

Evangelical Forum Newsletter



Vol. 3. No. 2
April 2006

The Times They Are A Changing

At least one blogger has written that the 2006 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Greensboro (June 11-14) will be as crucial as the one at Houston in 1979 that began the conservative reformation. That is likely an overstatement; nevertheless, it is clear that change is in the air among Southern Baptists. The 1979-1990 struggle was for the inerrancy of Scripture. The next one may just be about what that inerrant Bible has to say about doctrine and church order.

These shifts are apparent in several of the items in this quarter's issue of the *EFN*. The most important development is that the SBC is beginning to talk openly about the re-emergence of Calvinism in denominational life. We are reprinting Danny Akin's article on this topic that appeared in the April 2006 issue of *SBC Life*. Akin's article may serve as a helpful introduction for those not familiar with TULIP or the doctrines of grace. Many committed Calvinists will, no doubt, take exception to some of the things Akin says. Can one really ride the fence on this issue? Do Southern Baptists really need to "balance" an emphasis on God's sovereignty with an emphasis on "human freedom"? Is this the problem with our current evangelistic methods and church growth mindsets? Would anyone who has ever been seriously influenced by John Calvin's radically God-centered theology ever think to give more emphasis to John Calvin (JC) than Jesus Christ!?!

Perhaps more amazing than the ink given to explaining Calvinism in the official SBC Press is the fact that Paige Patterson and Al Mohler will dialogue on the doctrinal divide over election at the 2006 SBC Pastors' Conference. You can bet that this break-out session will be jam packed with young SBC Pastors and immediately evaluated in the blogosphere. The Patterson-Mohler discussion will be polite and tame, but the "rumble" in Lynchburg October 16th will likely be a real "debate" between the Caner brothers and White-Ascol. We who live in Virginia have an incredible opportunity to be present to watch history in the making this year in both Greensboro and in Lynchburg.

So, we can pull out the old Dylan tune and croon, "The times they are a changing." At the same time, however, we know that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Evangelical Forum Upcoming Events

- **The next quarterly Evangelical Forum Pastors' fellowship meeting will be Thursday, May 25, 2006 at 1:00 pm at the Covenant Baptist Church in Warrenton, Virginia.** Speaker: Rob Stovall, Providence Baptist Church of Suffolk. Topic: *Proclamation and Perseverance: The Relationship Between Growth in Grace and Preaching according to 2 Peter 1:1-14*. Host Pastor: Steve Clevenger. For directions, visit the church website: www.covenantbc.org. All Pastors are invited.
- **The Fifth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Forum will be on Wednesday, November 8, 2006 in Virginia Beach (time and place TBA). Keynote speakers will be Dr. Tom Nettles of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Dr. Andy Davis, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Durham, NC.**

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.

Newsletter Editor: Jeffrey T. Riddle, Pastor, Jefferson Park Baptist Church, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2505 Jefferson Park Avenue, Charlottesville, Virginia 22903. Email: ridddefam@juno.com.

To delete from or add your name to this mailing list: email Bonnie Beach at jeffparkchurch@juno.com or phone: 434-293-6175.

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.

Feature Article:

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: How Should Southern Baptists Respond to the Issue of Calvinism?

By Danny Akin

*Note: The April 2006 edition of **SBC Life**, journal of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee, published two articles on Calvinism, including this one by Danny Akin, President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. The article also appeared on Baptist Press on April 4, 2006.*

Few issues are more likely to ignite a lively debate than a discussion of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in this subject in Southern Baptist life, to the delight of some and chagrin of others. The Conservative Resurgence which began in 1979 was about the authority of the Bible. Those who believe the Bible to be the inerrant and infallible Word of God will take its doctrines seriously. Issues like predestination and election, freewill and human responsibility will naturally require our careful study.

Thankfully, our theological discussions are not those of other denominations in our day. Issues like the deity of Christ, the exclusivity of the Gospel, open theism, abortion, and homosexuality are settled for Southern Baptists because of our commitment to the clear teachings of Scripture.

However, some issues in the Bible are more obscure. There is often a mystery and tension to what we find when we examine all that the Bible says on some subjects. This is clearly the case when it comes to understanding God's sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation.

Unfortunately, there is more heat than light in many instances with shrill voices and unhealthy rhetoric—on both sides of the issue—getting too much attention. On one side you hear people saying that God hates the non-elect and damns babies to hell. They say that Jesus was a Calvinist and that Calvinism is the Gospel. On the other side you hear voices stating that Calvinism is heresy and that Calvinists do not believe in missions and evangelism. Some even suggest that the Southern Baptist Convention could split over this issue, though I am convinced this will not happen.

I believe we need to tone down the rhetoric. We need to seek biblical balance, theological sanity, and ministerial integrity in the midst of this discussion. Let me attempt to set the playing field for this important issue and then make some theological and practical suggestions as we work together for the glory of God and the cause of Christ.

A Look at Calvinism

The issue that is being debated today almost always revolves around the idea of Calvinism. To some, this is a theological landmine to be avoided at all cost, even if they are not sure what it means. For others it signals a recovery of biblical truth growing out of the Reformation of the 16th century and its emphasis on the great *solas*: Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, for the glory of God alone. John Calvin (1509-64) was the great theologian of the Reformation. An outstanding biblical scholar, he heralded the theology of both Paul and Augustine (354-430). Like Martin Luther (1483-1546), he emphasized the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man, and the necessity of grace for salvation.

Later in the 17th century, followers of Calvin would systematize his theology and go beyond what Calvin himself taught. This system would ultimately be codified through the now famous acrostic TULIP.

The history of Southern Baptists includes those on one side of the theological spectrum who have flatly rejected three or more of Calvin's five points and those at the other who have enthusiastically embraced all of them, with many Baptists falling somewhere in between. The reality is that the SBC has included "Five-Point Calvinists" and "Modified" Calvinists from the start. It should be stressed here that, from a denominational standpoint, in this discussion there is no "right or wrong." Southern Baptists have always been diverse in many regards, and the theological realm is no exception. Neither the Southern Baptist Convention, nor its seminaries, endorse or promote a particular theological system or stance on areas not addressed in the *Baptist Faith and Message*.

Frankly, I don't foresee that ever changing. So what follows is not an endorsement or promotion of Calvinism, but rather a review and condensed explanation of what some of our Southern Baptist brethren believe on the five points of the Calvinistic system. My hope and prayer is that a fuller understanding will help set the stage for what follows in the final section.

Total Depravity

This view holds that man is born with a nature and bent toward sin. Every aspect of man's being is infected with the disease of sin so that he cannot save himself, neither can he move toward God without the initiating and enabling grace of God. Man is not as bad as he could possibly be, but he is radically depraved. Most Baptists would agree on this point, at least in some measure. It is hard to deny it in light of Romans 3:9-20 and Ephesians 2:1-3.

Unconditional Election

According to this view, God, in grace and mercy, has chosen certain persons for salvation. Those who hold this view believe that His decision is not based on human merit or foreseen faith, but in the goodness and providence of God's own will and purposes. Many would add, however, that the electing purpose of God is somehow accomplished without destroying human freewill and responsibility. Accordingly, no one is saved apart from God's plan, and yet anyone who repents and trusts Christ will be saved. The French theologian Moise Amyraut (1596-1664) referred to this as God's secret or hidden decree. There is an admitted tension in this position, but a tension that need not be viewed as contradictory. Calvinists commonly cite John 6:37-47 at this point.

