

Who Are Southern Baptists?

By William E. Hull

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During most of our history, Southern Baptists suffered obscurity as the neglected stepchild, or even the unwanted black sheep, of the American religious establishment. But more recent years have found us blinking from the unaccustomed glare of national publicity as our heartland, the once-blighted Sunbelt, became a pivotal region both economically and politically; as one of our preachers, Billy Graham, became the most famous evangelist in the world; as one of our laymen, Jimmy Carter, became President of the United States; and as our ranks swelled to make us the largest evangelical denomination in the country.

Suddenly, everybody wanted to know who Southern Baptists really were. Our annual sessions began to be covered by the mass media, our leaders began to be interviewed for feature stories, even our controversies began to be analyzed in an effort to detect religious trends. As we moved from the shadows into the spotlight, what answers regarding our identity did we have to offer a curious public?

The most deliberate effort at self-definition for this image-conscious age came at our 1978 meeting in Atlanta when, for the first time, we adopted "a symbol for the Southern Baptist Convention."¹ This now-familiar design depicted the Bible and the world held together by the cross. These three components were selected to identify the cardinal convictions which lie at the heart of our common life. Therefore, let us use this official denominational logo to clarify afresh, both for ourselves and for all who would inquire, something of what it means to be a Southern Baptist.

I. Our Message: The Bible

That open book at the base of the SBC symbol represents Holy Scripture as the foundation of all that we seek to do. Baptists are, first and foremost, a People of the Word. The Bible is given pride of place in our confessions of faith because it serves as a singular source of religious authority. We have no creeds or canon law or ecclesiastical hierarchy to compete with the Bible as our sole rule of faith and order. It is the fountainhead of all our preaching, the textbook of all our teaching, and the inspiration of all our devotions.

But why should we accord Scripture an utterly unique place at the very core of our collective being? Because it provides the only access to our Lord Jesus Christ! Negatively, I invite you to ransack every ancient source outside the Bible—whether Jewish, Greek, Roman, or Christian—in quest of authentic information and insight on the saving ministry of the Messiah. You will find that the results of such a search can be put on the proverbial pinhead. It is simply a fact that, apart from the Bible, we know nothing really important or trustworthy about that Life which is the sum and substance of our faith.

Positively, however, when we open the Bible we find an inexhaustible source for understanding the revelation of God in Christ. The Old Testament prepares us to grasp every facet of his person, whether as Mosaic Prophet,

Davidic King, Isaianic Servant, or Danielic Son of Man. The Gospels provide a four-dimensional portrait of his incarnate life from the Womb to the Tomb. The epistles add an apostolic perspective on his enduring significance for the believer, the church, and ultimately the entire universe. Anyone seeking to discover the meaning of Christ has nowhere else to turn but to the Bible.

Because the Bible is our ultimate source for a God-given understanding of Christ, its significance is inseparable from the significance of its Lord. The Bible is unique because Christ is unique! It has no rivals because Christ has no rivals. When we call the Bible "authoritative," it is because all authority has been given unto Christ in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18). When we call the Bible "the Word of God," it is because Christ is that Word-made-flesh who, from all eternity, was with God and was God (John 1:1). When we call the Bible "infallible" or "inerrant," it is because Christ never fails to lead us unerringly to the Father (John 14:5-7).

Not only is the Bible the only book that enables us to interpret Christ correctly. It is, for that reason, the only book that Christ sends his Spirit to help us interpret correctly. The promise of the Upper Room, that the Paraclete will guide us into all truth by taking what is Christ's and declaring it to us (John 16:13-15), is a guarantee that our understanding of Scripture is meant to grow. That is why John Robinson said to the Pilgrim Fathers as they set forth on the "Mayflower" in 1620, "The Lord has more light and trust yet to break forth out of his holy Word."² Like the widow's jar of meal and cruse of oil in the hands of Elijah (I Kings 17:16), or the lad's five loaves and two fish in the hands of Jesus (John 6:11), the Bible in the hands of the Holy Spirit becomes an inexhaustible treasure of spiritual riches for all who seek them.

Symbolized, then, by that open book is our one and only message. We honor no other book because we have no other Savior. We preach the Bible because, as Paul put it, "we preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord" (II Corinthians 4:5). We search the Scriptures, whether in Sunday School or in seminary, because they bear witness to Christ (John 5:39). It is our bedrock conviction that the Bible will not fail because Christ never fails! It will not lie because Christ never lies! It will not disappoint because Christ never disappoints! Its words will ever be on our lips because they are "wonderful words of life."³

II. Our Mission: The World

We turn now to the second component in our SBC symbol, a globe looming just above the open book. This design implies that the Bible exists not only for ourselves but for the world. It suggests that the gospel declared in Scripture is for every person on the face of the earth. Our logo announces for all to see that, if the Bible is our message, the world is our mission.

