

Evangelical Forum Newsletter



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Something's in the Air

There was something in the air when we met for our fourth annual Evangelical Forum at the Good News Baptist Church in Alexandria. Around 70 pastors and laymen, representing some 25 Baptist churches in Virginia (BGAV, SBCV, and independent) and one Presbyterian church, made the trek to Northern Virginia. Tom Nettles and Mark Dever presented four inspiring and passionate messages. The relatively intimate nature of the setting meant that the participants were easily able to engage and dialogue with the speakers, two of the most influential Southern Baptist theologians of our times. The ladies of the host Good News Baptist Church and of the Providence Baptist Church at Suffolk provided an excellent meal at the supper break for all those who were present. In addition, an ample number of pastoral and theological books were for sale on the book tables.

Several participants have remarked to me since the meeting that they were moved by the passionate singing of traditional hymns. One good thing about going to a meeting well attended by Pastors, elders, deacons, and other committed lay leaders is that they usually do not hold back in worship and the singing of hymns and spiritual songs! Thanks to Pastor Rob Stovall who served as our worship leader for the meeting.

One question we have been asked is what we are planning to do next. When the steering committee of the Evangelical Forum met last Spring we decided to shift our focus away from merely being a fellowship of BGAV pastors and laymen hopeful of renewal (many

consider reformation of the BGAV to be a losing battle apart from the Lord's direct intervention, which—by the way—is not impossible!) and toward the larger issue of renewal and reformation within local Baptist churches regardless of their state or national denominational identity.

That shift is now reflected in this first issue of the third volume of this newsletter, which defines the identity and purpose of the Evangelical Forum as “a network of concerned evangelical Pastors and laymen who desire to see renewal and reformation within Baptist churches in Virginia.” We will continue to report on issues relevant to the BGAV since many of us are still connected to that fellowship and its continued decline is helpful to examine, at the least, as a cautionary tale. We will also try, however, to provide more general information that might be of help to a broader audience.

At present we can commit ourselves to the following three tasks in 2006:

1. The publication of volume three of the quarterly *Evangelical Forum Newsletter*;
2. The hosting of a Spring meeting of the Evangelical Forum steering committee for the purpose of fellowship and planning. Details TBA;
3. The hosting of a Fall meeting of the Evangelical Forum for the purpose of encouragement and inspiration. We hope to continue our tradition of inviting excellent guest speakers to this meeting. If we continue to offer this meeting in conjunction with the BGAV annual meeting, then the 2006 Evangelical Forum will be held on Wednesday, November 8, 2005 in the Virginia Beach area. Details TBA.

As always I am happy to receive news, articles, or reviews that you would like to share with others through this newsletter. ♦

JR

Purpose: The Evangelical Forum is a network of concerned evangelical Pastors and laymen who desire to see renewal and reformation within Baptist churches in Virginia. We are supportive of friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention and affirm the Baptist Faith and Message of 2000.

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Contributions to support the Forum and this newsletter may be sent to JPBC and marked for “Evangelical Forum.”

This is a quarterly newsletter. Projected publishing dates for Volume 3: January, April, July, October 2006.

Unsolicited articles, book reviews, and comments are welcomed by email or conventional mail.

Report on 2005 Evangelical Forum

Brian Hamrick, pastor of Fairfield Baptist Church in Burgess, Virginia, provided the following report on the 2005 Evangelical Forum as a November 10, 2005 guest blogger for Tom Ascol, Executive Director of the Founder's Ministry (www.founders.org/blog).

Good News Baptist Church of Alexandria hosted the Evangelical Forum on Wednesday, November 9th. The Evangelical Forum is a network of pastors and laymen affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) who affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message.

Dr. Tom Nettles spoke regarding soul competency (as it relates to church purity and divine sovereignty), and Dr. Mark Dever gave two historical profiles on John Bunyan and John L. Dagg.

It was fitting for Dr. Nettles to make this presentation at this time—almost 99 years ago to the date, E.Y. Mullins presented the doctrine of soul competency before the Virginia Baptist Historical Society. Dr. Nettles defined soul competency as simply, "the ability to make moral judgments," as we are created in God's image. In doing so, he stands with Mullins' view of the doctrine, strongly opposing the modern caricature used to justify absolute individual autonomy. As Nettles explained, "It is not true that this was an effort on his [Mullins'] part to move away from historic Baptist doctrine."

Dr. Nettles taught from Ephesians 4:17-24, Colossians 3:5-11, and 2 Thessalonians 2:5-15 to demonstrate that Scripture treats all sinners as deceived, yet fully responsible; justly judged by God. We are responsible for our condition. God does not treat us as people without capacity to be accountable, but as people who are competent to answer before Him ourselves. Nettles argues, if we're not competent, how could we be blamed or condemned for sin?

In the end, soul competency has much more to say about the justness of God's judgment than it does about the rightness of man's choices. In fact, Nettles tightly linked total depravity to soul competency, which "does not destroy moral competence," but rather points to the necessity of the Holy Spirit's regenerating work in us so that we would love the truth. It is this lack of emphasis on (or complete distortion of) total depravity that has contributed greatly to the misunderstanding and application of soul competency in our time by so many.

Nettles used Luke 4:14-30 to show the workings of total depravity in response to God's truth. His explanation of regeneration was particularly sharp: "the Holy Spirit has no helper."