Of course, this view is hotly debated among some Southern Baptists, with alternative interpretations of scriptural passages being offered and both sides genuinely believe they are operating from a biblical basis. The reality is Southern Baptists will likely debate this point until the Lord returns, but there is certainly no need for division or ill will over it.

Limited Atonement

Most Calvinists view this as an unfortunate phrase, preferring the term "particular redemption" instead. The original stance of Calvin's followers was that the intent of the atoning work of Christ was to provide and purchase salvation for the elect. Thus the work of Christ would be *limited* to the elect, and His atonement was made for a *particular* people (e.g. His sheep, the Church, His Bride).

This is a real point of contention for many, and, in fact, most Modified Calvinists cannot embrace this teaching in its classic form.

However, let me offer a crucial observation that hopefully will foster some unity on this point. All Bible-believers limit the atonement in some way. To not do so is to advocate Universalism, the view that eventually everyone will be saved. Most Baptists would say the Bible teaches that the atonement is limited in its application, but certainly not its provision. In other words, in His death on the cross Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4-6; 4:10; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:1-2; 4:9-10) making a universal provision. However, the application is limited to those who receive the free gift of salvation offered to them by their personal faith in Christ. One can see then that all evangelicals limit the atonement in some sense, but do so in different ways.

Irresistible Grace

Most Calvinists would see this as another unfortunate choice of words that stirs up unnecessary debate. Instead, they would prefer the phrase “effectual calling.” This doctrine asserts that those who are predestined to be saved are called to salvation (Romans 8:30) *effectually* or *effectively*. They are not forced to come but are set free to come and they do so willingly. Timothy George strikes the balance of this teaching with human responsibility when he writes, “God created human beings with free moral agency, and He does not violate this even in the supernatural work of regeneration. Christ does not rudely bludgeon His way into the human heart. He does not abrogate our creaturely freedom. No, he beckons and woos, He pleads and pursues, He waits and wins” (*Amazing Grace*, p. 74).

Perseverance of the Saints

Those God saves, He protects and preserves in their salvation. Baptists have historically referred to this as the doctrine of “eternal security,” or in popular terminology as “once saved, always saved.” This is one point of Calvinism that almost all Baptists affirm. Sometimes misunderstood and falsely caricatured by those rejecting this doctrine, perseverance of the saints does not teach people can live any way they want and take advantage of God's grace. Rather, because of the greatness of the gift of our salvation, true believers will be grieved when they sin and will pursue a life that is pleasing to the God whom they love and Who keeps them safely in His hand (John 10:27-29).

This is a summary of “five-point Calvinism” or what its advocates call “the Doctrines of Grace.” Though it is not as popular among Southern Baptists as it was in the past, there has been a rise in interest in its teachings. And one should honestly acknowledge many wonderful and significant Baptists in the past followed these doctrines. This includes men like William Carey, Andrew Fuller, Luther Rice, Adoniram Judson, Charles Spurgeon, John L. Dagg, Basil Manly Jr., and James Boyce. John Broadus and B. H. Carroll would also have considered themselves Calvinists, though both would have affirmed only four of the five points. They did not advocate particular redemption.

How then should Southern Baptists, with such a rich and diverse theological heritage, respond to this controversial issue at the dawn of the 21st century? As people of The Book who rejoice in a remarkable history, how might we move forward together in unity in the days ahead?

Finding Biblical Balance: Theological and Practical Considerations

Grasping the magnitude of this issue is a daunting task for finite, sinful humans. A good dose of humility is certainly in order. As we attempt to both understand the Bible's teaching and work

alongside of those with whom we may not see eye to eye, what are some theological and practical principles that can guide us? I would offer six suggestions.

1) In our doctrine of salvation, we should start with God and not man. The Bible affirms that *salvation is from the Lord* (Jonah 2:9) and *by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift -- not from works, so that no one can boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9). We should be God-centered in all of our theology, especially the doctrine of salvation. The Bible teaches that salvation is God's work. He is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He takes the initiative. He is the true Seeker!

2) We should affirm the truth both of God's sovereignty and human freewill. "The Abstract of Principles" was the founding confession for The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was penned by Basil Manly Jr. in 1859. Manly was a Calvinist, and yet Article IV on Providence reveals a healthy, theological balance in our Baptist forefather. Manly wrote:

"God from eternity decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any wise to be author or approver of sin nor to destroy *the freewill and responsibility* of intelligent creatures" (*emphasis mine*).

Many Baptists believe the Bible teaches that God predestines and elects persons to salvation, but that He does so in such a way as to do no violence to their freewill and responsibility to repent from sin and believe the Gospel. Is there a tension here? Yes. Is there divine mystery? Absolutely! Many believe this is what Paul felt when, at the end of his magnificent treatment of this subject in Romans 9-11, he concludes with a doxology of praise and says, *Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and untraceable His ways* (Romans 11:33). If you find it a challenge to fathom the depths of this doctrine then you are in good company!

3) Recognize that extreme positions on either side of the issue are biblically unbalanced, theologically unhealthy, and practically undesirable. Biblically, we affirm the truth of all of God's Word. Words like *called, chosen, election, foreknowledge, and predestination* are in Holy Scripture. We should embrace them, examine them, and seek to understand them, always remembering that intelligent and godly people will likely embrace differing interpretations. Words like *believe, evangelist, go, preach, receive, and repent* are also in the Bible. Biblical balance requires that we embrace and affirm these as well.

Theologically, we dare not be seduced into living in a theological ghetto that may espouse a nice, neat doctrinal system, but that does so at the expense of a wholesome and comprehensive theology.

Practically, we must not become manipulative and gimmicky in our presentation of the Gospel as if the conversion of the lost depends ultimately, or even primarily, on us. Neither should we be lulled into an antipathy toward personal evangelism and global missions. Attempting to construct a doctrine of double predestination wherein God elects some to damnation, hates the lost, and consigns non-elect infants to the fires of hell would be viewed by most in the SBC as irresponsible and lacking in biblical support. Any theology that does not result in a "hot heart" for the souls of lost persons is a theology not worth having. I fear that some extreme forms of Calvinism have so warped the mind and frozen the heart of its advocates that if they saw a person screaming at the top of their lungs "what must I do to be saved?", they would hesitate or even neglect the Gospel for fear of somehow interfering with the work of the Holy Spirit.

If the initials J.C. bring first to your mind the name John Calvin rather than Jesus Christ and you fancy yourself more of an evangelist for Calvinism than Christ, then this latter word of concern is particularly for you. Never forget that the greatest theologian who ever lived was also the greatest missionary/evangelist whoever lived. His name is Paul.

4) Act with personal integrity in your ministry when it comes to this issue. Put your theological cards on the table in plain view for all to see, and do not go into a church under a cloak of deception or dishonesty. If you do, you will more than likely split a church, wound the Body of Christ, damage the ministry God has given you, and leave a bad taste in the mouth of everyone. Let me give an example. I am pre-tribulational/premillennial in my eschatology. It would be inappropriate for me to interview with a church and continue the discussion if I discovered that it was committed to an amillennial position.

Now, let me address our topic. If a person is strongly committed to five-point Calvinism, then he should be honest and transparent about that when talking to a church search committee. He should not hide behind statements like "I am a historic Baptist." That statement basically says very little if anything and it is less than forthcoming. Be honest and completely so. If it is determined you are not a good fit for that congregation, rejoice in the sovereign providence of God and trust Him to place you in a ministry assignment that is a good fit. God will honor such integrity.

