

# CONVICTIONALLY BAPTIST AND CONFESSIONALLY EVANGELICAL: A CALL FOR SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL FAITHFULNESS

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## I. ON BAPTIST IDENTITY

Baptists have always pondered our identity. Longtime Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary church historian William Estep once argued that “the Southern Baptist historical experience can best be understood as a search for identity.”<sup>1</sup> This has always struck me as an insightful comment about Baptists in general and not just Southern Baptists in particular. Baptists not only tend to ponder our identity, but we have been writing about it for four centuries. Stan Norman suggests that Baptist writings about our identity represent a “confessional theology” within the tradition.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the study of Baptist history, which ought to be a primarily descriptive interpretation of the Baptist past, reflections on Baptist identity are by design intended to be prescriptive, making a case for present Baptist faithfulness and future Baptist flourishing.<sup>3</sup> Such is my purpose in this essay.

I believe that Southern Baptists (and other Baptists) are at our best when we understand ourselves to be simultaneously catholic, reformational, restorationist, and evangelical. By *catholic*, I mean that Baptists should be

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<sup>1</sup>William R. Estep, “Southern Baptists in Search of an Identity,” in *The Lord’s Free People in a Free Land: Essays in Baptist History in Honor of Robert A. Baker*, ed. William R. Estep (Fort Worth, TX: Evans Press, 1976), 145.

<sup>2</sup>R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: B&H, 2001), 24.

<sup>3</sup>For more on this distinction, see Nathan A. Finn, “Debating Baptist Identities: Description and Prescription in the American South,” in *Mirrors and Microscopes: Historical Perceptions of Baptists*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Bletchley, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2015), 173-87.

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rooted in what is often called the Great Tradition of ancient Christianity and understand ourselves to be in continuity with consensus Christian orthodoxy as it has been passed down through the ages. I appreciate the work of the Center for Baptist Renewal, of which I am a fellow, and resonate with the essays published in the 2020 anthology *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity*.<sup>4</sup> By *reformational*, I mean that Baptists are heirs of the Protestant Reformation, with historic roots in the Anglican and Reformed traditions. We affirm the Protestant recovery of doctrines like *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*, while also seeking further reformation by applying these principles to matters of church membership, polity, and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>5</sup>

By *restorationist*, I mean that Baptists have always had an impulse, rooted in our commitment to biblical authority, to reflect faithfully and, when necessary, recover courageously the New Testament vision of the church. I am sympathetic to Doug Weaver's contention that this emphasis has been at the center of the Baptist experience throughout our tradition's history.<sup>6</sup> In this respect we have affinity with certain streams of Continental Anabaptism, with whom Baptists share some ecclesiological affinity and by whom at least some of the earliest Baptists in the seventeenth century were influenced.<sup>7</sup> By *evangelical*, I mean that Baptists are part of the wider evangelical movement that arose in the eighteenth century. Following James Leo Garrett, I argue that Southern Baptists in particular are denominational evangelicals who embrace basic evangelical doctrines, but who emphasize the local church to a greater degree than most other modern evangelicals.<sup>8</sup>

For the remainder of this essay, I want to make the case for an evangelical Baptist identity. While everything I write could be applied to other

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<sup>4</sup>For more on the Center for Baptist Renewal, see <https://www.centerforbaptistrenewal.com/> (accessed November 5, 2022). See also Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds., *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Toward an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H, 2020).

<sup>5</sup>I have reflected on this theme more extensively elsewhere. See Nathan A. Finn, "Baptist Identity as Reformational Identity," *Southeastern Theological Review* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 29-49, and idem, "Reforming the Reformation," *Light* 3, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 27-30.

<sup>6</sup>C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup>For more on this topic, see Malcolm B. Yarnell III, ed., *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists: Restoring New Testament Christianity* (Nashville: B&H, 2013).

