



This we believe
by Paul W. Powell



Introduction

The purpose of this booklet is to help us understand the controversy that has continued to trouble our Baptist churches since 1977. At that time, a small group of fundamentalist pastors and laymen, using secular political methods, orchestrated the takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. They charged it had become liberal and promised they would restore it to its conservative roots. Their accusations were not true, but they were successful in their takeover and took the Southern Baptist Convention away from its traditional and historical roots and into fundamentalism.

The result has been the formation of other conventions and fellowships; and it has brought division, sometimes deep division, within our churches, associations, and convention as these bodies have struggled over which group they will be identified with and cooperate with in doing mission work. Today, several groups vie for the loyalty of pastors and churches and their missions money. As new ministers go into churches to serve, they will confront and have to deal with this division.

Some churches have clearly lined up on one side or the other. Others have voted to allow individuals to make their own choices about where they give their missions dollars. Most pastors do not want this issue brought into their church for fear it will divide the fellowship, so they just keep giving as they have always done.

Most people are woefully uninformed and have no interest in the issue at all. They are busy trying to hold their marriages together, pay the mortgage, and keep their kids off drugs. They are not interested in a religious squabble. They have enough problems in their life without the church adding to them.

Where do I stand? You deserve to know that. Having lived through the controversy from the beginning and having been deeply involved with most of the major players as a result of my positions (i.e., president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, president and CEO of the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Baylor regent, and dean of the George W. Truett Seminary), I have come to a settled position. I am a Christian by commitment, a Baptist by conviction, and a Texas Baptist (BGCT) by cooperation.

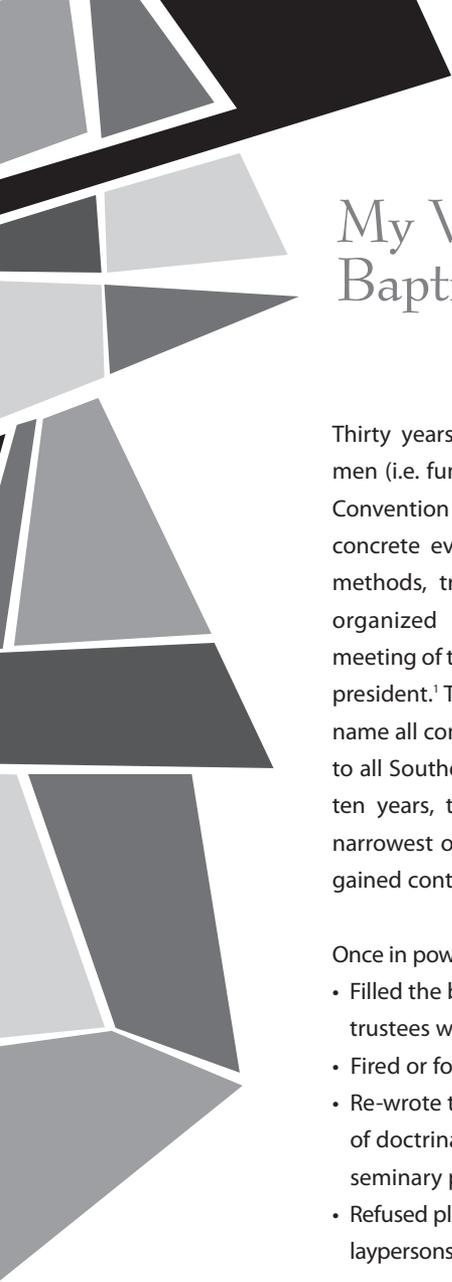
My hope and only purpose for this booklet is that it will help you to understand the controversy better and to deal with the problems it is creating in our churches in such a way that it does not hurt you, the church, or the Kingdom.

Paul W. Powell

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My View of the Current Baptist Controversy

by Paul W. Powell

Thirty years ago, 1977, a small group of ultra-conservative men (i.e. fundamentalists) decided that the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was becoming liberal. Though they had no concrete evidence of liberalism, they used secular political methods, traversed the Southern Baptist Convention, and organized preachers and laymen to attend the annual meeting of the SBC and to elect their handpicked candidate as president.¹ The president of the SBC has appointive powers to name all committees, who in turn nominate all of the trustees to all Southern Baptist boards and agencies. Over a period of ten years, these men got their candidates elected by the narrowest of margins – 51 percent to 49 percent – and thus gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention.