5) Teach the issues to your people, especially your youth. Sometimes pastors get frustrated when they send their students off to college and seminary, and they come back different. Sometimes they go to a liberal institution, and they return questioning or jettisoning the faith. Other times they go to a conservative school and return as double predestinarian, supralapsarian extreme Calvinists. They now question the public invitation and personal evangelism training and redefine into insignificance the Great Commission. It has been my experience that this latter malady is more often caught from immature fellow students than from godly professors.

This observation is not intended to absolve our colleges and seminaries of their responsibility. It is to say, however, that we do our people no favors with a dumbed-down theology in the local church. I believe we should raise the biblical and theological bar in our churches, and we should do so immediately. I believe we should train our people so they mature to the point that we can consider the great theological debates between Augustine and Pelagius, Luther/Calvin and Erasmus, Calvinists and Arminians.

I also believe we should help them mature to the point that we can familiarize them with the five points of Calvinism, the humanism of the Enlightenment, and the destructive criticism of rationalism/ant supernaturalism and the Jesus Seminar.

Some may protest that these issues will be over their heads. I would strongly disagree. If our schools can teach our children chemistry and biology, physics and geology, algebra and geometry, political science and economics, then we can certainly teach them theology and apologetics, Christian ethics and philosophy. We, as the local church, can prepare them in advance for what they will encounter so that various ideologies can be carefully critiqued and extreme positions intelligently rejected for the errors they contain. Again, it requires a gradual and intentional maturing process — you don't teach calculus to a first grader — but to neglect this area is to fail in preparing them to deal with the critical theological and social challenges of our day.

6) Recognize that our *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* is a well-constructed canopy under which varying perspectives on this issue can peacefully and helpfully co-exist. Pelagians, Arminians, and Open Theists will not feel at home in our Southern Baptist family. We will love them

while also disagreeing with them. Is there a place for differing positions on the issues of election, the extent of the atonement and calling, as well as how we do missions, evangelism, and give the invitation? I am convinced that the answer is yes.

Further, I believe we will be the better for it theologically and practically as we engage each other in respectful and serious conversation. As one who considers himself to be a true compatibilist, affirming the majestic mystery of both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, I have been challenged and strengthened in my own theological understanding by those less reformed than I as well as those more reformed than I happen to be. Because of our passionate commitments to the glory of God, the Lordship of Christ, biblical authority, salvation by grace through faith, and the Great Commission, we work in wonderful harmony with each other, and I suspect we always will.

7) Finally, as a denomination we must devote as much passion and energy to *studying the Word as we have to defending it.* Let us be known for being rigorously biblical, searching the Scriptures to determine what God really says on this and other key doctrinal issues. For the most part, we are not doing this, and our theological shallowness is an indictment of our current state and an embarrassment to our history! Furthermore, let none of us seek to be recognized so much for being Calvinists— five-point, modified, or otherwise— but rather for being thoroughgoing Biblicists and devoted followers of Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon was a five-point Calvinist. He was also a passionate evangelist and soul winner. On August 1, 1858, he preached a sermon entitled, "Sovereign Grace and Man's Responsibility." The words of wisdom that flowed from his mouth on that day could only come from a capable pastor/theologian with a shepherd's heart and a love for the lost. We would do well to heed the counsel of this Baptist hero upon whose shoulders we stand today.

"I see in one place, God presiding over all in providence; and yet I see and I cannot help seeing, that man acts as he pleases, and that God has left his actions to his own will, in a great measure. Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act, that there was no precedence of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to Atheism; and if, on the other hand, I declare that God so overrules all things, as that man is not free enough to be responsible, I am driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and that man is responsible, are two things that few can see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one place that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other. These two truths, I do not believe, can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring.... You ask me to reconcile the two. I answer, they do not want any reconciliation; I never tried to reconcile them to myself, because I could never see a discrepancy.... Both are true; no two truths can be inconsistent with each other; and what you have to do is to believe them both."

Here is a good place to stand. Here is a theology we can all affirm in service to our Savior. ♦

Dr. Daniel L. Akin is president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

News of Interest

- **Bob Reccord Resigns as Head of North America Mission Board**

Baptist Press reported that Bob Reccord resigned as President of the NAMB on Monday, April 17, 2006. He had served as President since 1997. Before taking leadership at the NAMB Reccord was the senior Pastor of First Baptist Church of Norfolk, Virginia from 1992-97.

Record had come under fire in recent months after questions were raised about his leadership and management style. Concerns were initially raised in the February 16, 2006 issue of the Christian Index, the state paper of Georgia Baptists. In its March 23, 2006 meeting the NAMB trustees heard a report by a trustee task force and suggested the implementation of "Executive Level controls."

NAMB trustee chairman Barry Holcomb is quoted as saying, "... Contrary to some opinions, Dr. Reccord is in no way being asked to resign, let alone forced to resign."

- **Mohler-Patterson Dialogue on Election at 2006 SBC Pastors' Conference**

The 2006 SBC Pastors' Conference held in conjunction with the SBC Annual Meeting in Greensboro, NC will include a breakout session featuring a dialogue on the doctrine of election between Dr. Paige Patterson, President of Southwestern Seminary, and Dr. Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The Patterson-Mohler dialogue is set to take place on Monday, June 12, 2006 and will be offered in two of the three break-out sessions (at 9:00 am and 10:15 am).

This year's Pastors' Conference theme is "Reaching Today's World For Jesus Christ." The Patterson-Mohler session has the title "Reaching Today's World Through Differing Views of Election." Presumably, Mohler will represent a Reformed perspective on the doctrine of election which stresses divine sovereignty in salvation and unconditional election. Patterson, on the other hand, will represent the perspective that stresses human responsibility and conditional election.

Though it is apparent that the organizers of this event want to avoid a "debate" format, it is also obvious that those in the leadership of the SBC are coming to terms with the need to deal openly and honestly with the re-emergence of Calvinistic theology in SBC life, particularly in the younger generation of pastors and leaders.

The Pastors' Conference will also feature a break-out session led by Mark Dever of Capitol Hill Baptist Church (and a featured speaker at the 2005 Evangelical Forum) and Art Wilder of Ferry Farm Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta on the subject of church discipline. That session will take place at 10:15 and 11:30 am and will have the appropriate title, "Reaching today's world through church discipline: Are you kidding?"

- **Debate on Calvinism at Thomas Road Baptist Church Set for October 16, 2006.**

It all started with a series of comments posted on the blog of Founder's Ministry Executive Director Tom Ascol (wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog) relating to the coming nomination of Johnny Hunt as the next President of the SBC. Many of Ascol's regular blog readers were expressing disapproval of Hunt. Then Ergun Caner, Dean of the Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and his brother Emir, Professor of Church History at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, began to weigh in on the discussion, lambasting Calvinism as a dangerous "virus" in SBC life. Before long, James White, Director of Alpha and Omega Ministries had joined the discussion and challenged Ergun Caner, the most outspoken of the brothers, to a public debate on the doctrines of grace.

Though many doubted it would ever happen, a public debate on Calvinism has now been scheduled. It will take place on Monday, October 16th at 7:00 pm at Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg between Ergun and Emir Caner and James White and Tom Ascol. The cost to attend will be free.

Ergun Caner, meanwhile, has continued his attacks on Calvinism, preaching a sermon at the Sunday evening service on April 9, 2006 at Thomas Road titled "Why I am Predestined not to be a Calvinist" that has drawn heated reaction.