Finally, Nettles gave 3 areas of application regarding soul competency:

- 1) Soul competency frees the church from the impurity of an improper nationalism.
- 2) Soul competency frees the church from the superficiality of ritualism. He cited the soul-of-the-month club as an example of violating the way God works with sinners.
- 3) Soul competency frees the church from the deceit of authoritarianism.

Dr. Dever's sketches on Bunyan and Dagg were insightful and stimulating. Of note was Bunyan's views on baptism, which desired to extend membership for the "visible saints by calling" in order to foster more unity in the local church. This, of course, would include paedobaptists in church membership. Dever graciously expressed the many contributions Bunyan has made for the faith, saying his works are the most appreciated writings in the history of the Christian church outside of Scripture. Yet Dever passionately challenged Bunyan's baptism position:

"Doesn't this create the idea that baptism is in the eye of the beholder?... obedience to God is not in the eye of the beholder, unless the beholder is God Himself."

Dever listed D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones as advocating an open baptism view in 1978 similar to Bunyan. Dr. Dever ended his treatment of Bunyan's position on baptism saying, "My conclusion of Bunyan's position on baptism is that he was editing Jesus."

His treatment of John L. Dagg was also helpful. Dever recounted Dagg's influence in several states in forming or leading in state conventions – he was instrumental in forming the BGAV. His pastorate in Philadelphia ended in 1834 when he lost his voice. This event opened the door to his writings, which included extensive arguments against infant baptism and Landmarkism. Dever concluded of Dagg, he is "almost unsurpassed as a doctor of the purpose of theology."

A brief time of Q & A was afforded at the conclusion of the meeting. Both men shared how encouraged they are of how God is working in the SBC, and they were hopeful a Patterson/Mohler discussion [planned for the upcoming 2006 SBC Pastors' Conference, June 11-12 in Greensboro, NC] would do much to expand theological understanding. Nettles expressed more confidence now than ever that we could return to our rich theological heritage.

Thanks be to God for the leadership of the Evangelical Forum who organized this event. Much encouragement and blessing was received by us all. ♦

Report on the 2005 BGAV

Lowest attendance since the 1950s

The 182nd Annual Meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) was held November 10-11, 2005 at the Hylton Chapel in Woodbridge, Virginia. According to an article in the Associated Baptist Press¹ the meeting drew a mere 850 messengers, the lowest attendance for an annual meeting since 1957.

Budget shortfall spin

A joint report by the BGAV Treasurer, Eddie Stratton, and the Executive Director, John Upton, interpreted current budget shortfalls in the BGAV. It was reported that 2005 undesignated giving was 4.93% (c. \$600,000) lower than in 2004. The \$14.4 million 2006 budget is c. \$300,000 less than 2005, and Treasurer Stratton suggested that 2006 giving would likely not fully fund even the reduced budget. The reduction in 2005 giving was interpreted to messengers as being a result of increased charitable giving to natural disaster relief.

Craddock Stories

The BGAV meeting program continued three recent trends: (1) an effort to promote “post-modern” ministry; (2) a move toward a more mainline Protestant denominationalism; and (3) backlash against the Southern Baptist Convention. The meeting format used an airport theme, “Connect: 2005.” Promotional material announced the “in flight entertainment” as the Korean Children’s Choir and the preaching of Fred Craddock.

The promotion of “post-modern” ministry was seen in various “breakout sessions” like that led by Randall Haynes of Westover Baptist Church in Manassas, which instructed messengers on how to begin an “emerging worship service.” The move toward typical mainline liberalism was seen in the featured preaching of Fred Craddock, a Disciples of Christ minister who retired from teaching at a United Methodist seminary, the Candler School of Theology at Emory. Finally, the reactionary backlash against the SBC was seen in the emphasis on the BGAV’s support of the Baptist World Alliance and the preaching of Korean pastor Billy Kim.

Sharp contrast with SBCV

This year a sharp contrast may be drawn between the BGAV and the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia (SBCV). According to a Baptist Press article,² the SBCV’s 9th annual meeting at Grove Avenue Baptist Church in Richmond witnessed a record attendance of 1,222. It appears for the first time that the SBCV annual meeting drew more participation than the BGAV. Executive Director Doyle Chauncey reported that despite strong giving to SBC Disaster Relief ministries, the SBCV’s 2005 cooperative program giving in the first three quarters of the year was 10.3% ahead of 2004’s pace. The SBCV’s 2006 budget of \$8.2 million is 5.8% higher than the 2005 budget. The SBCV approved 31 new churches for membership, raising their total to 470 churches in Virginia. The program theme was “Renewing Your Passion” and featured emphasis

¹ Robert Dilday, “Virginia Baptists cut budget as churches divert disaster funds,” Associated Baptist Press, November 11, 2005.

² Don Cokes, “Va. Conservatives’ turnout is record for annual meeting,” Baptist Press, November 21, 2005.

on support for traditional SBC partners and featured an address by Dr. Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Wrap-up

The BGAV leadership continues to ignore the warning signs of decline. Numbers should never be used to judge the health of a ministry, but neither should they be ignored. The “spin” of BGAV budget shortfalls as being the result of disaster relief simply does not hold water in comparison to the SBCV’s continued growth under that same donor pressure. The “spin” of low messenger support as due to lack of conflict is also suspect when the SBCV has now eclipsed the BGAV’s attendance, not by generating interest from conflict but by enthusiasm for its gatherings. The BGAV leadership has not yet honestly addressed the fact that enthusiasm and support for the BGAV has waned in proportion to its distancing itself from clear confessional commitments and traditional support for the SBC.

