

Vision Assessment: The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention
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Early on I would argue with Adrian Rogers about that [basis for unity in the SBC] and he'd say no, 'the theme that has held us together is not missions, but doctrine.' Well, historically I don't think that's accurate because historically the SBC is composed of people with varying theological perspectives My assessment is that they're [conservatives in the SBC] from an independent Baptist viewpoint where conventions are built around doctrine [sic] than from the heritage that we as Southern Baptists have had that the convention is built around missions. And so after arguing with Adrian several times, I finally came to realize that for him and I think for Paige [Patterson] and for others the unifying element ought to be a unifying perspective of theology . . . according to the Scripture, the Living Word is more important than the written word . . . it's a mistake in my estimation to elevate Scripture above Christ¹

Since 1979, the Southern Baptist Convention [SBC] has been engaged in a struggle to rediscover and reassert it's heritage. The citation above reflects the prevailing opinion of many within the convention at the beginning of the conservative resurgence. Conservatives would easily take issue with R. Keith Parks' assessment because he is basing it on a limited historical perspective of the heritage of the SBC.

Gradually, after World War I, the theological climate began to shift as the thought of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner and other Neo-Orthodox scholars took root in American theological schools. Our SBC schools were not immune to these trends. In essence, Barth introduced a dimension to theological methods and thought that would enable intelligent people to affirm simultaneously contradictory opinions. Bart claimed that the Bible is true and applies to the individual's life yet, he claimed, there is no need to jettison the conclusions of nearly a century of classical liberal thought, particularly emerging out of Germany, which used a higher critical methodology and challenged the integrity of the actual text of the Bible. By moving the location of revelation from the text to an "encounter" or experiential truth, it could be insulated from higher critical attacks. Hence, the Bible is no longer viewed as revelation; it is just the envelope or carrier of revelation that comes to us through an "encounter" with God. What has normally been deemed as the doctrine of illumination became the Bartian view of inspiration. The net

¹ R. Keith Parks, interviewed by Philip O. Hopkins, April 4, 2000, transcript Southeastern SBC Historical Missiology Oral History Collection, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC. This typical Neo-Orthodox influenced view of Scripture seems not to reflect the possibility of a third option, namely that Christ and the Bible can be viewed in parallel whereby the Living Word is explained and magnified by a reliable Written Word. About the same time that Parks resigned his presidency of the Board, church historian Bill Leonard wrote a monograph detailing the factions within the SBC and how the moderates held things together for over a generation and a half when they were pressured from both the left and the right within the Convention. Leonard reiterated the same principle Parks' statement reflects. Leonard stated it this way, "There was less a synthesis than a Grand Compromise based in an unspoken agreement that the convention would resist all attempts to define basic doctrine in ways that excluded one tradition or another [i.e. the left-wing liberals or the right-wing conservatives], thereby destroying unity and undermining the missionary imperative." See Bill Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 29, 38.

effect of this subtle but significant shift in theological method was to tolerate, and even embrace, a wide range of theological opinions since truth became highly personalized and freed from the critical eye of biblical scholars or even objective comparison to the text of the Bible. Theological pluralism, in a hot-house environment, became the ideal aim of theological education.²

These basic tenets of belief permeated the SBC's theological seminaries, especially after World War II.³ Whenever controversy erupted regarding the theological integrity of the seminaries, there were cries regarding the loss of academic freedom, as though that value superseded the truth of the Bible.⁴ Parks was a product of this more recent development in Southern Baptist theological circles. His statement reflects clearly what seems to be the pivotal point of difference between the Neo-Orthodox influenced SBC (1918-1979), and the heritage that preceded, and later followed, that development (1845-1917 and 1979-present). The older heritage is where contemporary conservatives root their beliefs and actions. In essence, Parks was saying that doctrine or theology divides us but missions unites us. Rodgers, however, was indicating that unless our theological convictions are solidly established squarely on an inerrant Bible, we will have no legitimate or reasonable basis for doing missions.