- **R. C. Sproul, Jr. Defrocked**

According to the February 1, 2006 *Searcy Report*, R. C. Sproul, Jr. was defrocked as a minister in the Westminster Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church General Assembly.

R. C. Sproul, Jr. is the son of the well-known evangelical theologian and apologist R. C. Sproul. The younger Sproul is founder of the Highlands Study Center in Bristol, Virginia and also serves as an elder at St. Peter Presbyterian Church in Abingdon, Virginia. He is also nationally known as an author and speaker on home-schooling and family integrated churches.

According to a January 26, 2006 "Declaratory Judgement" written by Kenneth Talbot, moderator of the Westminster Presbytery and president of Whitefield Theological Seminary, Sproul and three other men from St. Peter's were removed from the office of elder. Among the reasons cited for discipline were spiritual abuse of members, financial irregularities, and improper administration of infant communion.

- **Bethlehem Baptist Church Removes Consideration of Membership Proposal**

The controversial membership proposal under consideration at John Piper's Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota was abruptly removed from consideration by the Elders on December 18, 2005, the day originally scheduled for it to be voted on by the congregation. The proposal would have allowed persons who had not received believer's baptism by immersion into church membership while barring them from elder service.

A note posted on the Bethlehem website (www.bbcmpls.org) explained the decision to remove the proposal. Under the heading, "Why was it withdrawn?" the note explained:

At the December 6 Elder Council meeting, a few elders who previously voted in favor of the motion no longer supported it. In the original vote only two had opposed the motion. Others had now become uncertain about the wisdom of moving forward with the motion. It was clear that the support was not sufficient to move forward.

The posting also addressed Bethlehem's plan for dealing with the matter in the future, noting:

The elders realize that the issue cannot be dropped because the majority of the elders still favor the motion, including almost all the pastoral staff, and because that conviction puts most of the elders and staff in conflict with at least one literal reading of the Bethlehem Affirmation of Faith. Our Affirmation of Faith defines the local church as follows: "We believe in the local church, consisting of a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work, and fellowship." In the most narrow reading, this definition would mean that a Gospel-preaching Presbyterian Church, for example, is not a church. Most of us do not believe that. So at least there are explicit clarifications that we believe we should make in the present Affirmation of Faith. In view of these things, we will be praying and thinking and discussing various ways to move forward together as a church.

The Bethlehem baptism and membership proposal, therefore, remains an ongoing issue for this influential church.

Although not given as a reason for the delay, John Piper is also recovering from recent prostate cancer surgery.

IMB Trustee Chairman offers “Open Letters” to Southern Baptists

Tom Hatley, Chairman of the trustees of the International Mission Board issued two open letters on March 7, 2006 (posted on IMB website: www.imb.org). The first is a short note addressed to all Southern Baptists. The second is a longer letter addressed to Southern Baptist pastors. In the letters, Hatley explains and defends recent controversial decisions made by the IMB trustees in offering guidelines for missionary candidates in the areas of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and baptism. Controversy has also swirled over trustee attempts to censor one its members, Wade Burleson of Oklahoma, who was blogging sensitive information from trustee meetings. An original motion to remove Boggs as a trustee at the 2006 SBC annual meeting has also been reversed.

Below are the complete texts of the letters from Hatley:

Dear Southern Baptist brothers and sisters,

Thank you for your passion for sharing Jesus. These are great days of opportunity and advancement in our work for the Lord. Advances are being made on a scale never before known in the history of Christianity. For this we join together in praise to our Savior.

I have addressed the following letter to pastors because they are the teachers and guardians of the Word for their congregations. Their sacred duty is a calling higher than that of the President of the United States and, as such, I wanted to address them concerning these doctrinal matters. But feel free to look over their shoulders and read this material.

There has been no small controversy concerning some of our recent decisions. However, as I have shared this information with pastors and others, most have expressed joy because information they had previously received was incomplete. Seeing the greater context has helped many to appreciate the decisions recently made. I pray you will have the same experience.

We are on a great adventure together. It stands to reason that our adversary would love to put us against one another. Let's put all blame on our real enemy and work harder than ever to reach every person with the Gospel in our lifetime.

Thank you so much for your prayers. We are your servants and we appreciate every word you share, even the constructive criticism. I pray our hearts will be obvious as you read these pages.

For His Glory,

Tom Hatley
Chairman, International Mission Board trustees
Southern Baptist Convention

Dear Pastors,

You are due a report from me concerning recent actions by your International Mission Board trustees concerning the qualifications for new missionaries. This letter is my attempt at giving you historical context and logical reasoning for these actions.

Let me first state that this letter is written from my perspective as your chairman of this board. Further

clarification may come from appropriate committees. Because such contextualization might not be formed and delivered to you until April or even June (because of the timing of our next meetings), I thought it best to write and at least give you my perspective.

The need to address these areas (baptism and tongues) has been discussed from time to time for more than a decade. The decisions that were recently made have been matters of review and study for more than two and a half years. Similar precedents adopted by staff in dealing with these issues have been used for years. They were not as strong as the current guideline and policy, but they were the base upon which the current statements were constructed.

Forgive me, but to give you a worthy context for these actions I must brief you on the process through which every candidate for long-term mission service must pass.

Upon completion of an application for service a candidate is assigned a candidate consultant. The consultant is a staff member who walks with the potential IMB missionary through the appointment process.

After forms are completed, interviews are held and testing is processed, the candidate consultant determines whether or not to bring the candidate to the trustee board for interim approval, which usually leads to appointment three to six months later.

To review the hundreds of people who go through appointment each year, the trustee board is broken down into a series of subcommittees. Each subcommittee reviews an assigned group of candidates. The future missionaries do not appear in person at this point, but their lives, ministries, callings, testimonies and core beliefs are presented in writing on green paper (to remind us they contain sensitive material). Trustees read hundreds of pages of these (we call them “green sheets”) every year in order to interact with the staff candidate consultants. Action is taken on advancement of these applicants based on the content of these “green sheets” and the recommendation of the staff candidate consultants. This is usually done as a part of our six annual trustee meetings.

This is a thorough process that we take very seriously because these potential missionaries will be guiding our work around the world. What they believe and practice will be emulated many thousands of times over by those they influence and train.

As a trustee board, working with staff, we see this process as similar in nature to a pastor search committee. You trust us to qualify these career missionaries. Most will carry the ability to influence many national pastors and some will influence entire church-planting movements, affecting millions of lives.

Just as there are higher standards in the Word of God for shepherds, and we insist on such from our American church leaders, there are standards for missionaries that are equally elevated. Serving as a missionary, like serving as a pastor, is not for every church member. Evidence of a clear call, strong commitment, spiritual maturity and doctrinal stability are insisted upon.

After all, these special leaders will be representing Southern Baptists while they are starting churches in the field that are also distinctively Baptist. They will be financially supported by Southern Baptists. Therefore, we are right to expect their ministries to be more in line with our heritage and doctrinal core than those of other denominations or belief systems. We are not an ecumenical movement, determined to send anyone who wants to go to the field. We are Baptists, and therefore we are only sending Baptists.

A problem or two with the “green sheets” process became more apparent a few years ago. It was not a new problem, but it was increasing in frequency. Often a subcommittee reviewing “green sheets” would find the candidate consultant deferring to the committee for a ruling concerning the issue of baptism or of glossolalia

in an applicant's profile. The lack of clear guidelines and policies addressing these areas created an inconsistency between subcommittees. One subcommittee would unknowingly allow what another subcommittee would disapprove. The need for consistency was called for by staff and so the appropriate subcommittee (the Process Review Committee) began almost three years ago to work on clear guidelines that would be adopted by the personnel committee – thus making judgments more consistent.

