

CRITICAL COMPASS POINTS
FOR A DRIFTING DENOMINATION

BY

CRAIG SHEROUSE

AN ADDRESS TO THE
FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

STETSON UNIVERSITY
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Rev. Craig A. Sherouse, Ph. D., Chairman, Board of Directors
of the Florida Baptist Historical Society and
Pastor, Seminole First Baptist Church

Hebrews 2:1 is one of the so-called “apostasy passages” which is most often approached with that classic Baptist exegetical tool, the “pole-vault method.” During these tenuous times in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention it would do us well to take another running leap at this Word from the Lord. The New American Standard Version translates it: “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.”

The word *παρὰρῳμεν* is the one which puts electricity into the air. It can be translated “to flow past,” “to glide by,” or “to drift away.” A nautical image is suggested of a ship drifting past a sure anchorage, a safe harbor, which is within reach. The passive plural presents to me the picture of the captain, crew and passengers being almost oblivious, perhaps even asleep, while they drift along.

Herschel Hobbs, with a good Baptist “security of the believer” type of interpretation, suggests that the emphasis in Hebrews 2:1 is on missions and evangelism-on the possibility of a whole generation losing its opportunity for, shall I say, “Bold Mission Thrust.” To drift past such a chance-to miss such a secure anchorage-would be almost unforgivable, in the twentieth century as well as in the first century. “For this reason we must pay much closer attention!” I believe that we Southern Baptists need to heed this warning from God’s Word.

I recently heard a leading SBC politician describe the drifting state of affairs on the “Good Ship S.B.C.” He indicated that he felt like he was down in the bilge of the ship, manning the pumps and patching holes, trying to keep the ship afloat. All the while, he said, the rest of those aboard were on deck sunning themselves. As I heard this illustration I thought that there are some others of us who think we are at work. Some are up in the bridge, checking the compass and trying to steer the Good Ship into her safe anchorage in the harbor of missions and evangelism.

I would like to try and take my stand on the bridge this morning. I share the concern of many that we need to do more than just keep the Good Ship afloat. I believe the greatest threat we face is drifting, not sinking. In the process of trying to patch the holes we may lose our directions and drift to the point that we lose some of our distinctives and become a different vessel with a different harbor altogether.

We are drifting. The very nature of the Southern Baptist Convention is being altered. We need some “compass points,” drawn from the map of Baptist history, to bring us on course and to help us into the harbor. Let me suggest five such compass points.

COMPASS POINT #1: “UNITY AMID DIVERSITY”

We Southern Baptists are an incredibly diverse people. Early historical differences among the forerunners of the S.B.C. are still present. Tremendous growth has made us into a national entity, not just a regional one. With this change has come our identity crisis: “Who are we?” we have asked ourselves.

We are a people who have a history of maintaining mutual respect and cooperation, although we have not all been alike. We have disagreed over missions, baptism, church discipline, the Lord’s Supper, ecumenism, Arminianism, Lankmarkism, women’s roles, worship styles, millennialism, dispensationalism, segregation, the nature of biblical inspiration, and etc’s.

We are a people who have our southern roots in the functional merger of the Regular (or Particular) Baptists and the Separate Baptists decades before the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention. These groups were different, and our diversity still reflects these differences. The Separate

Baptists were/ (are) revivalistic, highly emotional in worship, untraditional, suspicious of associational authority, non-creedal, suspicious of education, minimally ordered, and big on religious liberty. The Regular Baptists, on the other hand, were/(are) Calvinistic, formal, ordered, confessional, emphasize of “churchmanship” perhaps more than evangelism, strongly connectional and associational, and big on educational institutions. Talk about diversity: How do you compare Shuball Stearns and Richard Furman? Yet the two groups they led could eventually come together and lead out in the Triennial Convention and the S.B.C. because they were unified in Christ, some commonly held Baptist distinctives, and the cooperative challenges of missions, education and evangelism.

I believe that most Southern Baptists are still part Regular and part Separate Baptists. One or the other dominates us individually and often shapes a particular congregation. These differences are major factors in our diversity. They greatly shape style. Yet these differences are more matters of degree, not kind, of emphases, not essence. But they are differences! Shuball and Richard still stand in the pulpits of the S.B.C.

We need diversity. Denominational life is made less boring by it. More different kinds of people are reached for Christ. According to 1 Corinthians 12, conformity=deformity in the Body of Christ. If we cut off either wing this old bird is going to crash!

