

VII. The Missouri Synod and the Southern Baptists: Lessons from Recent History

by Wayne Judd

The present effort by Seventh-day Adventist church administrators to develop official statements of doctrinal belief is not unprecedented in recent Protestant history. Nor is the near unanimous rejection of this trend by Seventh-day Adventist scholars a unique response. Few Adventists who read are unaware of the crisis of authority in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, a church now tragically split into two organizations.¹ Not so widely publicized is the creedal controversy within the largest denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention.

Three General Conference vice-presidents, W. Duncan Eva, W. J. Hackett and Richard Hammill, have been campaigning on Seventh-day Adventist college campuses for approval of two doctrinal statements, as a preliminary to formal adoption of these statements at Annual Council this fall. Formally approved statements are to be used, as Hackett has written, to "evaluate persons already serving the church, and those hereafter appointed, as to their commitment to what is considered basic Adventism."²

In what follows, I will review crises of authority that have affected the Missouri Synod and the Southern Baptist Convention. My summary is based largely on two papers read at the April 1977 convention of the American Society of Church History, in Louisville, Kentucky.³ The premise is that the information here presented has instructive relevance for our own situation.

Ironically, the kind of crisis that gave life to

the Missouri Synod in 1847 brought about a schism 130 years later. This crisis involved both administrative and biblical authority.⁴

In 1839, under the leadership of Martin Stephan, 600 Saxon Germans arrived in America to settle in St. Louis. Stephan outlined a hierarchical polity in which he would be the "first clergyman," or bishop. He secured a written Declaration of Submission from his followers, a loyalty that applied absolutely both to civil and religious affairs. Only a few months later, however, the Saxons disfellowshipped their first minister for having had sexual relations with three young women. Now it was necessary to redefine the meaning of church and authority, a task performed in 1841 by C. F. W. Walther, who located authority in Scripture and Sacrament rather than in persons.

In its Constitution (1847), the recovered Synod recognized the "Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice." The Constitution further declared that the Synod could not coerce individual congregations, but rather should serve as an advisory body, always operating in accordance with the Word of God. The bibliocentricity of the Constitution is revealed in Article II, "All matters of doctrine and of conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God." These articles have never been altered.

In 1920 Franz Pieper, Missouri Synod dogmatician, wrote:

Men have derided synods which have only advisory power. They have thought that nothing but 'confusion' and 'disorder' would have to result if synods were not vested with authority to enact ordinances binding the conscience in matters not regulated by God's word. This fear is groundless, as can be seen from the history of those Lutheran synods of

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America which have left consciences entirely unfettered in regard to synodical resolutions. We so-called Missourians have perhaps, as far as peace and order is concerned, experienced the most peaceful time, comparatively speaking, which the Church has ever en-

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joyed. We can truthfully say that government of the Church solely by God’s Word has stood the test of nearly a century among us. Of course, the flesh of Christians has sought to create disorder also among us. But God’s Word has proved its ability to rule and control everything.

But the stage for crisis was being set. In 1932 a Missouri convention resolved:

Since the Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical and secular matters.

In 1959 the Synod resolved that all confessional statements adopted by the Synod be imposed on pastors, teachers and professors of the church. This resolution, however, was declared unconstitutional three years later.

With the election of Dr. J. A. O. Preus as president of the Missouri Synod in 1969, the final conflict began. The 1971 Milwaukee convention adopted a resolution to speak more “authoritatively” to modern theological issues. Since the Lutheran conservatives’ concern was largely with critical methods applied to Scripture by Synod scholars, they needed a binding doctrinal statement to apply to these scholars. Such a statement could not easily be harmonized with Article II, which called for “all matters of doctrine and conscience” to be decided by the Bible. However, the 1971 conven-

tion skillfully applied another portion of Article II, “All other matters shall be decided by majority vote,” to an implied need for “restatement of doctrine with reference to contemporary issues.” The convention declared: “Be it *Resolved* that the Synod reaffirm the desirability of the formulation of doctrinal statements which clearly set forth the teachings of the Holy Scriptures.”

This resolution carried by a slim majority. However, since the resolution also stated that such doctrinal statements were subordinate to the Confessions, seminary teachers refused to be judged by them.

