

# The *SBJT* Forum: Retrospect and Prospect

*Editor's Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Paige Patterson, Mark Coppenger, Jerry A. Johnson, and Richard Land have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

**SBJT: As an outside observer, what comments would you make on the conservative resurgence in the SBC during the last quarter-century?**

**D. A. Carson:** Doubtless I am an "outside observer" in the sense that I am not myself a member of a church belonging to the SBC. On the other hand, I am an ordained Baptist minister, and have followed the resurgence reasonably closely, both in person and by scanning the histories that both sides have produced. The observations that seem most pertinent include the following:

(1) This resurgence is not unique. Several other denominations and associations have followed a somewhat similar path. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was heading for a decline into systemic liberalism, and in the mercy of God that decline was halted. The old Baptist Union of Ontario and Québec, after lurching toward liberalism under the influence of McMaster in the 1920s, gradually built up the percentage of confessional pastors, and about a dozen years ago voted itself *out* of the World Council of Churches. Examples in other countries come to mind. This observation is not in any way meant to

denigrate the conservative resurgence in the SBC. It is merely a way of reminding ourselves that the preservation of the gospel and the purifying of a denomination are not unique phenomena: God's grace has been poured out in similar ways in the past, and will doubtless be poured out in similar ways in the future.

(2) The lines that were drawn were muddied from the start. On the conservative side, the most far-sighted leaders understood that the fundamental issue was the truthfulness and authority of Scripture, but some voices tried to make a handful of other issues touchstones as well. More disturbingly, on the moderate side, not a few well-meaning pastors and other leaders, who themselves were entirely orthodox, viewed the conservatives as nothing more than a nasty group of power-hungry tyrants whose ostensibly theological motives were a cover-up for naked greed, whose asseverations of theological commitment merely masked their native belligerence. These moderates knew many nice people in the moderate camp, and could not believe that they were denying the truth in any fundamental way.

**D. A. Carson** is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of numerous commentaries and monographs, and is one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars. Among his many books are *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (John Knox Press, 1981; reprint, Baker, 1994), *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996), and *Love in Hard Places* (Crossway, 2002).

I must say that on this score I am entirely aligned with the conservatives. Had it been nothing but a power grab by disgruntled right-wingers who were irked by the fact that they were sidelined, I would not assess things this way. But throughout the period of the conflict, I scanned the journals and many of the books put out by SBC seminaries and other organs, and I was deeply disturbed by the theological and critical drift. In the mid-1980s, I was asked to give some lectures at one of the leading SBC seminaries—asked, it must be said, not by the faculty, who at that juncture *never* invited a conservative like me, but by a caucus of evangelical students on that campus. I was told by one of the faculty members that at that institution there were only two members of the faculty (out of about fifty) who considered themselves to be inerantists. Several students told me of one faculty member who, after introducing his classes to the thought of Rudolf Bultmann, would regularly ask, “So whose understanding of the resurrection of Jesus is closest to getting things right—Paul’s, or Bultmann’s?” In recent years, classes had been voting about 65 percent in favor of Bultmann. I could multiply reports of this sort. Such stances were widespread, virtually unchecked, and growing. The issues were not marginal or merely personal. They very often had to do with the non-negotiable fundamentals of the faith. Those moderates who were personally orthodox but who failed to see these dangers were either extraordinarily ill-informed or extraordinarily blind to the dangers.

(3) In the years since the conservative resurgence, the most frequent charge leveled by the moderate organs runs something like this: The conservatives have

caused the SBC to lurch toward the right, especially in the matter of soul-liberty. Baptists have always cherished the freedom to make up their own minds, to avoid hierarchies and (many would say) creeds that cripple the principle of soul-liberty. Thus in the name of Baptist orthodoxy, the conservatives have sacrificed the most fundamental Baptist principle, constraining soul-liberty by a bunch of politically astute demagogues.

