just the inerrancy of Scripture, but it was the inerrancy of Scripture for the furtherance of the gospel The purpose of this was not just to make sure we articulated all the right doctrines, but that we were driven by the right passions.”¹⁰⁴

Throughout the entire debate, moderates consistently blamed the conservatives for being divisive and unloving in their approach. Although moderates had controlled the denomination for decades, they were clearly displeased with what they referred to as the “fundamentalist takeover.” In the minds of the moderates, compromise was not an option, even though they said they wanted compromise. In reality, the only compromise acceptable would have been for conservatives to forget their ideas of reformation and return to a place of minority on the boards and agencies of the SBC.

Incidentally, compromise was not an option in the minds of conservatives either, but their reasoning was much different than the moderates. The moderates seemed to want everyone to just “go along and get along.” They had an attitude of peace at all costs, as long as they got their way. To the contrary, the conservatives knew there would be an incredibly high price to pay, but that price had to be paid for the sake of the gospel in the cooperating purpose of the convention: missions.¹⁰⁵

The missiological impact of this sermon on the conservative resurgence lies in the fact that Rogers clearly articulated the importance of inerrant Scriptures for the mission of global evangelization. He skillfully argued that not only was “Bold Mission

¹⁰³Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention,” 17.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

Thrust” possible, but it was indeed unstoppable under the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God.¹⁰⁶ Paige Patterson offers a helpful perspective on this idea of the impact of the conservative resurgence on the missional bent of the SBC when he says,

I don’t think anything more noble can happen than for an institution to return to the faith of its founding fathers and unfortunately that’s very rare Now granted, Southern Seminary may never have been nearly as liberal as Yale or Harvard or something like that, but, in fact, it was so liberal that it was turning out pastors for churches that did not win people to Christ and did not teach the biblical revelation. So sermons became lightweight sermons that were more inspirational, if anything, than textual and biblical.¹⁰⁷

Very simply, without the conservative resurgence, the very purpose for which the SBC was originally created would have ceased to exist. To paraphrase W. A. Criswell, the denomination would not have to worry about how they were going to support their missionaries anymore, because there would be no more missionaries to support.¹⁰⁸

Strategic Impact

Although the theological and missiological impact of Rogers’ sermon are of far more importance to the conservative resurgence than any other aspect, one final area of impact should be mentioned: the impact of the conservatives’ strategy for reforming the denomination. In order for the resurgence to be a success, certain things had to happen in the convention from a process perspective.¹⁰⁹ The most important of these processes was ensuring victory in the SBC presidential election for ten consecutive years. As Pressler notes, “with the president appointing the committee on committees, and the committee appoints the committee on nomination that nominates all the trustees . . . the way my

¹⁰⁶Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” videotape.

¹⁰⁷Paige Patterson, quoted in Aaron Cline Hanbury, “3 Questions with Paige Patterson,” *The Towers of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* 12, no. 10 (June-July 2014): 28.

¹⁰⁸W. A. Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Pastors’ Conference address, Dallas, TX, June 10, 1985).

¹⁰⁹Pressler, quoted in Hanbury, “Seven Questions with Paul Pressler about the Conservative Resurgence,” 14.

mind works, I don't care how many resolutions you pass, if you don't have the power to carry out those resolutions, you don't accomplish anything."¹¹⁰ He continues by saying, "my influence was to direct us not to pass resolutions, necessarily . . . but, instead, to elect officers who could get the right people in the right places to do things."¹¹¹

Although none of this "behind-the-scenes" work was mentioned in Rogers' sermon, the work was vital nonetheless. In much the same way the structure of a good sermon is visible only to the preacher and not the audience, so the structure of the conservative movement was constantly in place and consistently being employed, but never directly visible to the average messenger elected to the convention. Instead, this sermon lent strategic impact to the movement in that the first elected president of the conservative resurgence clearly and unequivocally articulated the deeply held beliefs of the vast majority of Southern Baptists—the Word of God is inerrant.

Conclusion

During the course of the conservative resurgence many battles were fought and won by those on both the conservative and liberal sides of the aisle in the SBC. There were battles over "secondary issues" such as women's ordination that were lost by those on the conservative side.¹¹² Furthermore, the conservatives lost votes on numerous resolutions, such as one messenger's resolution to ask future nominees to the offices of president and vice president to voluntarily sign a simple and basic doctrinal statement.¹¹³ Moreover, at the 1979 SBC, a resolution was presented and passed which expressed special appreciation to the six seminaries' faculties and openly rebuked the conservative

¹¹⁰Pressler, quoted in Hanbury, "Seven Questions with Paul Pressler about the Conservative Resurgence," 14.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Beale, *S.B.C. House on the Sand*, 153.

movement.¹¹⁴ However, in the end, Rogers' clear articulation of the most deeply held beliefs of the majority of Southern Baptists on inerrancy and the authority of God's Word in this presidential address laid the groundwork for the most important and hard-fought battles of the coming decade—truly a decade of decision and destiny.

¹¹⁴Beale, *S.B.C. House on the Sand*, 153.

CHAPTER 3

WHETHER WE LIVE OR DIE

Introduction

As the debate which had come to be known as the “Inerrancy Controversy” intensified to a near boiling point in the middle of the 1980s, so did the resolve and conviction of those on both sides of the theological aisle in the Southern Baptist Convention.¹ Both liberals and conservatives were determined to win the battle for the soul of the denomination, but no one could have predicted the turnout, much less the tension and turmoil, which would erupt at the annual meeting of the convention in Dallas, Texas in June of 1985. The 45,519 registered messengers converging on the convention center that morning prompted a traffic helicopter pilot to opine, “What the Democratic and Republican National Conventions failed to do, Southern Baptists have done—we have terminal gridlock on Dallas freeways.”²

Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and a key leader of the conservative resurgence, struck on the significance of the 1985 SBC when he mentioned it was monumental if for no other reason than it remains the largest annual meeting the denomination has ever known.³ People arrived at the convention hall by six o’clock that morning trying to get seats, and

¹Walter B. Shurden, “Major Issues in the SBC Controversy,” in *Amidst Babel, Speak the Truth: Reflections on the Southern Baptist Convention Struggle*, ed. Robert U. Ferguson, Jr. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 1.

²Paige Patterson, *The Southern Baptist Conservative Resurgence: The History. The Plan. The Assessment*. (Fort Worth, TX: Seminary Hill Press, 2012), 27.

³Paige Patterson, telephone interview by author, April 23, 2015.

nobody left until late into the night.⁴ Nancy Ammerman notes, “In all the history of Southern Baptist Conventions, barely more than 22,000 people had ever come to one of these annual meetings. But when registration closed the night before, more than 35,000 had already signed in for this one. By 9:00 Tuesday morning, the number would pass 40,000; and by the time the crucial presidential vote was taken that afternoon, 5,000 more would have picked up their ballots.”⁵ This was the big convention. In many ways, 1985 was to be the year which would determine the course of the denomination for decades into the future: whether it would continue a process of reform through the efforts of conservatives, led by SBC president Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, or whether the moderates would regain control of the convention through the election of Winfred Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church in Amarillo, Texas.⁶

This chapter will examine Criswell’s sermon, “Whether We Live or Die,” and will take into consideration the political climate of the denomination at the time of its preaching, as well as the theological, missiological, and strategic implications therein. Special attention will center on the impact of this sermon on the conservative resurgence, in addition to Criswell’s influence on the SBC as a whole through his work as a pastor, mentor, and Baptist statesman.

Summary of the Sermon

On June 10, 1985, immediately preceding this prodigious annual meeting and serving as the climax to the SBC Pastor’s Conference, W. A. Criswell, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, came to the pulpit and addressed the audience on

⁴Patterson, interview.

⁵Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 3.

⁶Walter B. Shurden, ed., *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 87.

“Whether We Live or Die.”⁷ Reporting on comments made by President Albert Mohler during a chapel service of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, at which a video recording of “Whether We Live or Die” was played, RuthAnne Irvin notes, “The sermon came at one of the most intense times of controversy over the inerrancy of the Bible in SBC life.”⁸ As Mohler recounted the context in which Criswell preached this sermon, he said the highly revered preacher and past convention president delivered this message “under conditions of maximum warfare” at a meeting he referred to as “one of the great turning points of the denomination.”⁹ He continued, “‘Whether We Live or Die’ could have been answered in the course of that convention had the vote gone differently than it did.”¹⁰ Irvin summarizes Mohler’s sentiments when she recounts his comments: “There is a line that runs very straight from that day in Dallas, Texas, to this day in Louisville, Kentucky We can look back at history and say, had not the convention voted as it did in the very day after Dr. Criswell preached that sermon, we would not be sitting in this chapel today. It would be a very different world and a very different institution.”¹¹

Text and Purpose of the Sermon

Although he made exceptions for special days of the year, such as Mother’s Day and Christmas, Criswell encouraged new preachers to commit to expository preaching as the main spiritual diet for the ministries with which God would entrust

⁷Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 80.

⁸RuthAnne Irvin, “W. A. Criswell Chair Announced at Southern,” October 25, 2013, accessed May 8, 2015, <http://bpnews.net/41358/wa-criswell-chair-announced-at-southern>.

⁹R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Whether We Live or Die,” October 17, 2013, accessed May 11, 2015, <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/chapel/whether-we-live-or-die>.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Irvin, “W. A. Criswell Chair Announced at Southern.”

them.¹² During a lecture to a group of students in 1997 on the methods he employed in the development of sermons, he asserted, “When you stand up there to preach, you ought to deliver an exposition of a passage of Scripture in a selected book that you are presenting to the people.”¹³ In addition to the foundational elements of grammar, history, and context, David Allen describes in detail what Criswell meant when he spoke of expository preaching and how he applied the message of the Word to the hearts of his audience:

His use of the elements of persuasion made Criswell virtually peerless in his ability to make relevant biblical exposition Vividness of language, use of strong, active verbs, and a regular use of the first person plural instead of the second person, all combined to create a bond between himself and his hearers. Concreteness, repetition, alliteration, combined with a superb ability to make use of figures of speech turned the ear into an eye for Criswell’s listeners.¹⁴

As Mohler concedes, “Whether We Live or Die” is not an expository sermon.¹⁵ Rather, this sermon stands as a clear demonstration that Criswell was remarkable in his rhetorical skill, possessed a masterful theological mind, and was a titanic preacher of the last half of the twentieth century.¹⁶ Allen notes, “When the history of twentieth century Southern Baptist preaching is written, one name will stand at the top of the list: W. A. Criswell.”¹⁷

Criswell had certainly mastered exposition of the Scriptures. In fact, from the days of Charles Haddon Spurgeon to his own time, he is arguably the best example of a

¹²W. A. Criswell, “Preparing the Expository Sermon (Lecture),” September 8, 1997, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.wacriswell.com/sermons/1997/preparing-the-expository-sermon-lecture>.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴David L. Allen, “With a Bible In My Hand: The Preaching Legacy of W. A. Criswell,” July 1, 2004, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.preaching.com/resources/past-masters/11548836>. Allen, “With a Bible In My Hand.”

¹⁵Mohler, “Whether We Live or Die.”

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Allen, “With a Bible In My Hand.”

prominent preacher who was committed to faithful exposition of the Word of God on a regular basis.¹⁸ Referencing his own predecessor at First Baptist Dallas, the famed George W. Truett, Criswell affirmed he was “possibly the greatest preacher our denomination has ever produced.”¹⁹ But he went on to mention Truett “never preached an expository sermon in his life—not one time. He preached topically The only kind of a sermon those people had ever heard was a topical sermon.”²⁰ If Truett was the greatest topical preacher the SBC had ever produced, Criswell was certainly the greatest expository preacher the SBC had ever produced—to the point his expository preaching ministry became world-renowned.²¹ Allen claims, “Perhaps the single most significant impact Criswell’s preaching had was to foster expositional preaching within the Southern Baptist Convention and beyond.”²² Criswell was an avid expositor, but an expository message was not the need of the hour. June 10, 1985, called for a fervent warning from a trusted preacher on the dangers of liberal theology in the Southern Baptist Convention, and a fervent warning is precisely what was brought to the pulpit that night.

The singular purpose for the preparation and delivery of this sermon is readily accessible. Criswell unequivocally stated its purpose in his opening remarks when he said, “The message tonight, entitled ‘Whether We Live or Die’ is delivered, prepared in view of the convocation of our assembled messengers beginning in the morning.”²³ His aim was to steel the resolve of conservative inerrantists for the fight that lay ahead, to encourage them to vote their conscience and beliefs during the convention to follow, and

¹⁸Mohler, “Whether We Live or Die.”

¹⁹Criswell, “Preparing the Expository Sermon (Lecture).”

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Allen, “With a Bible In My Hand.”

²²Ibid.

²³W. A. Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, SBC Pastor’s Conference, Dallas, TX, June 10, 1985).

to reverse the determined opposition of any moderates who happened to be in the audience that night.

Major Arguments of the Sermon

In reality, this sermon is a single argument, meticulously prepared, methodically practiced, and masterfully presented. Criswell thoroughly understood the weight of the hour and the realities of the controversy, as he aptly conveyed through his opening statement:

Not in all of my life have I ever prepared an address as minutely and meticulously as I have this one tonight. I have been a pastor fifty-eight years. I began preaching at this Pastor's Conference at the invitation of Dr. M. E. Dodd when he founded it something like fifty years ago. And I would think more than thirty times have I spoken to this assembly of God's anointed under-shepherds. But I have never, ever approached a moment like this.²⁴

Criswell's argument for conservative theology and warning against the spread of liberalism in the SBC began with an examination of "The Pattern of Death for a Denomination."²⁵ He took as an example the Baptist denomination in Great Britain during the days of Charles Haddon Spurgeon.²⁶ As evidence for this "pattern of death," he offered two sources from which the opposition to evangelical truth sprang.²⁷ The first was Darwin's publication of *Origen of Species* in 1859, which he said, "made the Genesis account of creation a myth."²⁸ The second came in the form of German higher criticism and rationalism, which he claimed, "explained away the miracles of the Bible and reduced the inspired Word to merely a human book."²⁹

²⁴Criswell, "Whether We Live or Die," videotape.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

Criswell went on to describe the “fungal attack on the Scripture” by the British liberals and the “militant opposition from the mighty preacher” Spurgeon as he urged the Baptist denomination to “speak out against the heresy.”³⁰ Criswell contended that in much the same way the Southern Baptist moderates had responded to conservatives with their belief in the priesthood of every believer, the liberal Baptists of Spurgeon’s day “avowed that Baptists could believe their own way so long as they baptize by immersion.”³¹ He then referenced Spurgeon’s scathing retort in “The Downgrade in the Churches” and said,

He wrote, “Instead of submission to God’s Word, higher criticism urges accommodation to human wisdom. It sets human thought above God’s revelation and constitutes man the supreme judge of what ought to be true. He wrote, “Believers in Holy Scripture are in confederacy with those who deny plenary inspiration. Those who hold evangelical doctrine are in open alliance with those who call the Genesis fall a myth.” He wrote, “A chasm is opening between the men who believe their Bible and those who are prepared for an advance on the Scripture. The house is being robbed. Its very walls are being dugged down. But the good people who are in bed are too fond of the warmth to go downstairs to meet the burglars. Inspiration and speculation cannot long abide side by side. We cannot hold the inspiration of the Word and yet reject it. We cannot hold the doctrine of the fall and yet talk of evolution of spiritual life from human nature. One or the other must go. Compromise there can be none.”³²

Criswell went on to describe the efforts by John Clifford, London pastor and president of the British Baptist Union, and later first president of the Baptist World Alliance, to censure Spurgeon due to his warnings about theological liberalism in the Baptist churches of Great Britain.³³ Ultimately, Spurgeon would lose the fight, and according to his wife, it would cost him his life.³⁴ In light of that event, Criswell had a

³⁰Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

stern warning for the SBC. He quoted Clifford, who in 1888 said, “It pains me unspeakably to see this eminent preacher Spurgeon rousing the energies of thousands of Christians to engage in personal wrangling and strife, instead of inspiring them in an effort to carry the gospel to our fellow countrymen.”³⁵ He then leaned into the microphone and asked, “Sounds kind of familiar, doesn’t it?”³⁶

He adamantly asserted,

All that Mr. Spurgeon saw and said, and much more, came to pass. Baptist witness in Great Britain began to die . . . church attendance fell off, prayer meetings ceased, miracles of conversion were witnessed less and less, the number of baptisms began to decline The numerical graph of the British Baptists since the halcyon days of Spurgeon, their mighty champion, is down, and ever down, and for a century has been going down.³⁷

Having asserted the great theological danger ahead for the denomination if the course was not corrected, Criswell then concluded his first point with a passionate personal example:

I was in India years ago when English Baptists were closing down their mission stations on the Ganges River, stations founded by William Carey. Some say the position taken by Spurgeon hurt the mission movement. My brother, if the higher critical approach to the Scriptures dominates our institutions and our denominations, there will be no missionaries to hurt—they will cease to exist.³⁸

For his second example, Criswell detailed “The Pattern of Death for an Institution.” With great fervor he cautioned, “An institution can be like a great tree which in times past withstood the rain, and the wind, and the storm, and the lightning, but finally fell because the heart had rotted out.”³⁹ Expounding on that thought he made the following claim:

³⁵Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

This is the unspeakably tragic thing that happens to many of our Christian institutions They are delivered to secularism and infidelity, not because of a bitter frontal attack from without, but because of a slow, gradual permeation of the rot and curse of unbelief within. The tragic and traumatic example of that decay is the University of Chicago.⁴⁰

After providing a brief historical sketch of the early days of the university, he launched into a denunciation of the numerous professors who taught preachers in the divinity school for many years and according to his view had corrupted them with “the curse, the rot, the virus, the corruption of a higher critical approach to the gospel.”⁴¹ He quoted systematic theology professor G. B. Smith as saying, “The spirit of democracy protests against such an idea as that God has a right to insist on a rigid plan of salvation.”⁴² This statement stands as one example of three Criswell gave to prove the liberal, indeed “anti-Christian,” theology and philosophy that had infiltrated the institution and had caused the rot from within of which he so eloquently spoke.