What is more, despite decades of moderate control of the BGAV and negative spin on the SBC reformation, BGAV churches continue heavily to support SBC causes with their hearts and pocket books. One way to track the pulse of the congregations is by looking at designated giving (not at money funneled through BGAV budget tracks). According to the treasurer’s report, as of September 30, 2005, BGAV churches gave \$2.9 million to the SBC’s Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and \$1.3 million to the SBC’s Annie Armstrong Easter Offering. In comparison, only \$602,195 was designated to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Global Mission Offering; \$7,217 to the Baptist World Alliance (remember, however, that the BWA received \$119,858 through the BGAV “cooperative program” budget plan); and \$0.00 to Kingdom Advance New Initiatives.

JR◆

More Evidence of the Downgrade

- **Controversy in Roanoke over “holiday tree.”**

Controversy erupted in the city of Roanoke when the city’s traditional Christmas tree was re-named the “holiday tree” by city officials. The mayor of Roanoke who approved the change is Nelson Harris, pastor of BGAV-related Virginia Heights Baptist Church.

- **University of Richmond President under fire for “mush” comments.**

The November 22, 2005 *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported that William E. Cooper, President of formerly Baptist-related University of Richmond, is under fire from disgruntled and influential alumni who are seeking his removal. Controversy swirls over Cooper’s recent remarks on what it will take to move the school to a more elite academic level. In part, he stated, “The entering quality of our student body needs to be much higher if we are going to transform bright minds into great achievers instead of transforming mush into mush, I mean it.”

- **Pro-homosexual group at Mercer comes out of the closet.**

A November 9, 2005 Baptist Press article reported on the emergence of “The Mercer Triangle Symposium,” a group billing itself as the university’s “GLBT [gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender] Rights Student Organization.” The group sponsored a National Coming Out Day at Mercer on October 11 and publicized the event in the student newspaper. The group also apparently hosted a website until voting to close it down after a meeting with school officials.

Though Mercer officials seem embarrassed by the group’s existence, they also defended the group’s right to continue. President Kirby Godsey, known as a staunch “moderate” Baptist and author of the controversial book *When We Talk About God, Let’s Be Honest*, issued a statement in which he said the following: “Holding steadfastly to the rich and noble heritage of our Baptist forebears and the Christian values that have shaped and sustained Mercer for generations, we affirm our historic values, while including within them an unwavering devotion to the open search for truth, to religious and intellectual freedom, and to respect for the diversity of beliefs among members of the University community.”

Comment: Mercer University is the location of the national headquarters of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It is also home to The McAfee School of Theology at Mercer, a partner institution of the CBF, and recipient of BGAV mission dollars through churches which give to the WM3 track.◆

Baptist News of Interest

- **John Piper's Bethlehem Baptist Church considers changing baptism policy.**

Bethlehem Baptist Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota, where prolific author and influential evangelical theologian John Piper is pastor, is studying a recommendation from the church's elders concerning a key constitutional change regarding church membership. The proposed change, initiated and articulated by Piper, would no longer require believer's baptism by immersion as a prerequisite for church membership. It would allow persons who come from non-Baptist (paedo-baptist) backgrounds, who are not convicted by conscience that believer's baptism by immersion is a Biblical mandate, to become full members. The carefully worded proposal does, however, insist that the church will continue officially to teach and practice only believer's baptism by immersion and that those who have not been baptized by immersion as believers cannot serve in the church's eldership.

Piper maintains that this move will make the church more faithful to Scripture by not excluding professed believers from church membership, because of disagreement on what he considers a secondary doctrinal matter (the timing and mode of baptism). He has noted that many great heroes of the faith, like Jonathan Edwards, could not become members of his church, because of the issue of baptism. Piper has looked to the baptismal views of the great Puritan John Bunyan for inspiration and support for his views.

This proposal has sparked debate both within Bethlehem Church and within the larger evangelical and Baptist world. At least two of Bethlehem's elders have opposed the move. Documents and audio files are available at Bethlehem's website (www.bbcmpls.org). Many have expressed disagreement that baptism is a "minor" doctrine. Some have warned that Piper's proposal will create a "two-tier" membership. They point out that deeply convictional paedo-baptists—like Edwards—would not desire to join a Baptist church. They have also asked why it would be better to admit someone like an Edwards to membership and then deny him the right to serve as an elder.

Bethlehem was set to vote on this issue on Sunday, December 18, 2005. The December 20, 2005 issue of the church newsletter, *The Star*, however, noted that "the Council of Elders withdrew the Membership/Baptism proposal." Regardless of the outcome, this debate could have a wide impact on many young pastors and churches who have been deeply influenced by Piper's ministry.

- **International Mission Board Trustees Change Mission Policies.**

According to a November 22, 2005 Baptist Press article by Michael Chute, the November 14-17, 2005 meeting of the trustees of the SBC's International Mission Board in Huntsville, Alabama approved new policy standards for mission candidates that have generated controversy over Baptist principles regarding glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and baptism.

