

The Rise & Demise of Calvinism Among Southern Baptists

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In Search of Restoration of the Land

A woman of Shunem had house and land. Her recognition of God's goodness to her was demonstrated in the care she gave to God's prophet, Elisha. God had also twice blessed her with one son. His conception was God's gift, and, when he died as a child accompanying his father to the field, God's prophet restored him to life. Her life was overflowing with the grace of God.

When a famine of seven years came to the land, Elisha forewarned her to leave. She did. At the end of seven years, she returned and immediately made her way to see the king, intending to appeal for the restoration of house and land. Providentially, at the moment she came before the king, the story of the resuscitation of her son had just been told him. When she verified its truth, the king immediately saw to it that all that was hers, including the produce of the intervening years, was restored (cf. 2 Kings 8:1-6).

The first two generations of Southern Baptists received nurture and kingdom zeal from a theological system they called "the doctrine of grace." Bequeathed to them by their Baptist forefathers, this understanding of God's infinite majesty and the pure gratuity of his saving activity defined Baptist faith and practice. Subsequent generations succumbed to the theological famine which plagued twentieth-century American Christianity. Perhaps by God's good providence a reminder of the grace that formed us will inspire a restoration-of, what?-let's say, of ourselves, to the fountain of God's life-giving grace and to the understanding of that grace which gave godly vision to our founders.

Early New England

The story of the commitment of early Baptists to the doctrines of grace is a picture of unity and fortitude. The earliest Baptist in America, Roger Williams, was a decided Calvinist and built his theory of religious liberty on his commitment to total depravity, unconditional election, effectual calling, perseverance of the saints, and definite

atonement. Those who persecuted men over matters of conscience were guilty of an Arminian, popish error of free will, as if it lay in the power of a man's will to believe evangelically simply because the magistrate threatens him with punishment if he doesn't.

Isaac Backus, the historian of Baptists in New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had clear intentions to show that these Baptists were "sound in the faith and much acquainted with experimental and practical religion."^[1] He was careful to publish, therefore, not only their experiences of suffering for the sake of Baptist ecclesiology and freedom of conscience, but their confessions of faith on theological issues as well. The story of John Clarke, according to the method of Backus, would not be complete without establishing his theological convictions. Clarke, the founder of the second Baptist church in Rhode Island and America, begins his personal confession of faith by showing his unity with the Puritans and Pilgrims of Massachusetts in affirming that the "decree of God is that whereby God hath from eternity set down with himself whatsoever shall come to pass in time." A part of this decree consists of the unconditional election of certain individuals to salvation.

Election is the decree of God, of his free love, grace, and mercy, choosing some men to faith, holiness and eternal life, for the praise of his glorious mercy; I Thes. i. 4, II Thes. ii. 13, Rom. viii. 29, 30. The cause which moved the Lord to elect them who are chosen, was none other but his mere good will and pleasure, Luke xii, 32.^[2]

Obadiah Holmes, Clarke's friend, shared not only his Baptist convictions and willingness to suffer for truth, but joined him in his confidence in God's wise and certain purpose in salvation. A distillation of total depravity, particular and unconditional election, effectuality calling, and final perseverance constitute his affirmation that "no man can come to the Son but they that are drawn by the Father to the Son, and they that come, he in no wise will cast away." This doctrine is wrapped in the historical certainty of the irrevocable nature of Christ's reconciling death: "I believe God hath laid the iniquity of all his elect and called ones, upon him," Holmes affirmed. For this reason we can be assured that "the Father is fully satisfied, and the debt is truly paid to the utmost farthing, and the poor sinner is quit, and set free from all sin past, present and to

come.”[3]

The Move South

First Baptist Church of Boston, established by Thomas Gould with the help of Particular Baptists from England, played a major role in the establishing of Baptist life in the South. William Screven, a Baptist from England and signer of the Somerset Confession of Faith, was ordained by the church in January 1682 so that he might establish a church in Kittery, Maine. Later the church in Boston set aside the group in Kittery as a separate congregation. A part of the examination included their determining that the Kittery group conscientiously acknowledged the Second London Confession of Faith. This church eventually moved, in 1696, to Charleston, South Carolina, becoming the first Baptist Church in the South. When Screven retired as pastor, he warned the congregation to obtain a man to lead them as soon as possible and be careful that he is “orthodox in faith, and of blameless life, and does own the confession of faith put forth by our brethren in London in 1689.”

The power and influence of this confession continued for many years. Three of the most notable pastors of the church were Oliver Hart, Richard Furman, and Basil Manly.

Oliver Hart

Oliver Hart was born July 5, 1723, in Warminster, Bucks County, PA. His parents taught him Christian truth from his earliest years. He was converted in 1741 and baptized in April of that year, not quite 18 years old. Richard Furman remarks that this was “at an early period.” Hart often heard the Tennents and George Whitefield. Hart himself testified that he received great benefit from the preaching of George Whitefield.

December 20, 1746, he was licensed to preach by the Baptist Church at Southampton, PA. Almost three years later he was ordained to the gospel ministry. Hart immediately came to the South in response to a call for ministers. In 1749, he is listed as one of the ministers of the Philadelphia Association. In that year the association presented an essay on the “Powers of an Association” which Oliver Hart signed. He was called to pastoral charge of the First Baptist Church, Charleston, S.C., in February, 1750, and continued there for 30 years.