As he drew this point to a close, Criswell indignantly asserted,

If neo-orthodoxy were a separate movement in itself, built its own churches, launched its own institutions, projected its own denomination, then we could look at it as just another of the many sects that appear on the surface of history. But neo-orthodoxy in itself builds nothing. It is a parasite that grows on institutions already built. If these higher critical semi-Unitarians won the lost to Christ, built up the churches, sent out missionaries, ministered to the needs of the people, then we could abandon our Bibles, rest at ease in Zion, and watch the Kingdom of God advance from our ivory towers. The trouble is, these self-styled superior religionists do nothing but preside over a dying church, and a dying witness, and a dying denomination. No minister who has embraced a higher critical approach to the gospel has ever built a great church, held a mighty revival, or won a city to the Lord. They live off the labor and sacrifice of those who paid the price of devoted service before them. Their message, which they think is new and modern, is as old as the first lie, “Yea, hath God said?”⁴³

⁴⁰Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

For the third segment of his argument, Criswell posited “The Pattern of Death for a Preacher, a Pulpiteer, a Professor.” He recounted the story of Southern Seminary professor Crawford Howell Toy, who came to the seminary in 1869 as one of the brightest prospects the faculty had ever known.⁴⁴ He even knew more Hebrew than his teacher, Basil Manley.⁴⁵ Toy’s affirmation of Scripture was strong in the beginning of his tenure at Southern.⁴⁶ However, within a few years, his theological views changed, having been influenced by the teaching of German scholar and philosopher Julius Wellhausen.⁴⁷ Toy ultimately denied the authenticity of major sections of the Old Testament, and upon admonishment by then president James Petigru Boyce, offered his resignation from the faculty in 1879.⁴⁸ Criswell emphasized, “This was the young man with whom Lottie Moon had fallen in love, to whom she was engaged to marry. This was the young man who had been appointed by the Foreign Mission Board of the denomination as a missionary to the Orient. This was the young man who was idolized by the Baptist academic and religious world.”⁴⁹

Commenting on an article in the then current issue of *Review and Expositor*, the theological journal of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he said, “It is filled with lavish and extravagant praise for the Unitarian. Here are the closing sentences in the review, I quote, ‘So far as his critical trends developed within the ten years of his membership on the faculty, his views today would not be regarded as sufficiently revolutionary to call for drastic action. Toy’s research and views were too advanced for

⁴⁴Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Grady C. Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention: A Memoir of the Controversy* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 296.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

his contemporaries.”⁵⁰ He then fervently exclaimed, “That is, if he lived and taught today, his higher-critical, destructive approach to the Word of God would be perfectly acceptable, condoned, and defended.”⁵¹

Having clearly defined the patterns of death that had so silently crept into the denomination at the deepest levels, Criswell expounded “The Possibility and Promise of Resurrection, Renascence, and Revival.” He asserted, “Since Pentecost, there is no age, no century, no era, no time without the marvelous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The soul-saving experience continues.”⁵² He explained,

Darkness and death and decay may reign in one place, but always light, life, and salvation will reign and vigorously abound in another. The church at Jerusalem fell into Ebionitic legalism, but the church at Antioch experienced the greatest revival of Gentile converts the first century ever knew. When the waning of piety began to empty the church at Antioch, the churches at Ephesus and Rome and at Milan were waxing mighty in the work of the Lord. When the churches of Alexandria and Carthage were falling into empty philosophical dissertations, the churches of Gaul were winning all western Continental Europe to the Lord. While Rome was pursuing vain and sterile rituals, the churches of Ireland were baptizing the whole nation and their many tribes into the faith. While Mohammed was destroying the faith in North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia Minor, the scholars of Iona were going forth to evangelize the Northumbrians, the Scots, the Picts, the Anglo-Saxons: our ancestors. While the pontifical court of Avignon was engrossed in seeking political power, the cities of Germany were learning the heavenly ways of the Lord Jesus. When the darkness of night and superstition were covering the churches of France, the morning stars of the Reformation were rising in England. When Italian fields were turning into useless stubble, Bohemia was alive with the converting Spirit of Christ. When the Unitarian defection destroyed the evangelizing spirit of the congregations of New England, the pioneer preachers were advancing beyond the Alleghenies to build churches and Christian institutions in the heartland of America. And while elitism, and liberalism, and spiritual indifference are decimating the churches in the West, great revival is being experienced in Korea, and South America, and in central Africa. Why not America, and why not now?⁵³

⁵⁰Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

Criswell described the ever-present cultural changes on the horizon when he spoke of the political changes of the French Revolution, the intellectual changes of the Renaissance, the economic changes of the industrial revolution, and the religious changes of the Reformation.⁵⁴ He warned the denomination that the religious landscape had also changed by noting for the first time in world history, governments are “statedly and blatantly atheistic.”⁵⁵ He emphasized the depth of these changes when he said, “No ancient Greek would ever make a destiny-determining decision without first consulting the oracle at Delphi. No Roman general would go to war without first propitiating the gods. But these bow at no altar, call upon the name of no deity, and they seem to be possessing the world.”⁵⁶

Speaking to the necessity for Baptists to cooperate together in their mission he declared, “As Baptist churches, and as a Baptist people, we need each other. One segment of our community cannot do our work, our task, alone. Our strength lies in a common determination and a common dedication.”⁵⁷ He explained,

One church can build a Sunday School, but a Sunday School movement must be launched by an association of churches through a Sunday School board. One church can send a missionary, but a vast missionary movement must be engineered by a denomination of churches through a foreign mission board. One church can have a revival, but a revival movement must be prayed for, and prayed down, and lifted up by a community of churches through an evangelistic director.⁵⁸

Concluding this portion of his message in his typical dramatic fashion Criswell asserted, “United in prayer, preaching, witnessing, working, not around the higher-critical denial of Scripture, but around the infallible Word of God in Christ Jesus, we cannot fail.

⁵⁴Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

If we join hands with the blessed Savior and deliver the message of the inerrant Word of God, God will rise to meet us.”⁵⁹

All of these arguments were drawn together in Criswell’s closing statements when he declared, “No battle was ever won by retreat, or submission, or surrender. When Alexander the Great lay dying, they asked him, ‘Whose is the kingdom?’ And he replied, ‘It is for him who can take it.’ It will be we, or somebody else.”⁶⁰

General Reception of the Sermon

The reaction to Criswell’s sermon in many ways was nothing short of extraordinary. For the conservatives, there was a tremendous outpouring of invigorated messengers registering for the convention determined to continue the march to victory. On the moderate side there was far less enthusiasm over the sermon, but an equal amount of resolve to see their man elected to the presidency of the denomination. Hefley notes, “By Tuesday morning, June 11, 45,404 church messengers had registered, making the Dallas convention the largest parliamentary church business meeting in American history.”⁶¹ Ultimately, this historic turnout would prove to be an enormous advantage for the conservative movement as they sought to further solidify the growing possibility the convention would eventually see reform at the deepest levels.

For moderates, Monday evening of the Pastor’s Conference was not an enjoyable experience. Hefley mentions, “No more than 5,000 came to the Forum where moderate speakers made dire predictions of what might happen should Stanley be reelected and the ‘takeover’ not averted.”⁶² He continued by describing the scare tactics

⁵⁹Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, vol. 2, *Updating the Controversy* (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1987), 12.

⁶²Ibid., 13.

employed by the moderate faction in response to Criswell's address. First, they warned the Cooperative Program might be "blown apart with foreign missions the first casualty."⁶³ They also contended the "right-wing political alignment of conservatives might cause the \$1.5 billion Annuity Board to lose its religious status and special tax benefits."⁶⁴

Moderate Atlanta pastor Bill Self apparently perceived the resurgence as "a dastardly plot by some kind of political and religious coalition to gain access to the resources of the convention."⁶⁵ Needless to say, the reaction of the moderates was one of unnecessary concern, baseless accusations, and wild imagination. Further moderate backlash came in the form of agency leaders in the SBC banding together to actively oppose the re-election of Charles Stanley as president of the denomination.⁶⁶ Although this tactic gave hope to some moderates they would finally be able to reverse the effects of the conservative resurgence with the election of Winfred Moore, a 55.3 percent majority vote for Stanley would prove them wrong.⁶⁷

Representing the conservative perspective on the situation in general and this sermon in particular, Patterson has said, "That sermon that night was nothing short of spectacular. I feared for the safety of the building. I anticipated at any moment that people would be leaping from the rafters. I mean it was that kind of a night . . . it was just a spectacular evening."⁶⁸ His sentiments and recollection of the evening are easily verified by audio and video recordings of Criswell's address, which give one a sense of

⁶³Hefley, *Updating the Controversy*, 13.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, vol. 5, *The Winning Edge* (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1990), 34.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Patterson, interview.

the elation conservatives expressed through standing ovations and raucous applause following his masterful delivery. Indeed, the effects of this message remain powerful even today. Patterson continues, “I’ve even played it here at chapel for our students, not knowing what response they would have to it My kids loved it. They went crazy about it It was one of the most magnificent messages I’ve ever heard, and of course, it was irrefutable in the facts that he marshaled and I would have to say it had a big effect on what happened the next two days of the convention.”⁶⁹

Another aspect of the conservative response that should not remain unnoticed is the re-election of Charles Stanley as president of the SBC, at least part of which should be attributed to the reception of Criswell’s message, with others likely being encouraged and influenced by Billy Graham’s last minute endorsement of Stanley.⁷⁰ According to Hefley, the aforementioned opposition to his re-election by major convention agency leaders, all of whom were decidedly theologically liberal and strong supporters of the moderate agenda in the convention, also played a role, as it “created a backlash that brought thousands of conservative messengers to Dallas who might otherwise not have taken the trouble to come.”⁷¹ Moreover, putting all speculation to rest, the conservative reaction to Criswell’s address proves the majority of faithful Southern Baptists heartily agreed with his assessment of the theological, missiological, and strategic dangers the denomination faced, and were convinced something must be done in response.

Analysis of the Sermon

Homiletical Style of the Sermon

Without doubt, W. A. Criswell was the best-known expositor of Scripture in the SBC during the decades preceding the conservative resurgence. Although other

⁶⁹Patterson, interview.

⁷⁰Hefley, *The Winning Edge*, 34.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

preachers were committed to biblical exposition during the mid-twentieth century, no one modeled it more consistently or with more passion and impact than W. A. Criswell.⁷² Explaining his method for sermon preparation, Criswell stated there were really two parts: the construction of the message and the time he spent in prayer “getting the message in his soul.”⁷³ In fact, he shared about a time early in his ministry when he got down on his knees before God and pledged to preach without notes. He said, “I’m going to stand up there with a Bible in my hands, and I’m going to proclaim the Word of God out of the Bible and not with any kind of note.”⁷⁴ This was to be the primary preaching method Criswell would employ throughout the remainder of his ministry.

In spite of this dedication to preaching free of written notes on a regular basis, “Whether We Live or Die” was preached with a full manuscript, as is evident to anyone who has seen video of the sermon. Due to the large amount of quotes and cited works in the discourse, it was necessary for him to use a manuscript to ensure he properly represented the various sources that lent credence to the argument he so eloquently delivered.

Also worthy of note is the fact Criswell, the famed expositor, intentionally preached a topical message in this setting. The situation surrounding the 1985 Pastor’s Conference and subsequent SBC annual meeting called for a history lesson from those in the past who had traveled the same road of liberalism with which the SBC was threatened, and a history lesson is precisely what Criswell delivered. Ultimately, the sermon addressed what was at stake in the SBC.⁷⁵ In this sense, “Whether We Live or Die” was not so much a conventional sermon as a dire warning and heart cry of one who had given

⁷²Chad Owen Brand, “The *SBJT* Forum: Heroes of the Faith,” May 10, 2010, accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2010/07/sbjt-064_win02-forum.pdf.

⁷³Criswell, “Preparing the Expository Sermon (Lecture).”

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Irvin, “W. A. Criswell Chair Announced at Southern.”

his life and ministry to the sufficiency and inerrancy of Scripture, to faithful proclamation of the gospel, and to the life and mission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Organization of the Sermon

Contrary to his custom, Criswell never established a text of Scripture for this message. Instead, he organized this address in such a way as to remind the audience of the price previous denominations, institutions, preachers, and professors had paid for the lackadaisical manner in which they approached the authority of Scripture.

Criswell structured this message in a “top-down” fashion, whereby his first point related to the denomination in general, his second to the institutions of that denomination, and his third to individual preachers and professors, who by nature of their positions represented the denomination. He began by noting the terrible destruction of the Baptist denomination in Great Britain, which upon censoring the great preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, witnessed the decline and ultimate demise of their missionary efforts around the globe.⁷⁶ He warned if the SBC did not correct its course, it would suffer the same fate as the British Baptists who had lived a century prior to this monumental occasion.⁷⁷ Furthermore, he asserted, “The Baptist Union in their minutes recognized the presence of higher criticism in their midst, but they said it would do no harm. Spurgeon answered that the future would witness a lifeless and fruitless church.”⁷⁸ Criswell went on to note Spurgeon was ultimately correct in his assessment, “As he foretold, with the accommodation of the higher critical approach to the Scriptures which is universal among us, church attendance fell off, prayer meetings ceased, miracles of

⁷⁶Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

conversion were witnessed less and less, the number of baptisms began to decline, and the churches began to die out.”⁷⁹

Having established “The Pattern of Death for a Denomination,” Criswell transitioned to his second example, “The Pattern of Death for an Institution.” He recounted the story of the University of Chicago, noting how it began primarily as a theological institution through the generous gifts of John D. Rockefeller and the “faithful devout Baptist people of the north.” He told the tragic tale of its fall “not because of a bitter frontal attack from without, but because of a slow, gradual permeation of the rot and curse of unbelief from within.”⁸⁰

Next, he turned his attention to “The Pattern of Death for a Preacher, a Pulpiteer, a Professor.”⁸¹ He recounted the story of the scholar Crawford Howell Toy as the first addition to the faculty of Southern Seminary other than the original four, and noted he was the “pride and joy of the school.”⁸² However, through his fascination with and deception by German higher criticism and rationalism, he began to teach contrary to the *Abstract of Principles* of the institution, and ultimately had his employment terminated by President James Petigru Boyce.⁸³

Although the preceding points in his address came in the negative form, Criswell’s final point came in the positive form of “The Possibility and Promise of Resurrection, Renascence, and Revival.”⁸⁴ He reminded the crowd on that fateful evening, “If we will receive the Scriptures as of God, and be true to them as to the Holy Spirit, we as Southern Baptists will evangelize the world We can experience in our

⁷⁹Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid.

very midst great revival, the outpouring of the saving power of the Holy Spirit upon our churches, upon our preachers, and upon our mission fields.”⁸⁵

Functional Elements of the Sermon

The most striking element of this address lies in the sheer amount of preparation Criswell dedicated to it. In research for his book *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, Southern Baptist historian and pastor Jerry Sutton asked Criswell what he considered to be the most important sermon of his over six decades of ministry. In a personal letter to Sutton, Criswell said he considered “Whether We Live or Die” to be the most important because it “set forth the two directions and the implications of those directions in the Southern Baptist Convention.”⁸⁶ This sermon was monumental in the turn of events in the denomination, a fact Criswell himself understood well.

Another important element to the success of this message was the charisma and passion of the preacher. Ammerman notes, “Few could match Criswell’s eloquence or passion or his single-minded devotion to the dangers of ‘higher criticism.’ He influenced and trained many of the leaders of the Convention’s fundamentalist wing, and his power in the pulpit was awesome.”⁸⁷ She further suggests, “Those who listened became convinced (if they were not already) that the Bible must be either completely accurate or completely wrong; and without the Bible, all other beliefs were in danger.”⁸⁸ In fact, according to Ammerman, one of the major contributing factors to the success of

⁸⁵Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁸⁶Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 147.

⁸⁷Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 82.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

the conservative resurgence as a whole was the ability of the conservatives to “mobilize the troops.”⁸⁹ She emphasizes,

The most natural form of communication among Southern Baptists . . . is the pulpit. And in that medium . . . fundamentalists excelled. Their preaching styles and their message of clear answers and certain directions lent themselves to mass mobilization. Moderate style, on the other hand, was more likely to be subdued, somewhat scholarly, and open to the ambiguities of life. Fundamentalists asserted, “This is the way!” Moderates outlined a list of alternatives.⁹⁰

Another effective element of Criswell’s hallmark address to the SBC was his detailed historical account and analysis of previous skirmishes in the Baptist world. Evident from his recounting of the “Downgrade Controversy” in Great Britain involving the eminent preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon to his reminiscence over the capitulation to liberalism of the prominent University of Chicago to his recollection of the tragic events surrounding the downfall of the brilliant professor Crawford Howell Toy, “Whether We Live or Die” served as a tremendous history lesson for any Baptist concerned enough to take note.

Absent Criswell’s address was any doubt regarding the inevitable trajectory of the SBC barring any significant reformation. In dramatic fashion he warned of the predictable outcome from a failure to enact drastic changes by continuing the unbroken chain of conservative presidents. He asserted, “My brother, if the higher critical approach to the scriptures dominates our institutions and our denomination, there will be no missionaries to hurt. They will cease to exist.”⁹¹ His conclusion was simple, straightforward, and succinct: “As with the Baptists of Great Britain, whether we continue to live or ultimately die lies in our dedication to the infallible Word of God.”⁹²

⁸⁹Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 168.

⁹⁰Ibid., 181.

⁹¹Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁹²Ibid.

Illustration was one of the most effective and powerful devices Criswell employed in this message. Ever the consummate master communicator, he certainly knew the power of illustration, and he employed it skillfully and successfully here. In fact, a cursory glance at the transcript of this message reveals the entire address is comprised of one illustration after another. From his recounting of the controversies Spurgeon faced, to the fall of the once evangelistic University of Chicago, to the apostasy of Crawford Howell Toy at Southern Seminary, Criswell masterfully wove together a tapestry of Baptist history which stood as a dire warning to all Southern Baptists of the dangers that lay ahead should the denomination continue to embrace a higher critical approach to the Scriptures and abandon the conservative resurgence.⁹³

Quoting E. J. Poole-Conner's work *Evangelicalism in England*, Criswell related the story of a conversation between the editor of an agnostic magazine and a neo-orthodox minister. He said, "The editor told the minister that despite their different vocations, they had much in common. 'I don't believe the Bible,' said the agnostic, 'but neither do you. I don't believe the story about creation, but you don't either. I don't believe any of these things, but neither do you. I am as much of a Christian as you, and you are as much of an infidel as I.'" ⁹⁴ He went on to warn that the SBC's survival lay in their dedication to the infallible Word of God.⁹⁵

Another perfect example of Criswell's ability to move an audience through the power of illustration is a compelling story he told toward the end of his message to demonstrate the vital need for Baptists to come together in the work of the Kingdom of God. With concern in his voice he said,

Years ago I saw a pathetic picture in LIFE Magazine. A little boy had been lost in a horizon-to-horizon Kansas wheat field, had wandered away from the house, and had

⁹³Criswell, "Whether We Live or Die," videotape.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

lost his way in the vast sea of standing stalks. Frantically, the parents had searched for the small child to no avail. The sympathizing neighbors helped, but without success. Finally, someone suggested they join hands and comb the fields by sections. The picture I saw was the sorrowing neighbors with the family standing over the dead body of the little boy, and the cry of the father printed as the caption below: “Oh, if only we had joined hands before!”⁹⁶

Much of the power of Criswell’s illustrations came from their personal nature. For example, he related the story of a friend of his, a teacher, who went to the University of Chicago to pursue a Ph.D. in pedagogy. He recounted,

While there, he made the friendship of a student in the divinity school. Upon the young theologian’s graduation, the budding preacher said to my teacher friend, quote, “I am in a great quandary. I have been called to the pastorate of a Presbyterian church in the Midwest, but it is one of those old-fashioned Presbyterian churches that believes the Bible, and I don’t believe the Bible, and I don’t know what to do.” My teacher friend replied, “I can tell you exactly what you ought to do.” Eagerly, the young preacher said, “What?” And my teacher friend replied, “I think that if you don’t believe the Bible, you ought to quit the ministry.”⁹⁷

This type of concrete illustration served the conservative cause well. While moderates were trying to convince the convention everyone ought to be able to believe whatever they want, and in so doing leaving much ambiguity when deciding the lines between right and wrong, conservatives like Criswell were always content to boldly state the issue in plain language, eloquently remind the audience of the threats of liberalism and higher criticism, and provide a clear path for the convention to follow in their quest for biblical fidelity.⁹⁸

The final functional element worthy of note here is Criswell’s use of application in this sermon. When one considers the extreme state of affairs in the SBC in 1985, it is easy to understand why one of the most pertinent applications Criswell employed was a story about preaching on the mission field. He related a gripping experience of the effects and downfall of liberal theology when he said,

⁹⁶Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 82.

