

THE FUTURE OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

(The following paper is presented as nothing other than the simple musings, ruminations, and reflections of a neophyte pilgrim traveler, who having experienced a limited degree of firsthand interaction within the denomination is largely uninformed and uninvolved in whatever informational 'loop' exists within the leadership structures of the "world's largest Protestant denomination." It is understood that those with a fuller understanding of the denominational struggle for orthodoxy might take exception with the prognostications offered herein, which are neither intended as lugubrious nor excessively benign. The author is under no blithe hallucination concerning the current state of affairs within a denomination both created and governed by fallen men. Likewise, wherever clarion words of indictment or caution are offered, it is hopeful that they will be received as from a young prophet yet learning to blast the battle-song of his newly acquired shophar. As to the potential charge of axe grinding, such is not intended. Come to think of it, I don't even have an axe.)

The 15-million member Southern Baptist Convention, having just emerged victorious in the now famous 'Battle for the Bible,' is boldly pushing forward with a reinvigorated and revitalized mission thrust to take the 'more certain word' (2 Pet 1:19) to the nations in an unprecedented strategy of indigenous church-planting and missionary zeal. As her armies now march forward, their backs are still warmed by the soft glow of the smoldering coals of camp-fire controversy and strife, which though regrettably necessary has removed the dröss of 'liberalism' and 'neo-orthodoxy' from the holy armor now adorned in exuberant triumph. Before they journey too far, it seems appropriate for those young soldiers yet unmarked by the scars of 'holy war' to ask themselves whether or not the smoldering coals of yesterday will rage again, lest in their own crusade they be summoned home only to find the territories conquered by their forefathers reclaimed by interlopers and destroyed. This question is as troubling as it is rewarding. The wisdom to be gained by critical analysis of the strategies of yesterday's battles provides both insight and warning for the battles that lay ahead. The past does indeed shape the future, and this paper is more an exercise in preparation than anything.

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The Responsibility of Current Leadership

If the future generations of Southern Baptists are to be equipped for ministry, the responsibility of equipping rests largely on the demonstrated commitment of seasoned veterans of the faith and the required curriculum at the institutions that train them. How then would such commitment be demonstrated, and what form would the necessary instruction take? The commitment to training the next generation is one that requires both integrity and transparency. Without the former, the student will adopt the moral and/or ethical excesses of the teacher, but exponentially so. Without the latter, it is only a matter of time before the young mature to a disheartening recognition of their would-be hero's clay feet.

→ soldiers

Commitment to integrity is of first importance, as both the presence and lack thereof are transferable. "The righteous man walks in his integrity, and his children are blessed after him" (Prov. 20:7, NKJV). And does not the Lord visit "the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation" (Ex. 34:7)? The attestation of the world to the moral fiber and ethical values of one generation will not suffice; it is the testimony of the next generation, those who have studied under and observed firsthand the former generation, that either validates or invalidates authentic and permanent influence. The demonstration of integrity is a natural manifestation of a godly life. It cannot be coerced into compromise or cleansed when contaminated. Because the next generation of Southern Baptist leaders are currently learning from the lives and examples of the current generation, the latter should give all the more careful attention to themselves and to their doctrine, for in doing so they will both save

themselves and *those who hear them*. Great is the task of modeling faithfulness—so great that it should elicit holy fear for God that in teaching others one might be found approved. Too many are the poor examples of unholy and unconcerned ministers than that their number should increase due to the moral laxity that has claimed once great men, stripped them of any positive influence, and relegated them to the wastelands of would-be prophets of God. The all-importance of integrity in the current generation of denominational leadership cannot be overstressed.