At the same time that these matters were under consideration, the board completed an extensive, year-long study concerning our approach to missions, which we call "Strategic Directions for the Twenty-first Century" (SD21). This study helped us evaluate our effectiveness on the field in many areas. The study was broken down by geographical regions (I think we had 15 at the time) and was the result of input from multiple sources.

While many positive things about our strategy were affirmed by the study, one thing surfaced that related to doctrine. An addendum to the study was completed by leadership in each region in consultation with the corresponding regional trustee committee chairman. The results of that addendum indicated that there were some doctrinal concerns in some regions. The assessment did not indicate involvement by our personnel, as that was not the purpose of the exercise. It simply helped us to see that some of our ministries in some of our regions were facing doctrinal challenges.

At the same time we were receiving concerns from the field, from pastors and others returning from mission trips, and from trustees visiting the field. The concerns were varied, but the three greatest doctrinal concerns were the need for a consistent definition of a local church, a poor understanding of the importance of scriptural baptism and charismatic problems that would intrude into some of our mission work.

Our doctrinal resolve needed to be affirmed. Our president had already seen the need to assure Southern Baptists of our doctrinal integrity and requested every missionary on the field and those in leadership in Richmond to sign an affirmation of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000. This request was well received by the vast majority of our personnel, and the trustees joined in the effort by also signing the document.

With this task accomplished, the Process Review Committee was working to assure Southern Baptists of the solid beliefs of new missionaries. We already have policies in place to address these issues when they become problematic on the field, and no one on the board thinks we should terminate a missionary for believing something we allowed at the time of their appointment. Therefore, when the new baptism guideline and tongues policy were adopted, they only referenced those who were new applicants (even those already in process were exempt).

These were adopted by the Personnel Committee in May 2005. We were then asked by our president, by some staff and by some members of the trustee board to approve or disapprove these guidelines at full board level.

Many leaders on the board, including myself, suggested otherwise. We favored granting proper authority to the personnel committee and keeping the documents as a guideline rather than a policy (for flexibility and ease in making any needed changes). Another reason is that we saw that the adoption of the policy on glossolalia at the board level would be seen by some as an attempt to embarrass IMB President Jerry Rankin, who has publicly acknowledged that he has a private prayer language.

Trustees have been blamed for having the motive of trying to hurt our president. The force that pushed the issue to this higher level, however, included the president and a few others on staff and on the board.

When voted on by the board, both measures passed by well over two-thirds. Because there have been many misconceptions concerning these policies, I have included them as attachments that can be accessed at our IMB Web site or on Baptist Press. Nothing helps more than seeing the original documents yourself.

Again, I should state that I am writing this from my perspective. Others may have a different view of the evolution of the policy on glossolalia and the guideline on baptism. For your information, this is my seventh year as a trustee and I am nearing the end of my second (and last) year as chairman. Before serving as chairman, I was chairman of the personnel committee. My observations are made after having enjoyed a healthy vantage point from which to see this whole event.

I offer you another assurance. Dr. Rankin and his staff were involved throughout the process. Some of their suggestions were incorporated, and all were seriously considered.

Another key factor in the development of this guideline and policy was the consultation and comparisons we sought with sister SBC entities. North American Mission Board has similar policies; unlike our approach, they made theirs retroactive throughout the organization.

Note as well that we placed into both the guideline and policy an exceptions clause. This affords a measure of flexibility.

As chairman I am asking our personnel committee to take a fresh look at these documents with the intention of providing further clarification. Your suggestions will be passed along to this committee as they are received. You may send them to the International Mission Board, which has an e-mail address for trustees. That address is imbtrustees@imb.org.

Besides the attachments for the guideline on baptism and the policy on glossolalia, I have included an attachment of our definition of a church. Also included are two position papers – one addressing the guideline and one addressing the policy. They were done with the help of several people who have served in key positions as trustees in the last few years. Also consulted were sources considered as specialists in matters of historical theology. The form in which you find them is my edit. They have not been voted on by our board and may not reflect the views even of some who voted for the policy and guideline, but they are the theological points that many reflected upon when working through these issues and I thought them worthy of presentation for your consideration.

I pray this explanation and the included material will shed some light on the process and reasoning for recent trustee action on these matters. I think you should be proud of the tireless and unselfish work of your trustees. Serving on this board is a great honor and requires many days of work and large quantities of passion for the lost in our world.

For His Glory,

Tom Hatley
Chairman, International Mission Board trustees
Southern Baptist Convention

A Historical Perspective on Controversy in Denominational Institutions

These are days of change not just in Southern Baptist life but also within American religious life in general. Changes at several of the SBC mission and ministry agencies have been in the news of late. Bob Reccord has resigned as President of the North American Mission Board. In a more placid transition, Thom Rainer has succeeded Jimmy Draper as President of Lifeway, the SBC publishing arm. Jerry Rankin remains in leadership at the International Mission Board but his leadership has been challenged.

Conservatives gained a hard fought and improbable victory over entrenched moderates for control of the largest Protestant denomination in America from 1979-1990. They now face the challenge of leading institutions and agencies that are having a hard time hanging on to their relevance and brand loyalty in the modern American church market. Some moderate-liberals announce with glee each report of internal dissension at the now conservative controlled SBC agencies, as if such issues are the direct result of failed conservative leadership. Just read *the Religious Herald* and note the prominence given to such news items.

We might do well to ask, however, if such events are actually new to SBC life. Take for example the situation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary of Louisville, Kentucky in the late 1950s when it was firmly in control of denominational moderates. Moderate stalwart Duke McCall—who, by the way, would later vociferously resist the conservative resurgence in the SBC— became President of Southern Baptists' flagship seminary in 1952. He introduced sweeping administrative changes that were resisted by long-time faculty. In one fell swoop in 1958 McCall fired thirteen professors in a punitive reorganization of the seminary. For a brief account of the "internal controversy" at Southern in those days, see H. Leon McBeth's *The Baptist Heritage*, p. 668.

Administrative turnover is hardly something new in SBC institutional life. The big change is in how these stories are reported and how information about them is shared. McCall's massive 1958 firings were downplayed in denominational media at the time (mainly tightly controlled state Baptist papers in the South) who wanted to protect the seminary and the denomination's interests. There was no competing "party" eager to "expose" scandal. This was also the age before the internet revolution. Information about everything is now ubiquitous. The current IMB scandal is among the first to come about as the result of the "new media" of blogging. There will no doubt be more to come.

There is also the issue of denominational cynicism that impacts both liberal and conservative Baptists. No longer are most folk content to farm out their mission work or even their theological education to far away denominational entities who ask that we just trust them and everything will turn out OK. More crucial than any cultural issue, however, are the theological issues that might be raised as to how Southern Baptists are at present doing missions. Both the IMB and NAMB come off as—well—what they are: corporate business ventures. When conservatives unleashed the inerrant Bible on mostly unsuspecting Southern Baptists, my guess is that most did not realize that this would also result in a generation who would search that inerrant Bible to see whether the way we have organized for missions and theological education is, in fact, Biblical. Maybe these growing pains are not so bad after all.

JTR♦

Irenaeus and the so-called *Gospel of Judas*

News recently broke about the discovery and translation of the so-called Gospel of Judas. The release of this Gnostic Gospel by the art foundation which owns it and the National Geographic Society was strategically timed to coincide with the worldwide celebration of Easter and the impending release of Sony Picture's film adaptation of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*.