Regarding glossolalia, the trustees approved new standards to be used with missionary candidates that would exclude those who use "private prayer language." This move is

considered by many to be a direct challenge to the leadership of IMB President Jerry Rankin, who has in the past reported his own experience and use of a private prayer language.

Regarding baptism, the trustees passed a divided motion that more clearly defined standards for evaluating mission candidates' experiences of and views on baptism. The new guideline apparently specifies that mission candidates must have and hold the following convictions: (1) believer's baptism by immersion; (2) baptism follows salvation; (3) baptism is symbolic, picturing the experience of the believer's death to sin and resurrection to a new life in Christ; (4) baptism does not regenerate; and (5) baptism is a church ordinance. In addition, according to Chute's article, "the guideline says the candidate must have been baptized in a Southern Baptist church or in a church of another denomination that practices believer's baptism by immersion alone. Also, the baptism must not be viewed as sacramental or regenerative, and the church must embrace the doctrine of the security of the believer."

Comment: Moderates and liberals will, no doubt, criticize this effort by the trustees to achieve doctrinal clarity in examining mission candidates. We do not fault the trustees for this effort. There do, however, seem to be some difficulties in the process they have chosen to achieve this end. The policy statements, as reported in Baptist Press, do not always seem to clarify matters. For example, is the new baptism policy meant to exclude those who were baptized in Christian churches, Evangelical Free Churches, Assembly of God, or independent charismatic churches? Where is "the doctrine of the security of the believer" defined? Does this refer to the Reformation doctrine of the perseverance of the saints? Does it refer to the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) article V. "God's Purpose of Grace," that states, "All true believers endure to the end"? Again, the trustees are not to be faulted for seeking doctrinal clarity for mission candidates, but it does not seem that the search for clarity has been satisfied in the recent policy revisions.

- **Non-geographical Spurgeon Baptist Association formed in Midwest.**

Six Southern Baptists churches in Kansas have formed a new "non-geographic" association, called the Spurgeon Baptist Association (www.spurgeonbaptistassociation.org). According to its website, the association is "seeking to include any like-minded body of believers so that together we might better fulfill the great commission of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." The site also notes: "We welcome churches who adhere to the confessions of faith accepted by Southern Baptists throughout their history, including, but not limited to, the Second London Confession (1689) and the Baptist Faith and Message."

Comment: Many have predicted the demise of the local association. Most Southern Baptist associations no longer use confessions as a test of fellowship, but instead rely on programmatic, missions, or denominational identity. Traditional Baptist associations are growing increasingly weak within the SBC. The Spurgeon Association is, apparently, running counter to this trend and may serve as a model for fellowship among churches that share similar doctrinal commitments even if they are not located in the same geographical area. ♦

Local Association Goes on Record Opposing Homosexuality and BWA

The East River Baptist Association is a fellowship of thirteen Baptist churches in the Bluefield, Virginia area. At its annual fall 2005 meeting held on October 27, 2005, the association endorsed a resolution presented by its resolution committee that states, “we oppose the decision of the Baptist General Association of Virginia to support and affiliate itself with the Baptist World Alliance.” The resolution notes the decision of the Southern Baptist Convention to withdraw fellowship “from the Baptist World Alliance because of its acceptance of openly homosexual behavior among Baptist World Alliance member churches.” The resolution also questions the wisdom of the BGAV’s decision to increase its support for the BWA.

In recent years questions have been raised about the participation of pro-homosexual “welcoming and affirming” churches from the American Baptist Churches-USA and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship within the Baptist World Alliance.³ The East River Association resolution also raises the question of consistency by pointing out that the BGAV has severed ties with Averett University over the issue of homosexuality without applying that same standard in evaluating its relationship with the BWA.

The complete text of the East River Baptist Association resolution is printed below:

East River Baptist Association RESOLUTION ON HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOR

WHEREAS, Homosexual behavior has become widely accepted as an alternative lifestyle in the United States and some religious denominations; and

WHEREAS, God’s Word plainly states that homosexuality is sinful and an abomination to God (Genesis 13:13, Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:24-28); and

WHEREAS, Gods word commands that Christians are to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Ephesians 5:11); and

WHEREAS, The Southern Baptist Convention withdrew fellowship from the Baptist World Alliance because of its acceptance of openly homosexual behavior among Baptist World Alliance member churches, along with issues of biblical integrity, and

WHEREAS, The Baptist General Association of Virginia has been accepted into the membership of the Baptist World Alliance and according to a quote from an article in the Baptist Press by Robert Dilday, “The BGAV has increased it financial support from \$90,000 to \$150,000 per year largely by reducing funding for the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention;” and

WHEREAS, Because the Baptist General Association of Virginia severed ties with and stopped funding to Averett University because some students observed a gay pride day, it is confusing to the East River Baptist Association why the Baptist General Association of Virginia stopped financial support to one institution that condones homosexual practices but financially supports another, be it

RESOLVED, That we oppose the decision of the Baptist General Association of Virginia to support and affiliate itself with the Baptist World Alliance; be it further

RESOLVED, We disagree with any organization or church that supports or condones the practice of homosexual behavior; and be it further

RESOLVED, That we encourage the East River Baptist Association to demonstrate our love for those practicing homosexual behavior by sharing with them the forgiving and transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

³ Gregory Tomlin, “Calif. Churches to break ties with ABCUSA over homosexuality,” Baptist Press, September 16, 2005.

