

**AGAINST THE WIND**



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In memory of

**Ralph T. Eubanks**

A rhetorical scholar nonpareil, southern gentleman, and mentor

# CONTENTS

Foreword I ix

William E. Hull

Foreword II xxvii

Bill Leonard

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Preface xxxiii

Acknowledgments xliii

Author's Notebook xlvii

Chapter 1. In the Beginning:  
Voices of Salvation and Unity 1

Chapter 2. Sons of Thunder:  
Voices of Revival and Renewal 15

Chapter 3. The Elliott Controversy and the Broadman  
Controversy: Voices of Attack and Defense 27

Chapter 4. The Rise of Fundamentalism:  
Voices of Affirmation and Apologia 47

Chapter 5. The Inerrancy Idea:  
Voices of Truth and Silence 63

Chapter 6. Serving the Lord in a New World:  
Voices of the Moderate Baptist 75

Chapter 7. Why I Am Still a Baptist:  
Voices of Hope 81

Postscript: Southern Baptists in the Twenty-first Century	93
Duke K. McCall	
—	
Appendix I. Amazing Grace	103
Foy Valentine	
Appendix II. Who Are Baptists? A Historical Perspective	111
Lloyd Allen	
Appendix III. Who Are Southern Baptists?	113
William E. Hull	
Appendix IV. Why I Am Baptist: A Personal Perspective	119
Daniel Vestal	
Appendix V. On Religious Liberty	125
Bruce Prescott	
Appendix VI. Why I Am Still a Baptist: A Virginia Pastor's Perspective	133
Joe Lewis	
Appendix VII. A Summary History of the Conception, Development, and Publication of <i>The Broadman Bible Commentary</i>	141
Clifton J. Allen	
Appendix VIII. The Story behind "One Song"	165
Pepper Choplin	
—	
Notes	177
Contributors	185
Index	189

## FOREWORD I

WILLIAM E. HULL

The struggle for control of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which was publicly launched in 1979 and decisively concluded in 1990, marked an unprecedented turning point in the history of the denomination. To reach for an adequate metaphor, this was no fierce storm like the many feuds for which the “Battling Baptists” have long been famous.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it resembled a tsunami caused by the shifting of tectonic plates deep beneath the surface of our common life, resulting in a tidal wave that quietly gained momentum until it crashed into our midst, leaving untold casualties in its wake. In less than a decade, before a new millennium could dawn, everything in the denomination was different: its priorities, its policies, and its personalities. To change the metaphor, a crowd that did not even believe in evolution had engineered a radical mutation in the denominational identity gene.

Moderates have offered many reasons for their banishment from SBC life, most of them based on lessons learned from hand-to-hand combat with their opponents.<sup>2</sup> While these accounts offer valuable insights, I am not sure that they go far enough in explaining why this controversy was so different from the many that the denomination survived without schism. In an effort to broaden an understanding of the dynamics at work in this dispute, I shall mention five factors at play in the wider context that may not have received the attention they deserve as contributors to the conflict.

### **A NEW MANAGERIAL ELITE**

History weaves a seamless robe, but a story has to start somewhere, so let us begin in the mid-1950s. Freed at last from the constraints of World War II and the Korean War, American religion was booming, nowhere more so than in the SBC as symbolized by its “A Million More in Fifty-Four” campaign for Sunday School growth. Suddenly, everything was burgeoning too fast for the traditional denominational infrastructure to handle. Pioneer missionaries

were entering new states at home and new nations abroad. Additional agencies were being established and existing programs expanded just as trusted prewar leaders were moving off the scene. Clearly a more adequate support system was needed to manage this runaway expansion.

A blue-ribbon group called the Committee to Study the Total Southern Baptist Program was assembled to address the problem. One of its early moves after being authorized in 1956 was to employ the national consulting firm of Booz, Allen, and Hamilton to provide “professional assistance . . . in the more detailed and technical aspects of the study.”<sup>3</sup> By the time the committee submitted its findings in 1958 and the last of its recommendations were approved in 1959, the SBC and its agencies, without fully realizing it, had joined the managerial revolution that was sweeping the corporate culture of America. In a word, the agency heads were “professionalized.” Their titles were inflated, usually from executive secretary-treasurer to president and chief executive officer. Their staffs were increased, often from an office secretary to a number of administrative and executive assistants. Their salaries and benefits kept pace with the growing size and elegant furnishings of their office suites.

