

**Were it So?**  
**An Appeal to the Christian**  
**Nobility of the Southern**  
**Baptist Convention**

**Dr. Malcolm B. Yarnell, III**

The Center for Theological Research  
March 2007

White Paper 15  
Published by the Center for Theological Research  
at [www.BaptistTheology.org](http://www.BaptistTheology.org)

© 2007 Malcolm B. Yarnell

Preached in Chapel at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary  
March 20, 2007

Appreciation is extended to Dr. Paige Patterson for the continuing opportunity to preach theological sermons annually to the Southwestern Seminary family, and for his key leadership in maintaining the integrity of Baptist theology. You have consistently reminded your students, including this writer, of the unparalleled importance of theological integrity with regard to our Lord, His Word, and the local churches who authorize the seminaries to serve their needs

**Permissions:** The purpose of this material is to serve the churches. Please feel free to distribute as widely as possible. We ask that you maintain the integrity of the document and the author's wording by not making any alterations. For special requests please contact the editorial board for the White Papers for approval at [ctr@swbts.edu](mailto:ctr@swbts.edu).

The Center for Theological Research  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Fort Worth, Texas  
Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, Director

## “Were it So?”

### An Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the Southern Baptist Convention

When the faith of his people was at stake, Martin Luther wrote controversial little books on white paper. His first major Reformation treatise, *An Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), called people back to the Bible. In dangerous days, when theological error masquerades itself with authority, the people of God must be called back to the book from which they first drew life. We are now in a time of danger: Baptists, who may be tempted by the elitist or the existing or the ecumenical or the experiential, must return to the Bible. From that book alone comes our doctrine, our life, our polity. The Bible is sufficient for the entirety of our faith and practice.

Then the brethren [*adelphoi*] immediately [*eutheos*] sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded [*eugenesteroi*] than those in Thessalonica, in that they received [*edexanto*] the Word [*logos*] with all readiness [*meta pases prothumias*], and searched [*anakrinontes*] the Scriptures [*tas graphas*] daily to find out whether these things were so [*echoi houtos*]. Therefore many of them believed [*episteusan*], and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the Word of God [*logos tou theou*] was preached [*katengelle*] by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds [*ochlous*]. Then immediately [*eutheos*] the brethren [*adelphoi*] sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but Silas and Timothy remained there. So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command [*labontes entolen*] for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

Acts 17:10-15 (NKJV)

Our text demarcates three groups: the apostle and his assistants, the unbelieving Jews and the crowds, and the brethren. It should be noted that wherever the Word of God is proclaimed, it will divide people from one another. The preacher of the gospel must expect opposition; believers in the gospel must expect separation; and unbelievers must expect judgment. Let us look further at these three groups, asking: What makes each one unique? What are their attributes, their actions, their attitudes?

#### I. First, Consider the Apostle.

There are three things that leap from this text regarding the apostle: his calling, his concern, and his method and message.

### A. The apostle's divine calling: to proclaim

Paul, as you know, grew up with a strident form of Judaism: "According to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5). After participating in the persecution of the first church of Jerusalem during its infancy, Paul was converted by a personal appearance from the Lord Jesus Christ, who called Paul to preach the Word: "For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you" (v. 16). Paul's divine calling as an apostle was to go to the Jews and the Gentiles with the illumination of the Word: "to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (v. 18). Note, by the way, that biblical apostleship comes only to those who have been called visibly by the resurrected Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 9:1, 15:5-9). Apostleship is definitely one spiritual gift that ceased with the New Testament.

***Folded within Paul's call to preach was a warning that he would be persecuted and a promise that he would be delivered*** (v. 17). The calling of our Lord to spiritual war proved itself true. Listen to how Paul described his life, in mid-career: "in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" (2 Cor. 11:23b-28a).