Becoming Conversant With The Emerging Church:

A Review and Reflection

By Travis Hilton, Pastor, Parkview Baptist Church, Bluefield, Virginia

D.A. Carson. *Becoming Conversant With The Emerging Church: Understanding A Movement and Its Implications*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005, 250 pp.

It was with great dread and anticipation that many awaited the release of D. A. Carson's book on the emerging church movement. The book is an expansion of three Staley Lectures delivered at Cedarville University in February 2004. Carson was invited to speak out of concern over the growing emerging church movement. There has been a lot of debate and analysis of Carson's book in the days that have followed. Much of the chatter on emergent internet blog sites has revolved around what was perceived as an unfair assessment by Carson of the emerging church movement.

Now that the dust has settled, Carson and a host of other critics of the emerging church seem to be having an influence. Already, a missional training network called Forge in Australia has distanced itself from the emerging church. Mark Driscoll, pastor of the fast growing, gen-x appealing Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, has publicly renounced the movement. Among Baptists, some have determined not to be associated with EC oriented leaders. Recently, the Kentucky Baptist Convention Evangelism Conference withdrew an invitation to Brian McLaren, a prominent emerging church pastor and writer. On the internet, retiring LifeWay President Jimmy Draper's outreach effort to the current generation of leaders called "Emerging Leaders" was changed to "Younger Leaders." Steve McCoy's popular blog named "SBC Emerging Leaders" was changed to "Missional Baptist Blog." Why the change? Because the word "emerging" or "emergent" now carries a lot of baggage! Anyone linked with the emerging church now runs the risk of being associated with a movement whose most prominent leaders have played fast and loose with Christian doctrine. Even emerging leader Andrew Jones (www.TallSkinnyKiwi.com) admitted recently in an interview with Bruce Prescott that it may be necessary to find another name to describe the movement due to the negative reputation that is attached to emergent.

Even with all this, the Baptist General Association of Virginia continues to immerse itself in the emerging church movement. Emerging leaders have been given a continuous influence through BGAV sponsored events. Brian McLaren has spoken at the 2002 21-C Leadership Conference, the 2003 Youth Evangelism Conference, and met in 2001 with 50 Virginia Baptist ministers and leaders at his Cedar Ridge Church in Maryland. Leonard Sweet was the keynote speaker at the April 2005 BGAV sponsored Emerging Leaders Summit.

At the recent 2005 BGAV Annual Meeting in Woodbridge, Virginia, there was a special breakout session devoted to promoting an emerging worship service. Presented by Westover Baptist Church pastor Randall Haynes, the session was designed to model what an emerging church service would look like. Attendees were encouraged to plan for active participation through particular stations that would be set up in the sanctuary for various activities. At one station, it was proposed that one kneel in front of lit candles. At another station, participants would dip their finger in a jar of water and make a cross on their forehead and perhaps take a cross from another jar and place it in their pocket to remind them of something God has revealed to them. One attendee asked if there were concerns to similarities with Catholic practices, but the presenter responded by defending that Catholics are Christians too. When asked about the place of the preaching of the Word in the worship service, the answer was given that the message must be short, and emphasis should be on the participation of those gathered. The presenter credited emerging leader Dan Kimball, among others, with inspiring his ideas on the emerging worship service.

This demonstrates the kind of practices emergents are embracing that Carson also notes in his book.

Quoting from Kimball, he describes the emerging evangelicals as utilizing “multipurpose buildings that often serve as community centers, but are able to be turned into worship settings where technology, art, and even candles and liturgical symbols can be used to create a sense of mystery and awe” (39). Carson includes the following quote from Kimball's *The Emerging Church*, to describe the emergent vision of postmodern worship:

Here we must have much more symbolism and a greater stress on the visual. We should have crosses and candles. There might be an entire communion service without a sermon. The entire geography of the room may be different, with the possibility of different groups within the assembly engaging in different things at a time, and perhaps someone going off for a while to a quiet desk for a bit of journaling. The entire experience should be multisensory; the prayer corner may well burn incense (37).

Carson also points out the emergent approach to preaching:

Kimball offers us antithetical visions of modern preaching and postmodern preaching. In modern preaching, the sermon is the focal point of the service, and the preacher serves as a dispenser of biblical truths to help solve personal problems in modern life. Sermons emphasize explanation—i.e., explanation of what the truth is.... By contrast, Kimball writes, in the (postmodern) emerging church movement, the sermon is only one part of the experience of the worship gathering. Biblical terms like “gospel” and “Armageddon” need to be “deconstructed and redefined.” The scriptural message is communicated through a mix of words, visual arts, silence, testimony, and story, and the preacher is the motivator who encourages people to learn from the Scriptures throughout the week (37-38).

This kind of thinking has its roots in the ideas of people like the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida who suggested that texts mean nothing in themselves. The reader (not the author) is the one who determines the meaning of the text. Deconstructionism, as it is called, has made its way into the emerging church movement and into American pulpits. The writings of theologians Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke have been influential in the EC as they have attempted to “reconstruct” ideas and stories from Scripture.

