

REPORT OF THE THEOLOGICAL STUDY COMMITTEE

Part I

In every generation, the people of God face the decision either to reaffirm "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) or to lapse into theological unbelief. Precisely such a challenge now confronts that people of God called Southern Baptists.

As we approach the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention, we are presented with unprecedented opportunities for missionary outreach and evangelistic witness at home and abroad. We must bear a faithful gospel witness to a culture in decline; we must be the salt and light in a society which has lost its moral compass. We must also pass on to the rising generation the fundamentals of the Christian faith and a vital sense of our Baptist heritage. To meet these goals, we seek to move beyond the denominational conflict of recent years toward a new consensus rooted in theological substance and doctrinal fidelity. We pray that our effort will lead to healing and reconciliation throughout the Southern Baptist Convention and, God willing, to a renewed commitment to our founding purpose of eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort, for the propagation of the gospel."

Baptists are a people of firm conviction and free confession. Southern Baptists have expressed and affirmed these convictions through *The Baptist Faith and Message* confessional statements of 1925 & 1963.

This committee affirms and honors *The Baptist Faith and Message*, as overwhelmingly adopted by the 1963 Convention, embraced by millions of faithful Southern Baptists and their churches, affirmed by successive convention sessions and adopted by SBC agencies, as the normative expression of Southern Baptists belief. Therefore, this committee declines to recommend any new confession or revision of that statement.

However, each generation of Southern Baptists faces unique and pressing challenges to faithfulness which demand attention and test the integrity of our conviction. This report addresses several issues of contemporary urgency in a spirit of pastoral concern and a commitment to the unity of our Baptist fellowship as well as the integrity of our doctrinal confession. These emphases are intended to illuminate articles of *The Baptist Faith and Message*, consistent with its intention and content, and are thus commended to the Convention, its agencies, its churches, and the millions of Bible believing, cooperating Southern Baptists who freely join this Convention in its sacred work. We seek to clarify our historic Baptist commitment to Holy Scripture, the doctrine of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the nature and mission of the church, and biblical teaching on last things. We reaffirm our commitment to these great theological tenets since they are assailed, in various ways, by subtle compromise, blatant

concessions, and malign negligence.

We also affirm the historic Baptist conception of the nature and function of confessional statements in our religious and denominational life. Baptists approve and circulate confessions of faith with the following understandings:

☐ **As an expression of our religious liberty.** Any group of Baptists, large or small, has the inherent right to draw up for itself and to publish to the world a confession of faith whenever it wishes. As a corollary of this principle, we reject state-imposed religious creeds and attendant civil sanctions.

☐ **As a statement of our religious convictions.** We affirm the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of each local congregation. However, doctrinal minimalism and theological revision, left unchecked, compromises a commitment to the gospel itself. Being Baptist means faith as well as freedom. Christian liberty should not become a license for the masking of unbelief.

☐ **As a witness to our confidence in divine revelation.** The sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Bible, God's Holy Word. It is the supreme standard by which all creeds, conduct and religious opinions should be tried. As in the past so in the future, Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith in the light of an unchanging Holy Scripture.

None of these principles, sacred to Baptists through the ages, is violated by voluntary, conscientious adherence to an explicit doctrinal standard. Holy living and sound doctrine are indispensable elements of true revival and genuine reconciliation among any body of Christian believers. Desiring this end with all our hearts, we commend the following report to the people of God called Southern Baptists.

Part II

Article One

Holy Scripture

Southern Baptists have affirmed repeatedly and decisively an unswerving commitment to the divine inspiration and truthfulness of Holy Scripture, the Word of God revealed in written form. We believe that what the Bible says, God says. What the Bible says happened, really happened. Every miracle, every event, in every one of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments is true and trustworthy. In 1900, James M. Frost, first president of the Baptist Sunday School Board, declared: "*We accept the Scriptures as an all-sufficient and infallible rule of faith and practice, and insist upon the absolute inerrancy and sole authority of the Word of God. We recognize at this point no room for division, either of practice or belief, or even sentiment. More and more we must come to feel as the deepest and mightiest power of our conviction that a 'thus saith the Lord' is the end of all controversy.*"

The Baptist Faith and Message affirms this high view

of Scripture by declaring that the Bible "has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error, for its matter." The chairman of the committee who drafted this statement, Herschel Hobbs, explained this phrase by reference to II Timothy 3:16 which says, "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God." He explained: "The Greek New Testament reads 'all'--without the definite article--and that means every single part of the whole is God-breathed. And a God of truth does not breath error."