I was in India years ago when English Baptists were closing down their mission stations on the Ganges River, stations founded by William Carey. Some say the position taken by Spurgeon hurt the mission movement. My brother, if the higher critical approach to the Scriptures dominates our institutions and our denominations, there will be no missionaries to hurt. They will cease to exist.”⁹⁹

In relation to the drastic changes that had occurred within the SBC, Criswell asserted the mission frontier for the SBC “runs down every street and village, through every house, home, and classroom.”¹⁰⁰ Softening his tone, he emphasized this truth when he said:

Whether we live or die lies in the imponderables of Almighty God. Will God not judge atheistic, communistic Russia? Will he not also judge secularistic, hedonistic, humanistic, materialistic America? What is the difference at the judgment bar of Christ between a God-denying Russian communist atheist and a God-denying American liberal humanist? Can God judge Sodom and Gomorrah and Nineveh and Babylon, and not judge Moscow and Peking and San Francisco and Dallas?¹⁰¹

Overall Effectiveness of the Sermon

Speaking directly to Criswell’s preaching of “Whether We Live or Die,” Patterson admits, “He was a ‘Friday Night Lights’ preacher. He was great in his church, but when he got to the big house and the convention lights were on, that’s where he always excelled. And that sermon that night was nothing short of spectacular. I feared for the safety of the building. I anticipated at any moment that people would be leaping from the rafters. I mean it was that kind of a night.”¹⁰² To those familiar with the political climate in the SBC in the mid-1980s there remains no doubt this sermon served as a watershed moment in the conservative resurgence.¹⁰³ Criswell himself acknowledged

⁹⁹Criswell, “Whether We Live or Die,” videotape.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Patterson, interview.

¹⁰³David Roach, “1985 Dallas SBC: A Watershed Moment,” June 11, 2015, accessed August 22, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/44919/1985-dallas-sbc-a-watershed-moment>.

he prepared and delivered the message in view of the convocation of the assembled messengers to the 1985 Southern Baptist Convention, which began the following morning.¹⁰⁴ From its very inception, this address was intended to accomplish multiple objectives: to persuade the convention's messengers to continue the conservative resurgence through the election of biblical inerrantists, to remind them of the tragedies of the past and the threats of the present, and to encourage them as to the possible triumph for the future of their beloved denomination. Based on the actions of the convention's messengers the following day, it could well be argued the address succeeded in accomplishing its desired result.

The Sermon's Relevance to the Conservative Resurgence

More than one local pastor has quipped that Dallas has more Baptists than people.¹⁰⁵ This certainly would have seemed true during the roughly five decades W. A. Criswell pastored the city's First Baptist Church. During this period the church swelled to over 26,000 in membership and became the largest congregation affiliated with the SBC.¹⁰⁶ David Goza, pastor of Jefferson Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, appropriately noted of Criswell, "He was the most influential Baptist pastor in the '50s and '60s."¹⁰⁷ David Dockery, president of Trinity International University and the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and former associate pastor at First Baptist Dallas under Criswell, has affirmed everyone looked up to him and "when he was at his best, his presence in the pulpit was overwhelming."¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Curtis Freeman

¹⁰⁴Criswell, "Whether We Live or Die," videotape.

¹⁰⁵Sam Hodges, "Fiery Rev. W. A. Criswell Forged Views, Lit Way for Dallas Baptists," July 30, 2010, accessed August 21, 2015, <http://www.dallasnews.com/section-archives/125th-anniversary/headlines/20100730-fiery-rev.-w.a.-criswell-forged-views-lit-way-for-dallas-baptists.ece>.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

acknowledges Criswell as “the godfather of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention.”¹⁰⁹

Speaking specifically to the relevance of “Whether We Live or Die,” author and conservative activist Rod Martin affirms, “It is surely one of the most important sermons of modern history, and unquestionably the turning point in the conservative resurgence in the SBC.”¹¹⁰ Elaborating on that point even further, Patterson has commented, “If someone said to me, ‘What are the top twenty things that were critically important in the whole Southern Baptist Convention conservative renaissance,’ I would definitely put that sermon [Whether We Live or Die] as one of the top twenty events.”¹¹¹ Coming from one of the key architects of the conservative movement, this statement alone should lend credence to the monumental effects this single address had on the entire effort to bring reform and revival to the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

The Sermon’s Impact on the Conservative Resurgence

Theological Impact

James Draper, president of the SBC from 1982 to 1984 and former president of LifeWay Christian Resources, lamented,

There are people among us today, teaching in our institutions, laboring in our denomination, pastoring in our churches, who have not departed all that far from classic biblical doctrine But, they do not believe that everything in Scripture is necessarily accurate and without error. They have started over the edge. They have abandoned divine revelation as their final basis of authority.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁹Curtis W. Freeman, “Never Had I Been So Blind: W. A. Criswell’s Change on Racial Segregation,” *The Journal of Southern Religion* 10, no. 1 (2007): 12.

¹¹⁰Rod D. Martin, “W. A. Criswell: Whether We Live or Die,” March 21, 2014, accessed August 21, 2015, <http://rodmartin.org/must-watch-whether-live-die>.

¹¹¹Patterson, interview.

¹¹²James T. Draper, Jr., *Authority: The Critical Issue for Southern Baptists* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), 20-21.

This gradual desertion of biblical inerrancy in the convention certainly did not occur in a vacuum. The symptoms for which the conservative resurgence was initially embarked upon were merely the logical extension of the culture cultivated and circulated in the SBC for decades. Ultimately, because the theological foundation of the denomination had crumbled, the missional foundation for which the convention was birthed found itself to be anemic at best, dying at worst.

Mohler emphasized the importance of theological fidelity well when he said, “If current and future generations want to preserve the denomination from another theological drift, they require ‘constant awareness’ that culture constantly draws all truth claims into ambiguity.”¹¹³ He continued, “We’re not paranoid. We’re not insecure. But we are aware of the fact that opportunities for the loss of the faith—bit by bit, step by step, decision by decision—looms [sic] before us all the time.”¹¹⁴ Mohler recognizes what every Southern Baptist must understand in order for a strong commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture to endure. He is adamant Southern Baptists today can only continue to enjoy the effects of the conservative resurgence because of the price paid and opportunity bought during the reformatory movement of the 1980s and 90s.¹¹⁵ He concluded, “We owe a tremendous debt to a generation of courageous Southern Baptists who put their lives and ministries on the line for this conservative resurgence. People like Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler, Adrian Rogers, Jerry Vines, you can go down the long list. They put themselves on the line, and we’ll forever be grateful for them.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³R. Albert Mohler, Jr., quoted in Aaron Cline Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention,” *The Towers of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* 12, no. 10 (June-July 2014): 17.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Aaron Cline Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention: Mohler Discusses the Conservative (On-Going) Resurgence,” June 12, 2014, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/towers/semper-reformanda-and-the-southern-baptist-convention-mohler-discusses-the-conservative-on-going-resurgence>.

¹¹⁶Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention,” 17.

These truths, so masterfully articulated by Mohler, echo the heart of Criswell's "Whether We Live or Die." This sermon served as a dire warning to all Southern Baptists to heed the lessons of history, not make the mistakes of John Clifford and the Baptists of Great Britain, the University of Chicago, and Crawford Toy, to shore-up the theological moorings of the denomination, and to fight with resolve for the inerrancy of God's Word.

Missiological Impact

Though Criswell addressed deep theological issues dividing the SBC at the time of the preaching of "Whether We Live or Die," there were inherent missiological issues at stake as well. He deliberately and effectively brought these concerns to the fore when he said,

If neo-orthodoxy were a separate movement in itself, built its own churches, launched its own institutions, projected its own denomination, then we could look at it as just another of the many sects that appear on the surface of history. But neo-orthodoxy in itself builds nothing. It is a parasite that grows on institutions already built. If these higher critical semi-Unitarians won the lost to Christ, built up the churches, sent out missionaries, ministered to the needs of the people, then we could abandon our Bibles, rest at ease in Zion, and watch the kingdom of God advance from our ivory towers. The trouble is, these self-styled superior religionists do nothing but preside over a dying church, and a dying witness, and a dying denomination. No minister who has embraced a higher critical approach to the gospel has ever built a great church, held a mighty revival, or won a city to the Lord. They live off the labor and sacrifice of those who paid the price of devoted service before them. Their message, which they think is new and modern, is as old as the first lie, "Yea, hath God said?"¹¹⁷

The missiological impact of this sermon on the conservative resurgence lies in the fact Criswell unmistakably and passionately articulated the dangers of the higher critical approach to biblical interpretation in a manner every person in the convention hall, from the most educated to the most uneducated, could understand clearly. Furthermore, in the words of Jerry Sutton, he "set forth two directions and the implications of those

¹¹⁷Criswell, "Whether We Live or Die," videotape.

directions in the Southern Baptist Convention.”¹¹⁸ But Criswell not only warned of the inherent fallacies of theological liberalism in the convention, he cast a positive vision of hope for the reform of the denomination when he said, “United in prayer, preaching, witnessing, working, not around the higher critical denial of Scripture, but around the infallible Word of God in Christ Jesus, we cannot fail. If we join hands with the blessed Savior, and deliver the message of the inerrant Word of God, God will rise to meet us.”¹¹⁹ Though the theological concern of liberalism was the primary focus of Criswell’s address, doctrine directly impacted the missiological structure of the convention as well.

Strategic Impact

The theological and missiological impact of “Whether We Live or Die” is by far of greatest importance to the overall mission of the conservative resurgence, but there remains a final area of influence worthy of note: the strategic impact of Criswell’s address on the convention in general and the reformatory movement in particular. The 1985 meeting of the SBC was the “big convention,” not merely due to the sheer number of registered messengers, but also due to the lasting impact the decisions made by that deliberative body would have on the entire denomination in future decades.¹²⁰ Because his warnings were heeded, Charles Stanley would be elected president of the SBC the day after Criswell spoke, which ultimately continued the unbroken chain of conservative presidents and increasingly conservative boards of trustees at the various agencies and institutions of the convention. Indeed, this sermon played a vital role in the conservative resurgence that would transform the strategy of the denomination in the coming years to see the gospel taken around the world.

¹¹⁸Jerry Sutton, “‘Whether We Live or Die’ Cited as Foremost Sermon by Criswell,” January 10, 2002, accessed August 11, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/12515>.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Patterson, interview.

Speaking directly to the impact of preaching on the conservative resurgence, Ammerman notes, “The messages of each side were carried largely by preachers.”¹²¹ However, she also admits those preachers didn’t keep their opinions in the pulpit, as they would often extend their reach by using television, radio, cassette tapes, and mass mailings.¹²² These methods would become the primary way both conservatives and moderates sought to spread the word about their desired outcome in the battle for the soul of the denomination. At the center of this activity was none other than W. A. Criswell, a trusted friend of the conservatives, and a dreaded foe of the moderates. In fact, Criswell’s impact stretched far beyond his own personal appearances and messages. As he had influenced and trained many of the leaders of the convention’s conservative wing, his reach was far and his influence was broad, both in and out of the pulpit, and even beyond his own death.¹²³

Jim Shaddix, W. A. Criswell Professor of Expository Preaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, confirmed this truth when he said, “I was there in 1985 as a seminary student when Dr. Criswell gave this address. It opened my eyes to become aware of what was going on and the need to stand on God’s Word and preach it faithfully with integrity.”¹²⁴ Further evidence to Criswell’s broad influence lies in the many positions he held during his decades of ministry. He was the founder and chancellor of Criswell College, served for over fifty years as senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, preaching more than 5,000 sermons from its pulpit, published fifty-four books, and was awarded eight honorary

¹²¹Ammerman, *Baptist Battles*, 185.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid., 82.

¹²⁴Jim Shaddix, “Southeastern Installs Criswell Chair of Preaching,” January 29, 2014, accessed January 19, 2016, <http://www.brnow.org/News/January-2014/Southeastern-installs-Criswell-chair-of-preaching>.

doctorates in addition to his earned doctorate from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.¹²⁵ Moreover, he was considered a point man for the conservative resurgence in the SBC, a designation directly related to the strategic impact of “Whether We Live or Die” on the entire conservative movement.¹²⁶

Conclusion

“Whether We Live or Die” has stood the test of time as a truly “watershed moment” in the life of the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention.¹²⁷ However, even though this sermon was incredibly influential in the final outcome of the annual meeting of Southern Baptists in 1985, this most famous address by one of Southern Baptists’ most famous preachers also serves as an example of the type of preaching going on every Sunday in pulpits around the nation, which formed and shaped the understanding of Scripture of lay men and women in the pews and inspired them to make tremendous sacrifices for the theological and missiological health of their denomination. Patterson summarizes this effect well: “The one common thread that runs through all of this was even on Sunday morning out in the churches, the Bible-believing preachers simply preached with greater conviction . . . and they normally not only had greater conviction, but they had greater zeal.”¹²⁸ 1985 was a year of great struggle and tumultuous division in the SBC, but by the grace of God, the faithful preaching of biblical truth served to inspire Southern Baptists to stand boldly against liberalism and in favor of orthodox fidelity to the inerrancy of God’s Holy Word.

¹²⁵Shaddix, “Southeastern Installs Criswell Chair of Preaching.”

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Martin, “W. A. Criswell: Whether We Live or Die.”

¹²⁸Patterson, interview.

CHAPTER 4

A BAPTIST AND HIS BIBLE

Introduction

The conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention remains an unequaled phenomenon in the modern church, especially among mainline denominations.¹ Lumpkins accurately notes, “Without exception, no denomination has ever successfully resisted the acids of theological liberalism once the bottle of fundamental belief has been broken—no denomination, that is, with the sole exception of the Southern Baptist Convention.”² In much the same way Criswell’s “Whether We Live or Die” was one of the watershed sermons of the conservative resurgence, the 1987 Southern Baptist Convention in St. Louis, Missouri proved the watershed meeting of the movement.³ The conservatives had seen a full eight consecutive years of executive leadership in the denomination, and Adrian Rogers would be elected to a second term as president of the convention. The next year, at the 1988 meeting in San Antonio, Texas, Jerry Vines would be elected president, completing the ten years needed for conservatives to gain majority control of the boards of trustees of the agencies and institutions of the denomination, which effectively fulfilled the mission of the conservative resurgence.

¹Peter Lumpkins, “Jerry Vines & Charles Stanley: Heavy Hitters in the Conservative Resurgence,” *SBC Tomorrow*, September 11, 2009, accessed September 16, 2015, http://peterlumpkins.typepad.com/peter_lumpkins/2009/09/jerry-vines...heavy-hitters-in-the-conservative-resurgence-by-peter-lumpkins.html.

²Ibid.

³James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, vol. 3, *Conservative Resurgence or Political Takeover?* (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal Books, 1988), 71.

Interestingly, it was not only his presidency, but also the sermon he preached the year before his election for which Vines would be remembered. Some even believe “A Baptist and His Bible” has become as definitive of Jerry Vines’ preaching as “Payday Someday” has been the defining sermon of the legendary R. G. Lee.⁴ One of the most respected preachers in the SBC, Vines is widely known for his commitment to expository preaching and his defense of biblical inerrancy.⁵ Adrian Rogers, then pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, said of Vines that he represents “the best combination of scholar and country preacher in Southern Baptist life today.”⁶ Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, has characterized Vines as “awe shucks” brilliant.⁷ Expounding on that thought he said,

He comes across identifying with the average guy in the Southern Baptist Convention who is maybe not that intellectually sophisticated insofar as the general public would think of him. Vines identifies with that guy; that guy identifies with Vines. They feel at home with him. He’s a small town Georgia product, he actually reads his Greek New Testament without lexical help, but he doesn’t come across that way.”⁸

In many ways, “A Baptist and His Bible” sealed the case for the conservative cause and effectively squashed any hope of a liberal turn-around.⁹

This chapter will examine Vines’ convention sermon entitled, “A Baptist and His Bible,” given on June 17, 1987 at the SBC annual meeting held in St. Louis, Missouri. Because this message was also mass-produced and nationally distributed by First Baptist

⁴Peter Lumpkins, “Jerry Vines on The Baptist Way,” *SBC Tomorrow*, January 16, 2013, accessed September 15, 2015, http://peterlumpkins.typepad.com/peter_lumpkins/2013/01/jerry-vines-on-the-baptist-way.html.

⁵James A. Smith, Sr., “Jerry Vines to Retire in ’06; FBC Orlando Announces Transition,” *Baptist Press*, May 2, 2005, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/20708/jerry-vines-to-retire-in-06-fbc-orlando-announces-transition>.

⁶Lumpkins, “Jerry Vines on The Baptist Way.”

⁷Paige Patterson, telephone interview by author, April 23, 2015.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Lumpkins, “Jerry Vines on The Baptist Way.”

Church, Jacksonville, Florida, and due to the vast impact of the printed manuscript on the hearts and minds of Southern Baptists, the manuscript form will be considered as well. The chapter will take into consideration the political climate of the denomination at the time of its preaching, as well as the theological, missiological, and strategic implications thereof. Special attention will center on the impact of this sermon on the conservative resurgence, in addition to Vines' influence on the SBC.

Summary of the Sermon

The 1980s proved contentious for the Southern Baptist Convention.¹⁰ By the time Southern Baptists arrived in St. Louis for the 1987 annual meeting of the denomination, most of the hard battles of the conservative resurgence were behind them. Men like Adrian Rogers, Bailey Smith, Charles Stanley, Paige Patterson and others had already led the convention through its darkest days. And yet, one battle remained to be fought if the conservatives were to see the completion of their plan to regain control of the convention. That challenge was to place their candidate in the presidency one last time, which would complete the ten years needed to regain majorities on the various boards of SBC entities. Only one question remained—who would that candidate be?