In his funeral oration for Hart, Richard Furman characterized Hart as a “Calvinist, and a

consistent, liberal [generous] Baptist.” He continued,

The doctrines of free, efficacious grace, were precious to him; Christ Jesus, and him crucified, in the perfection of his righteousness, the merit of his death, the prevalence of his intercession, and efficacy of his grace, was the foundation of his hope, the source of his joy, and the delightful theme of his preaching.[4]

Furman, a keen observer of preachers and preaching, described Hart’s sermons as “peculiarly serious, containing a happy assemblage of doctrinal and practical truths.” Doctrinal preaching, as a matter of fact especially suited him for he was prepared “by an intimate acquaintance with the sacred scriptures, and an extensive reading of the most valuable, both ancient and modern, authors.”[5]

On at least three occasions Hart preached ordination sermons built on 1 Timothy 4:16. Edmund Botsford, Joseph Cook, and Samuel Stillman all heard Hart admonish them to take heed to themselves and the doctrine. They would constantly remember their own interest in Christ and the work of grace in their souls. He reminded them:

You cannot be qualified to deal with wounded spirits, unless you have been sensible of your own wounds. It is not possible you should, in a suitable Manner, direct Sinners to Christ, without an actual Closure with him yourselves.[6]

In speaking to the candidates for ministry about their doctrine, Hart said, “In general you will insist upon the two following Topics, namely our apostacy from God, and our Redemption by Jesus Christ, which will very naturally lead you to take notice of the Transactions of God in eternity, with reference to your salvation.” They were to bear in mind that the persons for whom God’s salvation has been given “are a certain, select number, out of the Race of Mankind, who are redeemed by his blood, justified by his righteousness, called by the inscrutable operations of his Spirit, sanctified by his grace, and finally glorified.”

In 1780, Hart was forced by the British invasion of Charleston to leave his beloved people. He found his way to Hopewell, New Jersey, and became pastor of the Baptist church. Again he was a part of the Philadelphia Association. In fact,

in 1780, at the Associational meeting the minutes recorded “Rev. Oliver Hart of Charleston, South Carolina” was present, and, along with three others, was admitted “to the full privilege of members.” He was “unanimously requested to preach” on the evening of Wednesday October 18. In 1782, he was chosen moderator and also presented the associational letter on the eighth chapter of the Confession, which treats Christ as mediator.[7] In this letter, he presented a strong statement on the necessity of the orthodox understanding of Christ’s person, “God and man in one person.” The human nature was taken “in union with and subsisted in the person of the Son of God.” He spoke also of the eternal counsel of the Triune Jehovah and voluntary submission of the Son to undertake for the people he had chosen: “Jehovah, the Father, in his manifold wisdom, having predestinated a select number of the fallen race to the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord, now proposed the business or work of saving the elect, to Jehovah the Son.” Hart says that in Christ’s position as mediator, “All the sins of an elect world were imputed to him.” As mediator He sustained several characters or offices which qualify Him for His work. He is covenant head to the elect; He is surety of His people in which office He took His people’s whole debt to the law upon Himself “in consequence of which, the elect...were set free;” He is an advocate “for all the chosen people of God” whose advocacy proved “efficacious to the pardoning, justifying, and glorifying an elect world;” He is a prophet in which office he teaches “powerfully and efficaciously by his Word and Spirit;” He is a priest in which capacity he “was offered up a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice[8] for the sins of an elect world;” He is a king as which he gives the saints “the most glorious charter of privileges contained in the covenant of grace.”

I have entered into some degree of detail concerning Oliver Hart because, like William Screven, he represents the continuity of doctrine from New England through the South. He also personifies the unanimity of doctrine and fellowship between the Philadelphia Association and the Charleston Association. It was due largely to Hart’s vision and energy that associational life developed among Southern Baptist churches. Furman says, “He was the prime mover in that plan for the association of churches, by which so many of our churches are very happily united at the present day.” The Charleston Association was established in 1751 one year after Oliver Hart came to Charleston and while the spiritual streams of the First Great Awakening were flowing into southern baptistries. Following the lead of the Philadelphia Association, the Charleston

Association, in 1767, adopted the Second London Confession as an expression of its doctrinal stance and used the *Baptist Catechism* regularly also. The Association's "Summary of Discipline" leaned heavily on John Gill's *Body of Divinity*.

Hart also led in the movement toward assisting young men to receive an education for the ministry. Both of these Baptist principles so strong in our own day (inter-church cooperation and education for the ministry) had their beginning in the South from Oliver Hart, a strong Calvinist who had been influenced toward this in the context of the Philadelphia Association.

Richard Furman

Richard Furman, who succeeded Hart as pastor of FBC Charleston, was born on October 9, 1755, at Esopus, New York, and was reared in a pious Anglican family. In 1771, Furman experienced a dramatic conversion under the preaching of Joseph Reese, a zealous Separate Baptist, who questioned Furman thoroughly in front of the entire church just before his baptism. Furman went through a period of deep study of Scripture and doctrine and long hours of prayer and meditation. He even stood as an exhorter in worship services in spite of ridicule and opposition from his teen-age peers.