Recent developments in Southern Baptist life have underscored the importance of a renewed commitment to Biblical authority in every area of our denominational life.

In 1986 the presidents of the six SBC seminaries issued the *Glorieta Statement* which affirmed the "infallible power and binding authority" of the Bible, declaring it to be "not errant in any area of reality." The miracles of the Old and New Testaments were described as "historical evidences of God's judgment, love and redemption."

In 1987 the SBC Peace Committee called upon Southern Baptist institutions to recruit faculty and staff who clearly reflect the dominant convictions and beliefs of Southern Baptists concerning the factual character and historicity of the Bible in such matters as:

- (1) the direct creation of humankind including Adam and Eve as real persons;
- (2) the actual authorship of biblical writings as attributed by Scripture itself;
- (3) the supernatural character of the biblical miracles which occurred as factual events in space and time;
- (4) the historical accuracy of biblical narratives which occurred precisely as the text of Scripture indicates.

In 1991 the Baptist Sunday School Board published the first volume of the *New American Commentary*, a projected 40-volume series of theological exposition on every book of the Bible. The commentary was intended to reflect a "commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture and "the classic Christian tradition." *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* was adopted as a guideline fore fully expressing for writers the intent of Article I of *The Baptist Faith and Message*.

In light of these historical commitments, we call upon all Southern Baptists:

☐ to foster a deep reverence and genuine love for the Word of God in personal, congregational and denominational life;

☐ to use the Scriptures in personal evangelistic witnessing, since they are "able to make one wise unto salvation;"

☐ to read the Bible faithfully and to study it systematically; and

☐ to encourage the translation and dissemination of the Bible throughout the world.

We commend to all Baptist educational institutions and agencies the *Report of the Peace Committee* (1987), the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978) and the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982) as biblically grounded and sound guides worthy of respect in setting forth a high view of Scripture. We encourage them to cultivate a biblical world view in all disciplines of

learning and to pursue a reverent, believing approach to biblical scholarship that is both exegetically honest and theologically sound. There need be no contradiction between "firm faith and free research" as long as both are exercised under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and in full confidence of the truthfulness of His Word.

Article Two

The Doctrine of God

The God revealed in Holy Scripture is the sovereign God who created the worlds and all therein, the God who called Israel out from the nations as a witness to His name, the God who spoke from a burning bush, and the God who decisively and definitively revealed Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ, through whom He brought redemption and reconciliation.

Baptists, and all evangelical Christians, recognize the centrality of biblical theism. We honor and worship the one true God and our first act of worship is to acknowledge Him even as He has revealed Himself.

This means that we affirm God's nature as revealed in Holy Scripture. He alone has the right to define Himself, and He has done so by revealing His power and His grace, seen in His absolute holiness and love.

The biblical doctrine of God has been compromised in recent years as efforts to redefine God have rejected clear biblical teachings in the face of modern challenges. Southern Baptists cannot follow this course. As a fellowship of evangelical Christians we must recommit ourselves to the eternal truths concerning God, even as He has freely, graciously, and definitively revealed Himself. As Norvell Robertson, one of our earliest Southern Baptist theologians wrote: "*The Word of God is truth. What He says of Himself is true...He alone knows Himself.*"

Thus, we must submit ourselves to the knowledge God has imparted concerning Himself and His divine nature.

First, Baptists affirm that God is limitless in power, knowledge, wisdom, love, and holiness. He suffers no limitations upon His power or His personality. He is not constrained by any external force or internal contradiction. We reject any effort to redefine God as a limited deity.