<sup>8</sup>Garrett makes his case in James Leo Garrett Jr., E. Glenn Hinson, and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists "Evangelicals"?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

types of Baptists, I write as a convictional Southern Baptist for my fellow Southern Baptists. My aim is not simply to inform readers about Baptist identity, or even to provoke greater reflection on this topic, though I hope readers will do both. Rather, my purpose is to encourage greater theological fidelity in a time of significant confusion and even drift.<sup>9</sup> Southern Baptists should not only be convictionally Baptist, but we should also be confessionally evangelical, for the glory of God, the health of our churches, and the sake of Great Commission faithfulness.

## II. CONFSSIONAL EVANGELICALISM

Arguably, David Bebbington's oft-cited "quadrilateral" remains the gold standard for understanding evangelical identity historically. Bebbington argues that evangelicals since the early 1700s have emphasized the Bible, personal conversion, the saving work of Christ on the cross, and faith-motivated activism, with emphasis on evangelism. Though evangelicals debate the finer points of each of these emphases, and while many evangelicals embrace additional emphases, the quadrilateral constitutes something like a "mere evangelicalism" for the purpose of historical inquiry.<sup>10</sup>

While Bebbington's paradigm has great value for historians, sociologists, and journalists, for my purposes it is insufficient because it is not (nor is it intended to be) prescriptive. In a 2011 contribution to the volume *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, Albert Mohler advocates for what he calls confessional evangelicalism.<sup>11</sup> He does not argue for a particular confession of faith, but rather for an intentionally confessional posture. Evangelicalism is a gospel-centered movement in continuity with the consensus orthodoxy articulated in the Great Tradition and refined during the Reformation. Confessional evangelicals believe that evangelicalism should have a strong theological core rather than one characterized by ambiguous doctrine and vague boundaries. For Mohler, "evangelicalism is a movement of confessional believers who are determined by God's

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<sup>9</sup>Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research have partnered together in publishing biennial studies of American theology since 2016. For the most recent study, see "2022 State of American Theology," LifeWay Research, available online at <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Ligonier-State-of-Theology-2022-White-Paper.pdf> (accessed November 5, 2022).

<sup>10</sup>For more on Bebbington's quadrilateral, see David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1-19.

<sup>11</sup>R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Confessional Evangelicalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology, ed. Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 68-96.

grace to conserve this faith in the face of its reduction or corruption, even as they gladly take this gospel to the ends of the earth in order to see the nations exult in the name of Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

I appreciate Mohler’s call for a more confessional evangelical identity, and I believe it is entirely consistent with the theological renewal that has taken place among Southern Baptists since the Inerrancy Controversy of the late-twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Southern Baptists are denominational evangelicals (descriptive), but we must also be confessional evangelicals (prescriptive) if we are to remain faithful in a time of confusion and compromise. To that end, I want to highlight three emphases that are central to confessional evangelicalism. These are by no means the only theological emphases, but they do represent areas where professing evangelicals are prone to theological compromise and doctrinal drift. For the sake of space, I will only introduce each of them with a brief sketch, leaving further elaboration for another day.

1. *Scripture*. Bebbington argues that evangelicals have always had a high regard for the Bible, believing it to be God’s inspired and authoritative written words to humanity.<sup>14</sup> This is surely correct. However, confessional evangelicals also argue that this is not saying enough. Based upon our reading of texts such as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21 (among many others), confessional evangelicals believe the Bible is inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient. These four concepts are closely related to one another, and there is a *theo-logic* to the way confessional evangelicals develop these aspects of bibliology.<sup>15</sup>

We affirm the plenary-verbal inspiration of Scripture. This means that God inspired every word of the original texts that were written by men,

<sup>12</sup>Mohler, “Confessional Evangelicalism,” 75.

<sup>13</sup>Space precludes a discussion of the Inerrancy Controversy. The standard conservative treatments include James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Hannibal, MO: Hannibal, 1991) and Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: B&H, 2000). The best historical studies written from a moderate perspective include Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) and David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, The New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969–1991* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996). For a sociological interpretation, see Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup>Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-3.