The original Charter of the Southern Baptist Convention, adopted in 1845, declared in its preamble that our purpose was "the propagation of the gospel." This founding vision has been given fresh impetus in our day by the adoption of Bold Mission Thrust as the central imperative of our denominational life.⁴ Launched in 1978, this massive enterprise commits us to share the gospel with every

person in the world by the year 2000. It challenges *every* church and *every* agency to do *every* thing possible to win *every* person to Christ before the second millennium of the Christian era has run its course.

There is, however, a profound mystery to this all-embracing definition of mission. Our history is not inclusivist. Baptists began as a small, persecuted remnant, and have never been an established church with close ties to world leaders. Our organization is not universalist, as in the Roman Catholic Church with its international headquarters and worldwide leadership structure. By contrast, we are a highly decentralized body emphasizing the autonomy of local congregations, most of them quite small. Our people are not internationalist in their loyalties. Most of us are rather provincial, little traveled, poorly read on world affairs, not deeply involved in such global organizations as the United Nations.

Then why this overriding desire to win the world for Christ? Not because we are prepared for it either historically, organizationally, or temperamentally, but because we are commanded to do it Biblically. We are like those frightened first-century peasants who had never been a hundred miles from Palestine but who heard the risen Lord say, "Go ye into all the world" (Mark 16:15), and who took him at his word! Like the shoe-cobbler, William Carey, who confounded his contemporaries with the audacious notion of a worldwide witness, we have decided that the Great Commission means exactly what it says!

Bold Mission Thrust, therefore, is not an expression of denominational imperialism; rather, it is a determined effort to insure that the word which God has entrusted to us will not return unto him void (Isaiah 55:11). If Bold Mission Thrust succeeds, it will be a divine miracle, not a human achievement. Humanly, the great majority of us are Southern-white-middle class-conservative-evangelicals, and, like most groups in our polarized society, we would prefer to stick with our own kind. But the Great Commission did not say, "Go ye into all of Dixie and make disciples of every Southerner" (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus did not say, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all conservative evangelicals unto myself" (cf. John 12:32). Paul did not say, "I am ready to preach the gospel to all middle class whites" (cf. Romans 1:14-15). In place of these grotesque perversions, we define our mission as extending to the ends of the earth. In defiance of inherited prejudices that would bind us with cultural strictures; in defiance of staggering costs that would postpone our goal to a more properous era; in defiance of escalating political tensions that would counsel compromise in the name of sober realism, we cry with John Wesley, "The world is our parish."⁵ In so doing, we determine to embrace not only the rich diversity of American life but also the planetary pluralism that, without a new reconciling center, threatens Armageddon in this generation. We resolve to penetrate every geographical region, every ethnic group, every socio-economic class, and every ideological persuasion with the good news of a universal Savior who transcends all of these cleavages and thus can unite our incredible differences.

It is difficult for outside observers to grasp the radical universality of our mission. Media pundits tends to positionize us in the religious marketplace with 19% of the American population that likes to view itself as "evangelical," or with 47% that prefers to call itself "conserva-

tive."⁶ While there is nothing wrong with recognizing these historical and sociological affinities, any effort to restrict our influence only to certain groups in society overlooks the mandate of Bold Mission Thrust to identify with 100% of the human spectrum because Christ died for us all! We witness to people, not because they are conservative or moderate or liberal, but because they are lost! We welcome them, not because they are white or Southern or middle class, but because they believe! It is not our task to lead the Gallup Poll sweepstakes by appealing to some favored group in society, but to empty hell of its prospective tenants.!

III. Our Motive: The Cross

Turn for a final time to our SBC symbol and you will see that its third component is a cross superimposed upon the book and the globe, holding them together. This is a graphic way of saying that conflict arises when the Word of God confronts the world of man. So it was with Jesus. He was killed, not for teaching on the hillside, "Behold the lilies, how they grow" (Matthew 7:28), but for crying in the Temple, "Behold the thieves, how they steal" (Mark 11:17). For him, the cross was that Gethsemane spirit of obedience in the face of utter jeopardy which prayed, "Not my will but Thine be done" (Mark 14:36). For us, the cross means that no price is too great, no sacrifice too costly, no suffering too painful to accomplish our mission of proclaiming the whole Word to the whole world.