Here it is important to emphasize that none of these changes were instituted in an effort at self-aggrandizement. Instead, it was simply assumed that the SBC power structure needed to abandon its simplistic homegrown ways in order to manage efficiently an increasingly complex bureaucracy. Far from being a grab for status, the recommendations of the management experts were accepted as a challenge for Southern Baptists to become as sophisticated in administering the Lord’s affairs as corporate executives were in guiding their for-profit enterprises. Not only was there a sense of inevitability about the shift, but it was carried out with a minimum of pretentiousness. The more generous emoluments accorded to agency heads did not begin to rival those heaped on their counterparts in the business world. Despite a little grumbling about heavyhandedness as change worked its way through the ranks of agency employees, the SBC managerial revolution was launched with remarkably little opposition.<sup>4</sup> After all, its leaders were known and trusted and their enhanced role was but a tribute to the success that everyone would enjoy.

Worthy motives notwithstanding, one unintended consequence of this professionalizing of SBC agency leadership was to create a managerial elite that gradually lost touch with its grass-roots constituency. The very nature of any professional group is to become inbred and self-policing. Admittance is restricted to those with specialized training who meet prescribed standards. Outsiders who lack their credentials and cannot use their jargon are certainly not qualified to judge their effectiveness. To be sure, professionals remain keenly aware of their constituencies, increasingly seen as customers

of the services they render, but the attitudes of the clientele are surveyed utilizing technical methodologies that only a few statistical specialists can understand and interpret. As SBC agencies began to move in this direction, they gradually created a top-down aristocracy of expertise, particularly in some of the seminaries, that became insensitive to the bottom-up democratic impulse lying at the heart of Baptist polity.<sup>5</sup>

It took several years for the new system to become self-perpetuating, but by the 1970s its vulnerabilities were becoming obvious. As the agencies became ever more professional in the way they did their work, many of the churches were moving in the opposite direction, becoming—for lack of a better word—more “populist” in the way they did their work. A few of the tall-steeple First Churches with highly educated clergy tried the professional model, but their strength was steadily waning. The growing churches threw out organizational charts, personnel manuals, and five-year strategic plans, depending more on innovative leadership in an unstructured environment to get the job done. Carefully devised denominational proposals began to be spurned, and soon the once-monolithic “Baptist program” was in tatters. A few agencies tried to make adjustments, but they were trapped by their elaborate internal processes and by the long tenure of their senior executives, which made it difficult for them to keep pace with the latest expectations of their constituencies.

Beyond the quickening pace of innovative changes in the churches lay two stubborn statistics that changed very little. First, most churches were small congregations of fewer than three hundred members located in economically stagnant or declining sections of the Deep South. In 1970, for example, 34,360 churches were affiliated with the SBC, 22,778 of them (66.3 percent) in open country or village settings and only 11,582 (33.7 percent) in cities of over twenty-five hundred population.<sup>6</sup> Even though the managerial elite of the SBC lived modestly compared to their counterparts in the business world, they could not avoid the widening gap between their working conditions and those of small church pastors, many of whom lived on subsistence wages and had no staff except for perhaps a part-time secretary and/or custodian. In professionalizing agency leadership, the SBC thought that it was getting more efficient techniques for administering its programs, but what it actually got was a corporate culture out of step with the dominant culture in the majority of its churches.

Second, the registration rules for voting status at annual sessions of the SBC were heavily weighted in favor of small church representation. Each cooperating church was automatically entitled to one messenger plus one additional messenger for every 250 members or \$250 annual contribution up to a maximum of ten.<sup>7</sup> This meant that two or three country churches giving a thousand dollars to the Cooperative Program could outvote a much larger

city church giving hundreds of thousands of dollars. When I explained how the system worked to the chairman of our finance committee, an astute accountant, he muttered with evident exasperation, “We don’t get to vote our shares!” What I am suggesting here is that the demographics were right for a populist revolt. Which is exactly what Jerry Vines was encouraging when he extolled the mythical Billy Baptist who was confused by the latest theology from Germany and by programs designed using techniques from consulting firms such as Booz, Allen, and Hamilton.