<sup>15</sup>For more on the doctrine Scripture from a confessional evangelical perspective, see David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville: B&H, 1995); D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Adam W. Greenway and David S. Dockery, eds., *The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture* (Fort Worth, TX: Seminary Hill Press, 2022).

representing a miraculous concurrence of the Holy Spirit's divine authorship and the distinctiveness of each human author. It is not enough to say the ideas or concepts in Scripture are inspired; the very words themselves are inspired. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, three generations of theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary helped refine the doctrine of plenary-verbal inspiration over against a variety of challenges to historic Christian understandings of Scripture. Since that time, confessional evangelicals have echoed their insights.

Because the biblical text is not only human words, but also God's words, the words reflect his divine character. God is trustworthy, and thus his written words to us can be trusted. Inerrancy is the conviction that the Bible in its original autographs is without error, speaking truthfully in all matters it addresses. Further, because modern translations of the Bible are based upon ancient manuscripts with a high degree of accuracy, we can trust those translations to convey God's words faithfully and truthfully to us. Inerrancy has been the subject of considerable controversy among evangelicals, including Southern Baptists, but confessional evangelicals remain committed to the principle that God's words are true.<sup>16</sup> This includes his written words.

The Scriptures not only reflect God's perfect character, but they are also grounded in his divine authority. As such, they accurately convey that authority to all readers. To obey the Bible's teachings is to obey God. To disobey the Bible's teachings is to disobey God. The Bible reveals to us what God wants us to understand about himself and the world he created. While the Bible is not our only authority, it is the ultimate authority by which we evaluate all lesser authorities. Confessional evangelicals thus affirm the reformational principle of *sola Scriptura*, or the supreme authority of Scripture alone.

Finally, the Bible is sufficient, communicating everything one must understand to believe in Jesus as Savior and follow him faithfully as King. The sufficiency of Scripture does not mean the Bible is an exhaustive work that speaks to every topic. There are countless subjects the Scriptures do not address because that is not God's intention for his written words. Nevertheless, the Bible is a fully truthful work that is sufficient to help us rightly understand all topics from the perspective of a biblical worldview

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<sup>16</sup>See Nathan A. Finn, "Inerrancy and Evangelicals: The Challenge for a New Generation," The Gospel Coalition (August 21, 2020), available online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/inerrancy-evangelicals/> (accessed November 5, 2022).

and for the sake of God's glory and our good. The sufficiency of Scripture is hotly contested among believers today, but confessional evangelicals remain committed to this important principle.

*The Baptist Faith and Message 2000* has a robust statement on the doctrine of Scripture that aligns closely with the confessional evangelical perspective summarized above.

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.<sup>17</sup>

2. *Humanity*. At different seasons throughout Christian history, various challenges have led to particular doctrines being elevated in their importance and thus subject to further refinement for the sake of doctrinal fidelity. I believe we live in a time where theological anthropology is the central point of contention. Confessional evangelicals must remain committed to a biblical understanding of what it means to be human while firmly but pastorally challenging the disordered anthropologies that continue to undermine historic Christian understandings.<sup>18</sup>

Human beings are creatures that God created for his glory. Alone among God's creatures, we reflect his divine image and represent the pinnacle of his creative actions. These truths are the most important basis for our belief in inherent human dignity and the sanctity of human life. Humans are comprised of both material and immaterial components, often referred

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<sup>17</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article I: The Scriptures, available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> (accessed November 12, 2022).

<sup>18</sup>For more on theological anthropology from a confessional evangelical perspective, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996); John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); John S. Hammett and Katie McCoy, "The Doctrine of Humanity," in *Theology for the People of God* (Nashville: B&H, forthcoming).

to as the body and the soul or spirit. We are holistic creatures who relate to God, other humans, and in many cases to lesser creatures. God also created humans as gendered beings, either male or female. Our gender is fixed by divine intention, and males and females are designed to complement each other in the context of a one-flesh union that results in their flourishing and the procreation of the human race.