These variances are more than just incidental. The Parks attitude seems pervasive within the day-to-day operations of the International Mission Board [IMB] and represents the greatest future challenge to redirect Biblically the IMB and re-root it firmly in the older theological heritage of the founding fathers and its contemporary conservative commitments.⁵ The diagrams at the end of this document help depict graphically the theological issues at stake within the SBC itself as they parallel the practical carryover within the IMB. For comparison, immediately below are duplications of Article I in both the 1963 and 2000 Baptist Faith & Message documents.⁶

"The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. It reveals the principles by which God judges us; and therefore, is and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." (1963)

"The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation." (2000)

² See Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith: The Doctrine of Scripture*, vol. 1 (Ripon, CA: Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967) describing the Barbian view of Scripture, especially his concept of the authority of a mystical Christ. For an analysis of the influence of Neo-Orthodoxy's existentialism on Southern Baptists, see Stan Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2001.

³ See James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Dallas: Criterion Publications, 1986): 23-43 and Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1990): 72-125 for a survey of the moderate-conservative opinions regarding the Bible and the development of Neo-Orthodox thought.

⁴ Hefley, *Truth*, 46-47. Hefley concluded, "For many years, most conservatives were slow to see the difference between themselves and those who take the neo-orthodox position on Scripture. Moderates . . . became impatient with the slowness of the denomination to move into the 20th century thought and theology, as they perceived it. Finally in the 1960's, they decided the time had come to 'educate' Southern Baptist preachers with commentaries taking the new approach. The new ideas, published by the Sunday School Board's Broadman Press, stirred up a veritable hornet's nest. Conservatives fought back and the war began which signals the Southern Baptist Convention today." Hefley here made reference to the Ellison Genesis commentary controversy.

⁵ This statement is based on eighteen years of careful study, analysis, interaction with IMB personnel and materials, and observations from my students who have flowed through the IMB's ranks and given feedback.

⁶ See diagrams A, B, & C for graphic development of these concepts.

Cauthen (1954-1979)/Parks (1980-1992): Bold Mission Thrust

M. Theron Rankin died suddenly only eight years into his tenure as the head of the Foreign Mission Board. Baker James Cauthen followed him in this role and remained there for twenty-five years. Cauthen inherited a program designed to encourage SBC churches and missionaries to catch the spirit of enthusiasm that developed in the wake of World War II. Cauthen further developed this inherited plan during the first decades of his presidency. Near the end of his years of leadership, he charged the SBC with responsibility for a new vision of Bold Mission Thrust (1976-2000). This was the final strategic plan designed and implemented by the Cauthen administration. It was an all out call for full mobilization to push to the end of the century and complete the task of global evangelization, as far as humanly possible.

Parks assumed the president's role in 1980 and in his first address to the Board, he drew upon Cauthen's bold initiatives but showed he was planning to update the mission models used. While advancing toward the same stated goals in the Bold Mission Thrust campaign, Parks was influenced by trends among other Christian agencies. He advocated the use of strategic planning techniques and invited David B. Barrett, author of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, into the Board's facilities in Richmond. Barrett's own Anglican theological persuasions are far more ecumenical than those traditionally held by Southern Baptists. Barrett quietly influenced several strategic planners at the Board and his methods were used to analyze the remaining task of global evangelization. It was not until the early 1990's that Barrett was removed from the Board, yet his influence still lingers in the office of strategic planning and research to this day.⁷

Cooperative Services International (CSI), the concept of the non-residential missionary, and people-group foci were all contributions to the process gained during Parks' era. Yet, as the Board began to work in and with the broader Neo-Evangelical groups (now called Great Commission Christians)⁸, the cross-pollination of ideas without a careful analysis of the biblical and theological soundness of the trends that depicted the end of the last century missions world, began to erode even further the commitments Southern Baptists have historically had to a real need for personal evangelism, church planting, and discipleship of the nations. While the stated aims sounded familiar, the means and modes of accomplishing them revealed a theological drift away from biblical moorings. In the background of these developments, during the 1980's, the SBC was struggling to recover the theological commitments that would, when applied, serve as a filter or corrective to detrimental trends. Parks' view of doctrine as divisive while the causes of missions are unifying, enhanced the uncritical acceptance of these and other missiological trends.