That question would find its answer in short order. As Jerry Vines, then co-pastor with Homer Lindsay, Jr. at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, stepped to the pulpit to deliver a masterful address on the simplest of Baptist convictions—the absolute inerrancy, authority, trustworthiness, and sufficiency of God's Holy Word—it soon became clear he possessed the poise and conviction necessary to lead the denomination as president. Pennington emphasizes, "The most significant sermon of Vines' career may also be the most historic sermon of the conservative resurgence. It was the message he delivered as the 1987 convention sermon called, 'A Baptist and His

¹⁰Smith, "Jerry Vines to Retire in '06; FBC Orlando Announces Transition."

Bible.”¹¹ Indeed, this sermon would be far more influential than even Vines himself could have imagined.

Text and Purpose of the Sermon

For the text of the convention sermon of the 1987 SBC, Vines chose 2 Timothy 3:14-4:13.¹² This section of Paul’s second letter to Timothy contains his view on inspiration and his charge to Timothy to accurately preach the Word of God with conviction (2 Tim 3:14-17). He encourages Timothy to be faithful in caring for the flock with which God had entrusted him by reproving, rebuking, exhorting, and teaching them from God’s Word (2 Tim 4:2). Paul also reminds Timothy to be sober-minded, endure suffering, and do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim 4:5). Vines was also sure to make note of Paul’s personal instruction to Timothy to bring his books, most of all the parchments, which Vines’ would emphasize in his exposition of this passage (2 Tim 4:13).

The convention sermon had always been a highlight of the meeting, but when Vines stepped to the pulpit and began to speak, the event became one of the most important of the conservative effort. In the words of Kell and Camp, it was the “finest sermonic exposition of the loyalist movement.”¹³ His primary purpose in this sermon was to remind Southern Baptists of the intention, inspiration, and implications of the Bible.¹⁴ At the beginning of his address he stated, “In beautiful human language resplendent with divine revelation Paul sets before us the Bible’s doctrine concerning itself. He quickly

¹¹Jeffrey Donovan Pennington, “The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines: A Model of Evangelistic Focus” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 45.

¹²Jerry Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape (Nashville: Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Convention Sermon, St. Louis, MO, 17 June 1987).

¹³Carl L. Kell and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 167.

¹⁴Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

takes us to the counseling room and shows us the intention of the Bible; to the classroom and shows us the inspiration of the Bible; then to the crisis room and shows us the implications of the Bible.”¹⁵ He accomplished this purpose in a number of ways, not the least of which was his ardent defense of the inerrancy of Scripture, denouncement of the destructive forces of higher criticism, and declaration of the spiritual destruction wrought through the forces of theological liberalism in general, and higher criticism in particular.¹⁶

Major Arguments of the Sermon

Vines’ primary concern in preaching this sermon was to show Southern Baptists how the Bible’s doctrine concerning itself stood in stark contrast to the claims of the liberal wing of the denomination. He began by tackling the question of the intention of the Bible.¹⁷ Having pointed out Paul’s admonition to Timothy that the Scriptures are intended to make one wise unto salvation, he quickly reminded the audience of every human being’s two greatest needs: to know they are a great sinner, and God has provided a great Savior.¹⁸ He asserted that Baptists have always been a people who have revered the Word of God. For example, near the beginning of his message he stated, “Whenever you find a Baptist, somewhere nearby you will find the Bible, and that Baptist will speak of that Bible in terms of deepest reverence and deepest respect. We are taught early to reverence the Bible Baptists are a Bible believing people.”¹⁹

The second major argument Vines made in this sermon was to state his belief that higher critical methods of biblical interpretation were destructive and debilitating,

¹⁵Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

and ultimately were woefully inadequate.²⁰ He made his point by referring to the words of Scripture itself. He said, “The words of the Bible are God-breathed. Some tell us that the words are not necessarily inspired, but only the thoughts. I am no scholar, but no one has ever explained to me how it is possible to have thoughts without words. Try it sometime. Think a thought without words.”²¹ He continued, “Words are vehicles of thought . . . remove the words from the page and the thoughts disappear. There can be no music without notes; no math without numbers; no geology without rocks; no thoughts without words.”²²

Another major argument Vines made was against the higher critical approach to the Scriptures. He asserted,

At the turn of the century an old thief quietly entered the country. He had already robbed Germany of spiritual authority and moral conscience. He first appeared in the Garden of Eden, calling into question the authorship, accuracy, and acceptability of God’s Word. This old thief began entering and robbing in the north, leaving a trail of stripped denominations, faith-depleted schools and powerless churches.

He moved steadily down the eastern coast. A very crafty thief, he appealed to man’s intellectual pride. His goal? To snatch the Bible from the man in the pew. He travels under many aliases. I want to unmask him. The name of the old thief is Destructive Criticism. Not relevant, believing scholarship, but destructive, faith-wrecking criticism. That criticism which clips faith’s wings with reason’s scissors. That kind of destructive scholarship which submits the warm wonder of the Word to the cold, merciless analysis of unbelief.

This old thief is a demolition expert. He has many tools in his tool chest. None are constructive; all are destructive. He has a heretical hammer, driving into the Bible the nails of anti-supernaturalism and the anti-miraculous. He explains away every account of miracle as natural phenomena or primitive folklore. He has a critical saw, dividing Scripture and the Word of God. He puts asunder what God has joined together. According to the old thief some of the Bible is, some isn’t, the Word of God. The Bible is only inspired in spots. Only those who use his tools can tell you which spots are the inspired spots! He also has a cynical crowbar, ripping the Bible from the hands and hearts of simple believers.

²⁰Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

²¹Jerry Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible* (Jacksonville, FL: First Baptist Church, 1987), 6-7.

²²*Ibid.*, 7.

But, old thief, your tools are fatally flawed. Your heretical hammer won't do. To reject the miraculous and supernatural in the Bible is to deny the Bible its own nature. You can't kick God out of His Book anymore than you can kick Him out of His universe. I believe in the miracles of the Bible. I really believe Jonah was swallowed by a great fish. How the fish stood him, I don't know, but I believe it. I do believe Daniel survived a night in the lion's den. He had a lion's mane for a pillow and used its tail to swish away mosquitoes. Early the next morning the frantic king called, "Daniel, are you there?" "Yes, what's for breakfast?"

I don't have all the answers to all the difficulties in the Bible. I can't place my peanut brain alongside God's infinite mind and not expect to have some problems. But, my list of difficulties has been progressively getting smaller. When I run across a difficulty in the Bible, I do not suppose the error is in the text, but rather in my understanding. "Where did Cain get his wife?" I don't know and I don't care. If she suited Cain, she suits me. I don't understand all the Bible, but I believe it all. I believe it all from Genesis to Maps!

Old thief, your cynical saw is dull. You can't separate the Word of God from Scripture. Note that Paul uses Scriptures (3:15), Scripture (3:16), and the Word (4:22) interchangeably in this passage. When Scripture speaks, God speaks. Jesus said, *Thy word is truth* (John 17:17). Not, contains truth, but is truth. When you try to separate the Word of God from Scripture, there is no stopping place. The Bible cannot be put on trial every few days while theologians hold symposiums to pool their ignorance.

When you force the Bible to pay tribute at every little "toll gate" of rational opinion, eventually you give away every part of the Bible. You begin by giving up the Genesis account of creation; next you dissect the historical parts of the Bible; then the miracles have to go; before it is over you are picking and choosing from the very words of Jesus. Perhaps you have heard about the Jesus seminar. This group of scholars is planning to put out a color-coded New Testament. The intention is to show us which of the words in the New Testament were actually the words of Jesus and which were put in His mouth by the church. Have you heard about the garbage barge in the Atlantic? I would suggest this color-coded New Testament be put on the garbage barge so all who purchase it will recognize it for the garbage it is. When you start trying to separate the Word from Scripture you wind up with a fictitious creation, three Isaiahs, exaggerated miracles and a speechless Jesus. Before it is over you have a Bible full of holes instead of a whole Bible!

Old thief, your critical crowbar won't do. This is the most serious flaw of all. Only the so-called scholars are supposed to be qualified to explain what the Bible means. At the Inerrancy Conference in Ridgecrest in May 1987, Clark Pinnock was quoted as saying to reporters, "Adrian Rogers does not really know the Bible and Roy Honeycutt does. How do you deal with people who don't know the Bible?" (Florida Baptist Witness, June 1987). Let me say, first of all, I do not believe Roy Honeycutt would ever say that. He is too much of a gentleman. Further, I don't think Dr. Honeycutt would believe that. Poor Adrian Rogers. He doesn't have to be a Bible ignoramus all his life. Why doesn't he subscribe to my "tape of the month" plan! Look carefully at what is suggested in Pinnock's statement: The preacher doesn't know the Bible; the professor does. The two are pitted against each other. Do you know what that sounds like to me? The priesthood of the scholar. Baptists

affirm the priesthood of the believer. We do not believe our preachers and professors should be pitted against each other, but be in partnership with one another, helping us find out what God has said in the Bible. That's the Baptist way and I like it!

We believe the Bible was given for common men. The Holy Spirit can take an unlettered man and give him amazing insight into the Bible. One of the greatest Bible students I ever knew was a man named Ed Shellhorse. Ed never owned a car until he retired. He worked all his life in a fabric mill. He read the Bible many hours each night after work. His insight into the Scriptures was amazing. The same Holy Spirit who inspired common men to write the Bible can illuminate common men to understand it.²³

The third major argument worthy of note is Vines' emphasis on the implications of the Bible. He spoke of the expositional, evangelical, and eschatological implications contained therein. He avowed, "What the preacher believes about the Bible is crucial to the task of exposition. A low view of inspiration erodes the very foundation of preaching. Decide the Bible is not totally the Word of God and there will be no responsibility to study its text minutely and to preach its message authoritatively."²⁴

Speaking to the evangelistic implications of the Bible Vines said,

You can't have doubts about the Bible and be a soul-winner at the same time. The evangelist can't evangelize if he has misgivings about his evangel. As you go into the homes of the lost, what you believe about the Bible is absolutely critical.

Step with me into a modest home. The carpet is smelly; beer cans are scattered around; the family is holding together by a thread. We are looking into the face of a man whose eternal destiny is on the line. He is an alcoholic; his son is on drugs; his girl is pregnant. "Sir, let me share with you some verses from Romans. But we are not sure Paul wrote it. Maybe the disciples forged his name to lend credibility to their work. This book of Romans says, *all have sinned*. We are sinners because of the fall of Adam and Eve in Eden. But we aren't sure there was a garden of Eden or that Adam and Eve ever existed. It also says, *Christ died for our sins*. But don't make more of that than you should. He died to set an example for you to follow. He is reported to have said, *Come unto me and I will give you rest*. Could I interest you in having an existential encounter with the spirit of Jesus which is alive in the universe somewhere?" The man replies, "No thanks, but if you have the phone numbers of AA, Drug Rehab or Planned Parenthood, I would like them."

If you don't have a trustworthy Bible, you are out of business in the homes of lost people. Let's get on with our evangelical imperative. Let's fill the highways

²³Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 8-10.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 12.

and byways with Baptists and their Bibles, sharing the good news with a lost world.²⁵

These types of comments and quotations warned Southern Baptists if they did not believe the whole Bible, there was no point believing in a Bible with holes. Vines noted Paul's request in 2 Timothy 4:13 and said, "He [Paul] wanted his 'cloak,' something warm for his body; his 'books,' something stimulating for his mind; but 'especially the parchments.' He wanted the Word of God for his soul."²⁶ He concluded by applying the text personally: "I don't especially like funerals, but, like all preachers, I don't refuse to conduct them. When I stand before a broken-hearted family I need something to bring them comfort. I have a Book! I have never seen it fail. I have seen the Word of God brush tears from eyes and pour the balm of Gilead on hurting hearts . . . if you have no trustworthy Bible you have nothing to give hope to those who are facing death."²⁷

General Reception of the Sermon

Reaction to this sermon was enormously positive, especially among conservatives in the SBC. Paige Patterson asserts it "was monumental in that it identified with everybody there."²⁸ Danny Watters, then pastor of Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia stated, "Jerry is probably going to be our man in San Antonio."²⁹ Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, claimed after Vines finished preaching, "The message automatically nominated the president."³⁰ Even in the

²⁵Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 14.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 15.

²⁸Patterson, interview.

²⁹Hefley, *Conservative Resurgence or Political Takeover?*, 87.

³⁰Ibid.

analysis of secular historians, the sermon was a masterful display of sermonic exposition.³¹

The best moderate analysis of this sermon came from Carl L. Kell and L. Raymond Camp in their work *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention*. Kenneth Chafin, a moderate and former Southern Seminary professor, aptly conveys the thesis of the resource in the foreword: “The thesis of this book is true, and it saddens me. The authors rightly see the inerrancy controversy—the position that holds the Bible is literally true and without error on any subject—in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) as the best expression in the twentieth century of the power of the spoken word to change the nature and character of a major Protestant denomination.”³² Kell and Camp conclude “A Baptist and His Bible” is the “finest sermonic exposition of the loyalist movement.”³³ Their critique of the sermon is as follows:

Vines’ sermon “A Baptist and His Bible” is the finest national statement on biblical inerrancy we found during our research for this study. A gifted orator of the New South School of Southern Baptist preachers, Vines was the perfect combination of country preacher and gifted scholar of the Bible. Adrian Rogers, president of the SBC in 1987 and regarded as the quintessential orator of Southern Baptist life, introduced Vines. In all of the hours of videotape and transcript involving Adrian Rogers, he was never so humbled nor excited when referring to others on the podium. Vines was, for Rogers, “The best combination of scholar and country preacher in Southern Baptist life today.”

Jerry Vines did not disappoint, as he has always been a gifted speaker and an ardent student of the Bible’s native languages—Hebrew and Greek. In the words of southern folklore, “If you don’t want to believe the man, don’t listen to him.” In a firm, memorized textual speaking style, Vines established the Apostle Paul as the Scripture’s finest apologist, its prime defender, and its best teacher. Furthermore, Vines reinforced the long-held concept that the Bible is its own best footnote. Early in the sermon, Vines affirmed that the “purpose of the Bible is to lead men to Jesus Christ.” Because of the Bible’s internal purpose, Vines claimed that, “Baptists get

³¹Emir Caner and Ergun Caner, *The Sacred Trust: Sketches of the Southern Baptist Convention Presidents* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 180.

³²Kell and Camp, *In the Name of the Father*, xi.

³³*Ibid.*, 167.

concerned when there is any hint of attack upon it. We get upset when there is any undermining of its authority, questioning its reliability, or denying its accuracy.”

Setting a tone heard in national convention sermons of the early 1980s and heard down through the years in SBC presidential preaching, Vines proposed, “How can anyone say we must trust our soul to Christ for eternity, then turn around and try to obliterate the very document which tells us about him?” Vines moved quickly to warn his listeners regarding this particular brand of the “other”—destructive criticism. For the better part of the middle section of the sermon, Vines hammered away at the historical-critical method that “destroys the scripture piece by piece.” For the remainder of the sermon, Vines urged his hearers to reject the criticism of the Bible and, in turn, believe it in regard to all of life’s needs. It is the “Bible . . . and it will get you home.”

The assembled thousands rose to acclaim the great sermon and its humble voice. The power of a literate, prepared text and clear purpose, combined with Jerry Vines’ folksy rhetorical style, provided a defining moment in raising Southern Baptist preaching to a new level. The messengers roared their approval of this finely crafted sermon, delivered by a gifted speaker to an audience eager for a fresh breath of God’s Word. This sermon was a high rhetorical watermark in Southern Baptist preaching.

The Southern Baptist Convention has had its great rhetorical events in recent years, but when Vines strode to the plexiglass pulpit, acknowledged his audience, paused, and then spoke his memorized line to the gallery—“In beautiful human language resplendent with divine revelation Paul sets before us the Bible’s doctrine concerning itself”—everyone present knew this sermon was special.³⁴

As the above analysis attests, “A Baptist and His Bible” substantially strengthened support for the conservative side of the inerrancy debate.³⁵ Shortly after the 1987 annual meeting, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida mass-produced a manuscript of the sermon.³⁶ With this manuscript they included a letter from Homer Lindsay, Jr., Vines’ co-pastor, which affirmed the reasons for the sermon’s effectiveness.³⁷ Lindsay said, “I truly believe this message came from God himself. I know Jerry spent many hours praying and seeking the Lord’s mind and God’s direction in the matter of this one single sermon. He actually spent over four months in preparing this

³⁴Kell and Camp, *In the Name of the Father*, 56-57.

³⁵Pennington, “The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines,” 47.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

one message. He took very seriously the opportunity of speaking for God before so many men of God.”³⁸

Vines’ manuscript and Lindsay’s letter were circulated nationwide. Vines wrote in the booklet’s preface: “My hope is that this sermon be used of the Lord to create confidence in God’s supernaturally, verbally, totally inspired Word. I also earnestly hope that it will be used to resolve some of the controversy among us concerning the Bible’s inspiration.”³⁹ According to *Baptist Press*, this effort was influential in organizing widespread support for Vines’ run for president at the 1988 Las Vegas convention.⁴⁰

Analysis of the Sermon

Homiletical Style of the Sermon

Few would argue against the fact Jerry Vines was one of the best expositors of Scripture in the latter half of the twentieth century. He was committed to faithful exposition of the Word of God, both in his home church and at the convention level. Commenting on his well-known expository preaching style in an interview with Michael Duduit, Vines says,

I was a pastor in the Chattanooga area, and went to a Bible conference to hear a man I’d never heard before, named Warren Wiersbe. Here was a man who opened up his Bible and almost nonchalantly, matter-of-factly, just began to explain the Scriptures. I heard him say things about the Scripture I’d never heard, and I wondered, “Where is he getting this?” And I looked in the Bible, and he was getting it right out of the text. So it created a real desire on my part.

Taking from him, I determined that I would go back and start trying to preach through books of the Bible. Then along the way I had other influences in addition to Dr. Wiersbe. There was Stephen Olford—I started hearing him on Sunday nights from Calvary Baptist Church in New York. God gave me different teachers like

³⁸Homer Lindsay, Jr., letter included with a mass mailing of *A Baptist and His Bible*, March 14, 1988.

³⁹Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, ii.