In 1773, at eighteen, Furman was licensed by the High Hills Church. This action put him in contact with a company of men who would greatly influence him. In that year he met Oliver Hart, who was greatly impressed with the young preacher and from the beginning treated Furman as an equal. He also met John Gano, a messenger that year from the Philadelphia Association to the Charleston Association. Furman enjoyed the "rigorous intellect, the ready eloquence, scriptural knowledge, evangelical simplicity, and fervid devotion" of Gano. Gano wrote the circular letter for the Philadelphia Association in 1784 on "Effectual Calling" defining it as "an act of sovereign grace, which flows from the everlasting love of God, and is such an irresistible impression made by the Holy Spirit upon the human soul as to effect a blessed change." Gano defined the "called" as "such as God hath chosen and predestinated both to grace and glory, elected and set apart in Christ, as redeemed by his blood, although by nature children of wrath even as others." That Gano's impact on Furman was substantial is seen by the tribute Furman paid to him at his death in 1806.

As a minister of Christ, he shone like a star of the first magnitude in the American churches and moved in a widely extended field of action....He was not deficient in doctrinal discussion, or what rhetoricians call the demonstrative character of a discourse; but he excelled in the pathetic,—in pungent, forcible addresses to the heart and conscience. The careless and irreverent were suddenly arrested, and stood awed before him; and the insensible were made to feel, while he asserted and maintained the honour of his God, explained the meaning of the Divine law, showing its purity and justice, exposed the sinner's guilt proved him to be miserable, ruined and inexcusable, and called him to unfeigned, immediate repentance...The doctrines he embraced were those which are contained in the Baptist Confession of Faith, and are commonly styled Calvinistic. But he was of a liberal mind, and esteemed pious men of every denomination. While he maintained, with consistent firmness, the doctrines which he believed to be the truths of God, he was modest in the judgment which he formed of this own opinion, and careful to avoid giving offence.... He was cordially esteemed and honoured by the wise and good of all denominations.[9]

That description could very well be applied to Furman himself. Furman's sermons were filled with doctrine, though he was not doctrinaire. He was a strong Calvinist of the historic experiential kind. His love for gospel truth shone bright and pure; its beauty, however, did not consist of its abstract conformity to ideal categories or its internal consistency, though he would defend both. Its beauty consisted of its enlightening and transforming impact on the heart, under the Spirit's power, so as to renew the image of God in fallen creatures, recreating them in true righteousness and holiness.

His sermon entitled "Conversion Essential to Salvation" demonstrates the beauty of applied Calvinism.[10] Though Furman understood the technical difference between conversion and regeneration as some theologians defined the terms, his aim was not to present a "refined metaphysical discussion." He simply defined conversion as "a renovation of the soul, by the spirit of God." This definition was predicated on the doctrines of man's depravity and God's holiness. It does not involve an extinction of any of the natural faculties of the soul, but these faculties all undergo a "great and evident change, in a moral or spiritual sense."

Something in the nature of regeneration is "mysterious and wonderful" and as

inscrutable as the “operations and effects of the wind in the natural world.” Its effects, however, will be “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ; a hatred to sin, and a love to holiness; supreme love to God, and unfeigned benevolence to men,” including sincerity, humility, meekness, patience, and all the accompanying graces, which distinguish and adorn the “new man.” We see in this construction that Furman expounds the normal Calvinistic *ordo salutis*. Regeneration, or the new birth, precedes by virtue of moral necessity the graces of repentance and faith. He goes on to say later, “We have already seen, that the renovation of a sinner is the work of God. A man cannot change his own heart: How then can he effect this necessary, important change in the soul of another?”^[11]

Basil Manly

This same commitment to experiential Calvinism is seen in the ministry of Basil Manly, who was pastor of this same church from March of 1826 through November 2 of 1837, part of which time James P. Boyce, founder and first president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was a lad in the church. His sermon entitled “Divine Efficiency Consistent with Human Activity,” preached in 1849 in Alabama captures the spirit which was dominant in the churches in those days. Manly contends that men reject the doctrine of divine efficiency because “the doctrine of dependence on the divine being throws us constantly into the hands, and on the mercy of God. Proud man does not like it.” In concluding a section in which he had spoken boldly and deeply concerning the nature of God’s foreknowledge, Manly exclaimed, “My brethren, however mysterious and incomprehensible it may be, that God chose a poor sinner like me—freely chose me, loved me, redeemed me, called me, justified me, and will glorify me—I will rejoice in the truth, and thank him for his free grace! O, where is boasting then? Not at the feet of Jesus, not at the cross. It belongs not to that position.”^[12]

The Georgia Connection:

All I know Is What I Read in the Papers

Georgia Baptists, just as clearly as those of South Carolina, embraced the devotional, experiential Calvinism expressed in the Baptist Confession of Faith. In 1839, a Brother C. Collins was upset because of the bad influence a recent Methodist protracted meeting had among the Baptists. Some of his own brethren complained about his preaching saying, “there was too much election in it, the doctrine was too strong.” He

called for the *Christian Index*, a Baptist newspaper in Georgia, to “put something into the *Index* on doctrinal points” because there appeared to be “a great falling off among the Baptists from the doctrines they once held.” Jesse Mercer, the senior editor of the paper, was delighted to report that in the very issue the junior editor, William H. Stokes, had begun “extracting articles from the Baptist Confession of Faith with remarks.” Stokes’s introductory article argued that, though the Bible without doubt is the final, and indeed only, authority in matters of faith and practice, “compends of faith” also are useful. They state explicitly the faith of a group so that a general statement of adherence to the Bible will not be used as a “shield for heterodox opinions.” He called for an adoption of the Confession by all Baptist associations to achieve a “oneness in doctrine and practice” since “this venerable little book, does contain the doctrines systematically arranged, which are held by the old-fashioned, Calvinistic Baptists the world over.”