So what does it mean to be “emerging” or “emergent”? Carson explains in the first chapter, “at the heart of the ‘movement’—or as some of its leaders prefer to call it, the ‘conversation’—lies the conviction that changes in the culture signal that a new church is ‘emerging’” (12). Current forms of thought by which we communicate the gospel are seen as ineffective on the emerging generation. These forms of thought that are perceived as ineffective include the use of propositional truths. To present the Word of God with a convincing certainty could be considered inauthentic. As Carson concludes, “by and large the focus of the emerging movement is on perceived shifts in epistemology” (58). In other words, our culture has changed the way it perceives what is true. According to emerging leaders, because of these shifts, efforts must be made to move from the “absolute” to the “authentic” if we are to reach this generation with the gospel.

Carson points out that it is not only churches that wear the label “emergent” that are embracing its core values. He uses the example of Baptist Union churches in Great Britain who used to emphasize that one must be a “believer” before he can “belong.” Today, however, “the leaders of the Baptist Union encourage its member churches to reverse the priorities: first ‘belonging,’ then ‘believing’”(13). Carson warns that truth is being jettisoned in favor of experience. Experience must have truth as its foundation.

Carson gives much attention to the writings of Brian McLaren, a recognized leader of the emerging church. McLaren's writings reflect a distaste for theological certainty, which he would describe as “absolutism.” As Carson explains, from McLaren's perspective, “if absolutism is the cancer, it needs relativism as the chemotherapy” (32). Carson continues to describe McLaren's diagnosis:

McLaren comes back to the central issues that are more typically his central concerns—the destruction of the absolutism that he finds endemic to a lot of old-fashioned Western confessionalism—and he returns to the topic by coming through a side door.... McLaren affirms that absolutism is simply not the answer (32).

To illustrate McLaren's approach to thorny issues, Carson describes a brief question-and-answer period following a workshop where someone asked him how Christians should respond to the issue of homosexuality:

McLaren asserts that there is no good position, because all positions hurt someone, and that is always bad. Moreover, homosexuality may be seventy-five different things.... McLaren insists that by such cautions he is *not* making a judgement on homosexuality itself, one way or another, but how to treat people (35).

Carson says that McLaren attempts to avoid the trap of religious relativism, because he knows that for the Christian that is not an option. So he attempts to steer a course somewhere between absolutism and relativism. Though McLaren attempts this, Carson points out that nowhere in emerging leaders' writings is there any critique of postmodernism. This is because postmodernism is the matrix in which they are working out their theology. Postmodernism insists that objective knowledge is neither attainable nor desirable. Nothing can be known with certainty, including the Bible. For example, Carson quotes McLaren's views on the atonement as expressed in *The Story We Find Ourselves In*:

How can punishing an innocent person make things better? "That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?"

When the subject of hell comes up in McLaren's narrative, Neo, his central character, ducks the issue. Carson says the character Dan Poole is basically rebuked for asking Neo about eternity. For Carson, this comes across as "a kind of teacher's cheap shot: If you do not want to answer the question, make the student feel guilty for asking it" (169). Carson stresses that we can, in fact, know what Scripture truly says, even though we are not omniscient. He spends the last portion on the book giving a long list of Scriptures that speak of truth and certainty. One of the many that Carson quotes is 2 Timothy 4:3-5:

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears *away from the truth* and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Carson's book covers many of the key issues facing the emerging church movement, but it certainly does not treat them all. The movement continues to evolve. It would have been helpful if Carson had defined the word "missional," a word that is sometimes used by emergents and non-emergents alike. Some in the emerging church movement will continue to complain that Carson's analysis is not fair, even though the author went out of his way to compliment some aspects of the movement where he could. The "conversation" or debate will, no doubt, continue in the future. ♦

Book Review: *Ready for Reformation?*

By Jeffrey T. Riddle,

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Tom Nettles, *Ready for Reformation: Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005. 140 pp.

This is a courageous book in which Nettles, Professor of Historical Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, dares to say that the recovery of Biblical inerrancy among Southern Baptists, though laudable, does not go far enough. With a voice like a prophet, Nettles warns that true reformation involves more “than the mere recovery of biblical authority” (2). The chapters are relatively brief, but the writing is dense and often lyrical. There is much for the thoughtful reader to digest.

In chapter one (Remember from Where You Have Fallen), Nettles opens with a cautionary warning that Southern Baptists not repeat the error of Jehu in 2 Kings and settle for a half-baked reformation. The battle for the Bible in the SBC is over and conservatives have won. Southern Baptists must now ask what that inerrant Bible says about the purity of our doctrine and practice: “If only the acceptance of the divine *authority* of the deposit gains adherence but the *content* of the treasure itself lies dormant, the recovery is a sham” (9-10). Southern Baptist must not enjoy “premature satisfaction” (9) at the recovery of inerrancy, lest the conservative resurgence become a failed reformation.