⁴⁰Greg Warner, “Courageous Conservative Needed to Continue SBC Correction: Vines,” *Baptist Press*, May 12, 1988, 3-4.

that. Then I started reading books like *Expository Preaching Without Notes*. I just set out to do it, and I'm still learning.⁴¹

Any straightforward evaluation of Vines' preaching, both at the denominational level and in his own pulpit at First Baptist Jacksonville, will reveal him a gifted expositor and communicator indeed. In reference to Vines' polished delivery, evangelistic zeal, and homiletic expertise, Patterson notes with enthusiasm, "What could the moderates say to it? They had no ability to go up against that kind of preaching."⁴²

Unlike Rogers' textual handling of Revelation 3:7-8 in his 1980 presidential address entitled "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny" and Criswell's "Whether We Live or Die," which was admittedly not an exposition, Vines' "A Baptist and His Bible" was a genuine exposition of 2 Timothy 3:14-4:13. Part of the genius of his preaching stems from his ability to read the Greek New Testament without any lexical help, although he never comes across as arrogant or looking down on others.⁴³ In fact, he identifies with the common Baptist in the pew and has a way of putting everyone in his audience at ease—from the most educated to the least literate.⁴⁴ This ability was displayed perfectly in this sermon as he frequently referenced the Greek text, never in an attempt to show off, but in such a way as to make important points throughout the address.

Organization of the Sermon

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, asserts, "Vines is a master of the art and science of preaching, a wordsmith who deploys the English language with skill and verve, and a pastor-

⁴¹Michael Duduit, *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights from Twenty Top Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 199.

⁴²Patterson, interview.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

theologian who dearly loves the church.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Vines’ greatest contribution to the field of preaching is his advocacy of the expository method.⁴⁶ He asserts, “The best preaching you can do is to go through books of the Bible—chapter by chapter and paragraph by paragraph—in a systematic fashion.”⁴⁷ He argues this method not only benefits the preacher himself, but also provides his people “a well-balanced meal of the Bread of Life.”⁴⁸

Vines defines expository preaching as that which “expounds a passage of Scripture, organizes it around a central theme and main points, and then decisively applies its message to the listeners.”⁴⁹ Moreover, he calls his approach “the expository sermonizing method,” which he contends, “reflects understanding of the passage on the part of the preacher. He prepares a logical presentation of the content of the message. He has a main topic, main divisions, an introduction, and a conclusion. Using this structure he will by means of illustration, argumentation, and explanation make the passage clear to the people and apply its truths to their lives.”⁵⁰

Vines is well known for his predilection to employ assonance and alliteration in his sermons, which enables him to better engage his audience. “A Baptist and His Bible” deployed these methods with great skill and expertise. Vines’ outline effectively revealed Paul’s meaning in 2 Timothy 3:14-4:13 while appropriately applying its truth to the issues of inspiration and inerrancy which had enthralled the denomination in intense debate for decades. He began by saying the Apostle Paul “takes us to the council room and shows us the intention of the Bible” in verses 14-15 of the text. He noted all people

⁴⁵Smith, “Jerry Vines to Retire in ’06; FBC Orlando Announces Transition.”

⁴⁶Pennington, “The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines,” 122.

⁴⁷Jerry Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 7.

⁴⁸Duduit, *Preaching with Power*, 199.

⁴⁹Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 7.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 10.

are great sinners before a God who has provided a great Savior.⁵¹ Next he said Paul “takes us to the classroom and shows us the inspiration of the Bible” in verses 16-17 of the text.⁵² He focused intently on the term “God-breathed” and noted the implication rests on the supernatural inspiration of Scripture, which does not eliminate the human element in the Bible.⁵³ For example, he pointed out,

The personalities of the human authors are everywhere apparent. We see the burning sarcasm of Isaiah. We witness the moving pathos of Jeremiah, the deep philosophy of John and the crisp logic of Paul. Amos writes like a farmer, Simon Peter like a fisherman. Luke writes like a doctor, James like a preacher. Each writer was sovereignly prepared by the Holy Spirit to be the ideal penman for that portion of Scripture. Does God want a selection of Psalms like David’s? He prepares a David to write them! Does he want a series of letters like Paul’s? He prepares a Paul to write them!⁵⁴

He also noted the verbal inspiration implied by “God-breathed,” and said the obvious reference is to the very words of Scripture.⁵⁵ Concluding his point on inspiration he asserted “God-breathed” refers to the total inspiration of the Bible. To support this claim he quoted Herschel Hobbs who said, “every single part of the whole is God-breathed.”⁵⁶ At this point Vines described what he referred to as an “old thief,” a metaphor he used effectively to describe the assault, ineffectiveness, and destructive qualities of liberal higher criticism.⁵⁷

For his final main division he transitioned to Paul’s personal instructions to Timothy and said, “Paul takes us into the crisis room and shows us the implications of the

⁵¹Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 4-5.

⁵⁴Ibid., 5.

⁵⁵Ibid., 6.

⁵⁶Ibid., 8.

⁵⁷Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

Bible” in 2 Timothy 4:1-13.⁵⁸ He spoke of the expositional, evangelical, and eschatological implications of the Bible and using several well-planned illustrations, showed how the Bible by necessity will have an impact on the life of the believer.⁵⁹

Vines concluded the sermon with a passionate plea:

Do you see this Book? It is a lamp unto your feet and a light to your path. There will be times when winds of unbelief may seem to almost put out its glow. Storms of skepticism may threaten to engulf it. There may be times when you are tempted to lay it aside and make your way unaided. At times it may look old fashioned alongside the psychedelic flashlights of our age. But, my Baptist brothers and sisters, hold on to your Bible. It will see you home!⁶⁰

Functional Elements of the Sermon

One of the most prominent aspects of Vines’ preaching is the organization of his sermons, which are easy to follow primarily because of the functional elements around which he builds them. According to Vines, after developing an outline of the passage being expounded, the preacher’s task is to then put “meat on the bones” of his message. This happens by developing the main ingredients of every main division through explanation, illustration, argumentation, and application.⁶¹ He firmly believes all these elements are essential aspects of faithful exposition of the Scriptures.⁶²

As Pennington notes, clear explanation is an essential component of the development of a main division in a sermon.⁶³ Vines explains, “Preaching has its roots in the clear explanation of God’s revelation.” Therefore, the goal of expository preaching is the proper explanation of the biblical text. Though this goal reveals the commitment

⁵⁸Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 11-12.

⁵⁹Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

⁶⁰Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 16.

⁶¹Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 125.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Pennington, “The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines,” 127.

undergirding expository preaching, Vines draws a distinction between general explanation and specific explanation in a sermon to a particular aspect of the text. He argues the sermon should implant “the supernatural Word into the mind of the listener, thus enabling life change.” His point is rather than focusing on the unimportant details of a text, preachers should aim for life change by explaining the unclear elements of the passage. He understands the remaining elements of the main division to be subservient to clear explanation, because “the rest hinge on a proper understanding of truth.”⁶⁴

The second element Vines considered essential to the development of a main division was illustration. Part of his clarity and giftedness in the pulpit stemmed from his ability to illustrate important truths in a memorable manner. For example, speaking of Baptists’ commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture and sound doctrine he said,

I heard about a Pentecostal and a Presbyterian and a Baptist preacher who were talking one time about what denomination Paul would join if he returned to the earth, and the Presbyterian said, “Oh, I’m sure he would become a Presbyterian. He would love our scholarship.” The Pentecostal said, “Praise God, he would be a Pentecostal. He would love our praise and our doxology.” The Baptist preacher didn’t say anything so they said, “Well what do you think about it?” He said, “Oh, I don’t think he would change.”⁶⁵

Another essential element in the development of a main division for Vines is persuasive argumentation. He describes this element as “persuasion with the intent of changing an attitude or action.”⁶⁶ Pennington expands this description in a helpful manner: “By answering the question, ‘What assertion(s) won’t my audience immediately agree with?’ the preacher strives to anticipate the possible objections of the audience to the truth he proclaims and respond to these objections with reason and discussion.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 176-77.

⁶⁵Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

⁶⁶Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 178.

⁶⁷Pennington, “The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines,” 128.

The final piece of the “main division” puzzle for Vines is how clear explanation, vibrant illustration, and skillful argumentation culminate in proper application to the listener’s life. He asserts proper application occurs only when the preacher accomplishes the laborious task of “linking the importance of the truth of the text with the hearers’ situation and need.”⁶⁸ For him, application must be the final aspect of expounding the meaning of the text as the preacher asks himself, “So what? What does this have to say to my people?”⁶⁹ As Pennington notes, “The answer to these two questions, when derived from the proper understanding of the text, leads to text-driven application.”⁷⁰

Overall Effectiveness of the Sermon

Little more than a cursory glance of the manuscript for “A Baptist and His Bible” is needed for one to grasp the biblical foundation and faithful exposition undergirding it. Not only does Vines build the entire sermon around a biblical text, he continuously cross-references other Scriptural passages to support his arguments, which lends credibility to the entire discourse. Further considering the construction of the sermon, Vines’ outline is simple and easily understood by the hearer. Moreover, this sermon is entirely personal in its address, as he spoke with conviction about the historic beliefs he said Baptists had always held dear.⁷¹ Virtually every moment of this message is saturated with Vines’ conviction that God would richly bless the denomination if it stood firm on the principles that had made it great from its inception.

Patterson notes about this sermon in particular, “[A Baptist and His Bible] was monumental in that it identified with everybody there. And by that time, we had begun to

⁶⁸Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 181.

⁶⁹Ibid., 181-84.

⁷⁰Pennington, “The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines,” 129.

⁷¹Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

turn the thing, and so it was a high order of affirmation and again, what could the moderates say to it? They had no ability to go up against that kind of preaching.”⁷² To those familiar with the conservative resurgence through 1987, it comes as little surprise this sermon solidified the cause of the movement. Perhaps the most telling clue to the effectiveness of this address is found in the words of Kell and Camp, who understood the theological importance of this sermon, and said it was “the finest national statement on biblical inerrancy we found,” referring to Vines as “a gifted orator of the New South School of Southern Baptist preachers” and “the perfect combination of country preacher and gifted scholar of the Bible.”⁷³

Assessment of the Sermon

Exposition of the Passage

The main reason this sermon was immensely admired, not just among conservatives, but by moderates as well, was due to its faithful exposition of the biblical text. Vines certainly was concerned with the position of the SBC on the issue of inerrancy, but in the preaching of “A Baptist and His Bible,” he clearly expounded 2 Timothy 3:14-4:13 in a manner in which everyone present could understand unequivocally that which the Bible claimed for itself, no matter which side of the political aisle they were on. In so doing, he shared his concern for the future doctrinal fidelity of the denomination. Moreover, Vines’ exposition of this passage had direct bearing on the message of the conservative resurgence and its implications for the long-term future of the convention.

Vines displayed for his audience an exposition from this passage of the absolute veracity and trustworthiness of the Bible. He took special note of the unusual word combination in 2 Timothy 3:15 τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα, translated in the King James as

⁷²Patterson, interview.

⁷³Kell and Camp, *In the Name of the Father*, 56.

“the Holy Scriptures.” He said, “Paul normally uses the word γραφή (Scriptures) as in verse 16, but here he uses γράμματα which sometimes refers to the letters of the words themselves or to the document.”⁷⁴ He also notes the unusual word Paul uses for holy:

Not the normal ἅγιος but ἱερά. This word is found only one other time. In 1 Corinthians 9:13 reference is made to the “sacred things of the temple.” The sacred things were the utensils set apart for God in temple services. The word means sacred or pertaining to God. Only of the Bible can it be said that it is the Sacred Scriptures. The Bible is the only book set apart for God’s special uses. This term attaches great reverence to the Bible.⁷⁵

Moving from his introduction into the first main division of the message, Vines recites Paul’s instructions to Timothy while offering his own commentary on the passage,

*But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned . . . that’s continuation. The Bible is intended to help us live consistent Christian lives, moving to maturity . . . the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of . . . that’s conviction. The Bible is intended to place our lives on a firm, assured foundation. And that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation . . . that’s conversion. The Bible is primarily intended to bring people to salvation.*⁷⁶

The second main division he noted was the inspiration of the Bible from 2 Timothy 3:16-17. He quoted Paul who said, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” which is translated from only three words in the original text: πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος.⁷⁷ Vines explained the meaning of θεόπνευστος and said it “seems to have been coined by the Holy Spirit to give us a glimpse into the mystery of inspiration. The word is a verbal adjective used in a passive sense. The emphasis is that God alone is the agent in the Bible’s inspiration. The Bible is the product of the creative breath of God.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 1.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., 2.

⁷⁷Ibid., 5.

⁷⁸Ibid.

He pointed out these truths show the supernatural, verbal, and total inspiration of Scripture.⁷⁹

Finally, Vines concluded the sermon with his third main division focusing on the implications of the Bible. He noted the expositional implications of Paul's command to Timothy: "Preach the Word," and said, "preaching is central in the worship of Baptist churches." He pointed to Paul's second command: "Do the work of an evangelist," and commented, "evangelism and missions are at the heart of all Southern Baptists do." His final expositional observation centered on the eschatological implications of the Bible and Paul's words about his own impending death.⁸⁰ An honest hearing of this sermon will reveal the great difficulty moderates found in assailing it directly relates to the saturation of the biblical text within it.

Illustration of the Passage

Vines is an enthusiastic advocate of illustration in preaching. He urges preachers to use illustrations when he writes, "There are many purposes of sermon illustrations. The people can remember the truth you are communicating much better by means of simple, to-the-point illustration. Good illustrations stir the emotions and move people to action. By means of an illustration you can create an awareness of need in your listeners. They are very helpful in building bridges to your listeners."⁸¹ Illustrations clarify truth, and one would be hard-pressed to find a better example of effective deployment of illustrations than Vines exhibited when he preached this sermon.

One of the most gripping illustrations he employed came when he spoke of the Bible's intended purpose and asked,

⁷⁹Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 5-8.

⁸⁰Ibid., 12-15.

⁸¹Vines, *A Practical Guide to Sermon Preparation*, 131.

Did you ever hear a man say, “I was a thief. One day I read a math book and it really straightened me out.” Or, “I was impure. I read a geometry book, and it surely cleaned me up.” Or, “I was a liar. I read a book on anatomy and I have been telling the truth ever since.” Or, “I was a drunk. I read a chemistry book and it sobered me up.” But I can take you places where I have preached this Book and show you drunkards made sober, liars made truthful, and adulterers made pure.⁸²

He also recounted a story about the great preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, who was once invited to be the guest of an Atheist Club presided over by Robert Ingersoll. He said,

He went and listened to a brilliant speech by Ingersoll, who attacked Christianity unmercifully. Ingersoll sat down amidst thunderous applause. He turned to Beecher and invited him to say a few words in defense of the Bible. Beecher rose slowly to his feet: “Gentlemen, forgive me if I seem a bit shaken. I saw something shocking on the way to the meeting. I saw a poor, blind man with a cane, groping at the curbside. A young lad came along, offering to help him across the street. As he took the blind man’s arm a hulk of a man came along, bullied the boy, broke the blind man’s cane, pushed the blind man in the mud and went on his way laughing.” A silence fell over the meeting. Then Ingersoll leaped to his feet, eyes blazing: “The bully,” he roared, “Do you know who he is, Beecher?” “Yes, I know who he is. It is you! Mankind is poor, blind, and wretched. He has little enough to lean on as it is and few to help him on his way. What do you do, Ingersoll? You come along, break his faith in the Bible, push him in the mud and go on your way laughing. I tell you, Ingersoll, you are the man!

How can anyone say we must trust our soul to Christ for eternity, then turn around and try to obliterate the very document which tells us about him? We honor the book and earnestly contend for it because we know what it is intended to do.⁸³

A final illustration worthy of note is Vines treatment of the total inspiration of the Bible. He argued, “It must be decided on the basis of lordship, not scholarship.”⁸⁴ To prove his point he offered the following illustration:

Robert Dick Wilson was professor of Semitic languages at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was considered the greatest biblical linguist of modern times. To answer the destructive critics he learned all the cognate languages of the Bible, and all the languages in which the critics had written. He learned Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, French, German, Latin, Egyptian, Coptic, Syrian. He made himself at home in 45 languages and dialects. To answer a single sentence of a noted critic, he read all the extant ancient literature of the period under discussion in

⁸²Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 3.

⁸³Ibid., 4.

⁸⁴Ibid., 11.

numerous languages. He collated no less than 100,000 citations. From the material he got at the basic facts, which when known, proved the critic was wrong! Critics then and now can't handle him. This is what he said: "After forty-five years of scholarly research and biblical textual studies and language study, I have come to the conclusion that no man knows enough to assail the truthfulness of the Old Testament." Yet, I repeat, ultimately the question of total inspiration must be decided on the basis of lordship, not scholarship. The decision must be one of the heart, not of the head.

I don't know about you, but I have heard enough from the old thief. I feel like the dear old grandmother who couldn't hear well. Her grandchildren insisted she go to the doctor. The doctor said, "I can solve your problem. All you need is a minor operation and you'll hear fine." Grandmother said: "There'll be no operation. I'm seventy-nine years old and I've heard enough!"⁸⁵

Application of the Passage

Vines clearly believes every sermon should culminate in personal application of God's Word to the lives of the preacher's audience. That is, the preacher must show his listeners how to live out particular biblical truths in the context in which they currently find themselves.⁸⁶ He modeled his own advice well in this sermon when he noted,

Wherever you find a Baptist, somewhere nearby you will find a Bible. That Baptist will speak of the Bible in his hands with respectful tones. Baptists are early taught to love and respect the Bible. On a hot summer day, at Vacation Bible School, little Baptist feet carry little Baptist bodies into the awesome church auditorium. Billy Baptist stands before his little classmates and with trembling hands holds a Bible. Little Baptist voices sing, "Holy Bible, Book divine, precious treasure, thou art mine." Baptists are known as a people of the Book. We are a Bible-reading, Bible-believing, Bible-loving and Bible-sharing people.⁸⁷

He was also quick to point out, "Because we understand the Bible's intention, Baptists get concerned when there is any hint of attack upon it. We get upset when there is any undermining of its authority, questioning of its reliability or denying of its accuracy. This Book has to do with man's eternal destiny. To attack the Bible is like tampering with

⁸⁵Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 11.

⁸⁶Pennington, "The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines," 128.

⁸⁷Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 1.

medicine for a sick man; like poisoning the bread of a hungry man.”⁸⁸ Obviously, Vines understood the importance of the Bible to the majority of Southern Baptists.

Further affirming the authority and authenticity of Scripture he asked, “How do we separate salvation matters from other matters? Take the virgin birth. If the virgin birth is not historical and biological fact, then it is theological fiction. Or consider the resurrection of Christ. If there was not a time when and a place where the resurrection occurred, what kind of resurrection was it?”⁸⁹ He then drew the following conclusion: “Salvation matters are so embedded in historical matters that you cannot consistently attribute inspiration to the one and deny it to the other. Every line, every sentence, every word and every letter was placed in our Bible by the supernatural inspiration of God.”⁹⁰

A final example should be mentioned here, as Vines provided poignant application through personal example. He said, “I will study my Bible with more reverent, faith-building methods. I will study it textually, historically, grammatically, contextually, theologically, and practically. I will study it on the basis of a ‘simple Biblicism,’ which never calls into question the supernatural, verbal, or total inspiration of the Bible. Let the critics pick over the bones of the Bible. Bible-believing Baptists will continue to feast on the meat of the Word.”⁹¹

Relevance to the Conservative Resurgence

The significance of this sermon for the conservative resurgence cannot be overemphasized and should not be underestimated. Vines’ role as president of the 1977 Pastor’s Conference of the SBC vaulted him into the position of being one of the main leaders for the conservative cause. In fact, he was a key player from the very beginning

⁸⁸Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 3-4.