But populist revolts had erupted periodically in SBC life only to subside, so why was this one different? In the past, peace had been restored by strong pastors who were also veteran denominational leaders: George W. Truett, Louie D. Newton, and Herschel H. Hobbs, to name a few. These men had profound rural roots which they retained as they ascended to top churches in Southern Baptist life, never losing the common touch. At the same time, they served for years on various SBC boards, often exerting more influence than the agency head. In 1946, the SBC began a more systematic rotation of board and committee assignments which, when combined with the managerial trends traced above, had the effect of further increasing the internal power of long-serving agency heads. When external trouble arose, however, these executives now found at their side not a highly esteemed pastor who could talk to the grass-roots in language they understood, but a board chairman who had served in that key position for only a year or two and was largely unknown to most Southern Baptists.

### **A NEW CLIMATE OF FEAR**

The 1950s were what one historian called “years of confidence.”<sup>8</sup> The American dream seemed vindicated by the verdict of World War II. It was an orderly era in which people dressed carefully and went to church in droves. The “greatest generation” was busy launching the “baby boom” as an expression of optimism about the future. However, seeds of discontent were already growing beneath a placid surface of cheerful conformity, but traditional systems of authority were still sufficient to control their explosive potential.<sup>9</sup>

This presumption of continuing progress reached a climax in the Camelot years of the Kennedy presidency (1960–63) but was rudely shattered by a “decade of shocks” stretching from the assassination of John F. Kennedy to the resignation of Richard M. Nixon (1963–74).<sup>10</sup> Suddenly an encroaching chaos became part of everyday life: the slaying of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the collapse of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and War on Poverty in the jungles of Vietnam, burning racial ghettos in cities such as Los Angeles and Detroit, civil rights advocates assaulted and arrested in droves, campus riots at elite universities from Berkeley to

Harvard, Cold War stalemate following nuclear confrontation in Cuba, a sexual revolution that undermined the traditional family, and a Watergate burglary that imperiled the U.S. presidency. Suffice it to say that the American dream was in utter disarray. A few avant-garde theologians found religion so impotent to combat these devastating developments that they pronounced God—at least the God we enjoyed so much in the 1950s—to be dead.<sup>11</sup>

The dominant reaction to this massive destabilization that seemed to assault our most cherished values was one of fear, a complex emotion compounded of frustration over unanticipated failures, fretfulness over an uncertain course of action, and foreboding that the worst was yet to come. It was not just the high rate of change that prompted an upsurge of anxiety in the 1960s, but the fact that most of these changes were unexpected, unwelcome, and seemingly uncontrollable. The South, in particular, permitted its fears to be exploited by those seeking to attract political support. This is well illustrated by the 1968 presidential campaign of George C. Wallace, whose strategy remarkably anticipated the dynamics of the SBC takeover.<sup>12</sup>

Running as an independent, the former governor of Alabama spoke to and for “the average man on the street”: blue collar workers, small business operators, and farmers—the common people disdained by “all those over-educated ivory-tower folks with pointy heads looking down their noses at us.” To those fearful of federal intrusiveness, he promised defiance at the schoolhouse door. To those fuming over Vietnam draft dodgers, he advocated a patriotism of victory at any cost, selecting as his running mate Gen. Curtis LeMay, who famously favored bombing the Communists back to the stone age. Whether it be the upsurge of immorality, the decline of the work ethic, or disrespect for authority, the antidote was the recovery of traditional morality. The Dixie crowds that roared at his rhetoric were predominantly Baptist. They helped Wallace carry the Deep South and forced Nixon to mimic his message to carry the Outer South. The first Southern Baptist vote on elitism versus populism had been cast—and the populists won hands down. Why? Because in a climate of fear most people want a scrappy fighter to defend them, not a sophisticated technocrat to enlighten them.

