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**20th century witnesses  
decline of postmillennialism**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- The world is getting better. It will keep on getting better. Eventually, evangelism, missions and social reform will usher in God's reign on earth.

There's a sermon you probably haven't heard in a while -- about 100 years.

A prevalent belief at the start of the 20th century, the end-times theology called postmillennialism has all but dissipated at the century's end. The shift is one of the great changes in Baptist theology over the past 100 years, according to an informal survey of Baptist theologians.

Postmillennialists believed the return of Christ predicted in the New Testament book of Revelation would occur at the end of a 1000-year period of peace known as the millennium.

B.H. Carroll, founder and first president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, was a postmillennialist. So was Methodist founder John Wesley and Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher in London.

"Among Protestants in this country at the end of the 19th century, there was a strong commitment to postmillennialism," said James Leo Garrett, theology professor at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

That began to change, however, as the 20th century unfolded. Premillennialists countered that Christ would return before -- not at the end of -- the millennium. Amillennialists, on the other hand, said the thousand years in Revelation should be understood in symbolic, not literal terms.

While the tenets of postmillennialism may seem far-removed to Baptists at the dawn of the 21st century, theologians say it was a different world 100 years ago.

Many thought the 20th century would be the "Christian century" when most of the world would accept the gospel.

That mood birthed a still-popular theological magazine named The Christian Century, said Dwight Moody, dean of the chapel at Georgetown College in Kentucky.

"Missions movements were at their height," Moody said. "There was a lot of optimism that preceded the 20th century."

As decades passed, however, harsh realities in the new century "laid a blanket of despair" on American

Christians, Moody said. Two world wars and the Depression eroded postmillennialism's underlying view that times would steadily improve, Moody said.

In turn, a competing end-times view called premillennialism began to gain influence. Premillennialists see history spiraling downward, with evil increasing until the point when God finally intervenes.

The movement found particular affinity with the hellfire-and-brimstone preaching style popular among fundamentalists. Several fundamentalist Baptist groups organized around premillennial views, and premillennialism is a defining characteristic of the conservative element that has influenced the Southern Baptist Convention in the last quarter of the century, historian Leon McBeth has written.

One particular school of premillennialism grew exponentially in influence during the 20th century, Garrett said. The view known as dispensationalism divides human history into seven epochs, called "dispensations." It teaches that Christians will be delivered from earth through the "rapture" of the church just prior to a seven-year period known as the "tribulation."

A critic of the movement, the late Baptist theologian Dale Moody, wrote that premillennial dispensationalism "spread rapidly in the United States after the publication of the second edition of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1917." Moody said there is no evidence that such a theological system even existed before 1830.

Garrett agreed the Scofield Bible, with its extensive footnotes commenting on the Bible text, proved paramount in spreading the influence of dispensationalism. Many people "read the notes as though they were part of the text," he said.

In addition, popular preachers such as W.A. Criswell of First Baptist Church of Dallas advanced dispensationalism among Southern Baptists, Garrett added.

Another factor in the movement's spread was the growth of preaching on radio and television featuring ministers of various denominations, said Brad Creed, dean of Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. "Baptists no longer got all their information and doctrinal training through Training Union, the Baptist Book Store and their pastor. They could listen to the radio or TV broadcast."

Dispensationalism now stands "at the peak of its influence in Southern Baptist life," Garrett reported. "Never has there been a time when dispensationalism has had so much influence."

Garrett suggested the rise of dispensationalism may indicate that current events play a role in how Baptists interpret the Bible. A question to consider in evaluating the changes in Baptist theology, he said, is, "Does dispensationalism do better in times of crisis?"

Not all Baptist premillennialists have been dispensationalists, however. Writers in the 20th century describe a view called "historical" premillennialism that de-emphasizes a pre-tribulation rapture.

The belief that Jesus will return to earth and reign for a thousand years dates to the early days of Christianity, particularly in times when Christians were persecuted, and remained common until the third century.

Over the centuries, as Christianity became more established, Christian thinkers began to view the millennium not as a literal 1,000 years but as symbolizing the long view of history, leading up to the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. That view, known as non-millennialism or amillennialism, prevailed until the Protestant Reformation.

Both views have been held by Baptist theologians influential in the 20th century.

One interesting twist is that both Criswell and Herschel Hobbs, principal author of the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, were influenced by a common teacher. E.Y. Mullins, a professor and president at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary early in the 20th century, was an amillennialist. Hobbs shared Mullins' position, while Criswell rejected it in favor of dispensationalism.

Over the years, Southern Baptists of different stripe followed both streams.

## 20th century marked by growth in Baptist theology

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- The 20th century has witnessed an explosion in Southern Baptist theology, experts say.