⁸⁹Ibid., 6.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid., 11.

of the movement, even though he did not assume the presidency of the convention until nine years into the conservative resurgence. The rallying point from the movement's conception was the denomination's doctrinal position on the inerrancy of the Bible, and Vines had established himself solidly as one of inerrancy's leading advocates and spokesmen.⁹²

Led mainly by Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson, the conservative resurgence officially launched in 1979 at the annual meeting of the SBC.⁹³ As the movement continued into the 1980s, Vines' conservative leadership grew dramatically. In 1984 he nominated Charles Stanley as a candidate for the SBC presidency, which Stanley won on the first ballot.⁹⁴ He contributed to the Peace Committee that convened from August 1985—June 1988 and worked toward the resolution of theological and political tensions between conservatives and moderates within the denomination. While these contributions are important for understanding Vines' impact on the denomination, one of the greatest contributions directly attributable to him is the preaching of this sermon.⁹⁵ As Pennington notes, it was certainly the most significant of Vines' preaching career, and may also be the most historic sermon of the conservative resurgence.⁹⁶

Referencing Vines' more than twenty-year tenure at First Baptist Jacksonville and his influential leadership in the conservative movement of the 1970s and 80s in the SBC Caner states, "his influence among a new generation of Southern Baptist ministers continues."⁹⁷ Pressler observes, "Perhaps no leader has ever had greater rapport with

⁹²Pennington, "The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines," 44.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 142.

⁹⁵Pennington, "The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines," 45.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Caner and Caner, *The Sacred Trust*, 180.

pastors of small churches than Jerry Vines. He was always available to everyone, and conservatives had been awaiting the time that he felt God's leadership to be nominated."⁹⁸

Reflecting upon his involvement in the conservative resurgence, which culminated in his election as president, Vines summarized his motivation as follows:

Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson came along, expressing the same concerns I had about the liberalism in the convention. And then, they began to coalesce preachers from some of the larger churches, myself, Adrian Rogers, Jimmy Draper, Baily Smith, Ed Young, Charles Stanley, and Morris Chapman. We had a song playing inside of us that we couldn't quite put together. Then one day two men, Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler, came along and they put the words to the music and told us how to do it. And then we realized that to take the stand we were going to take would be denominational suicide, but we were willing to pay that price to turn the convention around. As it turned out, we didn't commit denominational suicide. God gave us the denomination and we all became presidents of the convention. But we didn't know that going in, because every indication was our necks would be on the chopping blocks. But the more we were attacked by the moderates, the more folk heroes we became by the rank and file out there, because we were singing their tune.⁹⁹

The above quote effectively demonstrates the heart behind the conservatives' decision to proceed with the movement—not to destroy the denomination, but to save it from the ravages of liberalism. The denominational battles that marked the conservative resurgence drew to a close as the decade of the 1980s ended.¹⁰⁰ Conservatives had predicted a ten-year cycle of conservative convention presidents would solidify their control of the denomination. Vines' presidency proved their projections correct.¹⁰¹

The Sermon's Impact on the Conservative Resurgence

As one of the defining sermons of the conservative resurgence, "A Baptist and His Bible" had profound impact on the entire movement. For the purpose of this study,

⁹⁸Paul Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002), 143.

⁹⁹Pennington, "The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines," 53.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Bill J. Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 139.

the influence of this sermon on the conservative cause will be limited to the theological, missiological, and strategic results effected through this type of biblical, expositional preaching.

Theological Impact

Many longtime leaders of the conservative resurgence immediately grasped the brilliance Vines brought to the movement, and many modern colleagues have echoed the same sentiment.¹⁰² Morris Chapman, former president and CEO of the Southern Baptist Executive Committee, called Vines “one of the greatest expository preachers of our time His brilliance, passion for Christ, and heart for the lost to be saved all converge in his preaching.”¹⁰³ O. S. Hawkins, president of GuideStone Financial Resources and former Florida pastor, noted, “Jerry Vines is without peer in his pulpit prowess, but what is even more God-honoring is that . . . his life has matched his lips. His character is beyond reproach and his reputation is spotless.”¹⁰⁴ Mohler notes, “Vines has been a central figure in the theological recovery of the Southern Baptist Convention.”¹⁰⁵ In addition, Patterson has applauded Vines saying, “Dr. Vines’ contribution to Southern Baptists in terms of preaching and evangelism are of enduring consequence.”¹⁰⁶

This sermon could well be considered the definitive word on the inerrancy controversy in the SBC. It also served as a clarion call to Southern Baptists in the pew to hold fast to the inerrancy and inspiration of their Bible, as Vines said it would “see them home.”¹⁰⁷ From a theological standpoint, the conservative resurgence was an inevitable

¹⁰²Smith, “Jerry Vines to Retire in ’06; FBC Orlando Announces Transition.”

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Vines, “A Baptist and His Bible,” videotape.

phenomenon once began, as the majority of Southern Baptists firmly believed in the inerrancy of God's Word. The only question left to be answered would be whether the conservatives or the moderates would prove better equipped to articulate their message and assemble their messengers for the vital presidential votes of the 1980s. As history has shown, the conservatives would ultimately prove victorious.

Missiological Impact

Though Vines addressed deep theological implications of the denomination's doctrine concerning the Bible, there were inherent missiological concerns as well. He skillfully highlighted these issues when he asserted,

Paul says, "Do the work of an evangelist." Not all have the gift of the evangelist, but all should do the work of evangelism. Evangelism and missions are at the heart of all Southern Baptists do. Southern Baptists became great because of preachers and missionaries and evangelists and denominational leaders and lay people who carried New Testaments into the homes of lost people and led them to Christ. Our problems started the day we got away from personal witnessing. Every preacher and layman, denomination servant and scholar, missionary and institutional representative should do the work of an evangelist.

You can't have doubts about the Bible and be a soul-winner at the same time. The evangelist can't evangelize if he has misgivings about his evangel. As you go into the homes of the lost, what you believe about the Bible is absolutely critical.¹⁰⁸

The missiological impact of this sermon on the conservative resurgence lies in Vines unmistakable and passionate articulation of the dangers of higher criticism in a manner that resonated with every person in the convention hall. Furthermore, he presented a "simple Biblicism" and a positive approach to the inerrancy controversy that overwhelmingly convinced the audience of the inherent veracity of the Scriptures and inspired them to stand firm on the truths of God's Word. As Patterson notes, Vines has a way of relating to everyday people in such a way they feel at home with him.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Vines, *A Baptist and His Bible*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁹Patterson, interview.

Therefore, he is able to communicate incredibly complex ideas with ease and win the trust of his audience.

Strategic Impact

The theological and missiological effects of Vines' sermon are by far of greatest importance to the consideration of the role of preaching on the conservative resurgence in the SBC. However, there were significant strategic implications as well. One of these strategic effects was Vines' own presidency, which at least in part was encouraged by his preaching of this sermon. His election to the office of president effectively decimated moderate momentum at the end of the decade. Although he received less than 700 more votes than his challenger, Phoenix, Arizona pastor Richard Jackson, his first term completed the ten years conservatives believed they needed to accomplish their mission of reform in the denomination. By 1991, moderates would no longer even offer a candidate to challenge the conservatives for the presidency.¹¹⁰ His election moved the conservative resurgence into a new phase. The theme of his presidency, according to Sutton, was "first and foremost, the mandate to be faithful to Scripture."¹¹¹ Simply, this sermon lent strategic impact to the conservative resurgence in that Vines clearly and unequivocally articulated the deeply held beliefs of the vast majority of Southern Baptists, especially on the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Word of God.

Conclusion

Jerry Vines will rightfully be remembered for his commitment to expository preaching.¹¹² During the course of the conservative movement many battles were waged

¹¹⁰Pressler, *A Hill on Which to Die*, 141.

¹¹¹Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation*, 190.

¹¹²Pennington, "The Preaching and Pastoral Ministry of Charles Jerry Vines," 63.

over the theological questions surrounding the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture. As men and women of conviction and courage took the steps necessary to win the denomination back from the ravages of a denial of the truth of God's Word, Vines stood among them, leading, encouraging, praying, and preaching the conviction of his heart. Paige Patterson professes, "I wouldn't hesitate to say that Dr. Vines and Dr. Adrian Rogers were the two most important figures in the conservative movement."¹¹³ He notes of Vines that his "contribution to Southern Baptists in terms of preaching and evangelism are of enduring consequence."¹¹⁴ To state the matter simply, for Vines, the conservative resurgence was always about one thing and one thing only—Baptists and their Bibles.¹¹⁵

¹¹³Art Toalston, "Jerry Vines to Stay on the Go After 23-Year Fla. Pastorate," May 12, 2005, accessed October 22, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/20778>.

¹¹⁴Smith, "Jerry Vines to Retire in '06; FBC Orlando Announces Transition."

¹¹⁵Vines, "A Baptist and His Bible," videotape.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS OF THE ROLE OF PREACHING IN THE CONSERVATIVE RESURGENCE

Introduction

From 1979 to 1990, conservatives and moderates struggled for control of the nation's largest Protestant denomination. Charges of theological liberalism as well as an insatiable hunger for power were leveled at every turn. Intense debate over the source and effects of the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention, known as the conservative resurgence, has become a controversy unto itself.¹ Conservatives point to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture as the source of the dispute and claim the denomination had strayed from its biblical, historical roots, and was in need of a return to doctrinal fidelity.² On the other hand, moderates charge conservatives were merely after power and control in the convention and deny any real theological concern on the part of conservatives at the heart of the bitter disagreement.³ These disputes ultimately led to the formation of a "Peace Committee," which presented its findings to the SBC at the annual meeting held in St. Louis, Missouri in 1987.⁴ The committee's report detailed both theological and political forces at play in the controversy, but held theological matters were mainly to blame. It sided mostly with conservatives and declared the primary

¹Michael Foust, "25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start," June 15, 2004, accessed November 2, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/18486/25-years-ago-conservative-resurgence-got-its-start>.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

source of the controversy in the SBC “the Bible; more specifically, the ways in which the Bible is viewed.”⁵

Today, conservatives look over the theological landscape of national denominations in the United States and cannot help but wonder where the SBC would be without the conservative resurgence. Foust notes, “The Episcopal church, Presbyterian church (USA), and United Methodist church all have strong factions supporting the homosexual rights movement. Just last year the Episcopal church ordained an openly homosexual bishop.”⁶ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky echoed these sentiments when he charged, “Look where mainline denominations are. You have the Episcopalian church ordaining an openly homosexual bishop. The United Methodist church recently refused to even admit that homosexuality is dealt with clearly in their standards. Do you have the sense that if the conservative resurgence had not happened, that’s exactly where we would be? I am absolutely certain it’s right.”⁷

This chapter will examine the implications of the role of preaching in the conservative resurgence as represented by the sermons evaluated in the previous three chapters. Emphasis will center on the current theological climate in the SBC, as well as the theological health of the denomination. Special attention will revolve around the impact of the conservative resurgence on the agencies and institutions of the convention, in addition to its global mission and evangelistic strategy. This chapter will also evaluate the need for sustained vigilance to ensure continuing doctrinal fidelity in the denomination. Finally, it will assess the indebtedness of the current generation of Southern Baptists to the generation of the conservative resurgence, who courageously

⁵Walter B. Shurden and Randy Shepley, *Going for the Jugular: A Documentary History of the SBC Holy War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 208.

⁶Foust, “25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start.”

⁷R. Albert Mohler, Jr., quoted in Foust, “25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start.”

stood firm on their conviction the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, and successfully won back the denomination from the brink of exile to the wasteland of theological liberalism.

The Impact of the Conservative Resurgence on Southern Baptist Agencies and Institutions

In the early 1960s, *Broadman Press*—the publishing house of the Southern Baptist Convention—published a commentary by Midwestern Seminary professor Ralph Elliott in which he denied the historicity and authenticity of the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, declared the worldwide flood narrative a myth, and asserted Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by natural occurrences, directly contradicting the biblical account. A controversy ensued, and Elliott was instructed not to republish the book. He did, and was subsequently fired.⁸

In reaction to this controversy, the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* was revised in 1963. Although some said the revision emphasized Jesus' affirmation of Old Testament teachings, it was instead used by moderates and liberal professors to pit Jesus' words against the rest of Scripture—especially the Apostle Paul. Southern Baptists had a new statement of faith, but the controversy was only beginning.⁹ Ultimately, leadership would have to change at every denominational institution, especially the seminaries, publishing house, and political action arm of the convention.

The Seminaries

The battle over the direction of the seminaries was a major focal point of concern for the conservatives. In various publications and lectures, some seminary professors had denied the inerrancy of Scripture, rejected the miracles of Jesus, denied

⁸Foust, "25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start."

⁹Ibid.

the deity of Christ, and embraced universalism.¹⁰ Dave Miller, pastor of Southern Hills Baptist Church in Sioux City, Iowa, shares his personal experience with some of these liberal professors as follows:

I saw liberalism firsthand. I attended a small Baptist college and I experienced the effects of liberalism. I saw the debilitating spiritual legacy of liberal teaching on the lives of those I entered school with and who were my friends. All of our professors were from Southern Seminary except one who came from SEBTS. They undermined or ridiculed every doctrine I had ever been taught in church. The complete truthfulness of Scripture. The uniqueness of Christ. The existence of the devil as a real entity. The substitutionary atonement of Christ.

One OT professor started class by saying that there was no such thing as predictive prophecy. Any such prophecies in Scripture were actually written later and falsely claimed as prophecies. In a Hebrew class, he said these words, "Let's face it men, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed; they are all just different flags under which God flies his name." Overhearing a conversation I was having with another student, he recommended that we correct our theology by watching the John Denver movie, "Oh, God!"

We had a well-known professor at our Spiritual Emphasis week tell us that Jesus did not actually come to earth intending to die, but that his death was the result of political miscalculations.

When my school cleaned up the religion department the year after I left, the OT prof went to teach at Midwestern Seminary, until he finally settled in a Virginia Baptist college. Another of my profs became president at one of the CBF-affiliated seminaries that formed after the CR.

I went to SWBTS after a couple of years at Dallas Seminary, and I encountered a mix of conservative and moderate profs.

No one can tell me that there was no real liberalism problem. I saw it firsthand. I sat under the tutelage of men who were not just moderate; they were Bible-doubting, Blood-denying, faith-crumbling false teachers, and I did not want their kind to spread in the SBC. I went to conventions not for any desire for political power. I loved the Word and was committed to Christ, and I was then, as I am today, convinced that doing nothing in terms of liberalism in the SBC was far more damaging than joining the fight.¹¹

From a conservative perspective, the situation in the six Southern Baptist seminaries during the 1970s and 80s was nothing short of appalling. Patterson recalls, "I could identify only sixteen inerrantists teaching on the faculties of our six seminaries.

¹⁰Foust, "25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start."

¹¹Dave Miller, "The Conservative Resurgence: Reflections of a Foot Soldier," April 25, 2013, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://sbcvoices.com/the-conservative-resurgence-reflections-of-a-foot-soldier>.

Most of these did not take an open stand. There are a few to whom I've never talked; so possibly there were a very few more than sixteen, but those are the ones I know and can count."¹² Conservatives claimed the seminaries were destroying the faith of their students, and a 1976 Th.M. thesis by a student at Southern Seminary seemed to validate these charges. According to the thesis, eighty-seven percent of first-year Master of Divinity students had no doubts concerning the divinity of Jesus, but by their final year, the number fell to sixty-three percent.¹³ In another category, eighty-five percent of those same students believed Christ to be absolutely necessary for salvation. By their final year, only sixty percent maintained that view.¹⁴

The greatest miracle in the conservative resurgence is that today, more than thirty-five years later, all six SBC seminaries boast a fulltime faculty of more than 200, without a single one who is not a biblical inerrantist.¹⁵ In addition, all six presidents of those seminaries are ardently outspoken inerrantists who make it crystal clear that biblical inerrancy is the epistemological position of the particular seminary they serve.¹⁶

The full impact and implementation of the principles undergirding the conservative resurgence was slow to come.¹⁷ Nevertheless, every entity eventually saw a change in leadership.¹⁸ The first conservative seminary president was William O. Crews, elected to serve Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, California in

¹²Paige Patterson, quoted in William Roach, "Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy," June 17, 2014, accessed November 3, 2015, <http://defendinginerrancy.com/interview-paige-patterson-biblical-inerrancy>.

¹³Noel Wesley Hollyfield, Jr., "A Sociological Analysis of the Degrees of 'Christian Orthodoxy' among Selected Students in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary" (Th.M. thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976), 60-64.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Patterson, quoted in Roach, "Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy."

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Foust, "25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start."

1987.¹⁹ 1988 saw the appointment of Lewis Drummond to the presidency of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.²⁰ By the mid-1990s, every Southern Baptist seminary had moved in a decisively conservative direction. Albert Mohler was elected in 1993 to serve The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1994, the trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas terminated Russell Dilday, and Kenneth Hemphill became the new president. 1995 saw Mark Coppenger elected president at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. The last institution to see a conservative leader was New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisiana, which elected Chuck Kelley in 1996.²¹

The ERLC

Although the seminaries were of greatest concern to conservatives, they were not the only SBC entities in dire need of reform. The Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission, formerly the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, was one of the most egregious public offenders. In 1971—two years before the United States Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade*—SBC messengers approved a pro-choice resolution supporting legalized abortion in cases of “severe fetal deformity” and in cases where the pregnancy could damage the “emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.”²² Three years later—after *Roe v. Wade*—messengers reaffirmed the position of the 1971 convention.²³ But not only did the convention messengers

¹⁹Foust, “25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start.”

²⁰Jason Hall, “Lewis Drummond, Former Seminary Head, Dies at 77,” January 3, 2004, accessed January 21, 2016, <http://archives.sbts.edu/the-history-of-the-sbts/our-professors/lewis-drummond>.

²¹Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 289-290.

²²Foust, “25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start.”