But this is a bit like Brian McLaren trying to convince us he is Reformed. He is Reformed, he says, because he holds to the Reformation principle of *semper reformandum*: the church must always be reforming itself under the Word. True enough. But he acts as if this principle is a *sufficient* definition of what belongs to the Reformation. At no point, however, does McLaren espouse the five *solas* of the Reformation, or think through how these *solas* relate to each other and to the principle of *semper reformandum*. By espousing just one principle of the Reformation, and making it the *sufficient* definition of the Reformation, while ignoring or even denying the five *solas* so characteristic of the Reformation, McLaren succeeds in simultaneously disowning the Reformation while claiming to be Reformed. He is, of course, at perfect liberty to espouse anything he likes, but simple integrity should warn him not to claim he is Reformed while he cuts his independent swath.

So also with the moderates who make soul-liberty the *sufficient* criterion of what a Baptist is. Historically, Baptists stand in the tradition of the Reformation, but, belonging as we do to the believers-church tradition (i.e., we hold that the local church should be made up of regenerate, baptized believers), we are inclined to be suspicious alike of state

churches and of churches that are undisciplined or that wish to mingle the openly regenerate with those who merely claim to belong to the covenant community (as in the Presbyterian tradition). Many Baptists have adopted creeds without feeling that soul-liberty was thereby jeopardized: many Baptists in England in the 1640s bound themselves together under a creed, and many Baptists adopted the famous 1689 Confession. It would be easy to multiply such examples. In such a heritage, soul-liberty was suspicious of an improper mingling of church and state, and of hierarchialism that imposed order but that was careless about regeneration. The contemporary version espoused by moderates, however, wants to elevate soul-liberty to the role of *sufficient* definition of a Baptist, and ties it to freedom from all creeds. Taken consistently, that would mean that a Baptist could disown the deity of Christ, feel uncomfortable about his resurrection, conclude that Christ's death on the cross did not atone for sin, deny the truthfulness and authority of God's written revelation, deny the Trinity, and so forth, and still be called a Baptist. Not for a moment am I suggesting that all SBC moderates go down such paths. But if they protest that, as Baptists, they *do* believe such fundamental truths are bound up with what it means to be a Christian, then of course they *do* adopt a creed, whether written or un-written. But if they say that soul-liberty trumps all such credal affirmations, then of course they are saying that their understanding of soul-liberty, which in their view *defines* Baptist, is more fundamental than what makes a person a Christian. This is such egregious silliness that it deserves to be exposed wherever it rears its head.

(4) On the other hand, it is desperately

important for the conservatives within the SBC, who have so largely triumphed, to avoid several mistakes, some of which are already present. (a) Eschew triumphalism. If God in his mercy has raised up leaders who have seen what needs to be done, if God in his mercy has granted them favor with the messengers year after year, if God has enabled confessional voices to regain the initiative, this ought to be an occasion for deep thanksgiving, renewed repentance, and humility of mind. (b) Avoid a swing to the cultural right. Not every issue on the right-wing of our culture, or on the right-wing of evangelicalism, is consistent with biblical thought. Many are; some are not. But a swing to the cultural right begins to align one's commitment to the Bible with every right-wing cultural item that comes along. Leaders begin to play games of "I'm more conservative than you." (c) Let the leaders become increasingly careful about the extent to which their public utterances are negative. In any movement of resurgence, there is a great deal that must be corrected, so of course there are lots of negative things to be said. The Reformers had to expose the corruption of the indulgences. But a couple of centuries later, Richard Baxter was right when he insisted that if anyone brings a false doctrine of justification into your area, your *first* responsible is to "preach up" (his expression) justification better than he. Within that framework, it is much easier to expose false stances on justification. So also today: God knows there are plenty of errors and dangers around, and we need clear thinking about them and in many cases warnings against them. But leaders who have earned their spurs by correcting things are in grave danger of thinking that our *primary* task is correct-

ing and warning, and end up sounding like perennial self-righteous and angry critics. Our *first* obligation is to unpack the glories of the gospel, the wonders of God and his self-disclosure, the privilege and pleasure of sins forgiven, the power of the Spirit, the anticipation of the glory to come, and much more of the same. Unless our warnings are surrounded by sheer delight in God and his truth, we ourselves become corroded, and invite a nasty backlash with deleterious results for years to come.

(5) And finally: we should be grateful to God for those who tried to be faithful to God and his Word during the years when the decline seemed irreversible. I have a friend, a pastor in New York, who likes to say, "For the Christian, optimism is naive, but pessimism is atheistic." Just so.