In the weeks that followed, the *Index* printed the first nine chapters of the confession. At times extensive remarks on one or two points were added and at other times only a brief comment followed. After the section on the decrees of God, the writer lamented that many brethren had opposed that article but in their opposition had “railed and not reasoned.” The doctrines had been “attacked from the pulpit” and “miserably misrepresented” in a way that was neither fair, right, manly, or honest. The writer, however, contended that “when the scriptures referred to” in the confession of faith “are carefully and prayerfully studied,” the “much abused ‘five points’ will be found in perfect accordance with gospel truth, and that they more than any other scheme, reflect honor upon the Divine character.”

In his notes concerning the chapter on “Christ the Mediator” the junior editor argues strongly for the particularity and efficacy of the death of Christ.

Is it to be supposed that he intended him to go unrewarded for his deep abasement, his labor and travail—for his obedience even unto death; for his glorious victory over the grave and all the powers of darkness? Can it be thought for a moment, that the Father would prepare a body for his Son—make him Prophet, Priest, and King—the great head of the Church, and still leave it in perfect uncertainty whether he should be rewarded for his mediatorial work or not?...He was not to be disappointed, nor was the object of his blood-shedding to be lost.

Jesse Mercer also printed in 1843 a series of messages written by C. D. Mallery, who just two years after these appeared was elected president of the new Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. The messages gave an exposition of Ephesians 1:3, 4 and unpacked the doctrine of election in several of its connections. He discussed the doctrine in light of the nature of God, in its connection with other biblical doctrines, as a necessary expository conclusion from several key passages of scripture, as opposed to a variety of objections, and in its practical effects. Mallery defined election as “God’s free, sovereign, eternal and unchangeable purpose to glorify the perfections of His character in the salvation of a definite number of the human family by Jesus Christ, without regard to any foreseen merit or good works on their part, as the ground or condition of this choice.”^[13] His development of this teaching is well-balanced but reflects the typically, for that time, southern [lower case on purpose because it’s still 1843] Baptist love for the experiential elements of God’s grace. In a passage reminiscent of the images and thoughts of Furman, Mallery discussed effectual calling in light of Jonathan Edwards’s distinction between natural ability and moral ability. “It is very easy,” Mallery claims, “for that person to do right, who is willing to do right.” A call which results in salvation must operate, therefore, in such a way as to create a desire for holiness; in other words, it must be effectual to be salvific. Mallery surmises:

What additional power or favor may or may not have been bestowed upon men as sinners, I would not now undertake to explain; but this much I will say, that whatever power may be granted, or whatever influence may be exerted upon the hearts of men, if it does not rise higher than the rebellion of the human bosom, and so operate on the perverse will as to determine it to that which is good, this influence never will be rightly improved nor result in the salvation of one single soul....Jehovah must put forth the energies of his Spirit, and by giving pungency to truth and force to the notions of the Gospel, bring down the rebellious will into sweet and cheerful submission, and plant in the bosom those pure and gracious affections which it is the duty of all to possess and exercise, but from which all alike, if left to themselves, will remain totally and forever estranged.

Given this reality combined with God’s intention to save and the eternal nature of his

purposes, Mallery concludes, "Hence, then, we are driven by the doctrine of human depravity into the doctrine of sovereign, particular, unconditional and eternal election."

The Churches Agree

This theology was not the ivory tower expression of the few theological *literati* among Baptists in the South. Those truths quickened devotion and worship of the churches. In December, 1839, the Indian Creek Baptist Church outside of Atlanta, Georgia, was organized. Their confession's form and content showed the theological ubiquity of Calvinism through the confessional impact of the 1689 [Philadelphia, Charleston] Confession among the general populace of Baptists. They state their belief in the "fall of Adam and the imputation of sin to his posterity" and in the "corruption of human nature and the impotency of man to recover himself by his own free will ability." In another article they state, "We believe in the everlasting love of God to His people, and the eternal election of a definite number of the human race to grace and glory." In addition they were convicted that "all of those who are chosen in Christ will be effectually called, regenerated, converted, sanctified, and supported, by the Spirit and the power of God, so that they will persevere in grace and not one of them be finally lost."