This call to preach and persevere through persecution according to the promise of God has become a paradigm for many of the great Christian leaders throughout history. Here, one thinks of Athanasius of Alexandria, whom should be thanked for holding the line on the doctrine of the Trinity when the rest of Christianity, in the words of Jerome, "groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian."<sup>1</sup> When most other bishops in the fourth-century church knuckled under the state and affirmed the heresy of Arianism, Athanasius stubbornly held the line. He was accused of everything, from personally appropriating funds to bribing his way into office, to international economic blackmail, even murder.<sup>2</sup> And yet, although he had to row against the prevailing theological and political tide and was fired from his role as bishop five times, Athanasius persevered. Athanasius stood for the incarnate Word as fully God, according to the written Word, when lesser men cowered behind the skirts of the state.<sup>3</sup>

We could go on with examples: One thinks here of Martin Luther, who stood for the Word of God as our entire righteousness, telling even the Holy Roman Emperor that he could do nothing less, "for my conscience is captive to the Word of God."<sup>4</sup> One thinks of Thomas Cranmer, who recanted his recantations and stood for the truth in the end, thrusting his hand into the fire, proclaiming his faith in the sufficiency of Scripture, not the sacrificial sacrament of the

<sup>1</sup> Jerome, *Dialogue against the Luciferians*, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12-14.

<sup>3</sup> George Huntston Williams, "Christology and Church-State Relations in the Fourth Century," [two parts] *Church History* 20.3 (1951): 3-33, and 20.4 (1951): 3-26.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950; reprint, Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 144.

“universal and visible” Roman church.<sup>5</sup> One thinks of Michael Sattler, who stood for the Word of God as sufficient for the church’s order, denying the evil and deceptive tradition of infant baptism, as they cut off his tongue, shredded his body seven times with red hot tongs, and burned his flesh with fire. Sattler’s last words at his trial cry out across the centuries to modern Baptists to hold the line: “I appeal to Scripture!”<sup>6</sup> What will they say of Southern Baptists? Will we steadfastly appeal to Scripture?

## **B. The apostle’s overarching concern: the churches**

Despite all the trouble he received for his efforts, Paul kept this one goal in mind: glorifying God by building the churches. Indeed, the burden he felt for the churches was greater than all the persecution heaped upon him. “Besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). Paul, the apostle, called of God to a ministry of proclamation, had this goal in mind at all times: the churches. Note the plural form.

Paul was not concerned with the invisible church that exists who knows where, intangibly observing its indiscernible ordinances, imperceptibly proclaiming its soundless gospel. Paul may have taught about the universal church, which as B.H. Carroll noted meets only at the end of time,<sup>7</sup> but only insofar as he could get people into it by building the visible churches here upon the earth now. Paul kept his visible ministry for the local churches in mind rather than speculating with Plato concerning the formal and the material, or with Aristotle regarding the substantial and the accidental, or with Augustine and Calvin concerning the invisible and the sacramental. *Paul was not enamored with the theological inventions of uninspired minds.*

*Nor was he impressed with cultural fads.* Paul was concerned for the churches. Paul was not concerned with what the culture preferred, except insofar as he might call people out of that darkness and into the glories of Christian light. Paul was not concerned with the tradition that the Jewish elders taught, except insofar as he might point Jews to salvation in Christ by grace alone through faith alone. Paul was not concerned with what the pagan poet-theologians guessed, except insofar as he might point the nations beyond those deceivers to the one true God and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Paul was not concerned with what the Greek academy believed, except insofar as he might call these professors of novelty to repent of their vain imaginations and embrace the One Who is truth itself.

Paul was concerned for the churches to embrace the virtues of the Spirit and avoid the wickedness of the flesh. Where he saw sin in the culture, he called for people to repent of “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like: Of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:19b-21). Where he saw gross sin in the church, he called for the sinner to be expelled until such time as he truly repented and believed. The church should be characterized, not by “the works of the flesh,” but by “the fruit of the spirit.” The church and the world are not in relevant tandem; they are in irreconcilable tension.

---

<sup>5</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 299.

<sup>6</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 67-80.

<sup>7</sup> Benajah Harvey Carroll, *Baptists and Their Doctrines* (1913; reprint, Fort Worth, TX: Center for Theological Research [www.BaptistTheology.org], 2006), ch. 2, p. 3.