²³*Ibid.*

approve these outrageous resolutions, the denomination’s Christian Life Commission—the SBC agency tasked to address social issues from a biblical standpoint—was also on record as being pro-choice.²⁴ In fact, in 1976 the CLC produced a pamphlet stating it is “impossible” to determine “when in the life cycle the fetus assumes the characteristics of a person.”²⁵ This pamphlet even posited, “Which is more important—the mental health of a mother or the eight-week-old fetal life she carries? There is no stock answer for these questions nor for the many other similar questions we face.”²⁶

1988 saw the election of Richard Land to the presidency of the ERLC, who led the moral and theological transformation of the organization during and following the conservative resurgence. Speaking to Land’s influence during his twenty-five year tenure at the commission, Strode declares, “He directed the commission as it became a stalwart advocate for the sanctity of human life and religious freedom while it maintained its biblical stances on such issues as racial reconciliation and marriage.”²⁷ Today, the ERLC, led by president Russell Moore, continues to be a beacon of the light of the gospel into the culture of the United States and around the world.

LifeWay Christian Resources

Another area of great concern among conservatives was the publishing house of the denomination, at the time referred to as the Sunday School Board. The 1969 *Broadman Press* publication of the Genesis-Exodus volume of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* drew even more criticism than Ralph Elliott had earlier in the decade.²⁸

²⁴Foust, “25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start.”

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Tom Strode, “Richard Land Honored for Courage at ERLC,” June 10, 2013, accessed November 6, 2015, <http://erlc.com/article/richard-land-honored-for-courage-at-erlc>.

²⁸Foust, “25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start.”

Like Elliott's work, this volume was critical of a literal historical interpretation of the Bible, especially the Pentateuch. Commenting on Genesis 22, author G. Henton Davies posited God did not order Abraham to slay Isaac. He said, "Did God make, would God in fact have made, such a demand upon Abraham or anybody else except himself? . . . Our answer . . . is no. Indeed, what Christian or humane conscience could regard such a command as coming from God?"²⁹ Here Davies directly assaulted the inerrancy of Scripture by questioning the authenticity of the divine command.³⁰ This volume resulted in messengers to the 1970 SBC annual meeting in Denver, Colorado approving a motion calling for the withdrawal of the Genesis-Exodus volume of this commentary and demanding a rewrite.³¹

In 1991 Jimmy Draper was elected president of the Sunday School Board of the SBC, an entity that would later be renamed LifeWay Christian Resources.³² Today, under the leadership of president Thom Rainer, LifeWay produces and distributes quality conservative material that is noticeably absent any denials of the deity of Christ, reality of the substitutionary atonement, or any other of a host of problems previously present in the publications of the organization.

The Current Position of the Southern Baptist Convention on Inerrancy

During the conservative resurgence, some argued inerrancy was not the historic or even majority view among Southern Baptists regarding biblical doctrine.³³

²⁹G. Henton Davies, *General Articles; Genesis-Exodus*, in vol. 1 of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 196-99.

³⁰James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists Evangelicals?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983), 116.

³¹Foust, "25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start."

³²Russ Rankin and Linda Lawson, "Jimmy Draper, 'Mr. Southern Baptist,' Retires from LifeWay," January 31, 2006, accessed November 6, 2015, <http://www.bpnews.net/2253>.

³³Patterson, quoted in Roach, "Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy."

However, Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, refuted this view in an interview with William Roach by asserting,

In the 1980s Dr. Russ Bush and Dr. Tom Nettles, then both on the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, published a book entitled *Baptists and the Bible*. Basically, they simply demonstrated in the book that while not all Baptists in history held to the inerrancy of God's Word, the overwhelming majority of Baptists did hold to the inerrancy of the Bible. From the time of the publication of that book until now, no one has again dared to challenge the view that most Baptists—and just about all of Baptist leadership—in the history of Baptists and the Anabaptist people, held diligently to the inerrancy of God's Word.³⁴

Interestingly, Southern Baptists are notoriously independent, and even the most devout Southern Baptist—like the devout Catholic or Jew or Lutheran—is not a walking doctrine textbook or systematic theologian.³⁵ However, worthy of note is that Southern Baptists are a vastly diverse people with a wide margin of convictions and beliefs. For example, although the total membership of the more than 46,000 Southern Baptist churches nationwide exceeds 15.5 million, weekly worship attendance is merely 5.67 million.³⁶ These are massive numbers, and 5.67 million people in weekly worship should not be discounted, but it still leaves a disparity of at least 9.83 million Southern Baptists who would appear to be so in name only. These facts lend credence to Patterson's assessment—although not every Southern Baptist today would describe themselves an inerrantist, the vast majority of committed Southern Baptists happily claim that title. In fact, there are multiple reasons one should conclude the conservative resurgence directly, and sermons such as Adrian Rogers' "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," W. A. Criswell's "Whether We Live or Die," and Jerry Vines' "A Baptist and His Bible"

³⁴Patterson, quoted in Roach, "Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy."

³⁵Cary McMullen, "Survey of Florida's Southern Baptists May Surprise You," February 23, 2014, accessed November 3, 2015, <http://www.ocala.com/article/20140223/OPINION/140229937?p=all&tc=pgall>.

³⁶Mark Woods, "Is the Southern Baptist Convention in Terminal Decline," June 11, 2015, accessed October 29, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/article/is.the.southern.baptist.convention.in.terminal.decline/55989.htm>.

subtly, helped to solidify the Southern Baptist understanding of and belief in the total inerrancy of God's Word.

Revision of The Baptist Faith and Message

The first of these reasons comes from the 2000 revision of *The Baptist Faith and Message*. Several decisions were crucial in the success of the conservative movement among Southern Baptists. Patterson notes a vital strategic decision made early in the movement by the leaders of the conservative resurgence when he recalls,

We believed that the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists believed in the inerrancy of God's Word. Furthermore, we felt that this was an issue that easily could be explained to the vast majority of people. In addition, the same people who were propagating other forms of heresy invariably had a problem with the truthfulness of God's Word. Consequently, we made our decision to pursue one subject and basically to refuse to be sidetracked onto others. By making the epistemological issue of inerrancy of the Word of God primary, we were able to secure the following of the vast majority of the people in the Southern Baptist Convention. When we then voted on *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* with the major changes to strengthen the doctrine of Holy Scripture, ninety-eight percent of the convention messengers voted in support of that revised confession. Consequently, clearly the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture was the primary focus of the conservative resurgence; and, as we had expected, the other doctrines of the church fell quickly in line once that was accepted by the convention.³⁷

Most Southern Baptists, especially those of the conservative persuasion, considered the *BF&M* adopted by the convention in 1963 a relatively conservative document. But much to the chagrin of conservatives, they found moderates affirming that document's statement on the Scriptures, all the while holding a low view toward the inspiration and inerrancy of God's Word. According to the 1963 version, the Bible "has . . . truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter."³⁸ Unfortunately, some said, "The Bible *has* truth and the truth it has is without mixture of error. But it does not say

³⁷Patterson, quoted in Roach, "Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy."

³⁸David R. Brumbelow, "Differences Between the 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message," September 21, 2009, accessed November 3, 2015, <http://gulfoastpastor.blogspot.com/2009/09/differences-between-1963-and-2000.html>.

the Bible *is* truth.”³⁹ According to this liberal view, espoused widely by moderates in the SBC, the Bible contains truth, but it may also contain error. Therefore, a liberal could be in complete agreement with the 1963 *BF&M*, all the while believing there are errors in the Bible.⁴⁰

Also of concern was the 1963 document’s statement, “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Christ.” Although a little confusing, the sentence sounded good, as Southern Baptists certainly believe in the preeminence of Jesus.⁴¹ Liberals, however, interpreted this statement to mean, “If Jesus speaks directly to an issue it is true. If not, then we can make our own decision.”⁴² Brumbelow offers a helpful example when he says,

While the Bible says homosexuality is sinful, Jesus did not directly say that, so we have the option of agreeing or disagreeing with those passages in the Bible. (Actually, Jesus did speak to the issue. He spoke of marriage as being between one man and one woman. Jesus also affirmed the truth of the Old Testament, and it directly speaks to this issue.) Some have said that Jesus and Paul disagreed on some issues, such as the role of women. Therefore we disregard what Paul wrote in the Bible in favor of what Jesus said. The conservative believes all Scripture is true and inspired by God, and that Jesus and Paul do not contradict each other.⁴³

The 2000 version of the *BF&M* corrects these misunderstandings by stating, “All Scripture is true and trustworthy,” and by removing the “criterion” statement. While moderates who claim there are errors in the Bible could make use of loopholes and affirm the 1963 *BF&M*, they cannot do so with the 2000 revision, at least not without being blatantly dishonest.⁴⁴

³⁹Brumbelow, “Differences Between the 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message,”

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Resolution on Inerrancy

Another important indication of the commitment of Southern Baptists to the inerrancy of Scripture is the resolution “On Biblical Scholarship and the Doctrine of Inerrancy,” adopted at the annual meeting of the convention on June 20, 2012 in New Orleans, Louisiana.⁴⁵ This resolution voiced concern for many theological errors that had arisen during the decades preceding the conservative resurgence. For example, the author claims, “Some biblical scholars who identify themselves as evangelicals have in recent years denied the historicity of Adam and Eve (Gen 1-2) and of the fall of mankind into sin (Gen 3), among other historical assertions of Scripture.”⁴⁶ He also charges, “Many of these same scholars have called on other evangelical scholars to abandon the doctrine of inerrancy and to embrace on a wholesale basis the methodology of higher critical biblical scholarship in the study of Scripture.”⁴⁷ He notes,

The Bible asserts for itself that it is God-breathed and is altogether sufficient “for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17) The human authors of Scripture wrote not from their own imaginations, but instead as they were “moved by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21) The primary purpose of biblical scholarship is to glorify God through the study and proclamation of “the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (Jude 3), which faith is set forth in Holy Scripture Southern Baptists have affirmed historically and consistently our unshakeable belief that the Bible in its entirety has “truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter,” and is therefore “totally true and trustworthy” (*The Baptist Faith and Message*, Article 1, “The Scriptures”).⁴⁸

The resolution called Southern Baptists to “reaffirm our belief in and adherence to the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, as set forth in the Bible itself and in Article 1 of *The Baptist Faith and Message*,” as well as “our belief specifically in the

⁴⁵Ted Wolfe, *Southern Baptist Convention Bulletin, Part 3* (New Orleans: Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, 2012), 13.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

direct creation and historicity of Adam and Eve and in a literal, space-time fall of mankind into sin.”⁴⁹ Finally, it called “all biblical scholars serving in Southern Baptist institutions to help shape the Christian worldview of the next generation by carrying out their work of teaching, research, and writing with an excellence and freedom that is always in submission to Jesus Christ and in service of the inerrant Word of God.”⁵⁰ Signaling Southern Baptists’ commitment to this issue, the resolution was adopted with overwhelming support.⁵¹

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy

One of the major arenas within evangelicalism in which Southern Baptists have exerted significant influence is biblical inerrancy. They have been staunch advocates of this doctrine, even in the face of militant opposition—often within their own ranks. Mohler argues,

The affirmation of biblical inerrancy is nothing more, and nothing less, than the affirmation of the Bible’s total truthfulness and trustworthiness. The assertion of the Bible’s inerrancy—that the Bible is “free from all falsehood or mistake”—is an essential safeguard for the Bible’s authority as the very Word of God in written form. The reason for this should be clear: to affirm anything short of inerrancy is to allow that the Bible does contain falsehoods or mistakes.⁵²

He concludes his argument by asserting, “It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in principle. The devil, as they say, is in the details. That is what makes *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* so indispensable It is not enough to affirm biblical

⁴⁹Wolfe, *Southern Baptist Convention Bulletin*, 13.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Frank S. Page, *Annual of the 2012 Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 2012), 95.

⁵²R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Devil is in the Details: Biblical Inerrancy and the Licona Controversy,” September 14, 2011, accessed November 4, 2015, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/09/14/the-devil-is-in-the-details-biblical-inerrancy-and-the-licona-controversy>.

inerrancy in general terms. The integrity of this affirmation depends upon the affirmation of inerrancy in every detailed sense.”⁵³

Mohler is not the only scholar who sees the inherent value in this statement as it relates to Southern Baptists and their view on inerrancy. When asked how he thought *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* influenced Southern Baptists’ view of the Bible, Patterson noted,

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy had no effect at all on Southern Baptists’ commitment to the inerrancy of God’s Word. Such a commitment had a long history prior to the Council on Biblical Inerrancy’s founding. However, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the subsequent *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* did have a profound effect in strengthening many Southern Baptists. My contention would be that what was going on in the Southern Baptist Convention at the same time that the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy was doing its work provided mutual help for the two entities. On the one hand, the Southern Baptists provided the people power in support of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy while, on the other hand, the large number of tremendously helpful books and articles that came from the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy provided Southern Baptist people with the ammunition they needed to fight their battle. Consequently, even though I served on the Council on Biblical Inerrancy, I can also say that as a Southern Baptist, I am grateful to God for the monumental contribution that was made by the International Council.⁵⁴

Southern Baptists clearly have a long and distinguished history of defending this vital doctrine, but as Mohler concedes, “the war over the truthfulness of the Bible is still not over—not by a long shot.”⁵⁵

During the 1970s, the inerrancy battle centered around Fuller Theological Seminary and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The 1980s brought the focus to the Southern Baptist Convention and its seminaries. Today, the fight continues due to writings such as *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old*

⁵³Mohler, “The Devil is in the Details.”

⁵⁴Patterson, quoted in Roach, “Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy.”

⁵⁵R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Inerrancy of Scripture: The Fifty Years’ War...and Counting,” August 16, 2010, accessed November 4, 2015, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/08/16/the-inerrancy-of-scripture-the-fifty-years-war-and-counting>.

Testament by Peter Enns, former professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* by Kenton Sparks of Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania.⁵⁶ Again, Mohler provides clarity when he says, "The rejection of biblical inerrancy is bound up with a view of God that is, in the end, fatal for Christian orthodoxy. We are entering a new phase in the battle over the Bible's truthfulness and authority. We should at least be thankful for undisguised arguments coming from the opponents of biblical inerrancy, even as we are ready, once again, to make clear where their arguments lead."⁵⁷ As he articulates these realities, he reminds Southern Baptists not to let their guard down, and that they must remain vigilant in the battle for truth, as this war on the Bible presents "those who affirm the inerrancy of the Bible with yet another test of resolve."⁵⁸

The Link between Preaching and the Conservative Resurgence

One of the clearest ways the link between preaching and the conservative resurgence is seen is in the testimony of pastors and denominational leaders who were directly impacted and influenced by sermons such as "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," "Whether We Live or Die," and "A Baptist and His Bible." Two primary facts must be acknowledged for one to understand and appreciate the success of the conservative movement throughout the denomination.

The first reality of the success of the conservative resurgence lies in the fact that what the movement was trying to do was consistent with what the vast majority of Southern Baptist churches in general, and Southern Baptist church members specifically,

⁵⁶Mohler, "The Inerrancy of Scripture."

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

already believed about the Word of God.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, the reason liberalism and higher criticism had gained such momentum in the convention as a whole, specifically appearing in the seminaries to varying degrees, was because most SBC churches were simply oblivious to what was going on in the denomination.⁶⁰ One must believe if the majority of Southern Baptists had had knowledge of the blatant heretical positions of many of the professors teaching in SBC seminaries, the problem would never have become as dire as it was in the 1960s and 70s.

The second reality of the success of the conservative resurgence as relates to preaching lies in the fact that many pastors were taking back to their churches what they heard at the annual meetings and Pastor's Conferences of the convention. Hershael York, Victor and Louise Lester Professor of Christian Preaching at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and pastor of Buck Run Baptist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky, testifies to this truth about his own ministry and preaching as a 28-year-old pastor at the First Baptist Church in Marion, Arkansas during his days attending Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tennessee.⁶¹ He asserts the membership of First Baptist was decidedly conservative, but they simply had no knowledge of the problems the convention faced due to the liberal ideas being propagated in its seminaries.⁶²

In support of these theories and referencing the role preaching played in the conservative resurgence, Patterson notes, "The one common thread . . . was even on Sunday morning out in the churches, the Bible-believing preachers simply preached with greater conviction for obvious reasons. And they normally not only had greater

⁵⁹Hershael York, telephone interview by author, January 11, 2016.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

conviction, but they had greater zeal.”⁶³ Again, York draws the link between the conservative movement and the preaching and pastoral leadership going on in the local churches affiliated with the SBC using his former pastorate as an example.⁶⁴ He says the membership of First Baptist Marion were completely oblivious as to the theological battle being fought at the national level of the convention, but when informed of these realities, they were more than willing to attend annual meetings for the purpose of supporting conservative presidential candidates.⁶⁵ In fact, on one occasion he recalls eight messengers from the church (who along with he and his wife, Tanya, comprised the maximum number of messengers allowed from any cooperating Southern Baptist church) piled in a van and drove to the annual meeting being held in New Orleans, Louisiana— simply to cast their vote for Morris Chapman as the new president of the SBC.⁶⁶ Clearly, the faithful proclamation of God’s Word, both at national convention meetings as well as in Southern Baptist churches on a weekly basis, served the conservative cause well and contributed to the success in pushing back the tide of liberalism which had enveloped the denomination.

The Impact of the Conservative Resurgence on Global Missions and Evangelism

Southern Baptists currently maintain almost 5,000 missionaries ministering for Christ in 132 countries around the world.⁶⁷ Considerable mission efforts exist beyond these numbers, but these are the ministries for which public identification is possible.⁶⁸

⁶³Paige Patterson, telephone interview by author, April 23, 2015.

⁶⁴York, interview.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Patterson, quoted in Roach, “Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy.”

⁶⁸Ibid.

Commenting on the effects of the conservative resurgence on the missional and evangelistic efforts of the SBC Patterson notes,

It is conceivable that Southern Baptists could have yielded that many missionaries just based on the amount of money that was available, but they certainly would not under any circumstances be as effective as they are now. The result of taking the seminaries back to Christ and to the highest commitment to the Scriptures has resulted in the deluge of godly missionaries who believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Consequently, these are given courage to go to the most forbidding places on the earth and risk everything for the cause of Christ. Any lesser view of Scripture and confidence in the inerrancy of God's Word would never produce such a missionary.⁶⁹

A Reduction in the Force

The Southern Baptist Convention is still by far the largest non-Catholic denomination in the United States. However, although the SBC touts 15.5 million members, its numbers are not as high as they were last year, or even the year before. In fact, membership in SBC churches is down from a peak of 16.3 million in 2003, and many people in the convention sense a corresponding loss of clout and credibility when speaking to the culture at large.⁷⁰ Author Trevin Wax asks, "What's going on? The number of Southern Baptist churches is higher than ever—46,449 churches are in some way affiliated with the SBC. Meanwhile, church planting continues to pick up steam, and a common concern among established churches is the need to be 'revitalized.'"⁷¹ In addition, the International Mission Board recently announced a reduction of 600-800 missionaries and staff, citing fiscal instability within the organization.⁷² All this begs the questions, "Why did the SBC's growth begin to slow in the 1950s, stall in subsequent

⁶⁹Patterson, quoted in Roach, "Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy."