Two years later in New Orleans, the death knell struck when the 1973 convention voted by a fifty-five percent majority to require “formulation and adoption of synodical doctrinal statements,” and to declare the majority position of faculty at the Synod Seminary to be in violation of Article II of the Constitution. Twice during the convention the forty-five percent minority interrupted the proceedings to file written dissent.⁵

Jungkuntz said in his paper that what followed the New Orleans convention was “anticlimatic”—by the decision made there the church’s eventual split was assured. Already the church’s Concordia Seminary had seen the loss of the many students and faculty who in 1974 had formed the Concordia Seminary in Exile (Seminex). In 1976, largely over a disagreement as to whether Seminex graduates should be ordained, 150 congregations formally organized the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Church. The tragic schism had occurred.

Not so dramatic, but certainly as significant, is the ongoing crisis of authority in the Southern Baptist Convention. The issue focuses primarily on the freedom of Bible scholars to apply the historical-critical method of investigation, as well as on the related problem of the universal priesthood.

This conservative church has lived with the discomfort of constricting administrative attitudes since the early 1960s, when the “Elliott Controversy” challenged Southern Baptist unity. In July 1961, Ralph Elliott, professor of Old Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, published his book *Message of Genesis*.

With Elliott's interpretation of Genesis 1-11 as theology rather than history, Elliott, Midwestern Seminary, and the Sunday School Board were immediately under attack. Responding to the Elliott Controversy, the June, 1962, convention of Southern Baptists in San Francisco unanimously adopted the statement that "the messengers to this convention, by standing vote, reaffirm their faith in the *entire* Bible as the authoritative, authentic, infallible Word of God." The convention further resolved to deal with teachers whose views threatened the church's "historic position." In October, Ralph Elliott, who would not agree not to seek another publisher when his book was not reprinted, was fired.

The 1962 convention also determined that a confessional statement similar to one that had existed since 1925 should be presented to the 1963 convention in Kansas City. This confession, which was in fact adopted in 1963, was entitled "The Baptist Faith and Message" (and came to be called "The Kansas City Confession"). The preface to this confession emphasized that it would be used only as a guide, not as a creed.

The theological controversies continued, and the 1969 convention in New Orleans presented a motion calling for signed statements of belief by all writers, as well as annual signed statements by seminary professors. The motion did not carry, but a few months later the first volume of *The Broadman Bible Commentary* alarmed conservative critics once again. In 1970 the Southern Baptist Convention asked that this volume, in which author Henton G. Davies applied the historical-critical method to Genesis, be withdrawn from further distribution by its publishers. At first it appeared that Davies himself might be involved in the re-writing, but in 1971, the Convention voted to dismiss him as author.⁶

When the Southern Baptist Convention was organized in 1845, its central belief was, "We have constructed for our basis no new creed, acting in this matter upon a Baptist aversion for all creeds but the Bible." The 1963 revision of the 1925 confession of faith was designed to inform the churches and "serve as guidelines to the various agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention." The term "creed" was carefully avoided, since it might be used to "hamper freedom of thought or investigation." Shurden sadly reported, however, that the 1963 statement "has become a criterion of orthodoxy and a code-word for doctrinal purity" in the Southern Baptist Convention. He cited examples: The Foreign Mission Board has adopted the 1963 confession as a basis for examination of missionary candidates. The Sunday School Board has chosen the confession to measure doctrinal orthodoxy. In 1969, President W. A. Criswell asserted that those who did not believe the 1925 and 1963 confessions were not Baptists and should "join another denomination." In 1970 the Sunday School Board reported that new Board employees would be required to sign the confession.

Ironically, the General Conference administrators who have been promoting "carefully formulated statements" are aware of much of the information presented in this summary. Indeed, they say it is their awareness of trends toward "liberalism" in these other churches that goads them on in their confessional pursuit. What history makes abundantly clear, however, is that omitting offensive terms such as "creed" and "infallibility" provides little assurance that the intent and function of "carefully formulated statements" will do anything but devastate unity and truth in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See *Review and Herald* series of six articles appearing January 13-February 17, 1977, "A Church in Crisis," by Raymond F. Cottrell.

2. W. J. Hackett, *Review and Herald* guest editorial, "Preserve the Landmarks," May 26, 1977, p. 2.

3. Richard Jungkuntz, "The Crisis of Authority in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod," and Walter B. Shurden, "The Problem of Authority in the Southern Baptist Convention." These papers will be published in the January 1978 issue of *Review and Expositor*.

4. See James Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War*, New York, Harper and Row, 1977.

5. Jungkuntz told me *en route* to the airport after the convention that both the majority and minority wept as formal dissent was filed. In that dramatic moment, as the dissenting minority marched, the entire convention sang, "The Church Has One Foundation."

6. Shurden suggested that the plight of the Southern Baptist scholar is not "publish or perish" but "publish and perish."