As the century dawned, Southern Baptists had one denominational seminary. At century's end, the Southern Baptist Convention has six seminaries. In addition, dozens of Baptist-affiliated colleges and universities offer religion degrees. Several universities sponsored by Baptist state conventions now also house divinity schools or seminaries.

"A hundred years ago, theology among Southern Baptists was a very minor, provincial, unsophisticated enterprise," said Dwight Moody, dean of the chapel at Georgetown College in Kentucky and a contributor to the 1994 book "Has Our Theology Changed?"

Theology is an academic term describing the study of God and Christian beliefs.

Just two Southern Baptists had published theology books by 1900, J.L. Dagg and James Petigru Boyce. Dagg was president of Mercer University and Boyce the founding president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Both Dagg and Boyce studied under Presbyterians, and their theology books published near the turn of the century "were basically Presbyterian with a thin veneer of Baptist ideas on top," Moody said.

Curtis Freeman, professor of religion at Houston Baptist University, said there is "nothing distinctively Baptist" about Boyce's written theology. "It basically is his notes he got from (Charles) Hodge," a Presbyterian who taught Boyce at Princeton, Freeman said.

The situation has changed dramatically in the 20th century. Rather than drawing primarily on academic influences of others, Southern Baptists today are shaping the views of other religious thinkers.

"The most widely used textbook in theology in America is written by Millard Erickson, and he's on the faculty at Baylor," a Baptist-affiliated university in Texas, Moody noted.

That is illustrative of how theology has grown and developed among Southern Baptists over the last hundred years, Moody and others said.

"By and large, there was very little theological enterprise" at the turn of the century, Moody said. "There was no theological industry like there is now. Theology was done mostly in Sunday sermons."

That is why, Moody said, a doctrinal sermon became an important fixture at the annual meeting of Baptist associations. It is also why Baptists adopted confessions of faith.

Baptists in the last century also became aware of theological issues through sometimes-raucous debates with other faiths, added Brad Creed, dean and professor of church history at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. "It was not uncommon to find Baptists having debates with Methodists, members of the Church of Christ, Catholics."

"We mistakenly look at these events as historical curiosities," Creed said. "We underestimate the influence they had in solidifying Baptist identity. People got issues out in the open and were able to talk about them. I don't know that we do that so well today."

In time, an emerging class of Southern Baptist theologians grew from early groundwork laid by Boyce and Dagg. Most notable was E.Y. Mullins. Born in Mississippi and reared in Texas, Mullins studied at Southern Seminary and in 1899 returned as president of Southern Baptists' mother seminary.

Mullins became one of the most influential Baptist theologians of the century. He was a statesman, serving as president of both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist World Alliance.

Moody described Mullins' book "The Christian Religion and its Doctrinal Expression" as "the first effort in America to fashion a truly Baptist theology."

Mullins published other popular books, including "Why is Christianity True?," "Baptist Beliefs" and "Christianity at the Crossroads."

Mullins "The Axioms of Religion," published in 1908, highly influenced the teaching of pastor and statesman Herschel Hobbs. Hobbs, in turn, shaped Southern Baptist theology in the latter half of the century by chairing a committee that wrote the Southern Baptist Convention's official confession of faith, the "Baptist Faith and Message," in 1963.

Mullins "became the most powerful voice in Southern Baptist theology in the early part of the 20th century," noted Freeman. "E.Y. Mullins was one of the great statesmen, great theological leaders of Southern Baptists. He is the mind behind the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'"

W.T. Conner and W.O. Carver later joined Mullins as prominent shapers of Southern Baptist theology. Conner, a student of Mullins, taught systematic theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary 39 years, beginning in 1910. Carver taught theology, homiletics and missions at Southern Seminary from 1896 to 1943 and wrote numerous books on theology and missions.

Mullins, Conner and Carver "really helped develop Baptist theology in the South and gave us some sophistication, some Baptist identity," Moody said.

Their work paved the way for an explosion in Southern Baptist theology after World War II. Enrollment in seminaries mushroomed. Thousands of young men and women were trained to minister in local churches, and hundreds were trained to teach in Baptist schools.

The post-war environment also expanded the boundaries for Southern Baptist theologians. Southern Baptists traveled overseas in greater numbers. Some studied at prestigious European universities and seminaries. More visitors from abroad began traveling to the United States, exposing even Baptists at home to a wider variety of theological influences.

The rapid expansion of worldwide missionary efforts in the 20th century created a new kind of "international dialogue" and "cross-fertilization" in theology, Moody said.

Ultimately, this resulted in a "broader kingdom vision," said Paul Basden, pastor of Brookwood Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., and editor of the book "Has Our Theology Changed?"

