



Controversial Faith

What is faith? How does one come to faith, and what is it all about? From my perspective, that is one of the central theological issues behind the Southern Baptist Convention controversy. How does one define faith? For some faith is accepting a defined set of beliefs, like Jesus' resurrection and sacrifice for our salvation. To others it is a relationship of trusting Jesus Christ—answering Jesus' call of "Follow me," as the disciples and Abraham, the father of faith.¹ These distinctions generate differences in one's willingness to cooperate with those whose beliefs vary from one's own.

To many people, the Southern Baptist family appears very factious. Indeed, Baptists have always been a diverse group. As the SBC has grown, minority opinions have gained strength and voice, calling for Southern Baptists to redefine themselves. Current national SBC leadership speaks from a narrow perspective true to the aims of the SBC "conservative resurgence" group. Individual Baptists are largely unaware of the issues involved in Baptist convention life.

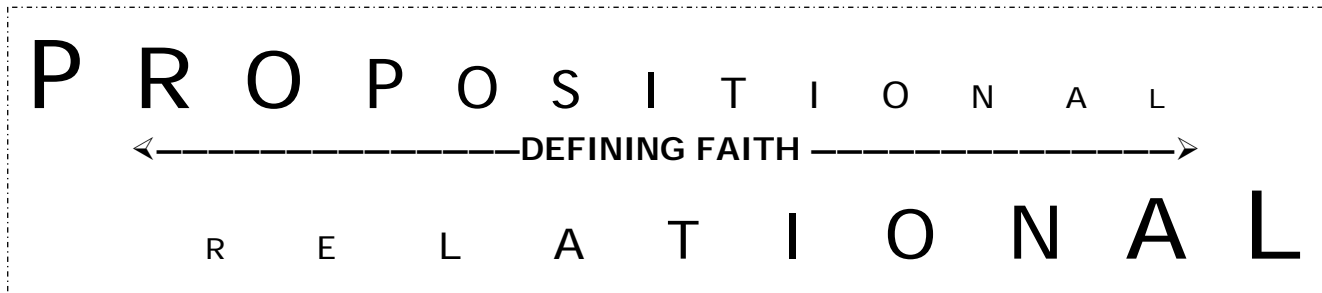
We appear to be divided essentially along two distinct issues: 1) degree of willingness to cooperate with those who do not hold with one's particular views and 2) defining faith as relational and/or propositional. The political division in SBC life mostly follows the issue of cooperation, for a significant number have been excluded from SBC life who would otherwise have maintained cooperation.² All along the issue of cooperation are folks from both "ends" of the Baptist theological spectrum. The least accommodating group is weighted with those in the camp of current SBC leadership, as they define faith more strictly as propositional—accepting a set of beliefs.

Propositional faith is as secure as the set of beliefs that one accepts. Such faith may be vulnerable to questions or doubts regarding one's beliefs. The more insecure feel it necessary to protect their core beliefs from questioning or differing views. The preface to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 states that faith is "established upon eternal truths." The stress here is on the statement of truths.

The opposite end of the cooperation issue is weighted with those at odds with current SBC leadership. They define faith less strictly in regard to truth statements. This group generally defines faith as trust or confidence—faith is primarily a personal relationship of trusting and depending on God. This kind of faith is as secure as one perceives God to be faithful and loving. Questions or doubts in regard to one's beliefs are not as critical as doubts and questions regarding one's confidence in God. The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message declared that "faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ." The stress here is upon the relationship—following the will of Christ "revealed in the Scriptures", not in definitions of truth. This is like the picture of Gideon trusting God for victory.

¹ Genesis 15:6. Abraham trusted God to be faithful in fulfilling the promise. His trust is pointed to as the essence of his faith, not his knowledge.
² Rick and Nancy Dill were being fired from service with the IMB, not for being bad missionaries, but for not signing the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. They served under the IMB for over 20 years. They were terminated for not signing what they understand to be a creed. Relational faith does not need a creed, while propositional faith desires one.

There is overlap in these positions stated above, as we are dealing with two separate aspects of faith and their relationship (propositional and relational). Also, I am painting the more extreme positions in order to help clarify the differences, fully aware that there is a viable middle ground of positions. Proponents of relational faith will draw limits on acceptable truth statements, and proponents of propositional faith will incorporate relational elements in their beliefs. In the broader circle of Christianity, the two extremes painted here are still relatively close together, and yet the differences are important to Baptists.



Those in SBC leadership at the beginning of the 21st century hold strongly to models of propositional faith. Since they are the most rigorous in holding to propositional definitions, they also call for greater rigor in holding to fixed doctrinal positions. This is the group within Baptist life that is the most interested in theological purity, specifically because their faith is the most dependent upon their particular theological models and beliefs. They have been the ones pushing for revisions to the Baptist Faith and Message, recent changes setting forth more narrow definitions than in the past.

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 defines faith as propositional. For the framers of the statement, propositional faith defines their basic religious outlook. One's salvation and relationship to God is based on knowing, accepting, and proclaiming certain truth statements. This is core to one's faith identity. In order to be saved, one must accept and confess certain truths. This is an essentially closed doctrinal system. Knowledge gained from Bible study is expected to support one's accepted beliefs, not to challenge beliefs already held. Revelation is understood to be static, since God revealed truth once for all and that revelation can be fully understood.