Leading Lights

John L. Dagg, the first writing Baptist theologian in America, served in Virginia (the state of his birth), as pastor of the prestigious Fifth Baptist Church in Philadelphia from 1825 to 1833, as trustee of Columbian College, as an officer of the Triennial Convention, and as an active member of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, the American and Foreign Bible Society, and the Baptist General Tract Society. From 1844 to 1854 he was president of Mercer University as well as professor of theology. For two years beyond his tenure as president he continued to teach theology. His *Manual of Theology* published in 1857 clearly aligns with the order and content of the Philadelphia Confession of faith. Its artistic and compelling presentation of the power and spiritual warmth of experiential Calvinism embodied the ideal of Southern Baptist thinking about the Christian faith in the nineteenth century. He was bold to say that objections to unconditional election will be found to contain "some lurking idea that it is safer to trust in something else than in God's absolute mercy." Such distrust is dangerous to the soul and the doctrine of election delivers one from this danger. "It tends to produce precisely that trust in God, that complete surrender of ourselves to him, to which alone the

promise of eternal life is made.” Should we persist in our resistance to the doctrine “we ought to consider whether we do not at the same time, reject our only hope of life everlasting.”[14]

P. H. Mell, the friend and contemporary of Dagg, joined him in his passion for the distinguishing truths of Calvinism, consistently presenting them as normative Baptist theology. In his 1884 centennial summary of Baptists in Georgia entitled “The Fathers of the Association,” Mell reported that “The prominent themes of the ministry of our fathers were the great doctrines of grace—man’s guilt and impotency, and God’s electing love.” Their preaching, according to Mell, “gave impressive proof that the great doctrines of grace are preeminently qualified to bring men to repentance and salvation.”[15] In that year, the year of Dagg’s death in Alabama, Mell was confident that those themes still prevailed in the Georgia Zion.

The Intention of Theological Training

Another example of Calvinistic theology and confessionalism among Southern Baptists is seen in J. P. Boyce’s address to the trustees at Furman University in the year 1856. Calling for the enforcement of a doctrinal standard on teachers in Baptist theological institutions, Boyce also was bold enough to recommend what precise standard should be adopted.

For all the purposes aimed at, no other test can be equally effective with that Confession of faith acknowledged in the Charleston Baptist Association — the doctrines of which had almost universal prevalence in this state at the time of the foundation of the institution. Let that then be adopted, and let subscription to it on the part of each theological professor be required as an assurance of his entire agreement with its views of doctrine and of his determination to teach fully the truth which it expresses and nothing contrary to its declarations.[16]

When Southern Seminary was established, Boyce reports that the Philadelphia Confession was seriously considered as the official confessional statement of the seminary. For several compelling reasons, however, a separate confession was constructed by a committee with Basil Manly, Jr., at its head. One guiding concern prominent in its composition was that it must include “a complete exhibition of the

fundamental doctrines of grace, so that in no essential particular should they speak dubiously.”

Boyce himself exhibited no tendency to “speak dubiously” on the doctrines of grace. His *Abstract of Systematic Theology* placed God’s sovereign purposes in salvation at the heart of his discussion from the attributes of God to the final judgment. God’s righteous sovereignty permeated his system because, in his view, it permeated all of Scripture. After spending several pages expounding what Boyce called “the Calvinistic theory of personal, unconditional, and eternal Election,” he argued that resistance to the doctrine “arises from an unwillingness on the part of man to recognize the sovereignty of God, and to ascribe salvation entirely to grace.” He had given attention only to some concise biblical passages which allowed more full exposition but certainly had not exhausted the biblical presentation of this truth. More lavish treatment would by no means exaggerate the biblical emphasis.

Let the Scriptures be read with reference to this doctrine and every passage marked which indicates God’s dealing with men as an absolute sovereign, and also every declaration which ascribes Election or the fruits of it to his choice and not to the will or acts of men, and every illustration afforded that this is God’s usual method, and it will appear that scarcely any book of Scripture will fail to furnish testimony to the fact that in the acts of grace, no less than those of providence, God “doeth according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.” Dan. 4:3-5.[17]

To Points Beyond

Baptists first moved to and settled in the Mississippi-Louisiana frontier around 1780. These people moved from the Charleston, South Carolina, area because the British had occupied the city in that year. Their theology clearly arose from the Charleston Confession of Faith. When they first formally organized a meeting for Baptist worship, they adopted a set of “Church Rules,” “Rules of Discipline,” and a “Church Covenant.” The church covenant contained a confession of faith which merely highlighted the doctrines they believed. Article one on the Holy Scripture reflects not only the order of the 1689, or Charleston, confession but the language is reminiscent of it. The second and third articles, which concern the “Living and True God” and the doctrine of the

Trinity, again reflect the order and concept of the old confession. Article four concerns the person of Christ and his role as mediator. Article five states:

We believe in the doctrine of Particular Redemption, personal Election, Effectual calling, Justification by the imputed Righteousness of Jesus Christ, Pardon for sins, by his atoning blood, Believer's baptism by immersion, the Final perseverance of the Saints, the Resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

When the Mississippi Baptist Association was formed in 1807, it adopted 9 articles of faith. These also reflect the order and language of the Charleston Confession. Articles 3-7 follow.