Yet we are drifting by labeling and polarizing instead of celebrating our diversity. Backslapping brotherhood has given way to label-reading: Only if you wear my label will I backslap. The problem is, there are so many labels: “Liberal,” “Conservative,” “Moderate,” “Ultraconservative,” “Fundamentalist,” “Middle Roder,” “Don’t-Take-Either-Sider.” Whatever happened to “Brother?” or “Sister?”

Speaking of our sisters, we have polarized many of them. “Debating” for eight minutes only one article of an offensive resolution, not even discussing the “Whereas” implications of it, and letting an all-male Resolutions Committee present it to us did not engender warmth for the majority of 1984 S.B.C. Messengers to millions of S.B.C. sisters (and brothers).

We are drifting by polarizing on the language we use to describe the Bible. Most Southern Baptists agree that there are at least a few biblical passages which offer unique challenges to rightly dividing the Word: 1) How many times did Jesus say the cock would crow? (Matthew 26:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:34) 2) How come Jesus is quoted in Mark 2:26 as saying that Abiathar was high priest whenever David ate the Shewbread whereas 1 Samuel 21:1 says that his father, Ahimelech, was high priest? 3) How does Mark’s Gospel end? (Compare K.J.V. and R.S.V.) 4) Did Jesus tell his disciples to take a staff or not? (Matthew 10:10; Luke 9:3; Mark 6:8) 5) Does a rabbit chew the cud? (Leviticus 11:6).

Although these challenging passages are rather easily met by “young theologues” using some of the most basic tools of conservative biblical scholarship and without any hint of challenging biblical inspiration and authority, the particular tools we use may greatly affect the language we use to describe the Bible- “inerrant,” “infallible”-as well as which “Bible” we mean when we use it-original manuscripts or modern translations. There are certainly differences within Southern Baptist life in these areas. Yet I do not believe they are nearly as great as our polarization over the use of descriptive language has made it appear.

To move safely toward the harbor we must celebrate diversity, cease veering off course through labeling and polarizing, and move toward even greater unity. I believe that the following six Baptist distinctives plus a seventh uniquely S.B.C. distinctive should be enough around which to unite: 1) Believer’s baptism by immersion; 2) final authority of scripture; 3) priesthood of all believers; 4) religious liberty; 5) autonomy of the local congregation; 6) symbolic view of the ordinances; and 7) a cooperative approach to doing missions, evangelism, education and other agreed-upon tasks as expressed through participation in our denomination and its Cooperative Program.

COMPASS POINT #2: “TRUST AND TRUTHFULNESS”

Trust is the foundation of a relationship. Our Southern Baptist life is a relationship of thousands of churches with millions of members trying to work together. Without trust we have no relationship, no

“trustees,” no cooperation, no Cooperative Program and eventually no convention. Our whispers about the convention “possibly splitting” are awesome indictments of our growing distrust. We are off course at this point. I pray that we are not yet to the point where many of my counselees are when they come to my Pastor’s Study for marriage counseling; distrustful to the point of no return.

There is widespread distrust within our S.B.C. family. Denominational leaders, institutions, trustees, presidents and vice presidents, missionaries, professors, literature, the press, people with opposing views, agencies, boards, commissions, seminaries, and colleges are all suspect. We distrust diversity. We run the tape recorder. We doubt that people who sign their names to documents meant it. Church members ask their pastors now “Do you believe the Bible?” and pastors stand drop-jawed after being transparent with a Bible in their hands three times a week for months before these grandly-sincere (but confused) inquisitors. Decades of sacrificial denominational service are slandered by gossip about a “drinking problem” or petty jealousies. “Yellow Dog” journalism flourishes. Reputable magazines print hearsay. There are spies in both camps.

Our “rope of sand with strength of steel” is so susceptible to rope tricks. Our convention, based on trust, is open to manipulation. Emotions are charged when we suspect such man-handling, and they can erupt at the convention-level just like in a congregational business meeting. Such sensoriousness hurts feelings and erodes trust. It is much easier to tear down than to build up. We are sinners and prone to distrust rather than trust.

I have several suggestions for following more closely this vital compass point of trust and truthfulness. Let us refrain from gossip and spend more time in honest dialogue. I recently spent over twenty hours talking with a brother who was not sure he trusted me, and vice versa. I now know, trust, and appreciate him as few other co-laborers because, I understand him, and vice versa. But it took some hard work. Simplistic though it sounds, I suggest that a few more “inter-camp” meetings be held--swap off a few more revivals and try to spend more time in dialogue.