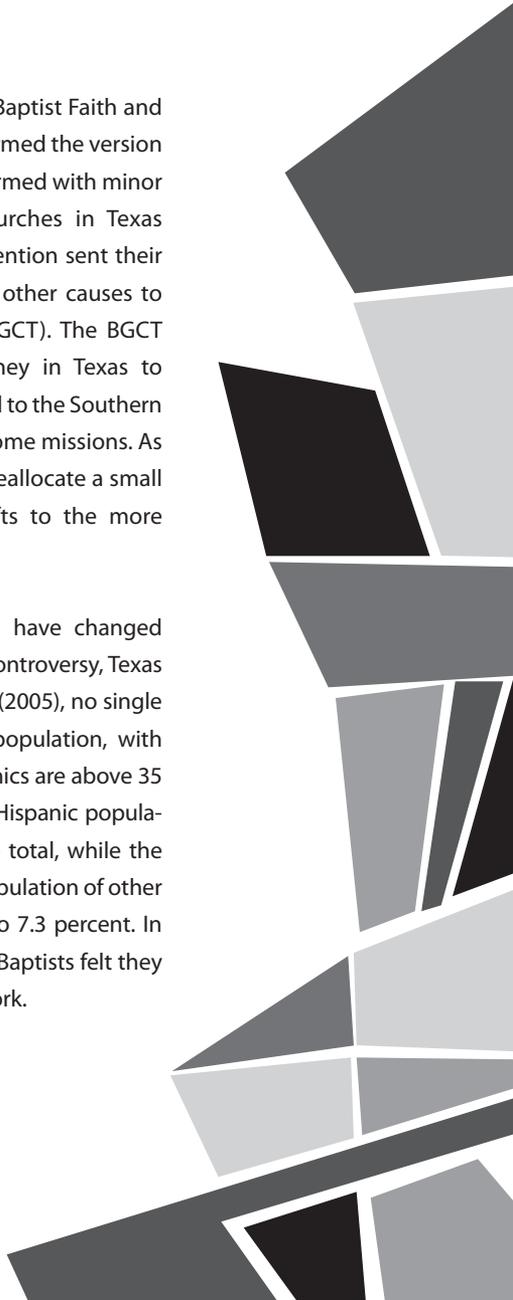
Once in power, they:

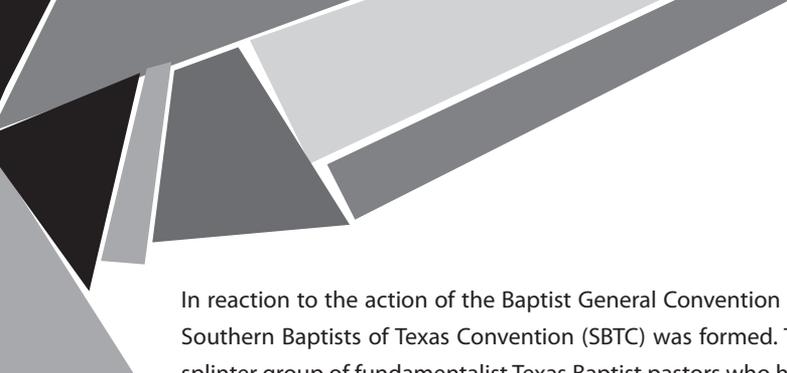
- Filled the boards of every institution with ultra-conservative trustees who shared their fundamentalist views.²
- Fired or forced out of office all of our respected leaders.³
- Re-wrote the Baptist Faith and Message and made it a test of doctrinal accountability and required all of the workers, seminary professors, and missionaries to sign or resign.⁴
- Refused places on boards and agencies to all pastors or laypersons who did not agree with or support their movement, regardless of their support of missions and evangelism.

In time, some of the more moderate (traditional) Baptists realized that they could never match the political power of the fundamentalists so they quit attending the SBC and formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) as an alternative way of doing missions and evangelism.

Texas Baptists rejected a new version of the Baptist Faith and Message adopted by the SBC in 2000 and affirmed the version that was first adopted in 1925 and then reaffirmed with minor revisions in 1963. Up until that time, churches in Texas cooperative with the Southern Baptist Convention sent their Cooperative Program gifts for missions and other causes to the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT). The BGCT kept approximately two-thirds of the money in Texas to support Texas causes and forwarded one-third to the Southern Baptist Convention to support foreign and home missions. As the controversy continued, Texans voted to reallocate a small percentage of its Cooperative Program gifts to the more needy areas of work in Texas.

