

I AM PROUD TO BE CALLED A SOUTHERN BAPTIST.

Sooner or later every Christian must wrestle with their denominational identity. We all must answer the question, “Which particular Christian denomination or church do I identify most closely to?” In my experience, this happened early in my Christian life. As a child, I attended Vacation Bible Schools (VBS) hosted by several different denominations including: the Assemblies of God, the Church of Christ, Pentecostal, Independent Baptist, and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In 1989, I prayed to receive fire insurance at a SBC VBS and was dunked on the 22nd of October later the same year, at the age of 12. However, I was not truly saved until 1998, in my second year of college, under an inter-denominational ministry, Campus Crusade for Christ.

Provided the wide array of denominational involvement that I had in my past, I faced a daunting challenge in determining my ecclesiastical identity. Was I a Protestant or a Catholic? Then, was I a Baptist, a Pentecostal, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, a Methodical Baptist, or simply a Christian? Upon much deep prayer and thoughtful study, I came to the realization that I identify with the Southern Baptist Convention based upon my biblical convictions.

My decision had nothing to do with conditioning; my prior church experience was rather eclectic. It also had nothing to do with convenience; my family had previously been wounded by a Southern Baptist congregation. No, I became a Southern Baptist because my biblical and theological convictions connected with those stated in the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. Specifically: the authority of the Scriptures, the fall of humanity, believer’s baptism by immersion, and Church polity. I will briefly describe

these convictions below.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The authority of Scripture has been under constant attack for decades. While many mainline protestant denominations have erroneously denied the authority of the Bible, Southern Baptists have valued the truth of God's Word enough to fight for it. Every aspect of Christianity rests upon the authority, inerrancy, and infallibility of the Bible.

Jesus Christ claimed, "*that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled*" (Luke 24:44). The divinely inspired Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21) are a special revelation of God to man. The Bible is not just *a* book; it is *the* Book, and Southern Baptists are known as "People of the Book." It is unlike any other literary work found in all of human history. Other books are transient, while the Bible is living and active (Heb. 4:12). Southern Baptists have historically held to these truths and recognize their sufficiency as the ultimate, eternal authority for every aspect of human life, especially concerning salvation (Pss. 19, 119; John 1; Rom. 15:4; 1 Pet. 1:23-25).

However, in recent decades Southern Baptists began to fall under the sway of popular philosophies and theories of interpretation which threatened the very core of their understanding of Scripture and therefore their faith. But rather than drowning in the cesspool of popular opinion, some valiant men fought to preserve the absolute authority of the truth of God's Word against the tidal wave of unbelief and unsubstantiated claims. It was a risky, hard fought battle for the soul of the Southern Baptist Convention.

In the end, most of the raging forest fire of anti-biblical thinking was extinguished; however, there are still many pockets of smoldering rubble waiting to be fanned into raging flames once more. These men and women had the conviction to stand in the example of the Apostles (Phil. 1:22-27). Due to this conviction, I stand ready to hold fast to the Word of Life as a faithful Southern Baptist Christian.

THE FALL OF HUMANITY

Being raised in an American context surely has its advantages; but, as a Christian it can also have its disadvantages, especially when one considers the biblical doctrine of the fall of humanity. In my cultural context, we are taught that man is inherently good, and therefore the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness is the American way. This popular American doctrine is nothing more than self-worship and self-gratification, and sadly it is gaining popularity within the Church at large today (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9).

While the Scriptures place a tremendous value upon humanity's role as the image bearers of God (Gen. 1:26-28), they also teach the horrors of the willful, sinful disobedience of mankind and the subsequent fall of humanity from a right relationship with our Creator (Gen. 3). They teach that we became wicked and are all condemned to judgment (Rom. 1:18-2:11; 3:23). But through God's grace He has offered redemption for those who believe, and they will be His ambassadors of reconciliation (Rom. 5:8; 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9 2 Cor. 5:20). These two views of humanity are at odds with one another.

The Bible teaches that we are sinners in need of a Savior (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). America teaches that we are all inherently good people. America teaches that we are our own individuals who are capable of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Scriptures teach that we are not our own and hence cannot save ourselves (Gen. 1:27;

Matt. 21:40; John 1:11; Prov. 14:12; Isa. 64:6; Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5-7).

While all denominations are influenced by their culture to some degree, we as Southern Baptists strive to remain true to Scripture. We make mistakes, although we tend to try and correct ourselves using the Bible as our rod of discipline more so than some other denominations. The “Conservative Resurgence” is one such example. Southern Baptists are convicted by the fallen nature of humanity as is attested by our missionary zeal.