⁷ See David B. Barrett, "Forecasting the Future in World Mission," *Missiology*, vol. XV no. 4 (October 1987):433-450. Here Barrett's penchant for exotic futuristic scenarios is blended with a conclusion that the Bold Mission Thrust campaign of the SBC was unrealistic and he applauds Parks' leadership in moving the Board to network with Great Commission Christian networks that ignore the sometimes serious theological differences between the variety of groups (he notes over 200 such groups working then with the Board). Also, since 1990, I have been the convener of a consortium of mission researchers that do not accept Barrett's models and have developed a different perspective on the remaining task since 1990. See www.worldmap.org. Barrett uses summary data with a mathematical formula for estimating the status of global evangelism; he imposes theological categories whereby he counts any grouping that calls itself Christian as being so. Hence, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and even cultic groups like Mormons are treated as Christian thus skewing the global need for an Evangelical presence in numerous places is neglected.

⁸ I am in agreement regarding partnering with agencies of like theological persuasion for some tasks at home or abroad. However, I sense there's no real mechanism in place to help missionaries evaluate the theological commitments of the plethora of groups that work around the world and certainly no incentive to guard themselves from unnecessary entanglements with charismatic people or agencies. Incidentally, the first time I heard the term Great Commission Christian was from the mouth of David Barrett as he was explaining to me how, in his opinion, Mormons are GCCs!

Rankin (1993-Present): New Directions

Trustees elected Jerry A. Rankin as the Board president on 14 June 1993. For the first four years of his administration, Rankin built his team and pointed the Board to the early stages of a "New Direction". In the spring of 1997, Rankin acted to dissolve CSI, reconfigure the entire Board structure, and openly advocate a set of new directions. What was new was an emphasis on church planting that resulted in movements or the contagious exponential expansion of churches. The means of accomplishing these new directions were to streamline the administrative operation of the Board on the field by dissolving the archaic localized mission administrative structures in the countries where the Board traditionally worked, move toward the unevangelized edges of each region by city or people group segment, and to move to the unreached areas more intentionally.

Rankin's "New Directions" campaign drew the Board more directly into the network of GCC's, again with no mechanisms in place to filter or check the entry of unbiblical practices other than the specific theological preparation of the individual missionary. Yet, under the Rankin administration, there has been an obvious and apparently intentional move away from requiring seminary training for the key roles related to church planting or church development. Pre-Rankin, the normal requirement was an MDiv or equivalent plus two years of pertinent experience. Today one may assume such roles with as little as 20-30 semester hours and there is a spirit or culture within the Board that downplays or undermines the need to even go to seminary at all. If it weren't for the Trustees holding the line on this requirement I am afraid that seminary requirements would be dropped completely. In lieu of seminary training, business management techniques and/or secular training in a variety of fields are much more highly prized and encouraged. While not meaning to demean the value of such backgrounds in general, I am concerned that evangelism, church planting, and discipleship are in the hands of theological novices. It raises serious questions regarding whether the end justifies the means when the types of churches planted increasingly do not reflect a biblical ecclesiology, Baptist values, or in some cases even appear Christian.⁹