Paul's purpose was to glorify God by building churches. Paul was concerned for the churches, so much so that he was constantly planting new ones wherever he could. ***Paul was the missionary church-planter extraordinaire.*** He did not stay at home and count numbers; he went out and added numbers. He did not speculate regarding the twenty steps to a seeker-friendly service; he went out and established twenty churches following methods that his culture considered distinctly unfriendly. He did not speculate regarding the correlation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility; he upheld both of them simultaneously and experientially. Paul wasn't an academic theologian; Paul was an evangelistic churchman.

Paul was the missionary church-planter extraordinaire. He built churches to baptize only believers (Acts 16:30-34), to govern themselves congregationally under the headship of Christ alone (1 Cor. 5:4-5; Col. 1:18), to practice church discipline that redeems (1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:3-11), and to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Paul built churches to call only qualified men as pastors (1 Tim. 2:11-3:7), to consult only the Word of God (1 Tim. 6:3-5), and to consider the Great Commission to be their primary purpose (2 Cor. 5:20). In other words, Paul built churches that look like Baptist churches, or at least like Baptist churches ought to look: reading their Bibles, glorifying God, maintaining the regenerate church, and confronting poor souls trapped by the world's crafty deceptions.

Paul was concerned to establish churches, not according to the demographics of the land, but according to the dictates of his Lord. Yes, he went to the major cities, the popular destinations: Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Rome. But, he did not limit himself to those that the world considered great. Paul also took odd bypaths, unexpected turns, as he followed the Holy Spirit wherever He led. Why are the small interior Asian cities of Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra so important that they must be visited first and repeatedly? Surely, it had nothing to do with importance as defined by culture. Why leave the Egnatian way and walk forty miles into the mountainous interior to a minor Greek city named Berea? We may not know until we see the great apostle in glory, but he would probably find such a question ludicrous. Paul said, "I have become *all* things to *all* men that I might by *all* means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22b).

Where?! Where? Where are the Pauls of our day? Where are the churchmen who are willing to pay whatever price to see men saved from eternal hell? Where are the churchmen who passionately proclaim salvation by personally receiving the sacrifice of Christ? Where are the churchmen who care more about teaching the eternal Jesus Christ of the Bible than the temporary speculations of men? "Besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11: 28). Where are the churchmen who recognize that our one concern must be to plant biblical churches?

### C. The apostle's method and message: the Bible alone

Before leaving Paul, we should consider his evangelistic method and message. Books and websites and conferences promoting various modern methods are all the craze in these crazy days. Maybe we should step back a moment and ask about the biblical method. ***If we believe that the Bible is sufficient for our doctrine (as it most certainly is), then certainly the Bible is sufficient for our practice, too.*** Isn't it?

Are there really Southern Baptists who would dare say that the Bible is insufficient for missions and evangelism (Matt. 28:18-20), or pastoral qualifications (1 Tim. 2:11-3:7), or questions regarding suing Christians (1 Cor. 6:1-8), or proper ecclesiology, or the counseling of

souls, or personal ethics, or politics? I was recently told I was an “agonizing preacher.” Anybody care to agree at this point? It is okay if you do. You do not have to like the preacher of the Word, who may stutter, stagger, and stumble. But you should sincerely ask yourself whether you are “kicking against the goads” of Christ by contradicting God’s inspired Word, which never errs.

Now, what was Paul’s missionary method? There are three aspects to Paul’s missionary method that leap to the mind from this biblical text:

1. As we noticed, Paul was *willing to stray off the beaten path*, where he might not have preferred to go. In the case of Berea, Paul trusted divine providence through the Thessalonian brothers, who rushed him out for fear of his life.
2. Paul usually *started with the traditional base* of the Jewish synagogue. It is certainly necessary to reach across cultural boundaries, as Paul did at Athens; but even there, notice that Paul started at the synagogue (Acts 17:17). I have resided in numerous cultures and sub-cultures, a man without a home, three nations and ten states, never for longer than 3-4 years. I can tell you this. Every culture has its positive aspects, but every culture is also dominated by sin. Don’t follow your culture, and don’t follow their culture, whoever “they” happen to be; follow Christ alone. Be His disciple. Obey Him completely. I can also tell you this. The sustenance for Christian life has always come through traditional churches, those churches glibly dismissed by postmodernity as irrelevant.
3. Paul *preached the Word of God from the Bible*. In Thessalonica, he pursued a threefold paradigm. First, he “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (v. 2c). Paul’s preaching began with the exposition of the Bible; in this case, the Old Testament. In our case, we have both Old and New, reading the former through the gospel of the latter. *Paul was an expository preacher*. Second, Paul explained “that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead” (v. 3a). *Paul was a theological teacher, a doctor of dogma*. Third, Paul proclaimed, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ” (v. 3b). *Paul was an evangelistic preacher*. We know from other passages that the *kerygma*, the apostolic preaching, always closed with an appeal for repentance and belief, followed by receiving believers’ baptism (cf. 2:38-41). Like Peter, Paul boldly invited everyone to respond to the confrontational message that Jesus, the crucified man, is the Messiah, the Lord of the world: You must repent and believe (cf. 9:20-22; 13:10, 39, 40-41, 46). Paul and Peter emphasized “repent and believe,” simply because that is what Jesus also emphasized in His preaching (Mark 1:14-15).

That really is core to the biblical method: Proclaim the Bible, explain its gospel doctrine, and demand believing submission to Christ. Now, why look anywhere else for our method? Maybe all the books and conferences and websites are subliminally intended to assuage falsely our guilty consciences for not actually engaging in evangelism. Paul didn’t write books and hold conferences on how to engage in evangelism or identify the elect, although he certainly wrote gospel books and proclaimed the gospel in public venues. Paul just went ahead and engaged—by preaching expositionally, theologically, and invitingly—whomever he could, wherever he could, anytime he could! Perhaps we need to do the same.

Now, what about the message? What was Paul's message? Well, that is the interesting thing: The biblical message is the biblical method. The method is the message, and the message is the method. ***You cannot separate the Bible from the Word.*** The Word of God is the Bible, and the Bible is the Word of God. The Greek word *logos* is twice used in this pericope to refer to Paul's preaching. In verse 11, the Bereans compared the Scriptures, the *graphas*, to the *logos* of Paul to see if it really was of God. The noble Bereans understood that the *logos*, the Word or message, is intimately bound up with the *graphas*, the Scriptures or method.

The incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, is revealed in the inscriptured Word, the Bible, and proclaimed through the intoned Word, preaching. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Those who claim methods are *adiaphora* [indifferent], as long as you hold to the message, are in fundamental error. The method, biblical proclamation, and the message, Jesus Christ himself, cannot be separated from one another. You cannot divorce the Word of God from the Bible and attach it to the Koran or any other fallen book. You cannot divorce the Word from the Bible and attach it to art. You cannot even divorce the Word from the Bible and attach it to preaching. To preach the Word, preach the Bible. The Bereans treated the message of the gospel and the method of the Bible as inseparable, and so should we.

## II. Second, Consider the Unbelieving Jews and the Crowds.

Whenever the gospel is preached, people will be divided. Jesus warned that he had come to separate even families (Matt. 10:35). Paul called the holy to come out and be separate from the unholy (2 Cor. 6:11-18). Modern western culture demands tolerance and mutual affirmation. Exclusivist, non-pluralist Christianity, which is what the Bible advocates, contradicts modernity. However, this is not a new occurrence, historically. The Roman state persecuted the early Christians because those Christians would not recognize the validity of multiple gods. They would proclaim only "Jesus is Lord"; and denied that "Caesar is Lord" or "Zeus is Lord."

Wherever the gospel is preached with power and conviction, opposition is very likely. When Paul came to Thessalonica, he proclaimed the Word of God with power, and the Thessalonian Jews raised the crowds against him. When Paul went to Berea, he proclaimed the Word of God there, and the Thessalonian Jews came to Berea and raised the crowds against him [*saleuontes kai tarassontes*; "inciting and unsettling" or "shaking and stirring"]. Fallen human culture rejects the exclusivity of the Christian gospel.

People must make a basic choice: Either they will separate themselves from the fallen world into gathered churches, or they will seek to remain one with the world. There is no middle ground: church or world? Make your choice.