Though one might cite many reasons for public interest in this document, the most cogent is that given by Union University (Tenn.) Bible professor George Guthrie: "The bottom line is that the world is enamored with anything that calls into question orthodox Christianity...whether it's historically credible or not." No serious historian believes that this Coptic Gnostic document was written by the real Judas or that it adds any reliable historical information to our knowledge of the life of Jesus. It is a second century heretical work that was rejected by the early Christians, because it did not conform to the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) as represented in the canonical Scriptures and in the canonical Gospels, in particular.

Though the thirteen page papyrus under discussion was not re-discovered until the late 1970s and presented to the world in 2006, Christians have long known of its existence. The indomitable early Christian apologist Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-200 AD) wrote an extensive refutation of Gnostic heresy about the year 180 AD titled "Against Heresies" in which he denounced this false "gospel."

In book I, chapter XXXI Irenaeus addresses the doctrines of a gnostic sect that he called the "Cainites," who were notable for taking Biblical villains (like Cain and Judas) and making them into heroes. This fit with the normative Gnostic scheme of rejecting the plain sense reading and authority of canonical Scripture and seeing the God of the Old Testament as an evil Demiurge. Of these Cainites, Irenaeus wrote (emphasis added):

Others again declare that Cain derived his being from the Power above, and acknowledge that Esau, Korah, the Sodomites, and all such persons, are related to themselves. On this account, they add, they have been assailed by the Creator, yet no one of them has suffered injury. For Sophia was in the habit of carrying off that which belonged to her from them to herself. **They declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal;** by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. **They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas.**

The discovery of the Gospel of Judas only confirms the assessment made of it ages ago by Irenaeus. Still, this historically naïve and Biblically illiterate generation is vulnerable to fall prey to those who would use the discovery of this document to undermine the authority of canonical Scripture and obscure the gospel.

As the Preacher said in Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun." Paul urged the church to reject anyone who "preaches another Jesus" or offers "another gospel" (2 Corinthians 11:4; cf. Galatians 1:6-10). Irenaeus continued that message in his denunciation of the Gnostics. In another passage, Irenaeus describes the Gnostic distortion of Jesus:

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and then should maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and thus by exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king's form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of a fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavor, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables, whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions (Against Heresies, Book I, Chapter VIII).

Orthodox Christians are being called upon again today to refute Gnostic attacks on the historical, Biblical Christ. JTR♦

Book Review: *The Deliberate Church*

Dever, Mark & Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005. 221 pp.

With the glut of church growth books on the market, the reader encountering *The Deliberate Church* might reasonably wonder, “Why do we need yet another one?” *The Deliberate Church*, however, is a worthy addition to your bookshelf because of its radical departure from the modern church growth movement. Unlike many of these other books, which may (or may not) begin with biblical principles but rapidly descend to corporate principles or pragmatic arguments, Dever’s book proposes the radical idea that the Bible is a sufficient and authoritative handbook for what the church should be and do. Many other church growth books and ministry methods assume that method is largely unimportant to God, so long as it does not violate clear biblical prohibitions, resulting in a “Whatever grows the church is a self-authenticating good.” *The Deliberate Church*, however, begins with the premises that (1) theology drives method; (2) God’s methods determine ours; (3) the gospel both enables and informs our participation is God’s purposes; and (4) faithfulness to the Gospel must be our measure of success, not results” (27-28). In accordance with these premises, this book presents itself not as another new program or quick fix but “the Word building the church” (20).

The Deliberate Church is organized into four sections: (1) Gathering the Church; (2) When the Church Gathers; (3) Gathering Elders; and (4) When the Elders Gather. In chapter one of section one, “Gathering the Church,” Dever argues that the pastor is not called to be—nor will he ultimately help his church by being—the one who implements programs *par excellence*. Instead, he is called to be about, as Dever calls them, “the four P’s”: preaching, prayer, personal discipline relationships, and patience. These pastoral disciplines teach a church to depend on God and think long-term rather than depending on the Next Big Thing™ to grow the church.

The other chapters in this section expound on how pastors and church leaders can help their churches reform by clarifying the gospel and church membership, doing responsible evangelism, taking in new membership in a biblical way, and doing church discipline. Especially helpful is the emphasis both on clarifying the gospel and building trust by preaching expositionally. As the congregation sees the pastor preaching *the text*, the gospel and its implications are continually re-presented, and the congregation comes to trust the pastor as one whose agenda is not personal or programmatic, but is the Word. Contrary to a church culture that sees anything that gets someone “down the aisle” as good, *The Deliberate Church* places emphasis on doing evangelism in a way that presents even the hard, offensive truths of the gospel, avoids entertaining people into the Kingdom, and invites sinners to Christ in such a way that they will know salvation is found in Christ and not in a human ritual like walking an aisle. With alarming statistics that suggest that up to 60% of SBC members cannot even be found in any church on any given Sunday (much less displaying any other evidences of salvation), this carefulness should be a welcomed breath of fresh air to churches.

Additionally, any church leader who desires to be careful and biblical in church membership will benefit from Dever’s ideas about constructing a new members’ class and doing formative and corrective church discipline. Both these ideas may seem strange to many churches, even Baptist churches, but Dever correctly asserts that if the doctrine of *regenerate church membership* is biblical, then we should be making sure that our membership is actually saved.

Section two deals with what the church should emphasize when it comes together in worship and in its other regular meetings. Most helpful and challenging for pastors and other worship leaders is Dever’s emphasis on the “regulative principle of worship.” This principle is

that “everything we do in a corporate worship gathering must be clearly warranted by Scripture” and that “the Regulative Principle forbids anything not commanded by Scripture” (77). *The Deliberate Church* asserts and demonstrates Scripturally that God does regulate the elements of our worship and that he really does care in both Testaments how we worship him. Therefore, worship elements are not determined by polling, the tastes of either the congregation or the lost, or whatever works to grow the church, but by God’s Word alone. Dever does not use the Regulative Principle to advocate a return to traditional worship (in itself a mere cultural form or matter of taste in some expressions) but a return to the sufficiency of Scripture in organizing our worship. What will this principle look like in practice? It will involve “read[ing] the Word, preach[ing] the Word, pray[ing] the Word, and see[ing] the Word (in the ordinances)” (82). Pastors, especially, are cautioned to exercise responsible oversight to make sure all these elements are correctly emphasized. He should also exercise care in selection of all the elements of worship, from readings, to ordinances, to even music, so that they may point to God and teach the congregation.

In sections three and four, Dever moves from congregation to leadership. In section three, “Gathering Elders,” *The Deliberate Church* makes and Scripturally demonstrates the assertion that “New Testament churches are to be congregationally governed yet led by a plurality of elders who are released by servant deacons to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer” (131). Dever also demonstrates the practicality of a plurality of elders both for the pastor and the congregation in balancing gifts, diffusing criticism, providing wisdom, and building indigenous leadership. Next, Dever discusses the criteria for elders. He emphasizes the biblical qualifications from 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 and helpfully reminds the reader that these qualifications revolve mainly around *character*, not mere skills. He also gives sound advice on leading a congregation from a less biblical model to a plurality of elders, beginning with careful exposition and explanation to the congregation. In this area, and in fact for any element of reform in this book, Dever wisely cautions the church leader to take a long view of reform and never to try to bring about reformation without teaching.