One hundred years ago, Southern Baptists were moving toward cooperation with Baptists around the world in the Baptist World Alliance, Basden said. Today, the desire to broaden cooperation is more likely to take place locally, such as through a church's involvement with Habitat for Humanity, Basden said.

As Southern Baptist theology has expanded and received more attention throughout the 20th century, several difficult issues have required attention, said Freeman, who is editor of a collection of writings about Baptist theology called "Baptist Roots."

A great deal of attention has been focused on "coming to terms with modernity," he said. "That means an understanding of history, coming to terms with science, ... all the questions about miracles and the nature of the Bible and the person of Christ. Everything gets re-evaluated based upon that."

There's also been an emphasis on a "quest for righteousness," Freeman said. More than any other question, Baptists in the 20th century have struggled with the issue of what it means to stand for righteousness, to integrate ethics and theology, he said.

That's why Martin Luther King Jr. must be seen as one of the most significant shapers of Baptist theology in the latter half of the century, Freeman said. King's message of civil rights was "calling the church to be a righteous church."

"There were some Southern Baptists who said the cross of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with civil rights," Freeman said. "King really helped us see that our call to follow Jesus meant standing for righteousness."

With all that's happened, are Southern Baptists in 1999 more theologically sophisticated than their forebears in 1899?

"We would assume we're more sophisticated because we're a hundred years down the road," Creed said. "Certainly the way we deal with theology is different. But Baptists still have a difficult time talking about theological issues without controversy erupting."

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## **Theologians trace changes in Southern Baptist theology**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- While many core beliefs remain intact, Southern Baptist theology has undergone many changes in the 20th century.

An informal survey of a cross-section of Baptist theologians and historians produced a list of seven areas in which they believe Southern Baptist theology has shifted from 1900 to 1999:

-- The Bible. While the nature and interpretation of the Bible has been the all-consuming debate among Southern Baptists in the last quarter of the century, it was barely on the radar screen at the turn of the century.

The push toward biblical inerrancy seen among Southern Baptists in the late 20th century "is really without parallel," said James Leo Garrett, professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

A 19th century systematic theology by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President James P. Boyce did not even include a chapter on Scripture, noted Dwight Moody, dean of the chapel at Georgetown College in Kentucky.

The issue of biblical inspiration had risen by the turn of the century, however, because of a dispute over a controversial professor at Southern Seminary. Crawford Howell Toy was forced to resign from the seminary faculty in 1879 for using a modern method called "higher criticism" to study the Bible.

When the Toy controversy erupted, Boyce turned to Basil Manly Jr. to write a defense of the traditional view of biblical inspiration, said Moody, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject. Manly's book, "The Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration," was published in 1888.

The issue of biblical inspiration gradually returned to the forefront as historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation gained a foothold in many universities. This set the stage for what ultimately would become one of the most divisive chapters in Southern Baptist history.

-- Calvinism. Southern Baptist forebears came from two schools of thought on theological issues concerning the atonement and election. Calvinism, with its emphasis on predestination, offered a view called "limited" atonement, meaning Christ's sacrificial death was effective only for the elect. Arminianism, on the other hand, emphasized free will and spoke of a "general" atonement for all who believe.

As a result, Southern Baptists in the 20th century have tended to embrace a modified Calvinism that accepts perseverance of the saints -- popularly expressed as "once saved, always saved" -- while softening stances on other Calvinist dogma such as "irresistible grace."

"On the doctrine of election, the real change was from Boyce to Mullins," explained Garrett. Boyce, the founder of Southern Seminary, was a Calvinist. E.Y. Mullins, president of the seminary at the turn of the century, was not.

After a decline of Calvinistic teaching among Southern Baptists by mid-century, the theological system has recently experienced a comeback. As the century ends, Southern Seminary once again has a Calvinist as president, and an association of Southern Baptist Calvinists is growing in numbers and influence.

"One thing that explains this for me is that Baptist identity has always been a challenge," said Brad Creed, dean of George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. "We don't have a Martin Luther or a John Knox or a John Wesley. As we have witnessed the balkanization of Baptists at the end of the 20th century, there's more searching and questioning about what it means to be a Baptist, to discover the source of our identity or our historical roots."

"The resurgence of Calvinism is a function of that in part," he continued. "Those who are involved in this movement claim the Reformed heritage as the pristine heritage for Baptists today. That's true only in part. To make that claim is to ignore a great deal of Baptist history."

-- The Holy Spirit. "A hundred years ago, nobody was writing about the Holy Spirit," said Moody. "Of course, this century has been the century of the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal movement is the most powerful Christian movement around the globe. And it has brought the Holy Spirit back into center stage in Christian life."