I further suggest that before beginning to look askance at someone, you check out the tale for yourself. Distortion is often an unintentional by-product in the course of the kind of political polarization we have taking place. For example, I have heard the Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 3, p. 242, most quoted as an example of the kind of liberalism we are trying to purge from our seminaries. The reports of this commentary described it as, among other things, rejecting the miraculous by saying that the axe head did not really float in 2 Kings 6:1-7. I pulled out my commentary, checked it out myself, and read part of the truth which I had not heard quoted, including: “Whatever one’s attitude toward the historical antecedents of the story, the focus is the same: Elisha possessed such stupendous power that he caused a lost axe head to float.” Check it out for yourself.

My final suggestion for moving toward trust and truthfulness is to admit that we are all sinners, be willing to confess our sins and to “forgive those who trespass against us.” We must move back on course toward trust and truthfulness.

COMPASS POINT #3: “THE PURPOSE OF THE S. B. C.”

As we try to keep the Good Ship S. B. C. from drifting, we better pay close attention to the details of the harbor itself. This was our destination 140 years ago whenever the old ship was first constructed and christened – I mean, immersed.

The S. B. C. does not have a doctrinaire or creedal purpose. In fact, such purposes were repudiated by its architects, its founding documents, and the absence of any creed or confession attached to the documents. Only begrudgingly after sixty years did the S. B. C. adopt a “Statement”, the Baptist Faith and Message, in 1925 and revised it in 1963. This “Statement” has a lengthy Preamble which certainly de-creeds it. Also, the Baptist Faith and Message is written so loosely that you can drive that old ship right through it. S. B. C. diversity, liberty of conscience, and the remnants of suspicious Landmarkism (creedal though it may be) simply will not allow twenty thousand annual messengers to dictate beliefs to fourteen and a half million Southern Baptists.

To try and substitute doctrinal uniformity for the purpose for the S. B. C. causes widespread organizational disfunction. Creedalism is impractical at the convention level, but such is happening aboard ship now. Think of the time and energy that is being wasted in thinking and campaigning over our current problems: Campaign meetings, trustee hearings, letter writing and answering, keeping files, making phone calls, typing, mailing, and duplicating. Some people seem to thrive on such disfunction, but our convention does not. Neither do our pastorates and presidencies. I do not know how some of our leaders are finding time for the main purpose of S. B. C. life amidst such organizational disfunction.

The purpose of the S. B. C., according to our founding Constitution, is “for eliciting, combining and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort, for the propagation of the Gospel” and to accomplish this by promoting “Foreign and Domestic Missions and other important objects.” The purpose of the S. B. C. is functional not creedal: “missions, evangelism and education” does a good job describing our purpose.

Whereas some among us are very concerned about our Good Ship drifting down the slippery sloping waterfalls of doctrinal heresy, others of us are more concerned about our drifting past the harbor of missions, evangelism and education and fear more the slipperiness of creeping creedalism.

We have several appropriate forums for dealing with legitimate doctrinal concerns. Our trustees are charged to do this. Why do not we use them? I was astounded to hear a president of one of our seminaries recently say publicly that, so far as he knew, neither he nor any of his institution’s trustees had received any letters during these recent years of convention tension from concerned Southern Baptists outlining their charges of heresy and asking for a trustee response. We have the trustees. We need to exercise some trust.

The association also is an appropriate forum for dealing with doctrinal concerns. We can function a little better at that level. Historically the association has helped to lovingly (and sometimes not so lovingly) “bird dog” pastoral and congregational orthodoxy. We have the association. Why do not we use it? My association carried an independent congregation and a “charismatic” congregation on our membership roles for years, even though neither gave any hint of interest in us. I can count on one hand the number of ordination councils to which I have been invited in the last three years. We should be more conscientious at the local level.

Yes, let us be concerned about orthodoxy, but very carefully, non-creedally, appropriately, trusting and using our existing “bird dogs” and taking all caution that they never become “hounds from heaven” angrily roaming outside their territory.

COMPASS POINT #4: “CRITERIA FOR S. B. C. ELECTED LEADERSHIP”

As we well know, leadership is a critical factor in determining the nature of an organization. In the past, S. B. C. officers and trustees were elected in an honorific fashion and served their terms with little politicized use of their powers. In fact, most of us never even knew that our officers had much power until recent years. Now that these positions are being so carefully scrutinized, we ought to also carefully consider our criteria for convention-wide leadership.