Additional issues surfacing as the Board has progressed more deeply into "New Directions" ideologies relate to the role of women in missionary ministry, especially in the strategy coordinator (SC) capacity. SC's, or Strategy Leaders (SL's) in some regions, are the heirs of the earlier non-residential missionary model. The concept has evolved in numerous ways and is never quite the same from region to region or missionary to missionary. In one sense, this kind of flexibility is the strength of the concept. In another sense, it has little or no structure in place to regulate theological concerns. Women, while certainly capable in numerous ways to do ministry, should not be placed in doctrinal or ethical authority over men, and the SC role often causes this to happen. Additionally, partnering with GCC's is supposed to be guided by concentric circles of levels of partnership as outlined in David Garrison's book on church planting published by the IMB. Yet, there is no theological statement of boundaries. By default the structure collapses and SC's frequently lead their teams to partner with theologically suspect organizations. Again, without clear boundaries regarding GCC's and guidelines for partnering, with many who are theological novices guiding the process, problems emerge.

In the final analysis, the "New Directions" campaign seems to reflect the same theological position inherited from the Parks era. Theological definition is minimized and that which is "new" reveals it's roots in the very theological heritage that influenced Parks to conclude that doctrine divides and missions unites.

⁹ See for example the CPM training manual written by Curtis Sargeant used at the MLC in parallel to the following source Wolfgang Simson, *House That Change the World: The Return of the House Churches*, (Carlisle, UK: Regnum, 2000), especially his chapter on "Reinventing the Church".

IMB Future: Biblical Renewal

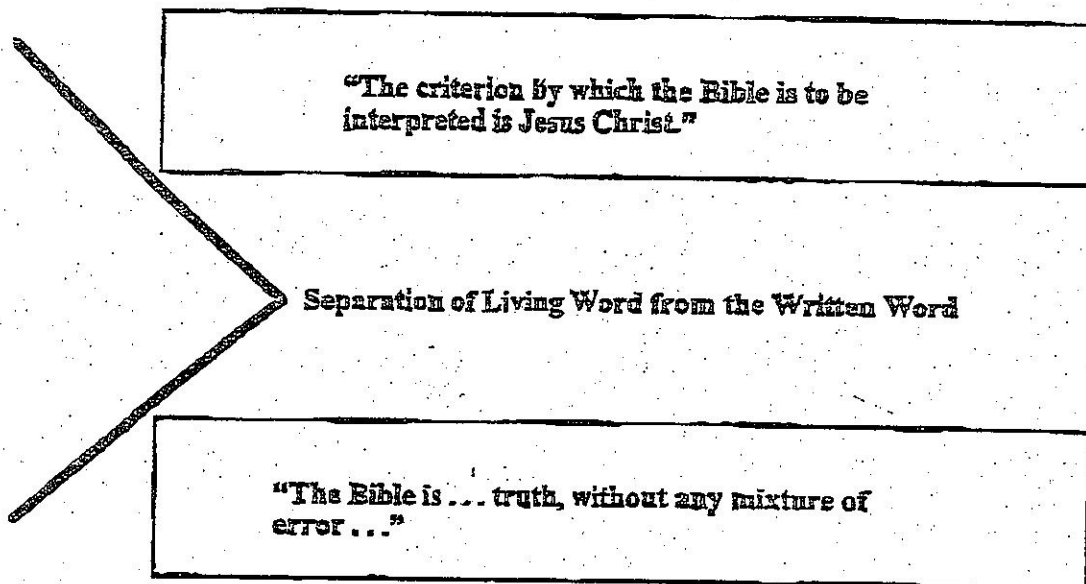
In order to synchronize the IMB with the theological convictions of the SBC, consistently expressed since 1979 and to set the Board's course directly back into the evangelical roots that were the convictions of the founders of the convention, then there must be a system set in place whereby biblical and theological inquiry is not minimized in importance. Rather it should be affirmed and elevated to serve as a critiquing mechanism for setting the policies, practices, and procedures of the IMB in line with Bible as true Truth that instructs, informs, and determines the IMB's worldview and culture. At this juncture, I can only present a rough set of ideas for doing this, but that does not minimize my commitment to the desired outcome. At least the following should be serious considerations:

- Recruit administrators committed to theological renewal of the Board.
- Change the appointment criteria and procedures to encourage theological preparation.
- Enlarge and encourage development of the 2+2/3 programs in the six SBC seminaries and Mid-America.
- Revise the entire curriculum and teaching staff at the MLC to create a coherently biblical foundation for missions, cultural adjustment, cross-cultural communication, and church planting. Procedures used at the MLC should be more "family friendly" and not use secular personnel management techniques that are thoroughly unchristian in nature (e.g. negative peer review processes).
- Renew the office of strategic planning to inculcate proper research techniques, move away from trendy data analyses (e.g. Barrett's model), and bring a balance to the view of the world needed to engage global harvest fields, especially among the uncached, that is untainted by ecumenical premises and thoroughly biblical.
- Generate theological definitions and boundaries for partnering with GCC's, review the nature of the SC/SL position and create alternatives suitable for women that are in line with the sentiments of the BF&M 2000, and create guidelines for church planting that will insure healthy theological development and be reflective of Baptist distinctives.
- Create a budget and planning process that prioritizes transparent use of funds and one that causes everyone to sense an accountability even to the little children in VBS programs or widows that faithfully give to the Board, as well as everyone else.
- Additionally, budgeting should balance the work in established areas with those in pioneer areas. The nature of the work in each will necessarily be different and the budgeting processes should reflect that reality.
- Create a synergy within the Board's culture that will minimize the competitiveness and enhance the value of a "koinonia" spirit generated from a common, likeminded faith.
- The aim of these types of changes is to solidify the foundation for engaging in missionary activity. Hell is real. Heaven is real. Everyone that has ever lived, or shall someday live, will spend eternity one place or the other. We've been charged with the responsibility to make sure everyone knows The Way to salvation through Christ's finished work on the cross alone. Shaky theological foundations that erode confidence in the integrity of the text of the Bible soon undermine the integrity of Jesus as the main character of the Bible and His exclusive statements regarding the need for salvation in and through Him. So the goal is to do our share of winning the world to Christ and to see His church established in every city, town, and village, thereby pleasing Him without care for the ways of the world.

Diagram A

Baptist Faith & Message 1963 Article I

Barthian Influence Seen In the Separation of The Authority of Christ from That of the Bible Making an Esoteric Christ Experientially Superior.



Baptist Faith & Message 2000 Article I

Reunified the Bases of Religious Authority. Eliminated the Barthian Influence. Recreated a Unity Between the Written Word & The Living Word and Minimized Subjective, Experientially Determined Truth.

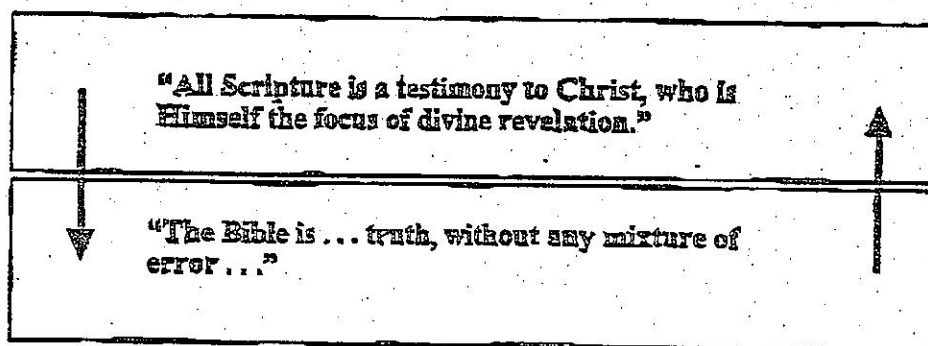


Diagram B

Problematic Biblical & Theological Relationships For Determining IMB Policies, Practices, & Procedures