In recent decades the challenges in Texas have changed dramatically. While we were focused on the controversy, Texas was becoming a mission field. At this writing (2005), no single ethnic group makes up a majority of the population, with Anglos dropping to 49.8 percent while Hispanics are above 35 percent. In the next 30 years, the percent of Hispanic population will increase to about 53 percent of the total, while the Anglo population drops to 30 percent. The population of other ethnic groups will double from 3.3 percent to 7.3 percent. In view of these changing demographics, Texas Baptists felt they should put more mission money into local work.





In reaction to the action of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention (SBTC) was formed. This was/is a splinter group of fundamentalist Texas Baptist pastors who have led their churches to withdraw from supporting the BGCT and to send their cooperative gifts through the SBTC, which wants to push a higher percentage of money to the Southern Baptist Convention.

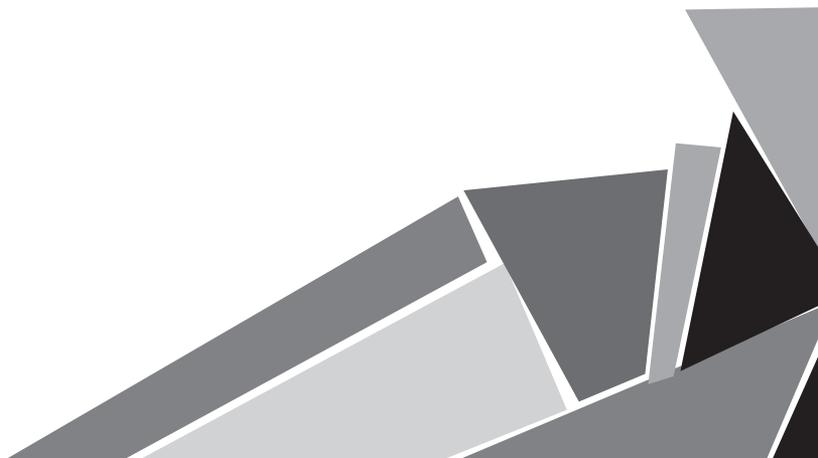
In the ensuing years other state conventions have also become divided as fundamentalists have tried to take them over. In some instances, alternative conventions have been formed by one side or the other.

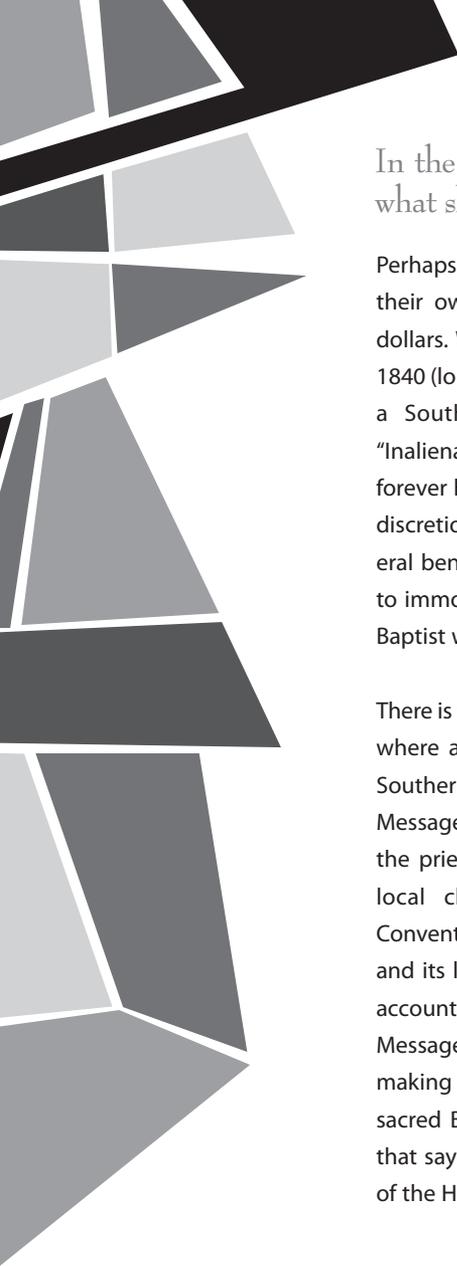
Every Texas church now has four choices in funding mission work:

- The Southern Baptist Convention, dominated by fundamentalist leaders who require that all employees and missionaries sign the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, which is tantamount to making it a creed.
- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an alternative group of traditional Baptists who are doing missions and evangelism and other work.
- The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, a splinter group of ultra-conservative Texas churches who give no support to BGCT causes. The SBTC has limited institutional relationships for providing ministry in Texas and beyond.
- The Baptist General Convention of Texas. Churches sending their mission funds through the BGCT Cooperative Program may choose the amount they want forwarded to the SBC or CBF or they may choose to have the funds distributed according to an adopted budget plan. Those who select the adopted plan choose to support missions work by

putting their trust in informed leadership to divide their gifts according to the needs of Texas and the world. A committee of knowledgeable pastors and laypersons elected by the convention plan the budget each year. It is then presented to the Executive Board, comprised of leaders from throughout the state, for their approval. Finally, it is presented to messengers at the Annual Meeting of the BGCT for approval. When churches give through the BGCT, they are still supporting foreign missions and home missions as they always have, plus our nine Texas Baptist universities, two seminaries, one academy, four ministries to children and families operating in 40 locations, 12 locations for the aged, Breckenridge Home for the mentally challenged, and five directly related and two indirectly related hospitals. Those who do not give through the BGCT have no part in these ministries, unless they give as individuals.

Most Texas Baptist leaders and churches have refused to go along with the ultra-conservative leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention. They have chosen instead to hold to their traditional Baptist beliefs and support much-needed Texas Baptist causes as they continue to support home missions and foreign missions.





In the light of the present controversy,
what should a church do?

Perhaps the best approach is to allow individuals to make their own choices about where they give their mission dollars. When the first association in Texas was formed in 1840 (long before there was a Cooperative Program or even a Southern Baptist Convention), they adopted two "Inalienable Rights." One of them said, "Each member shall forever have a full and free right to exercise his or her own discretion in contributions to the support of missions, general benevolence, and in other matters that may not lead to immorality." Freedom! That is the Texas way. That is the Baptist way.

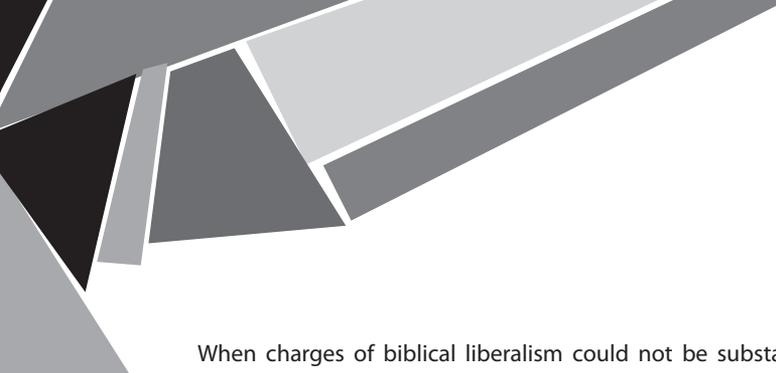
There is actually much more at stake in the controversy than where and how we give our missions dollars. When the Southern Baptist leaders rewrote the Baptist Faith and Message in 2000 they included statements that weakened the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church. And the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention goes further than that. To join them, a church and its leaders must sign the SBTC statement of doctrinal accountability that includes the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. To require the signing of this is tantamount to making it an official creed and that is a violation of the sacred Baptist principle of the priesthood of the believer that says every believer is competent under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to interpret the scriptures for himself.

Appendix

1. The charges of liberalism in the convention were never substantiated and after the convention had been taken over, fundamentalist leaders admitted there were no liberals in the classical sense in the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1985, I invited one of the two architects of the SBC takeover to lunch to see what we could do to resolve the conflict, stop the name calling and false accusation, be reconciled, and work together as brothers to reach people for Christ. He gave me no encouragement. A year later, I took him to lunch again. I said to him, "This controversy has been going on for 10 years, and I would like to have proof of your charge of liberalism in the Southern Baptist Convention." In response, he gave me a folder an inch-and-a-half thick. It contained the names and quotes from 15 individuals. Some of the quotes were 40 years old. At the time, there were 37,000 Baptist preachers in the SBC and thousands of denominational workers and seminary professors. But they had only 15 names after ten years of searching.