Second, Baptists affirm that God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of Sarah, and Rachel, and Ruth. God's self-revelation in Scripture is progressive, but fully consistent. He is the universal Creator and thus deserves universal recognition and worship as the one true God.

Third, Baptists affirm that God is one, and that he has revealed Himself as a Trinity of three eternally co-existent persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We acknowledge the Trinity as essential and central to our Christian confession, and we reject any attempt to minimize or compromise this aspect of God's self-disclosure.

Fourth, Baptists affirm that God has revealed himself as the Father of the redeemed. Jesus characteristically addressed God as His Father, and instructed His disciples to do the same. We have no right to reject God's own name for Himself, nor to employ

impersonal or feminine names in order to placate modern sensitivities. We honor the integrity of God's name and, acknowledge his sole right to name himself even as we affirm that no human words can exhaust the divine majesty. But God has accommodated Himself to us by naming Himself in human words.

Fifth, Baptists affirm that God is the sovereign Creator of the universe, who called all things into being by the power of His Word, and who created the worlds out of nothing. His creative acts were free and unconstrained by any other creative force.

Sixth, Baptists affirm that God is sovereign over history, nature, time, and space, and that His loving and gracious providence sustains and orders the world.

These statements, based upon Scripture and undergirded by historic Baptist confessions, force our attention to contemporary compromises which threaten the fidelity and integrity of our faith.

We call upon the Southern Baptists Convention, its churches and its institutions, to beware lest revisionist views of God such as those popularly modelled in process and feminist theologies, as well as the esoteric doctrines of the New Age movement, compromise our faithful commitment to biblical truth.

Article Three

The Person and Work of Christ

Jesus Christ is the center and circumference of the Christian faith. The God of heaven and earth has revealed Himself supremely and definitively in the Son, and the most fundamental truth of Christianity is that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." (II Cor. 5:19).

Jesus Christ is the sole and sufficient Savior of the redeemed throughout the world and of all ages. He is the divine Word by which the worlds were created; He is also the unique and solitary Savior in whom alone there is redemption and forgiveness of sins. From beginning to end the Bible proclaims salvation through Jesus Christ and no other. The Church is commanded to teach and preach no other gospel.

In His incarnation--an event in historical space and time--Jesus Christ was the perfect union of the human and the divine. He was truly God and truly man, born of a virgin and without sin, remaining sinless throughout His earthly incarnation. He was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day, He rose from the dead, the first fruits of the redeemed. He ascended to the Father and now rules as King and Judge. He will consummate the age by His physical return to earth as Lord and King.

Scripture bears faithful and truthful witness to Jesus Christ. The words and deeds of Christ set forth in the New Testament are an accurate record of what He said and did, even as the Old Testament prophetically revealed His identity and His purpose of redemption. The miracles of Jesus as revealed to us in Scripture were historical events which demonstrated Christ's identity and His power over sin, death and Satan.

All human beings, marked by original sin and there

own individual sins are utterly helpless before God and without excuse, deserving of eternal punishment and separation from God. Nevertheless, in Jesus Christ and His cross, God revealed both the extent of our lostness and the depth of His redemptive love. All human beings--in all places and of all ages--are lost but for salvation through Jesus Christ. He is the only hope of salvation and the only Savior.

Christ's redemption was wrought by His atonement which was both penal and substitutionary. Christ died in our place, bearing in His body the penalty for our sin and purchasing our redemption by His blood.

The cross of Christ is thus the apex of God's plan of redemption, revealing God's absolute holiness and infinite love. The gospel of that cross is the only message which can and does save.

The redeemed are justified before God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in Him alone for their salvation and acknowledging Him as Savior and Lord.

Therefore, Baptists must reject any effort to deny the true nature and identity of Jesus Christ or to minimize or to redefine His redemptive work. Baptists must reject any and all forms of universalism and bear faithful witness to salvation in Jesus Christ, and in Him alone. Furthermore, Baptists must join with all true Christians in affirming the substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement and reject calls - ancient and modern - for redefining Christ's reconciling work as merely subjective and illustrative.