Though humans are the pinnacle of God's good creation, tragically, we are fallen. We are sinners by nature and by choice, rebels against God's just rule, with devastating consequences for both our race and the rest of the created order. Sin corrupts every part of our lives to varying degrees, resulting in a spiritual separation between us and God. Sin also distorts all our relationships with other people. Nevertheless, despite the tragedy of the fall, because of God's common or creational grace humans are not as sinful as we could possibly be, and we still have a divine mandate to exercise dominion over God's creation and be sub-creators of human culture. The family, community, politics, education, the arts, and every other human sphere endures, however their original design has been corrupted, and each will one day be redeemed.

Every word in the previous two paragraphs is under assault in our culture and at times within the visible church. God's creative activity is either rejected or redefined by appealing to evolutionary theories. Human dignity is devalued in myriad ways, both intentional and unintentional, all of which are ultimately rooted in relational animus between individuals and groups of people. The sanctity of human life is challenged by the bookended evils of elective abortion of preborn children and euthanasia (both elective and forced) among the aged. Biblical sexuality is scorned in a culture that increasingly normalizes and even celebrates disordered understandings of gender, sexuality, and marriage. Transhumanists desire to perfect humanity through the integration of biology and technology, which they see as the next step in human evolution.

Confessional evangelicals will likely continue to face enormous pressure to capitulate on biblical anthropology. In the eyes of the world, it is superstitious to claim humans were created by God and reflect his divine image, archaic to claim that males and females are complementary by design, unloving to claim that abortion and euthanasia are moral evils, bigoted to claim that homosexuality and transgenderism are rooted in sinful desires, and evidence of luddism to question transhumanism. Nevertheless, when it comes to theological anthropology confessional evangelicals must be

countercultural for the common good. We must remain steadfast in our commitment to biblical teachings about humanity and their implications for authentic human flourishing.

The *Baptist Faith and Message* 2000 has a helpful basic summary of theological anthropology, though there is an opportunity for future revisions to engage more directly with the challenges that technological innovations present to a biblical understanding of humanity.

Man is the special creation of God, made in His own image. He created them male and female as the crowning work of His creation. The gift of gender is thus part of the goodness of God's creation. In the beginning man was innocent of sin and was endowed by his Creator with freedom of choice. By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race. Through the temptation of Satan man transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original innocence whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin. Therefore, as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation. Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God. The sacredness of human personality is evident in that God created man in His own image, and in that Christ died for man; therefore, every person of every race possesses full dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love.<sup>19</sup>

3. *Atonement*. As mentioned above, Bebbington argues that “crucicentrism,” or cross-centeredness, is a core emphasis among modern evangelicals.<sup>20</sup> While this is surely correct from a historical standpoint, as with the doctrine of Scripture it does not say nearly enough for confessional evangelicals, whose principal concern is theological fidelity. Scripture not only teaches that the cross is central to God's redemptive purposes, but it also speaks to how the cross achieves redemption. Confessional evangelicals argue that the penal substitution of Jesus Christ is at the heart of

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<sup>19</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message* 2000, Article III: Man, available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> (accessed November 12, 2022).

<sup>20</sup>Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2-3.



how sinful humans are reconciled with a holy God.<sup>21</sup>

Human beings are rebels against their Creator-King. We are relationally separated from God and deserving of his righteous wrath against every sinful rejection of his just reign over his creation. The end result of human sin is hell, which is the eternal, conscience punishment of unrepentant sinners. However, in his love for his fallen creatures, God has taken decisive steps to save us from the consequences of our sin. In accordance with the Triune God's eternal plan of salvation, at a particular point in history the eternal Son became a man, taking upon himself all that it means to be human without abdicating anything that it means to be divine. Jesus of Nazareth never sinned, but rather he was perfectly obedient to all of his heavenly Father's commands. In this way, he was the second Adam who was fully faithful to God. For three years he undertook a Spirit-empowered public ministry of preaching God's coming kingdom, healing the sick, and casting out demons.