BELIEVER’S BAPTISM

Much to my confusion, Believer’s Baptism by Immersion was a hotly debated issue among denominations. The popular debate seemed to revolve around the subjects of and the mode of baptism. But upon my early inquiries into the issue, I soon learned that the major concern was the meaning of baptism. Is baptism a means of saving grace and regeneration, and therefore to be considered sacramental? Or is it merely a symbolic ordinance used as an initiatory rite of passage into the church body? These questions were weightier to me than the questions of subjects and mode. The subjects and mode do not really matter if you do not have the proper meaning.

Ultimately, I concluded that my salvation was secure with or without baptism. Baptism is an ordinance not a sacrament. It was ordained by Jesus in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). It was intended to apply only to those who have professed and evidenced the salvific work of Christ in their lives (i.e. believers).

One may assume that for Jesus, the core meaning of baptism is to obediently display the salvation of God by means of a symbolic act of remembering His death, burial, and resurrection; while at the same time, representing the believer’s commitment

to follow Jesus in the death of his/her sin, the burial of his/her fleshly desires, and his/her resurrection into a new way of life as a disciple who is willing to be taught to observe Christ's commandments by the local church they are being adopted into. Paul appears to support this view in numerous texts of Scripture, but most notably in Romans 6:3-5 and Colossians 2:11-13.

Conviction in regard to this view of baptism is a primary distinctive of the Southern Baptist Convention. It is why we argue strongly that the subjects of baptism can only be genuine believers. This conviction leaves no room for Paedobaptism. A true baptism will occur only once in a believer's life. It is also why we fight firmly for the baptismal mode of immersion as it symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection discussed previously. Due to my conviction on Believer's Baptism, I was officially baptized in 2001 in obedience to the Lord as I forsook my earlier dunking.

CHURCH POLITY

The last particular theological conviction that will be discussed concerns the Church, specifically local church polity. When I was trying to make up my mind concerning the denomination that I would identify with, I found that there were three main church polities including: Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, and Congregationalism.

After considering each one's merit, I came to the conclusion that Congregationalism was closest to the practice of the New Testament Church. I ruled out the Episcopacy because it tries to create a distinct office of bishop by making a division between a bishop and an elder. Certain passages of Scripture use the terms for elders/overseers/pastors synonymously, therefore a distinction between overseer and elder is not supported by the New Testament (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).

Presbyterianism is intriguing, yet the idea of a college of presbyters exercising authority over a church body does not line up with the New Testament concept of church leadership. Therefore, I removed it from consideration.

In the New Testament, the congregation was accountable to each other and ultimately to the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter teaches the concept of the priesthood of all believers which assumes there is no hierarchy of authority (1 Pet. 2:9). In Matthew 18, Jesus calls on the congregation to practice church discipline rather than an Episcopacy or Presbytery. Paul appears to agree with this practice in 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2. In Acts 6, the apostles summoned the congregation to ask them to choose seven men to serve the Hellenistic Jewish widows. This appears to have been done by a majority decision. The congregation found approval with the Apostles proposal and granted the Apostles request. This alludes to the fact that there was a congregational style of polity already extant in the New Testament Church at Jerusalem. The majority of SBC churches are by nature Congregationalists. Every congregation is accountable to Jesus Christ.

The decision to be a Congregationalist was not without fear and trembling before the Lord. In my short life, I had already experienced first-hand the damage and devastation that can occur when unity is extinct within a congregation or when a pastor assumes too much authority within the church. Despite my fleshly hesitation and my inkling to practice the fight or flight theory, I knew that I had to be obedient to the Bible that our Lord has given to us for our good. When I got past my hesitations and fears, I realized the great potential a church could have when unity is achieved, and I knew then that I must follow my biblical convictions wherever they may lead (John 17).

CONCLUSION

I have presented some of the particular theological convictions that have caused me to identify with the Southern Baptist Convention. These are not all of my convictions, but rather they were some of the most important convictions that led to my ecclesiastical identity. I personally do not feel that I could identify with any other denominational entity.

Please do not understand that comment to say that there are no other denominations or churches that are serving and doing great things in the name of Jesus Christ. However, to the best of my knowledge, based on the four convictions discussed above I could not adhere to another denomination without compromising at least one core conviction.

In addition to my biblical convictions, I will offer one pragmatic conviction that no other denomination can touch: the Cooperative Program. The Cooperative program is hands down the best practical way for a denomination as diverse as ours to unite around the common goal of furthering evangelism and missions.

My study of Baptist history has influenced me in a positive way by reinforcing my understanding of the historical and theological setting that has helped the Southern Baptist Convention to become what it is today. I am proud to be called a Southern Baptist!