The most important consequence of this new mood for the SBC was that it reawakened a long-dormant fundamentalism that had been quietly gathering strength in a variety of churches, many of them Baptist. We know from the history of the movement in American Christianity that fundamentalism thrives on the kind of phobias that feed religious resentment. Emerging in the 1890s in response to fears of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization, which threatened a rurally based Protestant hegemony, it reasserted itself in the 1920s in response to fears that Prohibition would be repealed, Darwinian evolution would undermine the Bible, and a Roman Catholic would be elected as U.S. president. Right on schedule it reappeared in the

1960s in response to fears that legalizing abortion would cheapen the sanctity of life, that feminism would undermine the nuclear family, and that secularism would erode the spiritual foundations of the nation.

Resurgent fundamentalism was mediated to SBC life primarily through the ministry of Jerry Falwell,<sup>13</sup> pastor for more than fifty years (1956–2007) of the independent Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. Daily contact with his growing grass-roots congregation, which eventually came to number half the population of the city, provided abundant opportunities to sense the fears of a typical cross-section of ordinary working-class folk. While SBC agency heads were endlessly itinerating on Sundays to bring a “sugarstick sermon” to strangers then racing back to work at headquarters before there was time to get any reaction to what they had said, Falwell was hammering out a pulpit rhetoric for people who would listen to him week after week for a lifetime.

Because the threats to his congregation were national in scope and political in character, Falwell gradually abandoned his inherited fundamentalist tradition of preaching gospel sermons to the spiritual needs of individuals, especially after the Supreme Court ruling on abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). In its place he developed a clear, combative message that was explicitly pro-life, profamily, promoral, and pro-American. Three strategies were implemented to spread Falwell’s influence far beyond his local church base. First, his ministry purchased a jet plane that permitted him to criss-cross the country speaking at hundreds of “I Love America” rallies. He often traveled 250,000 to 350,000 miles per year. Second, a political action coalition called the Moral Majority was recruited from fundamentalists, evangelicals, conservative Jews, Mormons, and Catholics to agitate for reform by judicial and legislative means. The movement was thought to have raised sixty-nine million dollars from six million people in a decade (1979–89). (3) Liberty University was established in 1971 to offer both residential and distance learning programs that would attract a national and international student body of future civic leaders. With ten thousand alumni and twenty thousand students by the time of his death, Falwell viewed the school as his most enduring legacy.

Because the Thomas Road Baptist Church never formally affiliated with the SBC, the significant role of its pastor in the controversy is seldom appreciated. Falwell was closely connected to every major leader of the insurgency. Jerry Vines was his closest ministerial friend and funeral eulogist. W. A. Criswell delivered the commencement address on three occasions at Liberty University, the only person to do so more than once. Paige Patterson was offered the school’s presidency in 1991 when he found himself in difficulty at Criswell College. In the mid-1990s, a fourth of the school’s trustees were prominent members of the SBC takeover group, several of whom sent their

children to college there. At the time, Bailey Smith claimed that there were “more Southern Baptist ministerial students at Liberty than at any Southern Baptist schools.”<sup>14</sup> Despite moderate complaints to the contrary, Falwell insisted that he had never been involved with the internal politics of the SBC, but he really did not need to bother because as long as he maintained a circle of friends such as these, his influence was assured.

Nevertheless, even from a distance, Falwell’s contribution to the controversy was enormous. His greatest achievement was to redefine the core agenda of fundamentalism. The movement got its name from the title of twelve booklets published from 1910 to 1915 that emphasized reaching the lost and combating modernism. If SBC fundamentalists had stuck to that twofold agenda, they would not have capsized the Convention, because the laity did not really understand what modernism was all about or how it might subvert soul winning. But when Falwell subsumed those twin concerns under the overarching imperative of “bringing America back to God,” he tapped into visceral fears of the laity, who knew exactly what he was talking about. Moreover, he showed pastors how to combine religion and politics in ways that were alien to the Baptist understanding of church-state separation, thereby thrusting them into a civic arena that had heretofore been the preserve of Roman Catholics and northern liberals. To say the least, things would never be the same again.