Out of those 15 names, three were pastors and neither the Southern Baptist Convention nor state conventions exercises control over pastors. That's the local church's responsibility. Four were college professors over which the SBC had no control. Colleges and universities are associated with state conventions. They must deal with those problems. Out of the eight remaining names of people, three were retired. That left only five. They had been collecting evidence of liberalism for ten years, and they had the names of only five active people who worked at the Southern Baptist Convention who might be liberals. They were not necessarily liberals, but just might be.





When charges of biblical liberalism could not be substantiated, the ultraconservatives falsely accused moderates of being soft on abortion, homosexuality, etc. These charges were absolutely not true, but once a falsehood is spread, it is almost impossible to correct.

2. Fundamentalism is not just a theological position; it is primarily a spirit, an attitude, a disposition. It is characterized by narrow, rigid, inflexible beliefs. Its adherents are intolerant of views different from their own. Their arrogance leads them to exclude those who do not hold their beliefs, as though they alone know and hold the truth.

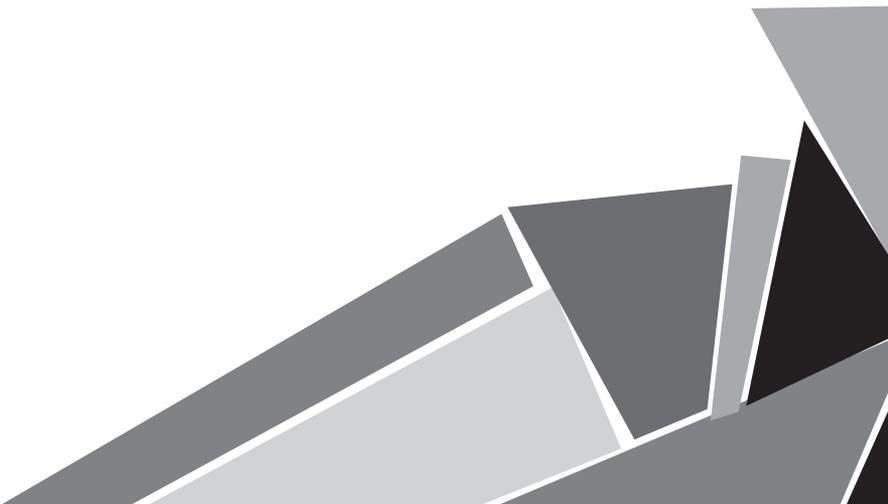
Russell Dilday, former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in the introduction of his book *Columns* writes of fundamentalism: "In the light of recent world events swirling around Islamic extremists, the term 'fundamentalism' has become a household word with negative connotations. A fundamentalist is one with extremist, fanatical views. Convinced that their position is the only right one, fundamentalists are confrontational and argumentative, demonizing anyone who differs. Reflecting a hidden insecurity, fundamentalists try to control others, forcing them into conformity. In furthering their cause, the end often justifies the means."

"At one time among Baptists the term had a positive implication. A fundamentalist was someone committed to the fundamentals of the faith. But today, the term 'fundamentalism' suggests a mind-set that is narrow, self-righteous, smug, judgmental, rigid, angry, combative, negative, critical, sanctimonious, and hypocritical. Whether it is political fundamentalism or philosophical fundamentalism, Islamic fundamentalism or Baptist fundamentalism, these same characteristics will likely be shared."

They are generally unloving, critical and judgmental toward those they cannot control, or who do not line up with them.

Fundamentalist pastors attempt to lord it over their churches, believing the pastor is the ruler of the church rather than its servant. Their leaders are not above misrepresenting the truth about those with whom they disagree.

3. As they gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention, they began to purge existing and respected leaders and replaced them with their own fundamentalist leaders. They fired or forced out of office men like Lloyd Elder, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board; Keith Parks, president of the Foreign Mission Board; Larry Lewis, president of the Home Mission Board; seminary presidents Randall Lolley, Roy Honeycutt, and Russell Dilday; they fired the editors of Baptist Press and hired their own reporters; they contracted with our most respected historian Leon McBeth to write the history of the Southern Baptist Convention and when his version of the history was not favorable enough to their cause, they paid for his manuscript and destroyed it.