But why should a hideous instrument of death come to occupy so central a place in our SBC logo? Because Calvary reminds us that entrenched evil will not give up without a fight. Baptists first learned that truth when they were born on a cross. Persecuted for daring to apply the New Testament to their own lives, hounded into jail for refusing to bow to religious conformity, their pilgrimage through history has indeed left a "trail of blood."⁷ Nor have we, after all these centuries, ceased to run the gauntlet of Christ's enemies. Bill Wallace was martyred in China because he embodied spiritual commitments that were intolerable to his Communist oppressors.⁸ All over the world Baptists have dared to pick a fight because, like Thomas Jefferson, we have "sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."⁹

We are not called, however, to fight God's battles with the Devil's weapons. Instead, the cross further reminds us that we are to meet the furies of hell with a costly compassion:

For not with swords' loud clashing,
Or roll of stirring drums;
With deeds of love and mercy
The heav'nly kingdom comes.¹⁰

Lest anyone misunderstand, let it be said that Southern Baptists are not a political action movement, or a religious lobby, or a single-issue pressure group, or an ideological voting block. We do not intend to coerce, intimidate, or manipulate the world to do our bidding. Instead, we have but one motive: to love the world into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. For our friends, we have only gratitude; for our enemies, we have only forgiveness. If that be weakness, then, with Paul, we are persuaded that it is "the weakness of God which is stronger than man" (I Corinthians 1:25).

In that great battle between the Word and the world, why do we fight "neath the banner of the cross?"¹¹ Because courageous love, offered in obedience to God's will, changes human hearts as nothing else can. In the first century, Caesar had unlimited power to coerce but none whatsoever to convert. He bludgeoned the entire civilized world into submission but left it a spiritual wasteland. By contrast, Christ commanded no armies, but his helpless love melted hearts of stone that gladly served him long after Caesar was forgotten. Today, a mean spirit of religious intolerance and fanaticism is sweeping the globe, from Ireland to Iran, which threatens to engulf our land as well. Against this rising tide of frustration and hatred we lift, not a sword, but a cross. As our badge of identity testifies, we have taken our stand with the Crucified who will win with his wounds or not win at all!

Over and over again we have confirmed the paradox of his cross in our own experience. When we are brash and arrogant, God does not bless; but, when we are broken and helpless, he comes to our rescue. It is the lesson Paul learned: "When I am weak (in my own strength!), then I am strong (in God's strength!)" (II Corinthians 12:10). To be sure, we yearn to share Christ's victory over the forces of evil. But we remember that God vindicated Jesus because he was first willing to die. As individuals and as a denomination, we will never know the power of Christ's resurrection until we also share the fellowship of his sufferings, "becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

How hard it is to understand Southern Baptists! For years now we have been told that the central drama of our destiny was to wage a fight to the finish between two warring factions, one called "liberal" and the other called "conservative." But a look at our logo says that this scenario is not so. Deeper than all of our surface skirmishes, which are but symptomatic of these troubled times, lies an identity shaped, not by politics or ideology, but by an open book, a lost world, and a suffering Savior. This identity calls us, not to be "liberal", but to be loving; not to be "conservative," but to be crucified! A broken world will not be won by any of the code words or catch phrases over which we sometimes squabble, but only by the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ proclaimed and preserved in Scripture.

Our symbol says it well, but the time has come to translate that symbol into reality. Therefore, let us stand united: with an open Bible in our hands, with a lost world in our eyes, and with a cross of love in our hearts, saying to one another and to all who watch, "This is who we are! This is what it means to be a Southern Baptist!"

NOTES

1. Reported in the 1978 *Annual* of the Southern Baptist Convention, p. 46, item 75, as Recommendation No. 13 of the Executive Committee, adopted on June 13, 1978. This action was initiated by a motion of Ray K. Hodge at the 1976 meeting in Norfolk on June 15, 1976, as reported in the 1976 *Annual*, p. 32, item 23, and p. 52, item 103.
2. Quoted by H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1946), p. 13.
3. Philip P. Bliss, "Wonderful Words of Life," *Baptist Hymnal*, edited by Walter Hines Sims (Nashville: Convention Press, 1956), #181, refrain.
4. The basic texts of official denominational action in adopting Bold Mission Thrust are found in the 1976 *SBC Annual*, pp. 53-55, item 119; and in the 1977 *SBC Annual*, p. 37, item 57.

5. John Wesley wrote in his journal of June 11, 1739, "I look upon the world as my parish." John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, thirteenth edition (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), p. 329.
6. On the 19% of American adults classified as "evangelical," see the 1979 Gallup Poll interpreted in *Christianity Today*, December 21, 1979, pp. 10-19. On the 47% of American Adults classified as "conservative" ("right" of center), see the Gallup Poll of October 5-8, 1979, published as "Public's Political Philosophy" (Princeton: American Institute of Public Opinion, November 11, 1979). The most recent Gallup survey identified 17%, or 27 million American adults, as "evangelical." See *Emerging Trends*, February, 1982, p. 3.
7. The allusion is to the title of a pamphlet by J. M. Carroll published posthumously in 1931.
8. See Jesse C. Fletcher, *Bill Wallace of China* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1963).
9. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush, September 23, 1800, cited in Bartlett, *op. cit.*, p. 374.
10. Ernest W. Shurtleff, "Lead On, O King Eternal," *Baptist Hymnal*, *op. cit.*, #417, stanza 2.
11. Daniel W. Whittle, "The Banner of the Cross," *ibid*, #408, refrain.