After presenting his initial thesis in chapter one, Nettles turns to examine the impact of taking the Bible seriously in various areas of faith and practice. Chapter two (The Health of Confessional Christianity) defends the Baptist practice of confessional boundaries. Chapter three (Priority and Power of Truth in Proclamation) is a serious call for evaluation of our preaching. Every preacher would benefit from reading this chapter. This reviewer was so struck and convicted while reading Nettle’s words that he felt compelled to re-read the chapter aloud to his wife. Nettles points to weak preaching as a primary cause of weak Christians and weak churches. Our preaching today is too filled with illustration and sentimentality rather than doctrinal exposition which believers so desperately need in order to grow strong in the faith and resist the world’s allures:

The believer’s only opportunity to hear an argument mounted against the torrent of temporality pressed daily and hourly into his conscience comes when a Christian minister stands to preach the Word of God. Will he hear anything that challenges and strips bare the lies that have pressed on him from every quarter? Or will he hear a few assertions from a biblical text surrounded by warm stories garnished with the trappings of sentimentality and never enter substantially into the truth? (32).

Chapters four and five (Baptists Must Recover the Work of Evangelism, Parts 1-2) challenge superficial and pragmatic evangelism methods. Chapter six (Baptists Must Recapture the Complementarity of Law and Gospel) urges Southern Baptists to take seriously the relationship between the law and the gospel. Though moderates obviously fail to grasp this great truth in their advocacy of “freedom,” “liberty of conscience,” and “free inquiry,” conservative churches make a similar error when they assume the minister’s task is “to present Biblical principles as giving a sound foundation for day-to-day happiness and healthy relationships” (72-73). Nettles ends this chapter with a keen insight: “Misperceptions and misapplications of this issue within the pale of the conservative movement of Southern Baptists could eventually be more crippling to the recovery of biblical Christianity than the active opposition of the moderate movement” (75). Indeed, the greatest challenge facing Southern Baptists is no longer the ever-waning moderate movement, but the siren song of therapeutic pragmatism.

In chapter seven (Recovery of a Grace-Centered Theology), Nettles makes the case that the reformation of the SBC will not be complete until it comes to terms with the sovereignty of God in salvation. Nettles is well-known in Southern Baptist circles as a confessional Calvinist who has worked in the Founders

Movement to point the denomination back to its Reformation roots. He pulls no punches in this chapter in laying the issue on the line:

Reformation of Baptist identity will be unretrieved to the degree that a grace-centered theology remains unrecovered. If effectual calling cannot be reconciled with human freedom and responsibility without making a person a robot, by the same token inspiration cannot operate to produce an infallible text apart from a mindless kind of robotic dictation. If the work of salvation hangs on human will, then so must the work of revelation and inspiration. The vital organ of inerrancy cannot survive in the absence of the nutrition of grace (89).

In chapter eight (Trinitarian Christ-Centered Theology), Nettles calls for robust Christ-centered preaching in Southern Baptist pulpits. In chapter nine (Theologically Integrated Ecclesiology) the connection is made between right doctrine and right church order. If Baptists truly begin to take the Bible seriously, then they will recover a proper understanding of church membership, the eldership, and church discipline.

In the final chapter (Theology that Will Support a Worldview) Nettles challenges “the worldliness of our thoughts” (116). He contends: “A structural denominational change from moderates to inerrantists does not constitute a reformation without a corresponding revitalization of applied doctrine” (116). Baptists must seek out a holiness of life and a Biblical worldview.

The epilogue recaps the vital arguments. Again, “Southern Baptists have taken the first step” toward reformation in their embrace of inerrancy, but “[s]tewardship of this recovery calls for long-term evaluation and renewal” (127). If we are not careful “the good beginning can come to a stumbling halt” (129). Nettles calls his fellow Southern Baptists to “self-judgement” (130). The greatest threat to the modern renewal of the SBC does not come from moderates without but from conservatives within: “While vigilance must endure in every area that was threatened by the insidious impact of the moderate contingency, many difficulties confront the church that have little or nothing to do with that influence” (130). Again, Nettles is less concerned with theological moderates than with his fellow inerrantists who are driven by pragmatic (numerical) success:

Though lip service is given to biblical authority, that which seems most dominant is the simple observation of success in terms of the immediate gratification of visible increase.

This practical pragmatism leads to theological minimalism (130).

Once again, Nettles’ words have the ring of the prophetic. Some are perpetually celebrating the victory of inerrancy among Southern Baptists. Nettles rightly points out that such celebrations are premature, for the recovery of Biblical authority was only the first stage. The next will be the application of the teaching of the inerrant Bible in the pulpits and church conferences of the local churches. Nettles is also bold in his identification not of moderates but of pragmatism as the chief danger to the reformation’s success. This book deserves to be read, pondered, and thoroughly discussed by Southern Baptists in leadership in our churches. ♦

Paradosis

Paradosis is the Greek word for “tradition.” It is also the title for this recurring section featuring voices from the Virginia Baptist past.

This issue’s column focuses on the issue of church discipline. This Biblical practice has been largely lost in our Baptist churches, even ones that claim to be doctrinally conservative. In recovering the practice of discipline in the local church it may be helpful to examine the historical records and self-produced histories of long established Baptist churches on this matter. Below are two such excerpts from the histories of Lyles Baptist Church in Fluvanna County, Virginia and Clarksville Baptist Church in Clarksville, Virginia.

Abstaining From All Appearance of Evil

Source: A. Paul Thompson, *Lyles Baptist Church* (Berryville, Va.: Virginia Book Company, 1974): 49-51.