### **A NEW POLITICAL ALIGNMENT**

The fundamentalist formula for reclaiming America that Falwell mediated to his SBC friends required a close partnership between preachers willing to fight in the public square and politicians willing to implement their agenda in government. But where could a mutually beneficial alliance be forged? The Democratic Party was immediately rejected as being in the grip of northern liberals. The conservatism of Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon was more appealing, but both of these Republican candidates were tone deaf to the concerns of the Religious Right. George Wallace was an attractive alternative, his virulent racism notwithstanding, but as long as he ran as an independent he would be only a political spoiler, and even that role was soon denied him by a would-be assassin’s bullet. And so the religious revolutionaries bided their time through the late 1960s and early 1970s, building their countercultural churches and waiting for an opportune moment to strike.

Timing is of the essence in executing a successful strategy, and in the late 1970s two developments that played perfectly into the hands of the Religious Right in general and SBC insurgents in particular coincided. The first was the emergence of Ronald Reagan on the national scene in his strong but unsuccessful bid to wrest the Republican nomination from sitting president

Gerald Ford in 1976. Once Ford lost that election to Jimmy Carter, Reagan quickly became both a frontrunner for the 1980 Republican nomination and a favorite of fundamentalist preachers looking for a political ally.

Once again Falwell was the key to SBC involvement. After Reagan sounded the right notes in addressing a National Religious Broadcasters Association meeting at what was then called Liberty Baptist College, Falwell agreed to meet with several of Reagan's key political operatives in May 1979 at a motel in Lynchburg. Included in the group was Eddie McAteer, national field director of the Conservative Caucus, close friend of Adrian Rogers, and member of Rogers's church in Memphis, who would organize the Religious Roundtable that September designed to involve Southern Baptists in Republican politics on behalf of "national moral issues." Once Reagan secured his party's nomination, the Roundtable sponsored a national affairs briefing on August 21-22, 1980, in Dallas which, as McAteer explained to the eighteen thousand gathered, was intended "not to endorse a political party or candidate, but to pledge allegiance to principles." Surrounded on the platform by W. A. Criswell, Adrian Rogers, Bailey Smith, Jimmy Draper, Paige Patterson, and Charles Stanley, plus Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson for good measure, Reagan responded by remarking, "I know you can't endorse me because this is a non-partisan meeting . . . but I endorse you." Now the SBC takeover leaders had on their side a soon-to-be president of the United States.

Second, just as Reagan was adding the Religious Right to his political coalition, the South was becoming a competitive two-party region for the first time since the Civil War.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1950s, there was not a single Republican senator from the South (Strom Thurmond of South Carolina becoming the first Republican senator from the south by switching from the Dixiecrat Party in 1964) with only 2 Republican representatives out of 105 in the southern House delegation. Ironically, it was a southern president, Lyndon Johnson, who contributed most to the breakup of the Democratic "Solid South" by signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, by the liberal social-spending policies of his Great Society programs, and by his inability to win the Vietnam War. Nixon exploited growing Democratic discontent with his "Southern Strategy" in the landslide election of 1972, but it was Reagan who enabled Republicans to displace Democrats as the plurality party among southern white voters.

This historic shift played itself out predictably in SBC life beginning with the 1980 presidential campaign.<sup>16</sup> The challenger was a nominal non-resident member of a Disciples of Christ church whose religious participation was minimal at best, who had long struggled with family problems, and who had gravitated toward a neo-apocalyptic theology that was peripheral to Christian orthodoxy. The incumbent, by contrast, was a quintessential Southern Baptist moderate who actively taught Sunday school as a serious

Bible student, who went on mission trips building houses for the poor, and who faithfully attended church, even in Washington during his presidency. Then why did the Religious Right in general, and Southern Baptists in particular, reject President Carter so decisively almost as soon as he took office? Additionally, he accommodated the more liberal wing of his party led by the formidable Edward M. Kennedy while Reagan purged his party of moderate “Rockefeller Republicans.” And finally, because he sought to downplay the Communist threat whereas Reagan later exacerbated it by describing the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” Because he sought input from those with alternative understandings of the family while Reagan championed the traditional view of family values.