## III. Third, Consider the Brethren Who Believed.

We should consider the Berean nobility, the characteristics that made them noble, and the current challenges to Baptist nobility.

### A. The Berean nobility

Why would anyone go to an out-of-the-way city to start an obscure ministry? Why would Paul, this church planter extraordinaire, this apostle of Jesus Christ, choose Berea? Why should

you consider going to a poor foreign country or small inner-city church or old country church? Because God does great things in unexpected places among unassuming peoples! The Berean church is quite special, in spite of its obscurity, and Baptists know it.

If we compare the three cities of Acts 17 and their characteristic responses to Paul's proclamation of the gospel, each city is unique. *Thessalonica* as a whole is characterized by **cultural enmity**. The Thessalonians, led by the Jews, didn't believe Paul's preaching and the Word of God from whence his preaching came. They were so hostile to the Word that they chased Paul out of their city and the next city, too (Acts 17: 5-8, 13).

*Athens* as a whole is characterized by **academic novelty**. "For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing" (v. 21). Athens lusted for speculative scholarship and its attendant idolatry. Perhaps Paul had in mind the academic Athenians and their immoral Areopagus when he warned, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). Human speculation is a seductive temptress who seeks to draw the witless theologian into her demonic lair.

But if Thessalonica is characterized by cultural enmity, and Athens by academic novelty, *Berea* is characterized by **biblical nobility**. The Greek word describing the Bereans' nobility in our passage is *eugenesteroi*, which means literally, "noble by birth," and metaphorically, "noble in character." *Eugenesteroi* described the Berean's characteristic attitude to the Word of God.

Before examining the characteristics of the Bereans, let me share with you something discovered on a hunch. Recently, I typed the words "Athenian Baptist Church" in restrictive quotes as a "Google" search. Guess how many responses? You are correct: there were no responses whatsoever. I did the same with "Thessalonian Baptist Church." Guess how many responses? There were a respectable 317. But, what about "Berean Baptist Church"? A restrictive search yielded an incredible 59,600 responses!

Now, why would Baptists name their churches after the Bereans more than after the Thessalonians or Athenians? It is because as local Baptist leaders repeatedly remind me: They care more about biblical fidelity than about cultural enmity and academic novelty. The local churches care more about reading the Bible and following Christ than about reading the culture or aping the academy. They want to plant biblical (i.e., Baptist) churches that teach Baptist (i.e., biblical) theology.

## B. The characteristics of Christian nobility

Why did Dr. Luke refer to these bypath Christians as "more noble"? There are five "noble" characteristics of the Bereans. The first two are directly mentioned in verse 11 and deserve some priority. The others come later.

1. The first characteristic of Berean nobility is that **they received the Word eagerly**. Literally, "they accepted the *logos* with all readiness." The Bereans were not systematicians demanding an *ordo salutis* that is more philosophical than biblical. They *edexanto*, "received," the word of God, *meta pases prothumias*, "with all willingness." The human will was involved in the conversion of the Bereans, as it is always involved in true Christian salvation. I have to agree with the current president of our convention when he approves the words of Billy Graham, "Thus, repentance is first, and absolutely

necessary, if we are to be born again.”<sup>8</sup> And again, when he approves the words of Herschel Hobbs, who wanted to teach only what the Bible teaches, “Man is free to choose, but is responsible to God for his choices.”<sup>9</sup> To be saved, you must personally receive the Word of God. Or, as Jesus and Peter and Paul appealed through their invitations, “repent and believe”!

2. The second characteristic of Berean nobility is that *they examined the Scriptures daily*. Literally, “they searched the *graphas* daily to find out whether these things were so.” *Anakrinontes* means searching, examining, coming to a conclusion. Now, notice the direction of the judgment. The judgment was not of the Bible, but by the Bible. The biblical critics, the purveyors of the historical critical method, read the Bible as peasants. The noble does not set himself up as the critic of the Bible. No, the noble is criticized by the Bible. When we read the Word of God, we pray for the Spirit’s illumination and ask, what is the Word’s judgment? The Bible is not to be judged by us; the Bible is to be our judge and the judge of everything in this world.