Section four, “When the Elders Gather,” deals with how to run an elders’ meeting. This section might be considered the least helpful, because it is the one most specific to the unique context of Capitol Hill Baptist Church. This section, however, does remind the reader that a plurality of elders really is a plurality of equal leaders and that the pastor and other elders must always exercise humility, love, and care for the entire congregation.

Those looking for a book full of flow-charts or outlines on how to grow a large crowd will be disappointed by *The Deliberate Church*. But the vision of this book is not about a church following every fad that comes from a church-growth marketer or denominational office but a church deliberately ordered by the Gospel and free to become the church God created it to be. Only when the church frees itself from the tyranny of the new and embraces the fact that the timeless truths of Scripture really do regulate our church life can we truly do God-ordained, God-blessed ministry. As Dever concludes, “Imagine...freedom from the tyranny of the new; freedom to become a body of believers in which membership really matters; freedom to become a church that is an increasingly clear display of God’s wisdom and glory to the heavenly powers and to the surrounding community. Imagine...” (202).

For those who are unfamiliar with the principles laid out in Dever’s other books, *The Deliberate Church* is a helpful guide to understanding God’s pattern for his church and how to implement biblical reform in your church. For those familiar with Dever’s other works, most notably *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* and *A Display of God’s Glory*, this book does not tread much new ground. However, its user-friendly format and “Think Tank” discussion questions will make it a useful resource in personal discipleship, congregational instruction, and leadership training.

By Steven R. Hills
Pastor, Western Branch Baptist Church, Suffolk, Virginia

Book Review: *The Transformation of American Religion*

Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003): 309 pp.

The author is the director of the Boise Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. He is a self-described non-religious (though ethnically Jewish) observer of American religious life. The central thesis of this book "is that religion in the United States is being transformed in radically new directions" (4). Wolfe also wants to allay the fears of some who believe that fanaticism among religious Americans threatens the principles of modern liberal democracy. According to Wolfe, liberals should not worry at the rise of religious expression in America, since "We are all mainstream now" (4). By this he means that religious Americans (i.e., primarily those who claim to be Christians) are, in the end, little different in their values and lifestyle than non-religious Americans.

Wolfe traces his thesis in eight chapters, each devoted to one aspect of American religious life: worship, fellowship, doctrine, tradition, morality, sin, witness, and identity.

In his discussion of worship, the author notes the movement in both Protestant and Catholic circles away from formalism and reverence in worship toward individualism and narcissism. Wolfe calls attention to the shift toward contemporary worship music over "imposing and distant" classical sacred music (33) and the doctrinal minimalism of power-point sermons in church-growth oriented congregations. He notes that liberals who fear the rise of strong religious belief in America "should not be fooled by evangelicalism's rapid growth" (36). Religion, he adds, like "Television, publishing, political campaigning, education, self-help-advice—all increasingly tell Americans what they already want to hear" (36).

In the chapter on fellowship, Wolfe notes that Americans are suspicious of institutions. He observes that more than ever they are prone to "switch" their religious loyalties, and "the decline of denominationalism is real" (43). According to Wolfe, "Denominations offer a sense of belonging in the same way the American Association of Retired Persons and the National Association of Railroad Passengers do; one joins them in only the most passive, coupon-clipping sorts of ways" (49). He concludes this section by stating, "Like other aspects of religious practice in America, the inward looking quality once associated with strong versions of faith has been transformed by the individualism and hedonism of American culture" (66).

Moving on to doctrine, Wolfe describes what he calls "the strange disappearance of doctrine from conservative Protestantism" (67). American fundamentalists no longer care about dogma but about pragmatism. If fundamentalists are weak in this area, we can just imagine the assessment given to evangelicals: "By playing down doctrine in favor of feelings, evangelicalism far exceeds fundamentalism in its appeal to Christians impatient with disputation and argument" (74).

In his discussion of tradition, Wolfe begins by noting that the United States is "a decidedly non-traditional society" (97). He points to Jews, Protestant Christians, and Catholics who are prone to transform religious traditions. He notes that our country currently "has conservatives aplenty, but it lacks traditionalists" (126). He thus argues that it is incorrect to assume that the recent American tilt to the right politically will result in the conservation of tradition in American culture, since, "the overwhelming majority of believers do not view their faith as requiring them to be against change" (126).

In the area of morality, Wolfe begins with the illustration of the Southern Baptist revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* to reflect a more conservative view on gender roles. He argues that despite the emphasis on "submission" even among conservative Christians the language of women's "empowerment" carries more cachet: "conservative women are not especially submissive at home" (132). Wolfe sees Mormonism as an exception to the rule in its ability to create in its adherents "a personal morality that stands in sharp contrast to the immorality of the world" (143). His final conclusion is that religious faith in America is generally not strong enough and strict enough to win moral obedience in its adherents.

When it comes to sin, Wolfe traces what he calls "the religious origins of non-judgmentalism" (165). In accessing "growth-oriented and spirit-filled churches" he notes that they "not only dispense with doctrine, denomination, and theology, they also want to avoid any actions that will make people feel that their faults have taken on cosmic significance" (166). Included here is Wolfe's observations of Saddleback pastor Rick Warren, who, he says, "does not come close to even mentioning hell" (166). He does, however, note that most Southern Baptist churches "tend to be places that have not caught up yet with the therapeutic individualism and egalitarian inclusion so prevalent in the rest of

America" (167). The avowed secular author ends this chapter with a surprising observation: "But somehow I am not pleased with this retreat from sin, for the ease with which American religious believers adopt non-judgmental language and psychological understanding is detrimental to anyone, religious or not, who believes that individuals should judge their actions against the highest possible ideals of human conduct, however those ideals are established" (184).

In his discussion of witness, Wolfe examines the evangelization efforts of evangelical Christians. While noting a zeal for evangelism, he also observes that "evangelicals often discover that their attempts to share their joy turn out to be more complicated than they may at first have realized" (187). Modern evangelicals "do not want to stand out as unpleasant and ill-mannered," and this tempers their zeal (187). To overcome this, Wolfe says that evangelicals have made "a Faustian pact" with the culture (205). Though long preaching separation from popular culture, they now seek to use it to promote their ends.

Finally, turning to identity, Wolfe hones in on the impact of immigration and the American tendency toward religious "switching." He discusses here the tendency of Korean-Americans to embrace conservative Protestantism and of Muslim Americans to accommodate their religious practices to American culture. America remains a nation that values choice.

In the concluding chapter, Wolfe asks, "Is democracy safe from religion?" (245 ff.). After his survey of American religious life, Wolfe responds that liberals in the post 9-11 world have little to fear from radicalism from religious Americans. He argues that so-called conservative Christians are not "sectarian" (256). We are "a religious people, but we are not a zealous one" (254). He notes that Americans are likely "to avoid faiths that ask them to take doctrine seriously" (246). He points out again the doctrinal anemia of modern Christianity noting that "in religion, whatever the Lord requires, knowledge of his teaching is not among them" (247). Far from separating from the popular culture, modern Christians "tend to jump on whatever cultural fad happens to be preoccupying secular people in their society" (250).

In retrospect, Wolfe's book is an immensely helpful analysis of American religious life and evangelical Christianity. Questions might be raised about his methodological lumping of all "faiths" together in this study (Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Muslims) and not distinguishing their differences. He also fails to acknowledge the fact that freedom for religious pluralism is a result of a society influenced by Protestant Christianity. No such freedom exists in Muslim countries, for example. Its most valuable contribution for evangelical Christian is its sobering analysis of our cultural compromise.