1. We believe in the fall of Adam; in the imputation of his sins to all his posterity; in the total depravity of human nature; and in man's inability to restore himself to the favor of God.
2. We believe in the everlasting love of God to his people; in the eternal unconditional election of a definite number of the human family to grace and glory.
3. We believe that sinners are only justified in the sight of God, by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is unto all and upon all them that believe.
4. We believe all those who were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world are, in time, effectually called, regenerated, converted, and sanctified; and are kept, by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation.
5. We believe there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who, by the satisfaction which he made to law and justice, "in becoming an offering for sin," hath, by his most precious blood, redeemed the elect from under the curse of the law, that they might be holy and without blame before him in love.

Mullins's Mild Modifications

In a study of Southern Baptist theology entitled *Winds of Doctrine*, W. Wiley Richards locates the origin of Calvinism's decline in the middle half of the nineteenth century. His thesis is interesting but his evidence is ambivalent.^[18] Only slight, isolated, and idiosyncratic declines from Calvinism entered Southern Baptist theology prior to the 20th century. No one of trend-setting influence seriously challenged the Calvinistic hegemony before the arrival of E. Y. Mullins as president of The Southern Baptist

Theological Seminary in 1899. He had entered as a student in 1881, receiving his degree in 1885. His return as president came after serving pastorates in Baltimore, Maryland, and Newton Center, Massachusetts.

During his 29 years as president, Mullins became a dominant force in Southern Baptist denominational life (convention president 1921-24) as well as a world-wide Baptist leader (president of the Baptist World Alliance 1923-28).

As a theologian, Mullins worked energetically to create a new theological paradigm for the defense of evangelical Christianity and in the process redefined both theological method and content for Southern Baptists. He gradually steered the Southern Baptist theological ship in a different direction by imposing the New England Baptist reticence toward confessions and creeds characteristic of Francis Wayland and the philosophical personalism of Borden Parker Bowne, a professor of philosophy at Boston University.

The Bible

His experientialism softened the belly of apologetics for biblical revelation as he created a superficial identity between argument for biblical authority and an unwarranted imposition of religion on the conscience. Defenses of biblical authority, or inerrancy, which relied on *a priori* reasoning, or syllogisms, were counterproductive to real spiritual life, in Mullins's view. Truth must be assimilated experientially, he reasoned, not "imposed by authority of any kind, whether pope or church or Bible."^[19]

Confessional Unity

Mullins's dislike for the *a priori* method made him just as hesitant to advocate inferential theology as he was to construct a theory of inerrancy. Mullins could still admit that creeds "help rather than hinder," especially as a tool to educate us "to unity of faith and practice" and "as means of propagating the faith" and as an instrument to judge whether an individual or group may have departed from the "common view sufficiently to warrant separation."^[20]

On the other hand, his language to describe the dangers of creeds can be picturesque and compelling. "As soon as [creeds] become binding they become divisive," Mullins said; and they "inevitably lead to mischief in the church."^[21] He speaks of creeds as becoming "stereotyped and formal" and used as "death masks for defunct religion" or

“lashes to chastise others.” A creed without life “becomes a chain to bind, not wings on which the soul may fly.” Nothing is more distasteful than the idea of a barren intellectualism, void of life, where creeds may become “whips to coerce men into uniformity of belief by carnally-minded champions of the faith.”[22]

Mullins encouraged a tentative and mediating approach toward confessions by creating a false dichotomy. Baptists are not creed-makers he said, because “the Scriptures are a sufficient revelation of his will.”[23] The sufficiency of Scripture is not the only spiritual reality to which creeds may be antagonistic. “They become barriers to the free development of personality in religion” when the propagation of them takes the place of the personal dimension of the God/man relationship.[24]

In spite of tipping his hat to their usefulness, Mullins’s warnings about the possible killing effects of creeds overwhelmed his weak attempts at advocacy. His heightened emphasis on the superiority of experience to creed, his clear warnings about the dangers of creeds, and the vivid images he evoked in speaking of their oppressive use tended to neutralize their advantages as instruments of education, definition, and discipline. Some of his warnings, though warranted if a genuine danger were present, were overstated and treated the worst possible scenario as the most possible scenario. His implication that the use of a creed and the experiential commitment to biblical truth are mutually exclusive will simply not bear the weight of the historical facts.

Calvinism

Though Mullins’s doctrinal positions reflected some characteristically Calvinistic emphases, he hesitated to identify himself with either Calvinism or Arminianism as a system, preferring to “adhere more closely than either to the Scriptures, while retaining the truth in both systems.”[25]

Mullins’s chosen approach made him more anthropocentric than theocentric and eventually eroded any meaningful emphasis on God’s sovereignty. Though election is, for Mullins, both personal and unconditional it operates within “limitations imposed upon his [good] action by the nature of human freedom and sin.”[26] He dismisses the discussion of the extent of the atonement in less than one page, affirming a universal atonement.[27] He does not discuss bondage of the will, but does say that “without God’s prevenient grace the will inevitably chooses evil”[28] and that men if left to

themselves “would inevitably refuse salvation.” In order to protect human freedom, however, God reduces “his own action to the minimum lest he compel the will.”[29]