Every time a church hears a new teaching, it should ask the question, whether according to the Bible, “Were it so?” *Ei echoi tauta houtos*, “if these things were had thus”: if the Bible said such a thing. That should be the first question when you hear a new teaching: “Were it so?” “Were it so according to the Bible?” Many of our problems would be solved immediately if our people would go back to asking this question: “Is what he is saying according to the Scriptures?” If so, accept it willingly. If not, reject it completely. And, this involves not sporadic effort, but daily Bible reading. This is the noble way.

3. The third characteristic of Berean nobility is that *they believed in Christ extensively*. It says in verse 12 that many “believed.” They repented and they believed. Salvation is entirely by grace through faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God, yet faith is entirely a divine gift. Christian faith involves utter dependence upon what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no room in true salvation for human works to be involved; then again, there is no evidence of salvation unless good works follow.

Moreover, there were many who believed. Verses 11 and 12 show that the Berean church was multi-ethnic, multi-class, both male and female. It contained Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, male and female. The Pauline churches were not market-driven communities pursuing some homogeneous unit principle. They were for all peoples of all classes without ethnic discrimination.

4. The fourth characteristic of Berean nobility is that *they cared for the apostle immediately*. Now, notice the word used here to describe the Christian nobility in verse 14: *adelphoi*, “brothers.” The interesting thing about the nobility of the church is that it includes everyone. In the Bible, the local church is structured congregationally. Baptists don’t have most holy right reverend doctor father vicars, because there is no distinction between clergy and laity or between priests and people in biblical churches. When the

---

<sup>8</sup> Frank S. Page, *Trouble with the Tulip: A Closer Examination of the Five Points of Calvinism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Canton, GA: Riverstone Group, 2006), 51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

later church fathers separated the people of God into two ontological classes, they introduced an ecclesiological novelty that brought untold suffering through the centuries. Baptists are congregational because biblical churches are congregational. The Baptist nobility includes all Baptists!

Now, the congregational equality of all members does not exclude a deep respect for Christian leadership. When the Thessalonians stirred up the crowds, the Berean brothers immediately, *eutheos*, provided for the protection of Paul. In the same way, the Christian nobility constantly cares for every need of its leaders. Baptists don't have "ruling elders" who lord it over the congregation; we have "serving pastors" who are cared for under congregational government. Why? Because I believe that the Baptist way is the biblical way, no matter what the Presbyterian Westminster Confession or any other ecclesiastical creed says.

5. The fifth characteristic of Berean nobility is that *they obeyed the apostle implicitly*. When the Berean brothers conducted Paul safely to his next preaching engagement, they received his orders. In this case, Paul's orders were for Timothy and Silas, his assistants, to join him in Athens as soon as possible. We know from 1 Thessalonians 3:1 that the Berean brothers conveyed Paul's message, for Timothy rejoined Paul in Athens, and Paul sent him back to Thessalonica to help that congregation. Silas was also active in building the churches as Paul directed (Acts 18:5).

Our obedience is properly directed toward the apostolic witness, because under Christ and alongside the prophets they are the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20; cf. 1 Cor. 3:11). The apostles themselves are not to be worshipped (Acts 14:11-15), but their word is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26, 16:12-15; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Pet. 3:15-16; 2 Pet. 1:21). We have the apostolic authority contained here in the New Testament. This is our foundation and noble Christians obey it implicitly.

### C. Current concerns for the Baptist nobility

There are certain trajectories manifested in modern Baptist life, which although near and dear to the heart of any Biblicist, if not balanced by the biblical outlook, will pull them away from the center, and may take some beyond the confines of biblical Christianity. Remembering the Berean character, please consider five current tendencies within our convention. In the attitude of Christian nobility, rendering honor where honor is due, please consider an appreciation and a concern for each tendency.

1. First, all Baptists should applaud *Calvinistic* Baptists for their high concern for orthodoxy. Every Baptist should take note of the Calvinist's concern for doctrinal specification and biblical polity. Baptists owe much to those who help remind us of biblical inerrancy, scriptural sufficiency, salvation by grace alone, and church discipline. We could go on.... In many things, Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic Baptists agree wholeheartedly and should join arms together. Why? Because these are biblical ways of thinking and acting.