Verbalized S. B. C. loyalty and a ten-generation string of grandfathers who were S. B. C. pastors are not sufficient criteria for election to S. B. C. leadership. Proven loyalty must be evident through convention and association involvement and leading a local church to be a strong, consistent, growing supporter of the Cooperative Program. Yes, if our S. B. C. president is a pastor, he should be a strongly evangelistic pastor with a proven record of growing an evangelistic church. But I think we need another lay person! One lay president in the last twenty-five years is a sorry record for such radicals as we! Perhaps God could use a lay person to get us out of this intra-mural preachers’ squabble.

I want our leaders to be diplomats, not politicians. I want them to model crisis management in the spirit of Christ’s love, which does not justify political means by holy ends. I want them to use their power with fairness, discretion and servitude. I want them to enable fellowship and unity within our diversity. I want them to appreciate the sinfulness of all institutions.

I believe the criteria for presidential election have changed within the last six years. One changed criterion is easily illustrated. From 1959-1978 the ten S. B. C. presidents came from churches which, averaged together, gave 12.59% to the Cooperative Program the year when they were elected. Our last four presidents have come from churches which, averaged together, gave 3.58% to the Cooperative Program. This is a critical change in criteria, especially when this year's S. B. C. budget was only raised 3.06% hardly matching inflation. Leadership must set the example to enable followship. We need followship in mission giving.

To avoid drifting past the harbor, without even being able to afford a tug boat to pull us back, we must consider this compass point more carefully and scrutinize the criteria for our S. B. C. elected leadership.

COMPASS POINT #5: "FREEDOM"

A limerick from a nineteenth century squabble between a Scottish State Church and its village Free Church neighbor goes: (Says the State Church to its adversary): "The wee Kirk, the free Kirk, the Kirk without a steeple." Responded the Free Church: "The old Kirk, the cold Kirk, the Kirk without the people!"

We are a part of that "Free Church" tradition, and the "free" therein is exactly the reason many pack our pews week after week. This "freedom" compass point contains some of those most cherished distinctives we have as Baptists. These are the things that have sent us to war-Revolutionary up through the current (un) "holy" one. Our "Good Ship S. B. C." has often uncovered its cannon to protect its and others' freedoms to sail according to self-determined compass points. This freedom brings out our battle flag, "Don't Tread On Me." This point leads us in the direction of such things as "soul competency," "priesthood of the believer," "religious liberty," "separation of church and state," "congregational polity," and "autonomy of the local church." G. W. Truett spoke of these "freedoms" we claim as Baptists as our "keystone" out of which "all our Baptist principles emerge."

But we are treading on some of these freedoms. Autocratic styles of leadership are pervasive in our congregations and within our denomination. Some pastors act as if they can run the whole ship the way they command their cabin. Parochialism, prayer in school efforts, and attacks on the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs are veering us off course. Denominational employees are asked to neuter and muzzle themselves, despite their convictions. Resolutions become increasingly authoritarian and infringe on local church autonomy in the areas of doctrine and polity.

Others are retreating into a "life boat" view of local church autonomy: "What does it matter what the denomination does," they say, "because our congregation is autonomous." Some seem to be abandoning ship as well as their responsibility to try and correct its drifting. Galatians 5:13 says: "For, brethren, ye have been called into liberty, only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."

The cry is not, "Abandon Ship!" The cry is: "All Hands (by the way, there are no passengers, only hands, aboard the Good Ship S. B. C.) On Deck!" There is plenty of work to be done. We need freedmen to act as servants and help correct the drift. We need the harbor. The lost world needs us to get back on course.

Well, my time is probably gone, and my metaphor was worn out before the time, so I will leave the bridge. I trust I have not sounded "too big for my bridges" today. Frankly, I am a brokenhearted, rather fed-up young sailor who is being aged too quickly by these tenuous times. I submit this to you as what I would like to see eventually entered into the logbook of the "Good Ship S. B. C." These compass points are all "things I have heard" (Heb. 2:1) from as early as I had ears to hear. I trust that God might use my humble offering however He wills (but preferably not as musket fodder for more on-board squabbling)! Maybe, at least, some more of the crew will be helped to awaken from some of the oblivion which has contributed to our denomination drift.