Fraying Loose Ends

The clear and precise commitment of Southern Baptists to Calvinism diminished rapidly after the time of Mullins. Preachers and teachers began to dismiss even the remnants of Calvinism remaining in Mullins. Dale Moody’s *The Word of Truth* gloried in the fact that it was the first theology by a Southern Baptist completely to dismiss all “five points” of Calvinism, including Perseverance of the Saints.[30] Nothing more antithetical to the position of Dagg and Boyce, indeed to their entire understanding of the spirit and fabric of the Christian faith, could be produced. Herschel Hobbs, in his reworking of Mullins’s *Axioms of Religion*, focuses on man’s freedom over God’s sovereignty when he pictures God’s activity as limited simply to offering “every incentive.” “The final choice,” however, “lay with man. God in his sovereignty set the condition. Man in his free will determines the result.”[31]

Another striking example of this is seen by comparing Mullins’s treatment of the potter and the clay with that of Wayne Dehoney. Mullins describes the potter as working toward beauty if the clay is “yielding and plastic.” Should the clay be refractory, the goal is not accomplished — “all of which means that God will not do violence to the will of man. His sovereignty is holy and loving; it respects human freedom.”[32]

Wayne Dehoney employs the same biblical picture with similar conclusions but with a kerygmatic flair. After describing the potter’s patient work resulting only in a destroyed vessel, he says: “Herein is an awesome truth! You and I, finite beings, can thwart the purpose of the Almighty God! We can resist and rebel and cause God himself to fail in our lives!”[33]

Later Dehoney applied this same idea by pressing his hearers to yield to a God who “is subject to your will, your response, your decision! By yielding to him in confession, repentance and faith, he will make you over and you can begin again, today!”[34]

None of Mullins’s concern for the efficacy of God’s holy and loving sovereignty is retained; only the dominant anthropocentric concern for freedom remains.

Conclusion

Southern Baptist beginnings were self-consciously and vigorously Calvinistic. This is reflected in the confessions, the associations, the preachers, and the theologians. The changes that have come could with clear justification be called “theological apostasy.” Some feel the force of this historical reality and with both conscience and conviction desire to restore the spiritual dynamic of the living truth of the documents. Others would rather ignore the implications of this theological matrix. As the outworkings of this apostasy have established themselves, we should see that the changes have not contributed to our health but have spawned a climate of theological disunity, rampant absenteeism, a circus mentality in much evangelism, and a justified distress concerning the spirituality of professing Christians.

The two generations of Mullins and his successors succeeded not in perpetuating but in altering historic theological commitments of Baptists.^[35] The microcosm of diversity embodied in Mullins was not reflective of an existing condition in Southern Baptist life. Rather, he was the seminal power in the procreation of a diversity innately centrifugal. The ideas which supported his treatment of biblical authority, the use of confessions, and divine sovereignty had no cohesive power. Though often scintillating, they were so individualistic that they had no hope of serving as an effective unitive force for a denomination intent on eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of its people in one sacred effort for the propagation of the gospel.

“So the king appointed unto her a certain officer, saying, Restore all that was hers, and all the fruits of the field since the day that she left the land, even until now.”

¹Isaac Backus, *A History of New England*, second edition with notes, 2 vols. in one. Newton, Mass.: Backus Historical Society, 1871; reprint edition 1969 by Arno Press, Inc., New York, 1:205.

²*Ibid.*, p. 206

³*Ibid.*, p. 207

⁴Richard Furman, *Rewards of Grace conferred on Christ's faithful People* (Charleston: Printed at J. M'Iver, 1796), p. 24.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶The details of this sermon are reported in Robert A. Baker, *Adventure in Faith: The First Three Hundred Years of First Baptist Church, Charleston, South Carolina* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982), pp. 139-142.

⁷For the full text of the sermon see *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, from A. D. 1707 to A. D. 1807*, ed., A. D. Gillette (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851) pp. 181-191.

⁸One of the remarkable features of this sermon is the number of times Hart quotes verbatim from the *Baptist Catechism* as a foundation for his theological exposition. He does this at least on seven occasions. This phrase is an answer to the question, "How does Christ execute the office of a Priest?"

⁹Richard Furman on "John Gano in William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1865), 6:66. Gano preached for Hart in Charleston in 1754 and found, much to his fear that among the twelve clergymen in the congregation was George Whitefield. Gano says that he was soon relieved of this embarrassment when he came to realize that he had none to fear and obey but the Lord.

¹⁰Richard Furman, *Conversion Essential to Salvation* (Charleston: Printed by J. Hoff, 1816). This sermon was preached before the Religious Tract Society of Charleston in the First Presbyterian Church at its first anniversary meeting on June 10, 1816.

¹¹This priority of regeneration is affirmed in Article IV of the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*. This document describes regeneration as “a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, *to which the sinner responds* in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” [emphasis added].

¹²The Sermon may be found in *Southern Baptist Sermons on Sovereignty and Responsibility*, ed., Thomas J. Nettles (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1984), pp. 9-32.

¹³*The Christian Index*, Friday, January 20, 1843, p. 42. The article continued each week through February 3. Mallery had delivered the address at a ministers’ meeting sometime previous to this publication but submitted it to the *Index* as a result of requests to “submit something to the pages of the *Index*.” Mallery argues for election from the doctrine of depravity, the covenant of redemption, the peculiar characteristics of salvation by grace, and the specific teaching of a number of passages of Scripture. Objections he answers are, “Election destroys free agency,” “Election makes God partial and unjust,” and “Election encourages one to neglect his spiritual interests.” In issuing a warning against “antinomianism” which had been a “spiritual malady” of the Baptists, he also urged that Baptists not “hurry on to its opposite, fritter down the doctrines of grace, and give countenance, by our faith and teaching, to self-righteous presumption.”