By an amazing stroke of good fortune for SBC insurgents, the 1980 presidential election became a referendum on moderate versus militant leadership, Carter and Reagan being ideal to play those roles, and the moderate option was solidly trounced. The denominational militants could not have timed their takeover strategy better to coincide with the moment of greatest political opportunity. Once the needed partnership was sealed in victory, the increasing dominance of militants in the SBC paralleled almost exactly the growing strength of the Republican Party among southern white voters. For example, in 1988, when the SBC controversy had almost been won by the militants, George H. W. Bush got more votes in every southern state than Reagan received in 1980, even though Bush had been identified earlier with the moderate wing of the Republican Party. In 2004, when the denominational takeover was complete, George W. Bush—as quintessential a militant as Carter was a moderate—swept the South so completely that he carried more than 90 percent of the counties where whites are a majority of the population.

For years, at least since George W. Truett and J. M. Dawson, Baptists had tried to keep politics out of the denomination by stressing the doctrine of church-state separation. But, in the 1980s, the takeover leaders redefined the relationship as symbiotic, each sphere reinforcing the other. By deliberate design the takeover leaders worked to make the SBC a core constituency of the Republican Party in exchange for which the party would support the moral concerns of the SBC. The marriage proved so mutually beneficial that both sides continually worked to strengthen it.

To illustrate: Lacking a majority of the voters in its new southern white base, Republicans had to attract a small percentage of black and independent voters to carry the region. A serious problem in reaching either group was the party’s poor civil rights record, compounded by the disastrous effects of Goldwater’s approach to race relations in the 1964 campaign. The Religious Right understood this dilemma because it had a poor civil rights record of its own to overcome as the nation began to move beyond segregation. So it came

up with a new list of urgent national concerns, civil rights and poverty not among them, that permitted the GOP to campaign vigorously for “morality” without ever addressing race. The Democrats had paid dearly to advance civil rights in the South, but this commendable achievement was suddenly made to seem insignificant when compared to the Republican goal of “reversing the tide of godless secularism engulfing America.”

Partisan politics proved pivotal in what was billed as a theological controversy for at least two reasons. First, the mass media always ensure that political contention will saturate the American mind, especially as an election campaign nears its climax. For more than a year the presidential candidates are overexposed through endless stump speeches, talk shows, interviews, and formal debates. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent to bombard voters with seductive advertising designed to secure their commitment to a particular ticket. By contrast, the SBC presidency is decided early in a two-day annual gathering based on a brief nominating speech backed by word-of-mouth campaigning without benefit of budget. It is true that what appears to be an informal process producing a spontaneous result can be manipulated behind the scenes to build support for a candidate among those in attendance, but the great majority of SBC members will have never seen or heard the winner or have any idea what issues were at stake in the outcome. This is only to say that partisan politics is vastly more influential than doctrinal disputes in shaping the Southern Baptist mindset.

The second reason why the secular political process proved so influential is that it was not all that secular. Candidates for public office do not talk about how they would actually govern if elected. Rather, they try to present a compelling case for how they would fulfill the nation’s mission, achieve its highest vision, and be true to its core values. Which is exactly the agenda on which the Religious Right agreed with Reagan Republicans in forming their partnership. As a result, beginning in the 1980 presidential campaign, the religious message of the former began to coalesce with the political message of the latter. To put it rhetorically, Adrian Rogers and his successors running for president of the SBC and Ronald Reagan and his successors running for president of the United States learned to talk alike. This gave the SBC take-over group a huge advantage because they were able to ride the coattails—free of charge—of the most powerful decision-making process in American culture.

Politics has been called a barometer of the *Zeitgeist*; that is, it constantly takes the pulse of the national mood. By 1979, a frustrated United States was ready to consider moving in a completely new direction. The SBC, as the “Established Church of Dixie,” a religious expression of the “southern way of life,” could not avoid facing the same choice. If Jimmy Carter had convinced southern white voters that his moderate approach to presidential leadership