However, when Herman Bavinck justifies why the Calvinist tradition removed repentance from the beginning of salvation and pushed it back into the Christian life,<sup>10</sup> one wonders whether Reformed theology departs from Jesus and the apostles, who kept repentance and faith front and center. One must ask of any Reformed doctrine: “Were it so?” Where is this in Scripture? When one hears a Reformed Baptist question believers’ baptism as a prerequisite for church membership, one should ask, “Were it so?” According to Acts 2:41, believers’ baptism preceded membership for all in the first church of Jerusalem; thus, it is also required for the first church of Minneapolis. Or, What about the Reformed distinction between the hidden and revealed wills of God? Where is this in Scripture? Or, What about the supposedly logical ordering of the divine decrees? “Were it so?” We could go on.... Ultimately, the Presbyterian system disintegrates when its extra-biblical framework is withdrawn.

Remember the noble characteristic of receiving the Word eagerly. Do not become enamored with rationalism, do not downgrade passionate invitational preaching, and do not downplay believers-only baptism. Be a noble Berean.

2. Second, all Baptists should applaud *Critical* Baptists. The critics are concerned to read the Bible with the mind, exploring every aspect of history and grammar in the search for truth. Every Baptist should honor a proper concern for linguistic specification and historical accuracy. Why? Because we must read contextually and grammatically.

However, critics must remember the noble characteristic of examining the Scripture according to the authority of the text. The church’s authority in reading the Bible is not the authority of the reader, nor is it the authority of the academic guild. Our authority in reading the Bible is the Bible itself illumined by the Spirit who guides the entire church. The Word is our judge; the Word cannot be separated from the Bible; and it is to be read with the church.

3. Third, all Baptists should applaud *Cultural* Baptists, who are concerned for the relevance of the gospel. The readers of culture may remind those set in their “churchly” ways, or more cerebral than evangelistic, of the priority of the Great Commission. An unrelenting zeal for reaching a lost world with the only hope of salvation is, to borrow a British colloquialism, “spot on.” Baptists must never cease beating the drum of missions and evangelism. Do not let other concerns distract the churches from the priority of witnessing.

However, please remember the noble characteristic of believing in Christ extensively. The gospel is for all people in all cultures and all sub-cultures. And the gospel comes only through the proclamation of the Bible. Some may unintentionally call the sufficiency of Scripture into doubt by claiming the Bible needs to be made relevant. The problem is not an irrelevant Bible, but an irreverent culture. The Bible does not need to be made relevant; it already is relevant! The culture needs to be enlightened as to what is truly relevant; and we need the Bible to do that.

In the twentieth century, left-wing neo-orthodox theologian Paul Tillich said Christians must answer the questions of the culture, allow culture to serve as a

---

<sup>10</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 3 vols. [to date] (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-2006), 3: 525-28.

theological source and norm, and adopt the “style” of culture.<sup>11</sup> Some today are similarly saying that we need the questions of culture to make the gospel relevant. I say, let us listen to the Bible for what is relevant. The relevant questions are already posed by Scripture: “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). “Why call you me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). Only the Bible provides the relevant questions and the relevant answers.

Culture is depraved, blind, and headed to hell: Don’t follow culture, lead it! Don’t embrace any particular sub-culture, lead them all! Don’t taint yourself with the sin of the culture: avoid “...lewdness...idolatry...selfish ambitions...heresies...drunkenness...” or whatever sins characterize your culture. Follow Jesus, imitate Paul, and lead the lost out of culture into Christ!

4. Fourth, all Baptists should applaud *Catholic* Baptists,<sup>12</sup> who may be dismayed by the separatist character of Baptist ecclesiology. Ecumenists speak truthfully that Baptists are not the only Christians on this planet. Indeed, there are some profound Christian traditions distinct from the free churches. Baptists should appreciate the theological, moral, and evangelistic contributions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Methodism, and Pentecostalism. There is truth in ecumenical claims that ecclesiology and soteriology are distinct, that no church is perfect, and that Christ called Christians to love one another.