⁷⁰Trevin Wax, "What to Make of Southern Baptists' Declining Numbers (COMMENTARY)," June 16, 2015, accessed October 29, 2015, <http://www.religionnews.com/2015/06/16/make-southern-baptists-declining-numbers-commentary>.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²David Platt, "Open Letter from David Platt," September 4, 2015, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://imb.org/updates/storyview-3509.aspx#.V13jA7w4muo>.

decades, and then begin to decline several years ago? And what does this mean for the SBC's engagement on political and social issues? More importantly, what does this mean for the future of global missions and evangelism?"⁷³

From the outside, some point to the conservative theological views of the SBC and place blame there. Others point to the political stance of the denomination and believe that could be the culprit. As Wax notes, "Lots of explanations are floating around, but it's likely that a variety of factors have led us to this point."⁷⁴ A few of these explanations are worthy of consideration.

Many former Southern Baptists are now nondenominational. Simply, many former Southern Baptists seem to be discouraged and disgusted with the bureaucracy that naturally finds its way into established denominational structures. Wax describes this phenomenon well with the following illustration:

Christian comedian Tim Hawkins has a funny bit on the differences between denominations. When he pokes fun at believers whose churches are unaffiliated, he jests: "Come on! You're not fooling anyone. You're just a Baptist church with a cool website."

Hawkins' line gets laughs because there's some truth to that statement. In the past five decades, the number of nondenominational churches has soared. And while I don't think we should write off traditional denominations as having no future, it's undeniable that many people who today attend a nondenominational church grew up Southern Baptist.⁷⁵

The reality is very few nondenominational churches publicly declare their views on important political and social issues, so as Southern Baptists have dispersed into other denominations, the perception of unity, strength, and conviction on social issues has diminished drastically.⁷⁶

⁷³Wax, "What to Make of Southern Baptists' Declining Numbers (COMMENTARY)."

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

Southern Baptists are having fewer children. Unfortunately, for over fifty years, the majority of reported baptisms in Southern Baptist churches were performed during the childhood and teenage years. If the “demography is destiny” mantra is true, it should come as no surprise that because Southern Baptists are having fewer children, they are also seeing fewer baptisms, which ultimately leads to stagnation and decline in the denomination.⁷⁷

Changes in membership philosophy and church attendance patterns. For many years, little attention was given to the accuracy of membership rolls in Southern Baptist churches, but recent resolutions regarding “meaningful membership” in the SBC have led to many churches cleaning up their rolls.⁷⁸ However, although some of the decline in the denomination may be because of more accurate reporting, the membership issue doesn’t explain waning baptisms and church attendance. In fact, twenty years ago, a “faithful church member” was considered someone who attended at least three times a week. Today, many pastors consider a “faithful church member” someone who attends three times a month.⁷⁹ Wax concedes, “the shift in attendance patterns is significant, and it’s no wonder it has shown up in the data.”⁸⁰

Southern Baptists are less evangelistic. Wax admits there is no way to prove or disprove this claim, but he notes, “Considering the drop in the SBC’s baptismal numbers, it seems clear Southern Baptist outreach efforts are diminishing—either in effectiveness or intensity, perhaps both.”⁸¹ This trend may be explained in a number of

⁷⁷Wax, “What to Make of Southern Baptists’ Declining Numbers (COMMENTARY).”

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

ways, whether one blames apathy regarding evangelism, the fact fewer Southern Baptists consistently maintain relationships with unbelievers, or the over-politicized vision of Christianity, the denomination has clearly seen a sharp decline in its evangelistic witness to the world.⁸²

Fiscal irresponsibility. For many years, the International Mission Board has been spending more money than it takes in. According to Wade Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma, and former trustee for the IMB, this fiscal irresponsibility “can be attributed to a philosophy of a previous IMB President who believed Jesus was returning soon and it mattered not whether or not bills could be paid.”⁸³ In fact, for more than twenty years, the IMB has been selling off capital assets and using the funds for operational expenses.⁸⁴

One needs little training in economics to understand an organization can never operate indefinitely from the sale of capital assets, and at some point someone in leadership will have to face the cold, hard facts that the money will soon be gone if nothing is done to stop the hemorrhage of funds.⁸⁵ As Burleson aptly notes, “David Platt was handed the International Mission Board at the tail end of a spending spree that would have made Croesus blush.”⁸⁶

Although these reasons do not constitute the entire picture of decline in the Southern Baptist Convention, from bringing missionaries home to declining membership and worship attendance to the atrophy in baptismal numbers, they do provide one with a

⁸²Wax, “What to Make of Southern Baptists’ Declining Numbers (COMMENTARY).”

⁸³Wade Burleson, “A Platt-Full of Trouble: The IMB’s Fiscal Crisis,” September 4, 2015, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://www.wadeburleson.org/2015/09/a-platt-full-of-trouble-imbs-fiscal.html>.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

glimpse into the subjugating factors, as well as an idea as to how these problems might be resolved in years to come.

Reaction to Decline

Of greater concern than the issue of decline in the SBC is how Southern Baptists are responding to the decline. One cause for encouragement is the increase in prayer for revival in the denomination, such as the prayer service led by Ronnie Floyd, pastor of Cross Church in northwest Arkansas and president of the Southern Baptist Convention, at the 2015 annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio. Another tremendous sign of the recognition of and reaction to decline is the surging church planting movement in both the International and North American mission boards of the SBC. In addition to church planting, efforts are being made to strengthen and revitalize declining and dying churches all across the United States and put more emphasis on personal evangelism.⁸⁷

Wax helpfully identifies other important areas where Southern Baptists are reacting to the news of decline in their ranks. He says, “In all these efforts, Southern Baptists are also grappling with rapid shifts in societal views of morality and are beginning to recognize that their diminishing clout when speaking to the wider culture is a sign that they are now closer to the margins of society, not the center.”⁸⁸ He appropriately reminds the reader that Baptists have a long and storied history of being on the margins of society, so “to look at the current state of the SBC with hope is not to succumb to a naïve optimism, but to face our challenges head-on, with confidence that God’s kingdom will endure and that, no matter what happens to the SBC, Christ will build his church.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷Wax, “What to Make of Southern Baptists’ Declining Numbers (COMMENTARY).”

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

The Indebtedness of the Current Generation of Southern Baptists to Past Generations

When asked what responsibility the conservative movement afforded the current generation of Southern Baptists, Paul Pressler responded, “Understand what the problem was and make sure that it is not repeated.” He continued, “I am somewhat concerned about a lot of our fabulous young preachers who want to be so independent, but they don’t understand or recognize the need to work together.” He acknowledged, “Some of these wonderful young preachers who do their own thing and don’t support the convention, don’t like bureaucracy. Well, I don’t like bureaucracy, either. But you’ve got to work together and do things a local church can’t do.” He also challenged the current generation of Southern Baptists not to “think you can do it all yourself, and recognize that we must cooperate. And give up a little of your independence to be able to accomplish things together that are essential for the kingdom.”⁹⁰

Indebtedness to Conservatives

Speaking to the necessity of belief in inerrancy for a successful, God-honoring ministry Patterson argues, “The simple truth is that if a man does not believe that God has spoken a sure and certain word, then when he enters the pulpit and gives a sermon, the very best that he has to offer is a moral platitude of some variety, calling on human beings to a more noble existence; but even then he cannot be sure that what he says is true.”⁹¹ He asserts, “The only way to have a thriving pulpit ministry and a growing church that is uniquely blessed of God is to have a pastor opening God’s Word as the final adjudication of all matters of human life and eternity. With charisma, one can build a large congregation if it’s located in the right place, but it is impossible to build saintly

⁹⁰Paul Pressler, quoted in Aaron Cline Hanbury, “Seven Questions with Paul Pressler about the Conservative Resurgence,” June 12, 2014, accessed September 15, 2015, <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/towers/seven-questions-with-paul-pressler-about-the-conservative-resurgence>.

⁹¹Patterson, quoted in Roach, “Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy.”

lives without the highest conceivable view of God’s Word.”⁹² This type of preaching was precisely that modeled by Rogers, Criswell, and Vines in their watershed sermons delivered throughout the conservative resurgence.

Mohler contends Southern Baptists today can only continue the reformation of the SBC “because of the price paid and opportunity bought during the conservative movement of the 1970s and 1980s.”⁹³ He asserts, “We owe a tremendous debt to a generation of courageous Southern Baptists who put their lives and ministries on the line for this conservative resurgence. People like Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler, Adrian Rogers, Jerry Vines, you can go down the long list. They put themselves on the line, and we’ll be forever grateful for them.”⁹⁴

Indebtedness to Moderates

Although the contribution of dedicated conservatives to this movement is easy to note, the moderates are another important group that played a formative role in the conservative resurgence to which today’s Southern Baptists are indebted. In his article, “This Man Was No Moderate: The Legacy of Cecil Sherman,” Albert Mohler recounts the impact Sherman had on his life. Cecil Sherman was the longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina, and a well-known leader in Southern Baptist life, especially during the conservative resurgence. Mohler claims, “No one will be able to understand the history of the Southern Baptist Convention in the twentieth century without reference to him. No one who had a meaningful encounter with him will ever

⁹²Patterson, quoted in Roach, “Interview with Paige Patterson on the Importance of Inerrancy.”

⁹³Aaron Cline Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention: Mohler Discusses the Conservative (On-Going) Resurgence,” June 12, 2014, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/towers/semper-reformanda-and-the-southern-baptist-convention-mohler-discusses-the-conservative-on-going-resurgence>.

⁹⁴R. Albert Mohler, Jr., quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

forget him. Cecil Sherman may have led the moderate movement in the SBC, but this much is clear—Cecil Sherman was no moderate.”⁹⁵

In 1975, Sherman preached a sermon in Asheville in which he affirmed the theory of evolution. In that sermon he informed his congregation, “If you want the answer to religious questions, the Bible is still your best source, if you take your mind with you when you go. If you want answers to scientific questions, go see the right scientist.”⁹⁶

In 1981, Sherman debated Paige Patterson, then president of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas, Texas, and leading theologian among conservatives in the SBC. That debate proved a crucial moment in the conservative resurgence, mainly because Cecil Sherman was so candid about his beliefs.⁹⁷ He stated clearly, “I will not declare that I hold to an inerrant Bible,” and then dropped the bombshell of the debate: “I actually do think parts of the Bible are more valuable than others, more inspired than others. In fact, I think that some parts of the Bible have been put aside by the Christian revelation.”⁹⁸ As Mohler notes, “Patterson was courteous but clear in his responses. Cecil Sherman’s view of the Bible was stunningly out of step with Southern Baptists. More importantly, it was horribly deficient by any standard of biblical orthodoxy.”⁹⁹

In a tremendous gesture to the honesty of Cecil Sherman Mohler notes,

Throughout his years as a leader among more liberal Baptists, Cecil Sherman never hid behind a claim of moderation. He was a man of deep principle who seemed incapable of trimming his sails for the sake of politics or public relations. There was no lack of irony in the fact that such an immoderate man was destined to lead a

⁹⁵R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “This Man Was No Moderate: The Legacy of Cecil Sherman,” April 23, 2010, accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/04/23/this-man-was-no-moderate-the-legacy-of-cecil-sherman>.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

group of people who insisted on being called “moderates.” He attempted to lead moderate opposition to the conservative resurgence in the SBC, even calling together a group of moderate pastors later known as the “Gatlinburg Gang” and orchestrating a sophisticated political strategy and machinery. His political efforts met with no electoral success. Writing years later he said, “I have a pretty good grasp of the obvious. We lost.”¹⁰⁰

Mohler admits he learned a lot from Sherman. He said,

His honesty revealed the basic theological issues at stake. His rejection of biblical inerrancy caused me to think more deeply about the inspiration and authority of the Bible. His candid and shocking words helped me to understand what was at stake. When I heard recordings of his debate with Paige Patterson over biblical inerrancy, I realized that I agreed with Dr. Patterson, not Cecil Sherman.¹⁰¹

He then revealed the primary reason conservatives today are in the debt of clear spoken liberals of the past generation of Southern Baptists: “Had Dr. Sherman equivocated or played verbal games, I might not have seen the issues so clearly.”¹⁰²

The Necessity of Continued Vigilance

The cost of the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention was unspeakably high, but undeniably necessary.¹⁰³ The theological differences between conservatives and moderates in the denomination were fundamental and irreconcilable. The leaders of the conservative movement saw this clearly and articulated it consistently. For the most part, moderates simply denied the reality.¹⁰⁴ According to Mohler, Southern Baptists should view the conservative resurgence as a reformational movement within the denomination, and like the Protestant Reformation, an opportunity for continuing reform.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰Mohler, “This Man Was No Moderate.”

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

Speaking to the issues surrounding and defining the conservative resurgence in the SBC, Mohler claims, “The great motivating issue for the thousands of Southern Baptists who showed up to vote was not just the inerrancy of Scripture, but it was the inerrancy of Scripture for the furtherance of the gospel The purpose of this was not just to make sure we articulated all the right doctrines, but that we were driven by the right passions.”¹⁰⁶ The major impetus for this reaction among Southern Baptists was the consistent, faithful preaching of God’s Word in Southern Baptist pulpits such as was modeled by the sermons considered in the previous three chapters and the insistence by conservatives that the issues facing the SBC were simply too important to ignore. Patterson affirmed this assessment when he stated, “The one common thread . . . was even on Sunday morning out in the churches, the Bible-believing preachers simply preached with greater conviction for obvious reasons. And they normally not only had greater conviction, but they had greater zeal.”¹⁰⁷

Hanbury relates that in seminary, Mohler became fascinated with and studied some of the various theological controversies in the history of the church—such as the Nicene and Pelagian controversies—and recognized a pattern into which the controversy in his own denomination fit.¹⁰⁸ But even with this deep understanding of the issues at stake in the convention, Mohler realized even conservative leaders underestimated the depth of the problems and need for renewal.¹⁰⁹

Speaking to his own personal experience Mohler asserts, “By the time I graduated from Southern Seminary, it would have been impossible for someone who was neo-orthodox to have been elected to the faculty at Southern Seminary. They would have

¹⁰⁶Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

¹⁰⁷Patterson, interview.

¹⁰⁸Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

been far too conservative—neo-orthodoxy would have been far too conservative.”¹¹⁰ In response to this, Hanbury notes, “Usually, left-ward denominations continue on that trajectory—as with mainline Protestantism in the United States, which Mohler called an ‘unmitigated disaster.’ He emphasized that ‘unmoored from any kind of creed or confession, and not to mention biblical authority, [denominations] simply shift further and further to the left.’”¹¹¹

Mohler is correct in his claim that Southern Baptists would not be where they are today had the convention not experienced the conservative resurgence. According to him, the movement was and is reformational, even as “necessary and as painful as was the Reformation in the 16th century.” As with the Protestant Reformation, the conservative resurgence represented more than a single moment in history. It aimed to ensure reform in the future as well.¹¹² He also claimed, “By an incredibly high price, we bought an opportunity to continue a reformation. It’s never over. You buy an opportunity to continue it.”¹¹³ He emphasized as well that if current and future generations want to preserve the denomination from another theological drift, they require “constant awareness” that culture relentlessly draws all truth claims into ambiguity.¹¹⁴ He concluded, “We’re not paranoid. We’re not insecure. But we are aware of the fact that opportunities for the loss of the faith—bit by bit, step by step, decision by decision—looms [sic] before us all the time. And that is very clear in the New Testament.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

¹¹¹Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

¹¹⁴Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

¹¹⁵Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

Conclusion

From 1979 to 1990, conservatives and moderates struggled for control of the SBC. They nominated opposing candidates for convention president, bickered and fought over proposed motions and resolutions, and often held very public debates and arguments filled with vitriol and frustration. Attendance swelled and media interest flourished.¹¹⁶ The 1985 annual meeting alone saw attendance of over 45,000, prompting Phil Donahue, king of daytime talk radio at the time, as well as ABC's *Nightline*, to devote an entire program to the controversy surrounding the denomination.¹¹⁷ According to moderates, the controversy was nothing more than a political ploy to wrest control of the massive convention of churches. But for conservatives, at risk was the very heart and soul of the denomination, which they feared was in danger of succumbing to the ever-increasing infiltration of liberal theology. Paul Pressler stated the conservative case well when he said,

If we have no standard by which we judge things, then there's no solid basis of belief. And if I didn't believe the Bible was true, why should I believe Jesus was virgin born? Why should I believe he died a penal substitutionary death on the cross to pay for my sins? Why should I believe he's coming again? Why should I believe there's victory in Jesus if it's just somebody else's idea? The Bible is the basis of what I believe. And, therefore, if people come out of our schools and go into our churches teaching doubt, then we are not going to have conviction preached from the pulpit. The Episcopalians are dying, the Methodists are in bad shape and the Presbyterians are dissolving, and we'd be in the same place. But you preach the Word and God blesses. So that's why I wrote my book *A Hill on Which to Die*, because I'm not going to die over women's ordination It's not a primary issue; it's a secondary issue. But there are two primary issues as far as I'm concerned: one is the inerrancy of Scripture, and two is the blood atonement. And if you're right on those two things, you're not going to be wrong on much else.¹¹⁸

Speaking to the effect of the hard-hitting, uncompromising preaching of conservatives such as Adrian Rogers, W. A. Criswell, and Jerry Vines on the

¹¹⁶Foust, "25 Years Ago, Conservative Resurgence Got Its Start."

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Pressler, quoted in Hanbury, "Seven Questions with Paul Pressler about the Conservative Resurgence."

conservative resurgence, Patterson claims the moderates “had no ability to go up against that kind of preaching.”¹¹⁹ Indeed, due to the ability of conservatives to clearly communicate the doctrinal concerns surrounding biblical inerrancy from the pulpit, the unwavering articulation of theological liberalism by moderates, and the unfathomable grace of God, the conservative resurgence won for the denomination an opportunity to continue the reformation and revival of the largest Protestant denomination in America.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹Patterson, interview.

¹²⁰Mohler, quoted in Hanbury, “*Semper Reformanda* and the Southern Baptist Convention.”

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ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF PREACHING IN THE CONSERVATIVE RESURGENCE OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

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This thesis evaluates the role of preaching in the Conservative Resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention. Chapter 1 establishes warrant for the examination of the role of preaching in the reform of the denomination and clarifies the methodology to be employed.

Chapter 2 provides an examination of Adrian Rogers' sermon "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny," preached at the 1980 annual meeting of the SBC in St. Louis, Missouri.

Chapter 3 provides an examination of W. A. Criswell's sermon "Whether We Live or Die," preached at the Pastors' Conference prior to the 1985 annual meeting of the SBC in Dallas, Texas.

Chapter 4 provides an examination of Jerry Vines' sermon "A Baptist and His Bible," preached at the 1987 annual meeting of the SBC in St. Louis, Missouri.

Chapter 5 offers concluding remarks summarizing the implications of conservative influence on the agencies and institutions of the SBC.

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