We must admit that this outsider has hit the nail on the head. Our churches are doctrinally thin to the point of being ephemeral. Our naive attempts to embrace popular culture in evangelism have been a deal with the devil, and we are on the losing end. How striking that an outsider must tell us that we no longer define and preach against sin! Wolfe also reminds us that in the current cultural milieu churches that place a high value on doctrine will not have mass appeal. We should not expect it.

The one paragraph from Wolfe that shouts like a prophetic jeremiad to the church of today is this one from the conclusion:

Growth is the enemy of sectarianism. Religions committed to the principle that the world is irredeemably corrupt and the sin of human beings [is] deeply etched may be content to watch their membership numbers stagnate as they gather into sects, but just about all other religions in America want to be attractive to the uncommitted and to retain the already committed. This adherence to growth can have its frustrations; watching sermons reduced to PowerPoint presentations or listening to one easily forgettable praise song after another makes one long for an evangelical willing to stand up, Luther-like, and proclaim his opposition to the latest survey of evangelical taste. Tacky as evangelicalism can be, however, sectarian it is not. Its problem, in fact, is the opposite—so strong a desire to copy the culture of hotel chains and popular music that it loses what religious distinctiveness it once had (256-57).

May we ponder this outsider's call and stand "Luther-like" against the tide of compromise. ♦

By Jeffrey T. Riddle
Pastor, Jefferson Park Baptist Church, Charlottesville, Virginia

Paradosis

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

James Madison (better known as J. M.) Pendleton (1811-1891) was one of the so-called “Landmark Triumverate” (along with J. R. Graves and A. C. Dayton). Though best known for his ministry in Tennessee as a professor at Union College, Pendleton’s roots were in Virginia. He was born in Spotsylvania County, Virginia on November 20, 1811, but his family soon moved to Christian County, Kentucky.

*Although his Landmark views on the ordinances were controversial, we should not neglect Pendleton’s keen theological insights. Below is an excerpt from a chapter entitled “The Purposes of God” from his **Christian Doctrines: A Compendium of Theology** (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publications Society, 1878) in which Pendleton ponders the doctrine of reprobation.*

The Purposes of God

In closing this chapter I make brief reference to what is often called God’s purpose of “reprobation,” by which, as we have seen, is meant his purpose to leave some to themselves, to give them over “to a reprobate mind” (Rom 1:28). That there is such a purpose is as evident as that God has threatened his incorrigible enemies with everlasting destruction. His threatenings are in pursuance of his purpose, and in the absence of purpose there would be no threatenings. That God has purposed to leave to dishonor and the just punishment of their sins any of the human race is a tenet which many regard as both incredible and cruel. This tenet has been often misrepresented, and placed even in an odious light. How many have said with a semblance of holy horror, “Does God make men to damn them? Is he not too good to punish his creatures?” In both of these questions there is a deceptive ellipsis. In the first, the words, “for their sins” are omitted; and in the second the epithet “sinful” should qualify creatures. No intelligent believer in the divine purposes will say that God has made any of the sons of men with a view to their damnation without respect to their sins, or that he is not too good to punish his creatures as creatures. But how is it as to his purpose to damn men *for their sins* and to punish his *sinful* creatures? We must not suppose, because there is a purpose of election uninfluenced by foreseen holiness, that there is therefore a purpose of reprobation which has no connection with the sins of men. There is no such purpose as the latter, for the wages of sin is death. The lost earn the wages paid them—eternal death; but the saved do not earn eternal life, for it is the gift of God. It is a fact that every mouth is stopped and all the world is guilty before God. All the inhabitants of the world being guilty deserve to be punished; that is, deserve to suffer the penalty of the law by a violation of which guilt has been incurred. God may justly punish the guilty—all the guilty—for their sins. If he chooses to save some of them to the praise of his glorious grace, and to leave the rest to suffer the consequences of sin to the glory of his justice, who shall find fault? Who shall charge God with unrighteousness? But some object to any *purpose* on the part of God to punish sinners. There is nothing valid in the objection. God does punish men for their sins. It is therefore right for him to do so, for he cannot do wrong. If it right, it cannot be wrong for him to form the purpose to punish, for his purpose is only his intention to do right in vindication of his justice.

Thus does it appear that this purpose of God is in full accord with the soundest principles of reason and righteousness. It is nothing more than his determination to treat those who live and die in impenitence as they deserve to be treated. There will be no departure from these principles in the miseries of hell. No lost sinner will ever feel a pang which he does not deserve to feel. There will be no arbitrary inflection of pain. No groan will be capriciously wrung from the bosom. No tear will be causelessly drawn from the eye. The fires of perdition will glorify the perfect justice of God. The wages of sin is death, and no more wages will be paid than have been earned. Justice will be done, and the sinner will feel that justice has him in custody. What anguish will this fact create! Could the ruined sinner persuade himself that his damnation is his misfortune, and not his fault; that he is unjustly dealt with,—how would his miseries be alleviated! But there will be no such alleviation. The sorrows of hell are unmitigated sorrows. The lost soul will know and feel that it suffers it deserts – no more, no less.

In the blogosphere

You can read the *Stylos* weblog (blog) of *EFN* Editor Jeffrey T. Riddle at www.jpbcstylos.blogspot.com.

You can also read the *Baptist Reform* weblog (blog) of Evangelical Forum steering committee member Travis Hilton, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Bluefield, Virginia at www.baptistreform.blogspot.com.



Available from Jefferson Park Press

J. B. Jeter, *The Obligations of Baptists to Their Distinctive Principles.*

This 21 page booklet is a reprint of Jeter's 1877 sermon preached at the annual meeting of Virginia Baptists in which he admonishes the churches to "earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude 3). Perfect for individual or group study. Cost: \$3.00 per booklet.

Jeffrey T. Riddle, *A Biblical Response to the Da Vinci Code.*

This 37 page booklet surveys the *Da Vinci Code* publishing phenomenon and offers a clear and concise Biblical response. Perfect for individual or group study. Cost: \$3.00 per booklet.

To order: Email request to jeffparkchurch@juno.com or call 434-293-6175.

Evangelical Forum Newsletter



Back Issues Now Available On-line
at www.jpbc.org/ef.html.

Links also available to audio files of
2005 Evangelical Forum plenary sessions.

In this issue:

- Editorial p. 19** *The Times They Are A Changing*
By Jeffrey T. Riddle
- Note p. 19** **Evangelical Forum Upcoming Events**
- Article p. 20** *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: How Should Southern Baptists Respond to the Issue of Calvinism?*
By Danny Akin
- News p. 26** **News of Interest**
- Note p. 28** *IMB Trustee Chairman offers “Open Letters” to Southern Baptists*
- Note p. 32** *A Historical Perspective on Controversy in Denominational Institutions*
- Note p. 33** *Irenaeus and the so-called Gospel of Judas*
- Review p. 34** **Book Review: *The Deliberate Church***
By Steven R. Hills
- Review p. 36** **Book Review: *The Transformation of American Religion***
By Jeffrey T. Riddle
- Paradosis p. 38** *The Purposes of God*
By J. M. Pendleton

Evangelical Forum



Return Service Requested

2505 JEFFERSON PARK AVE
CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA 22903
Phone: 434-293-6175 Fax: 434-293-3585
Email: jeffparkchurch@juno.com
Web: www.jpbc.org

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Charlottesville, VA
Permit No. 32