Several generations ago Baptist congregations were active in the process of self-discipline. They believed firmly in the concept that Christians should abstain from all appearances of evil, and to implement that concept. Baptist congregations would sometimes separate themselves from a non-repentant, erring member by excluding that member. Erring was a matter of both conduct and doctrine. Being Baptists, the Lyles congregation was entirely self-governed; the congregation set the standards; therefore, members had the opportunity to help define and refine codes of behavior and statements of doctrine by which they chose to live.

The business of excluding a member was a painful and regrettable affair to say the least, as it should have been. The guide used for conducting the procedures for and exclusion was the words from Matthew’s Gospel, Chapter 18, verses 15-17. Rarely was exclusion done in haste as shown in Lyles’ minutes; some times the matter went on for months. In practicing church discipline, Lyles’ people were treated alike – prominent or not so prominent, black or white, young or old, elder or layman. Exclusion was not forever, for frequently a member who had been excluded, upon repenting, was restored to full membership in to the church.

The proceedings for excluding a member followed this pattern: a member was thought to be in violation of the church’s code of conduct or statement of doctrine; the violation was brought to the attention of the church at a regularly scheduled monthly conference; if the member was present at the time, he was given the opportunity to state his position and/or express his sorrow and ask to be pardoned for his offense; if he was not present, usually a committee was appointed to visit the supposed offender and “cite him” to the next conference. If he came to the next conference, he had the opportunity to express himself. If he did not come, most often, the decision was postponed to give the offending member another opportunity to appear before the church. Refusing to honor the church’s call was considered a serious offence and most often ended with the offending member’s being excluded.

So important was the conduct of the members and the relationship among the members that often following the “divine services” and after the members being seated, it was determined whether or not the church was in fellowship before any reference was brought to the floor of the conference. To say that the church was intolerant would be both unfair and inaccurate; to say that the church was strict would be correct.

Instances of church discipline at Lyles are given below – not to amuse, or to discredit those early forefathers of the faith, but to record history.

A member was cited before the church for planting tobacco on the Lord’s day. The member expressed regret and was admonished to be more watchful and was reconciled to the church.

----- was “cited before the church” for fighting. Expressed sorrow and was retained.

A prominent member and wife were charged with attending a ball at Columbia. “After much being said,” they expressed sorrow and stated they went “principally to oblige a young woman under their care.” Retained in fellowship.

----- was reported for having a hogshead of tobacco refused for having stalks in it. The decision was postponed for a month and resulted in exclusion.

A member was restored after being excluded for allowing dancing in his house.

Because a fellow member's hogs kept getting into his cornfield, ----- became distressed with his neighbor and asked the church what he should do about it. The dispute ended by the two men agreeing to "bare with each other: and extending the right hand of fellowship."

Upon his wife's leaving him, ----- asked the church what his conduct toward her should be. The church advised him that his conduct was justified. (Just what his conduct was is not recorded.)

An elder was "cited" before the church to explain his missing the conference so often. He explained his absences were due to illness. He was retained.

One member was charged with "swearing." No proof; retained.

A woman was excluded for having been the mother of a base born child.

Upon confessing that he had been fighting, but in self-defense, a member was retained.

Because of having fellowship with Uriah Hickerson and his party – the Reformers, followers of Alexander Campbell, a woman was excluded.

Two members broke the fellowship at Lyles when one raised his mill dam (he had obtained the Court's permission). His neighbor and fellow member objected. For months, the church tried to work out a compromise, but the owner of the mill objected to the church's decision and he was excluded.

A charge was brought against a member for being drunk at a Methodist Camp Meeting; another for fighting on Court Day in Palmyra; another for getting drunk on Election Day. All three admitted their errors, expressed regret, and were retained.

It was reported that a member had left his wife. Inquiry was postponed (1839) because he was due to have a surgical operation on his eyes. It was learned that his wife had moved to care for her invalid mother and the matter appears to have been dropped.

One member was the executor of his father's estate asked the church's permission to go to court to collect debts owed his father by some of the church members and others. Permission was granted.

A member was excluded for placing a hundred dollars belonging to his grandmother in an account without her approval.

Attention was drawn to a report that a female member was married to a man who had another wife. It was learned that she did not know at the time of her marriage that he had a wife. She "discarded him," and was retained.

Having horse racing at Wilmington was the cause for a member to be excluded.

Several times a committee was appointed to see members at Palmyra who were dancing and playing cards.

The practice of disciplining members began to wane about the turn of this century, and today, it is not a regular practice at Lyles.

Committee on Discipline

Source: Warren Turner, *History of Clarksville Baptist Church* (no publisher listed, 1976): 13.

A church Constitution adopted in 1895 and amended in 1896 has some interesting sections, (Section 7, page 1), "The Committee on Discipline shall hold meetings at such intervals as they may deem advisable and shall when necessary report in writing to the church through its Chairman any case requiring discipline." (Section 7, page 3), "Members absenting themselves from Sabbath services for three months in succession or

from Covenant Meetings or the Lord's Supper three successive times when there is no apparent reason for such absence shall be asked for an explanation by the Committee on Discipline. Refusing to give an explanation or giving one that is unsatisfactory, such members shall be held as proper subjects for discipline. In cases of the continued absence of members and in such other cases as may be deemed proper the church at any regular, special, or adjourned meeting, by a two-thirds vote of members voting, may drop from its register the name of such members without citing such to appear before the church.”♦

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