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4. When the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845, it had no statement of faith. It operated without a statement of faith for the next 80 years, until 1925. From 1925 to 1963, the convention operated under the initial Baptist Faith and Message. Minor word revisions were approved by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963, and that is the Baptist Faith and Message that the Baptist General Convention of Texas accepts today. No one was required to sign it. It was not an authorized creed. It was just a statement of what Baptists generally believed.

The rallying cry of the fundamentalist takeover was the inerrancy of scripture, i.e., that the scriptures were without error. Ironically, once in power, they did not include the word “inerrancy” in the new Baptist Faith and Message because they knew that it was inaccurate, and that was never the real issue to start with. It was always power and control.

The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, however, does require that churches who affiliate with them sign documents that affirm inerrancy. To sign these documents is to step out of our Baptist tradition and move toward fundamentalism. Why is this so?

It is because Baptists historically have not used the term “inerrant” to describe the scriptures and for good reason. The earliest statement of faith widely accepted by Baptists in America was the New Hampshire Confession of Faith adopted by the New Hampshire Convention in 1833. It said of the scriptures:

Of the scriptures, we believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and as a perfect treasure of heavenly instructions (1); that it had God for its author, salvation for its end (2); and truth without any mixture of error for its matter (3); that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us (4); and therefore is, and shall remain until the end of the world, the true center of Christian union (5); and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried.

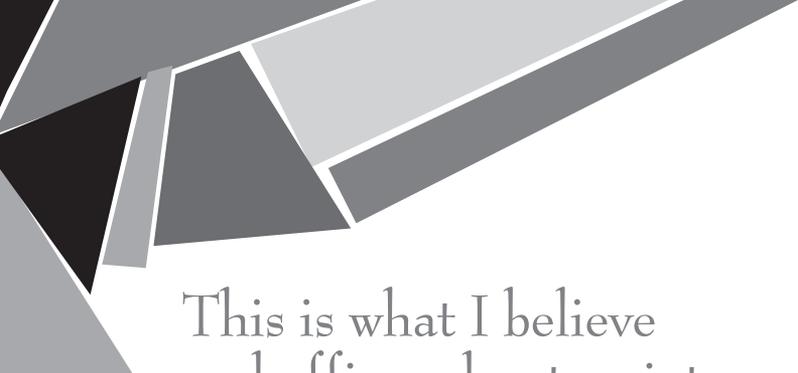
Texas Baptists adopted their first statement of faith in 1840, five years before there was a Southern Baptist Convention. This confession says of the scriptures:

We believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testament are revealed from God, and that they contain the only true system of faith and practice.

The Baptist Faith and Message adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925 and revised slightly in 1963 said of the scriptures:

The Holy Bible was written by men, divinely inspired and is the record of 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. It reveals the principles by which God will judge 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. The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.





This is what I believe and affirm about scripture:

Baptists have long recognized that the Bible is both human and divine. Its truths were revealed by God but recorded by men. As Peter wrote, "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." (2 Peter 1:21) The original record of God's revelation was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. According to the American Bible Society those manuscripts have been translated into 2,377 languages and dialects (422 complete Bibles, 1,079 complete New Testaments and 876 partial testaments). Since no two languages have exactly the same words to express an idea, it is impossible to translate the scriptures in an absolutely literal fashion. Therefore, translators have often had to use their own prayerful discretion in their translations.

In addition, before the printing press was invented, the scriptures had to be hand-copied. This was a long and tedious task, and copyists occasionally missed a word or line in carrying out their work. As a result, as every student of the Bible knows, translations of the scriptures do have minor discrepancies in them, but no significant truth is affected by them.

Honesty then demands that we speak of the scriptures just as our forefathers have done for generations.

Conclusion

Jesus' last words before he ascended into heaven were, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth." (Acts 1:8b)

Our Jerusalem is the city where we live. Our Judea is Texas. Our Samaria is the rest of our nation. And the "uttermost parts of the earth" refers to everything beyond that.

Our Lord's commission begins at the end of our nose and our toes, and it goes and goes until it encompasses all people everywhere. We cannot fulfill this command unless we cooperate together. The task is simply too great for one person or one church to do by themselves.

I believe we can best reach our state, our nation, and our world by working together in love and trust and unity. And I believe the best way to do that is through the Baptist General Convention of Texas. I am staying with the BGCT; and I urge you, as I urge all of my students at Truett Seminary, to do the same.