Second and more practically, the current generation should evaluate and revise the training strategy for the next generation as the structures and curricula of the primary pedagogical method are in need of serious reconsideration. Seminaries, second only to the local church, are the most influential element in the preparation of future ministers, and as such should never escape the constant scrutiny of their trustees, administrators, and students. The judgment of God regarding the standards, methodology and content of theological education in a seminary is far more important than the qualified approval of any sectarian society or association. To sell a denominational institution into indentured servitude to accreditation organizations is nothing short of an abandonment of a first loyalty to Christ and His Church. Therefore, seminary training should reflect the prioritized loyalties of a Christian institution: God, family, church, denomination. Another area for examination might be the current paradigm for theological education, which is far too affected by the ill-conceived and historically inadequate monastic ideal. Get out of the world; get alone with God for three years (or more); then venture out of your ivory tower to the huddled masses of unregenerate souls hungering for the Bread of Life on which you have fattened yourself these many months. The continued development of satellite campuses, Internet courses, and condensed semesters will be crucial to meet the demands of ministry in the next generation. Furthermore, the content of the coursework should be examined. Are future generations really being trained to rightly handle the Word of Truth when they are required only to take 6 hours of theology, 12 hours of biblical introduction, 6 hours of church history, and 3 hours of missions? It is not only the insufficient training in these areas that causes concern, but it is the superabundance of applied coursework that is equally frustrating. If the battles looming on the horizon will concern the proper method of gospel tract-production, mental-health assessment, or administration of the ordinances, then arm young preachers with the tools to combat these quasi-ominous enemies. If toy soldiers be my enemies, Ping-Pong balls will suffice. But if I am to face the Goliaths of postmodernity, I shall require heavier munitions. Finally, to what degree should theological education at Southern Baptist seminaries include mandatory instruction about The Controversy? Ignoring the Controversy, as some would surely suggest, is not the answer. Neither, however, should such instruction take the form of Orwellian indoctrination. While it is true that the victor writes the histories, it is equally certain that the definitive histories of the Controversy have not been written, nor will they be, by the current generation of denomination leadership. A balanced reading list is therefore of necessity lest the next generation become like those of Animal Farm:

Many animals had been born to whom the Rebellion was only a dim tradition, passed on by word of mouth; and others had been bought who had never heard of such a thing before their arrivals.

A Biblical Metaphor: Jesus, the Jordan, and Jehu???

Searching for a biblical motif befitting the Controversy is somewhat difficult, not in that there are too few examples of reformation, revival, and renaissance, but rather each narrative includes some detail that would certainly upset someone. With this in mind, the metaphor included herein has been adopted from the resurgence of orthodoxy under the anointed leadership of Jehu, son of Jehoshaphat.

A messenger sent by Elisha the prophet anointed Jehu king over Israel in a secret ceremony, and God ordained him to strike down the house of Ahab to avenge the blood of His

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Paul - after his conversion?

good

servants. Immediately, Jehu set out on a fierce crusade to eradicate the foreign gods of Baal from the land that rightly belonged to the Lord and to His people. The narrative culminates in the gathering and obliteration of the priests of Baal in one of the bloodiest, yet necessary doctrinal purification of the people of God recorded in the Bible. "Thus Jehu destroyed Baal from Israel"(2 Kings 10:28).

yes

The future generations of Southern Baptists owe an eternal debt of gratitude for the diligent efforts of those engaged in the Resurgence, and without these necessary reforms, the false gods of neo-orthodoxy, liberation theology, and epistemological heresy would remain in the camp of God's people to this day. No seminary was left untouched by the higher critical method, and most seminaries have completed a historic course correction. The fact, however, that Jehu's resurgence was reversed so quickly should serve as a chilling admonition to future generations yet untested by denominational controversy. Ground that has been gained must be maintained by the very same degree of vigilance; we need not pay for the same real estate twice. There is one other detail in the Jehu narrative that bears consideration. The lasting testimony of Jehu, and perhaps the cause for the reversal of his reforms, extends a word of caution to those who would take lightly the mantle of leadership. "However, Jehu did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who had made Israel to sin, that is, from the *golden calves* that were at Bethel and Dan"(2 Kings 11:29; italics added). For all the triumph of orthodoxy, Jehu was only concerned about foreign gods, allowing the domestic idols of Israel to remain. Had he turned his vengeance on the ancient sins of his people with the same holy wrath he demonstrated against Baalism, perhaps his eulogy would have been recorded differently. What, then, are the *golden calves* that threaten to weaken the resolve of future generations. Three are offered.