In the end, Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples and abandoned by his other followers. The Jews rejected him as their King and the Romans crucified him for insurrection. On the cross, Jesus took our place when he willingly bore the consequences for sin, the sinless one thus enduring God's just wrath against sinful humanity. After being dead for parts of three days, God raised Jesus bodily to new life, conquering the power of death. His death and resurrection paid the penalty for the sins of the world, secured the salvation of all who believe, and guaranteed the final redemption of the created order. As the Nicene Creed reminds us, Jesus did all of this "for us and our salvation."

Confessional evangelicals understand that penal substitution does not say all there is to say about the atonement. The biblical picture of the atonement is a rich mosaic that includes a number of motifs, including recapitulation, penal substitution, victory, and moral influence.<sup>22</sup> But confessional evangelicals understand that there is no salvation without substitution, which is the hinge upon which our redemption turns. To switch metaphors, while the full biblical portrait of the atonement is a

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<sup>21</sup>For more on the atonement from a confessional evangelical perspective, see Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984); Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997); Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006).

<sup>22</sup>See Joshua M. McNall, *The Mosaic of Atonement: An Integrated Approach to Christ's Work* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019).

cut diamond, the facet that shines brightest is penal substitution. There is also debate among confessional evangelicals as to the intent or extent of the atonement. That debate has ancient roots, and it has been a perennial conversation among Baptists since the beginning of our movement in the seventeenth century. While that discussion is important, all confessional evangelicals agree that penal substitution is the heart of the atonement.

The *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* speaks to the atonement, offering a confessional evangelical account.

Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the <sup>23</sup>virgin Mary. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin. He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. He ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and man.<sup>24</sup>

More recently, in 2017 Southern Baptists adopted a resolution “On the Necessity of Penal Substitutionary Atonement” that addresses contemporary challenges to the doctrine and concludes that “the truthfulness, efficacy, and beauty of the biblical doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as the burning core of the Gospel message and the only hope of a fallen race.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>See Andrew David Naselli and Mark A. Snoeberger, eds., *Perspectives on the Extent of the Atonement: 3 Views* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), and Adam J. Johnson, ed., *Five Views on the Extent of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

<sup>24</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article II: God, available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> (accessed November 12, 2022).

<sup>25</sup>“On the Necessity of Penal Substitutionary Atonement,” (2017), available online at <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-the-necessity-of-penal-substitutionary-atonement/> (accessed November 12, 2022).

### III. CONCLUSION:

#### TOWARD A CONFSSIONAL EVANGELICAL BAPTIST FUTURE

It is possible to affirm historic Baptist distinctives while rejecting evangelical emphases on Scripture, humanity, and the atonement—as well as a host of other doctrines that confessional evangelicals hold dear. One of the reasons that the Southern Baptist Convention needed the Inerrancy Controversy was precisely for this reason: too many Southern Baptists were moving away from our historic evangelical beliefs, all the while appealing to Baptist distinctives as a pretense for theological drift.<sup>26</sup> However, we must remember that the “battle for the Bible” did not begin in 1979, but rather in the Garden of Eden when the diabolical serpent questioned the integrity of God’s words (Gen 3:1–4). Doctrinal deviation will remain an ever-present threat until the end of the age.

For this reason, I believe Southern Baptists must remain both convictionally Baptist and confessionally evangelical. We should not retreat one step from our commitment to a regenerate church membership, believer’s baptism, congregational church government, local church autonomy, and religious liberty for all people. However, we must continue to frame these Baptist distinctives from a perspective that is rooted in robustly evangelical understandings of God, Scripture, humanity, salvation, spirituality, and mission. What would it profit Southern Baptists to gain the largest membership of any Protestant denomination in American but forfeit our souls because of heterodox theology and ethics?