However, appropriate desire for spiritual unity never compromises biblical truth. Southern Baptists heartily approve visible association, but only upon biblical principles. Let Baptists detect complete obedience to Jesus Christ alone, and they will want to associate with other Christians. But when paedobaptist denominations submit their theology and ecclesiology entirely to Jesus Christ, as revealed in Scripture, they just might have started to look like those Christ-ruled local churches known as Baptists!

One of the greatest dangers facing Southern Baptists is “evangelical ecumenism”. There are some who start as Bible-reading Baptists, but then identify themselves with contemporary evangelicalism, embrace Reformed systems of thought, become historically infatuated with early church fathers like Irenaeus, and receive the Roman sacrifice in a false appeal to unity. This is an old trajectory, as old as the Southern Baptist Convention, begun by John Henry Newman, who started as an evangelical and became a Roman Catholic in 1845. The ecumenical trajectory starts by downplaying the sufficiency of Scripture, by elevating tradition, and by promoting a scholarly or clerical elitism.

Stephen K. Ray followed the path from conservative Baptist through evangelical ecumenism to patristic theology to Catholic conformity. His journey to Rome came with the discovery of what he calls, “the unbiblical and unhistorical nature of the ‘Bible-only’ argument.” Ray, the Baptist evangelical turned Roman Catholic, claims Jesus never intended for us to have an authoritative book; rather, he wants us to have a magisterial pope.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1: 6-8, 38-40, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock [Paternoster], 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Stephen K. Ray, *Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historical Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), back cover. See Ray’s description of his journey to Rome on pp. 15-90.

For those who are becoming evangelical ecumenists or Catholic Baptists, consider the Christian nobility of Berea: The “brothers” cared for the apostle immediately. The first church of Berea was a congregationally-governed local church respecting its leadership while maintaining the entire sufficiency of Scripture.

5. Fifth, all Baptists should applaud the *Charismatics*. They remind us that the Holy Spirit must not be the forgotten member of the Trinity. As Carroll exemplified, Christians must worship the Holy Spirit just as they worship the Son and the Father.<sup>14</sup> Charismatics teach correctly that the Spirit of God intimately touches the human spirit. Conversion to Christ involves the whole person—body, soul, spirit, will, mind, emotions. Charismatics also emphasize spiritual gifts.

However, please remember that Christian nobility entails obeying the apostles implicitly. The Christian authority in discipleship is the Word of God as taught and written by the apostles and the prophets; it is not personal experience. If Baptists find it in the Bible, they embrace it. If not, they reject it. If Southern Baptists were shown by the Spirit that a “private prayer language” was really a spiritual gift defined as such by the Bible, they must surely confess it. However, Paul taught that the *charismata* are intended to support preaching in order to edify the church (1 Cor. 14), and that is why Southern Baptists focus on evangelistic proclamation and biblical ecclesiology instead of extra-biblical existentialism.<sup>15</sup>

The Bereans, those noble Christians, were always listening, then opening their Bibles, asking, “Were it so?” Following this biblical exemplar, the Baptist theologian must argue that unless it can be found in the Spirit-led church’s reading of the Bible, it is not central for the Christian nobility. Ask the text! “Were it so?” May the Lord God raise up the Christian nobility in the local churches of the Southern Baptist Convention to stand valiantly alongside such historic biblical aristocrats as Michael Sattler in total obedience to Jesus Christ, believing that the Spirit-illuminated Scripture is the all-sufficient standard of Christian faith and practice, and not permit us to be swayed except it were in the biblical text.

---

<sup>14</sup> See my “Pneumatology,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> See White Papers 8, 11, and 12, which address the issue of “private prayer languages” in the Southern Baptist context, at [www.BaptistTheology.org](http://www.BaptistTheology.org).

# **Dr. Malcolm B. Yarnell, III**

**Assistant Dean for Theological Studies,  
Director of the Center for Theological  
Research, Director of the Oxford Study  
Program, and Associate Professor of  
Systematic Theology**

**Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary**