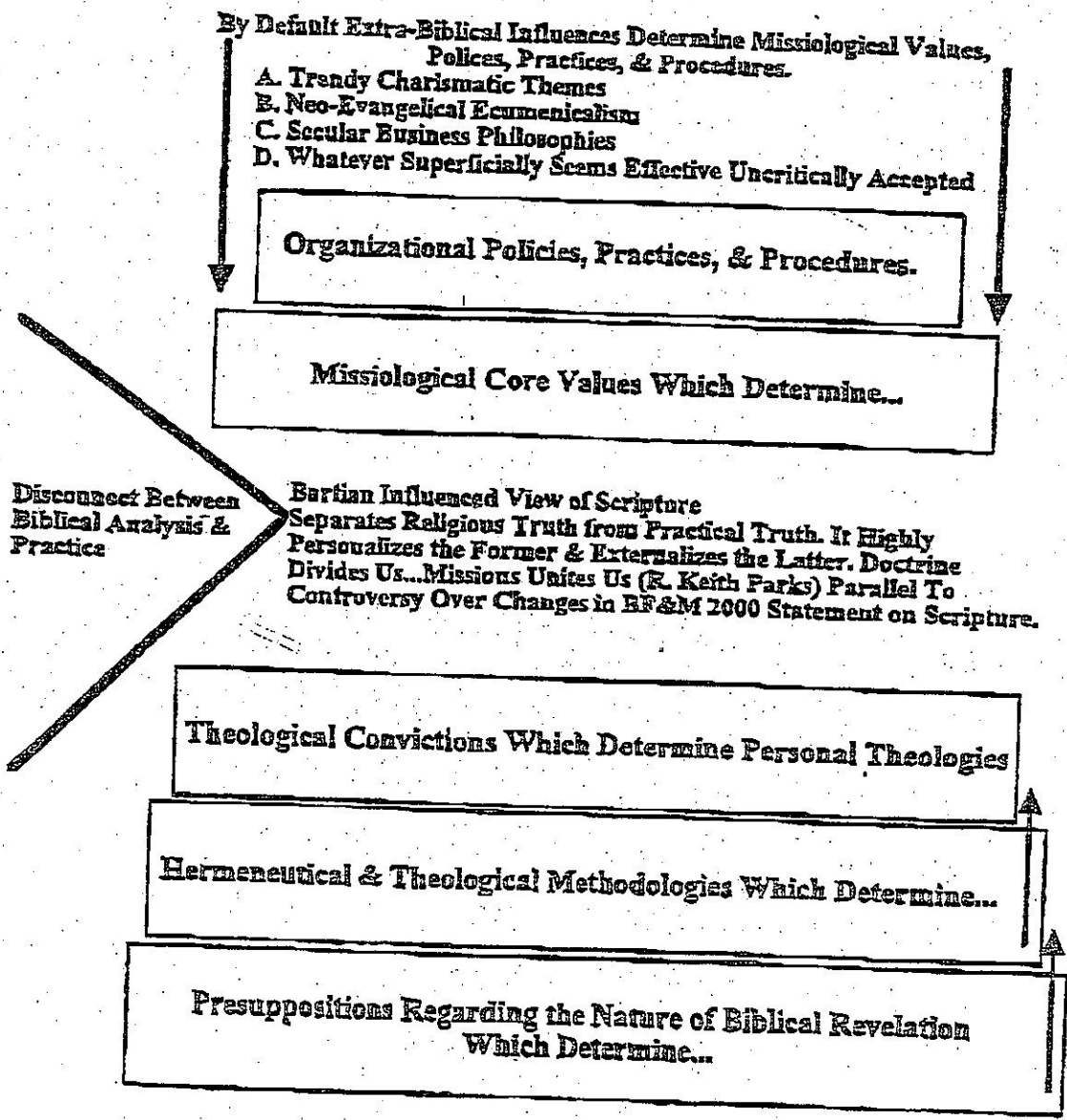


Diagram B

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