¹⁴John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857; reprint ed., Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1982), p. 316. Dagg employs all of his mental, spiritual, and theological powers in an impassioned defense of every aspect of the doctrines of grace. Not only election, but total depravity, effectual calling, particular atonement, and perseverance are all represented as essentially connected with the New Testament teaching of salvation by grace through faith.

¹⁵P. H. Mell, “The Fathers of the Association,” reprinted in *The Baptist Window*, Jan-May 1983 (vol. 15, nos. 1-5) 3:3, 4:2. Mell published several volumes specifically defending the doctrines of grace. e.g. *Predestination and the Saints’ Perseverance Stated and Defended from the Objections of Arminians*.

¹⁶J. P. Boyce, “Defense of the Abstract of Principles,” in *A Baptist Sourcebook*, ed.,

Robert A. Baker (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), p. 140. When the *Abstract* was constructed, the committee responsible took “all the Baptist confessions which could be obtained” and epitomized article by article the confession. Boyce clearly would have proceeded on no other basis than that of such a confession. He declared in all sincerity that he would have “abandoned” the project if the confessional foundation had not been adopted. Of particular satisfaction to him was the fact that “the doctrines of grace are distinctly brought out in the abstract of principles.”

¹⁷J. P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), pp. 347, 353.

¹⁸W. Wiley Richards, *Winds of Doctrine* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 45-59.

¹⁹E. V. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), pp. 10, 11. Mullins struggles long and honestly with the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in developing a concept of biblical authority. In the end, however, subjectivity and intuition win and an inerrant Bible as a foundation for doctrine becomes unhandy baggage in Mullin’s view of true religious experience. He believed that the whole of Christian apologetics resided in the “practical” life. When the “whole” is transferred to the practical life, human consciousness becomes the final criterion of truth and pragmatic existentialism practically governs the life of the individual and the church. Both the meaning and the truthfulness of the Bible recede in importance and give way to the authority of the visceral sensation.

²⁰E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press 1925 [ninth printing 1962] first copyright 1912 by Baptist World Publishing Company), p. 8. Also see *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (Philadelphia: The Griffith & Rowland Press, 1913), 301, 302.

²¹E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Griffith & Rowland Press, 1908), p. 143.

²²*Baptist Beliefs*, pp. 9, 10.

²³*Axioms*, p. 146.

²⁴*Freedom and Authority*, p. 302.

²⁵Mullins, *Christian Religion*, p. vii.

²⁶*Axioms*, p. 88.

²⁷*Christian Religion*, 336, 340.

²⁸E. Y. Mullins, *Axioms*, p. 84.

²⁹Mullins, *Christian Religion*, p. 349.

³⁰Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 337-65. Moody's hostility toward historic Southern Baptist Calvinism was strong and his caricatures of the system were grotesque. "Many... see a picture of an arbitrary tyrant on his hellish-heavenly throne watching mankind march by. Number six—you are in a fix! Number seven—you go to heaven! Why? God just decreed that all number sixes go to hell and all number sevens go to heaven." [p. 337]. The confessional past of the chair in which he taught he felt was an obstacle necessarily to be overcome. "In brief the system of Calvinism cannot be patched with new cloth. The new wine cannot be put in old wineskins. That is what too many do when they try to torture the texts of the Bible to agree with some creed or confession of the past. I cannot say this too strongly" [p. 347].

³¹Herschel Hobbs and E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), p. 72. Hobbs purports to be doing an exegesis of Eph. 1:3-13 showing how there is no conflict between sovereignty and free will. In this section he has quoted Mullins's *Christian Religion* at the point where Mullins says, "Election is not to be thought of as a bare choice of so many human units by God's action independently of man's free choice and the human means employed. God elects men to respond freely" [p. 347]. It is clear from his discussion that Hobbs completely misses the thrust of Mullin's argument.

³²*Axioms*, p. 90.

³³Wayne Dehoney, *Preaching to Change Lives* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), p.

120.

³⁴Ibid, p. 124.

³⁵A recent publication by Broadman has given substantial space to describing some aspects of the change described in this article. The basic pattern of early uniformity in doctrine to a progressive diversification is documented in *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845*, ed., Paul Basden. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994. It specifically highlights “Predestination,” “Atonement,” and “Perseverance.” The statement made about predestination is typical of the chronicle of doctrinal shift: “Although Southern Baptists consciously adhered to Calvinism for their first sixty or seventy years, their most recent theologians have rejected it in favor of an Arminian approach to predestination” (71). The editor, Paul Basden, indicates that the approach of the book was “to trace the development of those doctrines which Southern Baptists have seen change in the last century and a half” (2) and concludes that “Southern Baptists have significantly changed their beliefs on many of the doctrines related to the Calvinist-Arminian debate” (3). Sadly, Basden believes that Southern Baptist pragmatism (as misguided and destructive as it may be) will preclude any serious consideration of a return to historic Southern Baptist theology in an extensive way. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, however, and is not concerned with our assumptions of value built on pragmatic utility.