The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message stresses relational faith. The religious outlook underlying relational faith is very different from that described above. One's knowledge of God and acceptance of truth statements is a byproduct of a relationship with God. More than beliefs, faith is a commitment based on confidence in God's faithfulness. Faith is the commitment to a relationship of dependence, more than accepting a set of beliefs. This doctrinal system is open to a greater degree of change. Knowledge gained from Bible study is expected to change one's understanding of theological truth, deepening one's relationship with God and confirming God's faithfulness. Beliefs are expected to change with one's understanding of what God has revealed. Revelation is dynamic, in that truth needs to be better understood. God continues to clarify what has been revealed in essence, though not in completeness.³ Truth is constant, but one's understanding is limited.

³ Jesus gave us the overarching themes of God's will and character, but not all the details of God's will for our daily living. "Love one another" can be applied in many ways, but it is not specific for each situation. Paul knew he was to preach to the nations, but was not always clear on the specific direction that should take him (Acts 16).

The current Southern Baptist Convention leadership has waved the banner of faith as propositional. They have been calling for an end to “liberal theology” and upholding the so-called “inerrancy” of the Bible. More recently, they have been using the term “neo-orthodoxy” for those who espouse any views that do not fit within their acceptable parameters. The labels of “liberalism” or “neo-orthodoxy” are apparently being used regarding issues of inerrancy and propositional faith.

Inerrancy (the idea that the Bible contains no errors) is important to propositional faith, as it presents a more rigid foundation for Biblical interpretation. Biblical interpretation becomes more fixed under the banner of inerrancy. When one defines faith as the acceptance of specific truths, it is imperative that one be able to present an unmovable foundation for those beliefs. Since one’s faith is only as firm as its foundation, that foundation is extremely important.

Behind the concept of inerrancy is a more specific definition of inspiration. What is the nature of the Bible, how was it written, and in what sense is it God’s Word? Various theories of inspiration have been set forth. These vary from defining human participation in writing the Bible as word-for-word recording of God’s speech, to God giving a basic message a writer expressed in a personal way.

The more direct theories of inspiration are most closely linked to stricter definitions of inerrancy. Proponents tend to assume that Biblical documents were written by individual authors as “at one sitting,” rather than developing over time. As truth statements are deemed to be static, so the Biblical text and its transmission are understood to be static in character.

Opponents of inerrancy would point out that Greek and Hebrew manuscripts support that many Biblical texts underwent certain changes in their content and organization. Proponents of inerrancy often speak of the original documents as having been inerrant, though for some books like Daniel scholars cannot determine its original language. The Gospel of Mark has two separate endings, though it would appear that the original version ended at Mark 16:8, while our Bibles include the longer ending. We know at least three Greek editions of the book of Revelation of differing length, and the one we use seems not to be the original, but the more complete version. Which version should be considered inerrant? Should the label apply to them all?

In the definition of Gleason Archer, Jr., the Bible can only be God’s Word if it is completely absent of every class of error. He limits this definition to the original manuscripts, allowing for errors to have entered the Biblical text through the copying process. The Bible we currently use does not fit his definition for the original manuscripts, as it is different from the “original text,” if for no other reason than being a translation from Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew. Does that invalidate its identity as God’s written Word?

As stated, there are other theories of inspiration. Opponents of inerrancy would highlight that the church through the centuries has incorporated another aspect of the concept in its definitions and perceptions. It has included the inner working of the Holy Spirit, speaking to God’s people through various books. These texts were selected and preserved as the people recognized God’s voice in these words that were spoken and written. The original manuscripts were not preserved. Copies, translations, and versions with comments inserted into the text were passed on and canonized. The text as we have received it is the text that we use. We use it because for centuries it has pointed us to God. We have heard God’s Word in these Words, and we have treasured it for ourselves and for

others. This, too, might be considered an aspect of inspiration—the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, confirming God’s truth. It must be considered.

As the inerrantist is generally concerned with definitions of propositional faith, more attention is given to the factual record of the Bible. Often, the inerrantist can support a theological claim only as reliably as the Bible’s non-theological statements. For this reason, matters of history and science that appear in the Biblical text are as important to the inerrantist as are matters of doctrine. For them, the Bible’s theological truth is only as valid as the scientific and historical truths it presents. These matters are central to propositional faith, because it is essentially based on truth claims.

For one whose concern is relational faith, matters of science and history are of much lesser importance. There is little need to point out how differences between current scientific and Biblical perspectives may be reconciled. There is little reason to justify Biblical representations of history as precise, literal descriptions. For relational faith, the Bible is foremost a book that points to the character, identity, and purposes of God. One should focus attention on the theological teachings of the text, not the scientific or historical data presented by its writers.

Inerrancy, therefore, is of great importance to those whose faith is propositional. To those whose faith is relational, inerrancy is a side issue, if it is an issue at all.

Another implication of differing understandings of faith is one’s concept of salvation. For those who hold to faith as propositional, salvation is generally a question of one’s legal standing before God with regard to judgement, heaven, and hell. One’s focus often centers on meeting the legal requirements to be innocent before God. For relational faith, salvation is generally defined as being in a relationship with God which grows and continues beyond death. Since faith is relational, salvation is relationship with God that grants confidence in God’s care, direction, and provision for a future beyond the physical world. Rather than stressing symbols of judicial language, this group will focus on the Biblical symbols of relationship for salvation.

From my perspective the central theological question underlying the turmoil in the Southern Baptist Convention is how one defines faith. Is faith a relationship? Is faith the acceptance of a set of beliefs? To what degree is it propositional, to what degree is it relational? How will we define faith? How will we allow faith to define us? How accommodating can we be of those whose definitions differ from our own? Can we accept our differences and lay them aside in order to work together to fulfill God’s mandate to disciple the nations?

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