Denominational Narcissism—It is all too often on the lips of the next generation, "we won the battle for the Bible." This credit-taking for the labors and battles and blood-spilling of seasoned men of God is foolish at best and shameful at worst. To act as though the current doctrinal reforms have been gained by men who sat at home polishing their bayonets while their comrades heroically wielded the Sword of Truth is nothing short of laughable. Second, is it not time for the victory celebration to end? If pastor's conferences, chapel services, classroom discussions, and even national conventions continue to be shallow and trite pep-rallies for battles already fought, will we not be found like Nero to be playing away beautifully on our sacred harps while the city burns? The battle is most certainly not over, but perhaps it is long since past time for the parties and honors and proverbial backslapping to cease and desist. A boastful victor is as poor a sport as a sore loser is.

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yes

Hypocritical Nepotism—Under past denominational leadership, the practice of nepotism caused anger, frustration, and even the decision to abandon the convention altogether on the part of many conservatives increasingly overlooked for appointment to the various boards, agencies, and institutions. For future generations of conservative leadership to adopt this practice is blatant hypocrisy. To some degree this is already occurring. Any close analysis of the appointments over the past decade will demonstrate that some individuals have rotated off one board, only to serve on another and then another again. Other appointments have been made that raise questions with regard to more strictly defined nepotism. For members of the Committee on Committees, Committee on Nominations, or even the elected convention leadership to place sons, daughters, wives, mothers, fathers, in-laws, employees or their spouses on the boards or committees of the convention smacks of a closed good-ole-boy system that is rightly condemned by every code of ethics imaginable. If future generations are to hold the ship on course, this methodology of political maneuvering must be abandoned for a higher ethic of governance.

Fatuous Neo-isolationism—As what some have labeled a 'post-denominational' age quickly approaches, the task for Southern Baptists is to adapt to the changing paradigms while maintaining the denominational distinctives that have shaped centuries of Baptist polity. Our denomination was formed for the purpose of missions, and it is to that bedrock conviction that she should remain anchored. All other functions of a denomination are secondary to the task of

world-evangelization. In light of this, it is necessary for the denomination to consider greater cooperation with other Evangelical bodies in the task. Ecumenism is not the answer to past sins of isolationism, but rather a broader Evangelicalism that will sustain the missionary mandate. In order for this to occur it must be affirmed and modeled by the current denominational leadership. If megachurch pastors, inflated by the sprawling edifices of their debt-ridden congregations, continue to contribute nominal amounts of their enormous budgets to the cause of world-missions, future generations will observe their disproportionate priorities and continue the pattern established for them. There are however, a few noted exceptions to this model. The appeal, however, of glory and glamour associated with the megachurch may indeed be too great a temptation for the next generation to overcome without sufficient and established patterns of leadership. Kingdom building, if it is to honor the Lord, must extend beyond our own church roles or denominational structures. "A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire" (Prov 18:1).

Destined to Repeat the Lessons of History?

Historically, conservative resurgences are not unique to Baptists at all. The Puritan experiment of the 17th century serves as a distant reminder for any reformer of the dangers of losing everything as quickly as it was gained. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones examines the Puritan perplexities of 1640-1662 with candidness. His analysis demands an audience among those who seek the continued blessings of God on the Southern Baptist Convention.