The most noticeable impact among Southern Baptists is in worship, added Paul Basden, pastor of Brookwood Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

"A century ago, you would not have expected to have so many Baptist churches that look like charismatic worship services without (speaking in) tongues," Basden said. "Worship in Baptist churches today is far more like that."

-- Race. Early in this century, white Baptists in the South often quoted the Bible to defend segregation. Today, such rhetoric is hard to find among mainstream Baptists.

Race was "a burning issue in this century," Garrett said. Unfortunately, he continued, it was a case of culture pushing theology in the right direction. "We were forced to the change by the culture," he said. "We were not the pioneers here."

That's not to minimize the work of Baptist ethicists such as T.B. Maston and Henlee Barnett, who led Southern Baptists to think about racism in theological terms, Garrett said.

"They were very courageous. But by and large, Southern Baptists were forced to this. ... Our change in convictions was greatly influenced by change in the social order."

The result is a better theology, Garrett said. "Our doctrine of the image of God has been strengthened at this point. We operate out of a doctrine of the human that does not allow for racism, that sees racism as a sin. We didn't see it as a sin before; we saw it as a way of life."

Only in the last few years has this revised doctrine of humanity come full circle, Basden said. He credits the Promise Keepers movement, which made racial reconciliation a major theme. "Promise Keepers pushed it over the top," he said.

Sunday morning worship services still remain the most segregated parts of American society, Creed added. "While some progress is encouraging, Baptists still have a long way to go."

-- Religious liberty. Southern Baptist views on religious liberty appear to have shifted during the century, but how much is hard to say, Garrett said.

Early in the century, Southern Baptist leaders such as George W. Truett and J.M. Dawson advocated a strict separation of church and state, he said.

"Now, in the latter part of the century, particularly in the SBC leadership circles, we see people starting to question whether there really is a separation of church and state, advocacy of vouchers, a strong commitment to the return of Christian nation values."

Both those who hold on to the older view of separation and those who more recently call for greater accommodation claim to be defending religious freedom, Garrett noted.

"This is kind of a mixed picture," he said. "You didn't have two groups back in the early part of the century. Baptists were very much united. But they didn't have some of the issues to deal with we have today."

-- The church. A theology called Landmarkism heavily influenced Southern Baptists in the first half of the century, particularly in parts of the South and Midwest. Landmarkers believe that local Baptist churches are the only true church, and they trace their succession through dissenting sects back to Bible times. They reject "alien immersion," or baptism by outsiders, and practice "close communion," meaning only church members may observe the Lord's Supper.

Given their view of the primacy of the congregation, they are suspicious of any denominational affiliations that delegate decision-making beyond the local church.

Few Southern Baptist churches today advocate such ultra-conservative views of the church, both Garrett and Basden said, although there are pockets where Landmark influence remains.

At his own Birmingham congregation, Basden noted: "We just received a person from a Church of Christ this past Sunday, and she doesn't have to be baptized. She's been baptized in Jesus' name. We'll have the Lord's Supper on Christmas Eve, and we'll say, 'If you know Jesus, come forward.'"

-- Church leadership. The 20th century has seen the rise of a view that the pastor is the ruler or chief executive of the church. Garrett and Basden said it runs contrary to the common belief at the turn of the century.

"For all the Baptist talk about congregational votes, most churches are willing to give that up for a really strong leader who doesn't abuse them," Basden said.

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## **Supreme Court rejects challenge to exclusion of religious schools**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court sidestepped a dispute over tuition payments to religious schools Dec. 13.

The high court's order left standing Vermont's policy of excluding religious schools from its tuition-reimbursement program. For students living in small school districts that do not operate high schools, the state reimburses tuition to attend other public schools or approved private schools.

The exclusion of religious schools was challenged by the Chittenden Town School District, which pays tuition for its 95 high school students to attend other schools. In May 1996, the district's board voted to pay tuition for students to attend a Catholic school. State education officials responded by suspending aid to the district.

A trial court ruled that the school board's paying tuition at a parochial school "would have the effect of a direct subsidy to religious schools in violation of the United States and Vermont Constitutions."

The Vermont Supreme Court also ruled against the Chittenden district, citing a prohibition in the state constitution of compelled support for "any place of worship."

"We see no way to separate religious instruction from religious worship," the court stated.

The Vermont Supreme Court also rejected arguments by Chittenden officials that the exclusion of religious schools violates First Amendment free-exercise rights.

The Vermont case is the third dispute involving religious school tuition rejected by the nation's high court since it opened its current term. In October, justices declined to review lower-court rulings that upheld tax credits for donations to Arizona charities that fund nonpublic school tuition and Maine's exclusion of religious schools from a tuition reimbursement program similar to Vermont's.

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