Article Four

The Church

We acknowledge Jesus Christ not only as personal Savior and Lord, but also as the Head, Foundation, Lawgiver, and Teacher of the church which is His building, body, and bride. The person who despises the church despises Christ, for "*Christ...loved the church, and gave himself for it*" (Eph. 5:25).

In the New Testament the word "church" sometimes refers to all of the redeemed of all ages but, more often, to a local assembly of baptized believers. Until Jesus comes again the local church is a "*colony of heaven*" (Phil. 3:20), a "*sounding board*" of the gospel (I Thes. 1:8), and a fellowship through which God's people carry out the Great Commission of their Lord. The central purpose of the church is to honor and glorify God; the central task of the church is to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ through evangelism and missions.

In the light of this mandate, we call upon all Southern Baptists to reaffirm our commitment to these distinctive principles of our Baptist heritage:

□ *The priesthood of all believers.* Every Christian has direct access to God through Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, the sole mediator between God and human beings. However, the priesthood of all believers is exercised within a committed community of fellow believers-priests who share a like precious faith. The priesthood of all believers should not be reduced to modern individualism nor used as a cover for theological relativism.

It is a spiritual standing which leads to ministry, service, and a coherent witness in the world for which Christ died.

☐ *The autonomy of the local church.* A New Testament church is a gathered congregation of baptized believers who have entered into covenant with Christ and with one another to fulfil, according to the Scriptures, their mutual obligations. Under the Lordship of Christ, such a body is free to order its own internal life without interference from any external group. This same freedom applies to all general Baptist bodies, such as associations and state and national conventions. Historically, Baptist churches have freely cooperated in matters of common interest without compromise of beliefs. We affirm the wisdom of convictional cooperation in carrying out our witness to the world and decry all efforts to weaken our denomination and its cooperative ministries.

☐ *A free church in a free state.* Throughout our history Baptists have not wavered in our belief that God intends for a free church to function in a free state. Since God alone is Lord of the conscience, the temporal realm has no authority to coerce religious commitments. However, the doctrine of religious liberty, far from implying doctrinal laxity or unconcern, guarantees the ability of every congregation and general Baptist body to determine (on the basis of the Word of God) its own doctrinal and disciplinary parameters.

We declare our fervent commitment to these distinctive convictions of the Baptist tradition. We also call for a renewed emphasis on the faithful proclamation of God's Word, believers' baptism by immersion, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper as central elements of corporate worship.

Article Five **Last Things**

With all true Christians everywhere, Baptists confess that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." The God who has acted in the past, and is acting even now, will continue to act bringing to final-consummation his eternal purpose in Jesus Christ. Our faith rests in the confidence that the future is in his hands.

While detailed interpretations of the end times should not be made a test of fellowship among Southern Baptists, we affirm with confidence the clear teaching of Holy Scripture on these essential doctrinal truths:

☐ *The return of Jesus Christ in glory.* Christians await with certainty and expectancy the "blessed hope" of the outward, literal, visible and personal return of Jesus Christ to consummate history in victory and judgement. As E. Y. Mullins put it, "He will come again in person, the same Jesus who ascended from the Mount of Olives."

☐ *The resurrection of the body.* In his glorious resurrection, Jesus Christ broke the bonds of death, establishing his authority over it, and one day he will assert that authority on our behalf and raise us. The righteous dead will be raised unto life everlasting. The unrighteous dead will be cast into hell which is the second death (Rev. 20:14-15).

☐ *Eternal punishment and eternal bliss.* Following

the resurrection and judgement, the redeemed shall be forever with the Lord in heaven, a place of light and glory beyond description, and the lost shall be forever with the devil in hell, a place of utter darkness and inexpressible anguish. Nowhere does the Bible teach the annihilation of the soul or a temporary purgatory for those who die without hope in Christ.

The second coming of Christ is the blessed, comforting, and purifying hope of the church. We call upon all Southern Baptists to claim this precious promise in every area of our life and witness, and thus "to live holy and godly lives as we look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (II Peter 3:11).

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