Motivated into action by their increasing dissatisfaction with the state of the Anglican Church, the Puritans of various schools sought to gain control of their ecclesiastical structures and ultimately the doctrinal conscience of an entire nation. The very men, who had witnessed the beheading of Charles I on January 20, 1649, however, were to witness the crowds of Londoners acclaiming the return of Charles II on May 29, 1660. Lloyd-Jones offers two germane reasons for the failure of their experiment that add perspective to the future viability of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Admixture of Religion and Politics—It is precisely this point that bedeviled most of Puritan history. The excessive entanglement of religious leaders in the political systems of both ecclesiastical and national affairs made it impossible to separate the respective grievances. The result was an unholy alliance between those who were purely political in their motives and those who were essential religious, because they seemed to fight a common enemy. The sad reality is that toward the end the leaders were more politicians than they were preachers. The fire and zeal of doctrinal reform was channeled into social reform and carnal weapons were substituted for spiritual ones. Some have denied the existence of such carnality within the ranks of Southern Baptist conservatism. It is suggested that "to call politics unchristian and accuse brothers and sisters of 'playing politics' is naïve at best and dishonest at worst." Perhaps future generations should revisit the infamous Peace Committee Report for perspective: "Organized political factions [should] discontinue the organized political activity in which they are now engaged, including holding information/ideological meetings, extensive travel on behalf of political objectives, and extensive mailouts to promote political objectives in the Convention" (*Truth in Crisis: Vol 3, page 73*). Politics is a dirty business in any form it takes, and future generations should proceed with caution before adopting this as any *modus operandi* for spiritual ends.

Division of Ranks Within the Movement—Fundamentally, the Puritans of different stripes were agreed about doctrine. There is negligible difference to be found between the Savoy Declaration and the Westminster Confession. The picture, however, that is presented of the leaders of Puritan reform is one of division, with the chief division being on the question of church government. The Puritans were splintered over non-essentials, and of course, the Anglicans not only knew this, but they played upon and took advantage of it. Indeed there is nothing new under the sun. Such questions of church government and the 'doctrines of grace'

still threaten division among Southern Baptists. The continued insertion of the Founders' Conference into denominational quibbling, coupled with the belittlement of their position by those on the other side, though not driving a wedge into the denomination yet, could possibly cause the watching world to envision the fruits of reformation as Don Quixote's *Long March to Zion*. Second, some seem to revel in the 'party-spirit,' boastful of having smitten their 'enemies' and demonstrating the 'notches' on their denominational belts. Future generations should be reminded that "when a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Prov 16:7).

This young prophet does not stand alone in this assessment. Lloyd Jones continues, "it is more than likely there will be a fight about all this in the immediate future, and you and I will be expected to have some kind of attitude with respect to it" (*Puritans*, 66). He further adds,

If 1640 to 1662 teaches us nothing else, it teaches us this: that in that kind of ecclesiastical fighting, the ecclesiastics will win every time. They are past masters at it. It is the thing they really believe. While you and I are concerned about doctrine, and the culture, and the nurture of souls, their whole attention is given to the practicalities and to the politics of the situation. So the moment we begin to fight with a semi-political, ecclesiastical outlook, the moment we develop a party spirit and begin to think in terms of party advantage, and regard people who really agree with us about the centralities as enemies almost, and in opposition, the cause is already lost. (*Puritans*, 66).

A Look Inside the Farmhouse

Sentence Framed,
So, what to make of all of this? As one who was advised, and then instructed, to remove himself from any denominational activity, the perspective gained from days spent in study and ministry as the only avenue for his energies is appreciated more than any formal education received to date. Having swung between fierce opposition to any form of moderation to bitter frustration regarding my own sensed ostracism, I now attempt to forge a balanced path, holding fast the sound teaching which I have received, but owing my soul to no man but to God alone. One final observation regarding the future of the denomination I love and support is needed.

The striking parallel of admonition between Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the landmines that I have attempted to locate is striking. First, the words of Old Major seem appropriate:

In fighting against Man, we must not come to resemble him. Even when you have conquered him, do not adopt his vices. No animal must ever live in a house, or sleep in a bed, or drink alcohol, or smoke tobacco, or touch money, or engage in trade. All the habits of Man are evil. And, above all, no animal must ever tyrannise over his own kind.

As a new generation of leadership begins to take shape and fill the positions vacated by the first generation, the concluding words of *Animal Farm* should cause sober resolve to deny the syncretism of foreign gods *and* the subtle deceptions of domestic deities.

No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.

As to whether or not this author will ever be in a position of leadership in the denomination in future generations, he has resolved that to seek or obtain such positions are not worth the pottage required to purchase them. *He that troubleth his own house will inherit the wind* (Prov. 11:29).