There has always been a tension in the Southern Baptist tradition between our commitment to cooperative mission and our fidelity to confessional faithfulness.<sup>27</sup> In some ways, this is unavoidable in a tradition that values liberty of conscience and local church autonomy. However, we must strive for the proper balance between confession and cooperation. We should joyfully agree with the preamble to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, which argues that confessions of faith are both a “witness

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<sup>26</sup>This impulse is evidenced in works such as Alan Neely, ed., *Being Baptist Means Freedom* (Charlotte, NC: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988); Walter Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993); Grady C. Cothen and James M. Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018).

<sup>27</sup>Arguably, this phenomenon has been even more pronounced since the turn of the twentieth century. See Melody Maxwell, “A Confessional People: The Priority of Doctrinal Orthodoxy over Cooperation in the SBC, 2000–2019,” in *Southern Baptists Re-Observed: Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Politics*, ed. Keith Harper (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2022), 18–51.

to the world” and “instruments of doctrinal accountability.”<sup>28</sup> However, we should also affirm what the same confession says about cooperation:

Christ’s people should, as occasion requires, organize such associations and conventions as may best secure cooperation for the great objects of the Kingdom of God. Such organizations have no authority over one another or over the churches. They are voluntary and advisory bodies designed to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people in the most effective manner.<sup>29</sup>

As we build upon the theological renewal of the past generation, Southern Baptists should remain confessional evangelicals who affirm Baptist distinctives and who are deeply committed to the principle of cooperative mission. Confession should guide cooperation. This means we must continue to navigate issues where Southern Baptists are most divided, including (but not limited to) the following topics, in no particular order: (1) the most biblical understanding of the doctrine of election and the intent/extent of the atonement; (2) the most faithful applications of the biblical principle of gender complementarity; (3) how best to articulate religious liberty and the separation of church and state; (4) whether or not it is permissible biblically for churches to be comprised of multiple services and/or campuses; and (5) how best to advance the cause of the sanctity of human life in the public square. At the time of writing, the seeds of division are *potentially* present in each of these issues.

Albert Mohler has argued for “theological triage” as a paradigm for interdenominational or pan-confessional cooperation.<sup>30</sup> He makes a distinction between first-order doctrines that separate true Christians from heretics, second-order doctrines that define the theological convictions of different ecclesial or confessional traditions, and third-order doctrines that do not automatically preclude believers of differing opinions from being

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<sup>28</sup>“Report of the Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee to the Southern Baptist Convention,” available online at <https://bfm.sbc.net/preamble/> (accessed November 12, 2022).

<sup>29</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article XIV: Cooperation, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> (accessed November 12, 2022).

<sup>30</sup>R. Albert Mohler Jr., “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity,” available online at <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity> (accessed November 19, 2022). For a book-length reflection on Mohler’s paradigm, see Gavin Ortland, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

members of the same church. Within the Southern Baptist Convention, we must do the work of “confessional triage” that will help us reach greater consensus on which doctrines and emphases are essential to a confessional evangelical Southern Baptist identity and which should be matters of confessional latitude for the sake of cooperative mission.

Southern Baptists will almost certainly need to revise the *Baptist Faith and Message* in the coming years if we are to refine and renew our doctrinal consensus. While it seems likely that such a revision would result in some degree of controversy, there is historical precedent for revising the confession about once a generation. Until that time comes, Southern Baptists should debate the aforementioned topics in a spirit that honors the Lord and evidences a love for brothers and sisters with whom we disagree—especially within the Convention. Our conversations should demonstrate unwavering commitment to the supreme authority of Scripture and critical sensitivity to the best insights of historical theology, including within the Baptist tradition. Finally, as a convention of autonomous churches, a significant motivation for these conversations should always be to cultivate more faithful cooperative mission for the sake of Great Commission faithfulness.