

# Editorial: Understanding the Controversy

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Barry Hankins's fascinating *Uneasy in Babylon* explores the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention. In this issue of the journal we interact both narrowly and broadly with Hankins's work. Russell Moore both praises and criticizes the thesis advanced by Hankins. Moore maintains that devotion to the scriptures and the theology explicated therein explains the reaction of conservatives to moderates. Southern Baptists were not attempting to preserve a culture that was passing away but were contending for the faith handed over once for all to the saints (Jude 3). Greg Wills looks further back, examining what was happening in Southern Baptist seminaries, particularly Southern Seminary, in the last fifty years. He demonstrates that theological defection was not merely a problem in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. The seminaries were bleeding significantly even in the 50s and 60s. The controversy that erupted in the 70s was brewing for some time before everything came to the surface. R. Albert Mohler, like Russell Moore, traces the history of the Southern Baptist controversy, setting it against the backdrop of American culture and the continuing shift toward liberalism in American churches. He reminds us afresh that the battle turned on the issue of faithfulness to the gospel.

Since this issue of the journal is devoted to the controversy among Southern Baptists, which has been brought to our attention once again by Barry Hankins, we extended an invitation to Dr. Hankins to write a response to the articles by Drs.

Moore, Wills, and Mohler. Hankins naturally devotes his response especially to Moore since the latter's article is a direct response to Hankins's book. Hankins argues that Moore misunderstands his thesis, for, according to Hankins, culture and theology were inseparable in the recent controversy. He was not, Hankins claims, attempting to pit one over the other, nor to exalt one over the other. It is not the place here to enter into the debate in detail. We are grateful that Hankins so kindly agreed to contribute to our journal and join the discussion. He rightly points out that many of the theological issues that took center stage also have cultural ramifications. But this is scarcely surprising. Faithfulness to the teaching of scripture demands that we declare in public the teaching of scripture that is contravened in our age and time. It is easy to confess theological truths that remain uncontroversial. We speak out on abortion and homosexuality because these are the very points where our culture denies scriptural truth. We emphasize inerrancy and the necessity of personal faith in Christ to be saved because many in the theological community deny these truths.

But what about women's ordination? Hankins wonders why we exclude inerrantists at our seminaries who support the ordination of women. An excellent question deserves a thoughtful answer. First, the vast majority of Southern Baptists believe that the scriptures are clear on the matter of women serving as senior pastors. Apart from the matter of women functioning as

senior pastors, Southern Baptists actually have diverse viewpoints on where to draw lines on ministry that is permissible to women, and as a denomination we celebrate the marvelous way that God has used and is continuing to use women. Many women are enrolling in our seminaries, and we are encouraging them to use their gifts to God's glory. Southern Baptists may disagree on where lines should be drawn in the variety of ministries open to women, but nearly all Southern Baptists would agree that women should not serve as senior pastors. Second, to make such a decision on women serving as senior pastors is not radically different from establishing churches that are baptistic. As Southern Baptists we agree that Presbyterians are evangelical, but we think that the scripture is clear on baptism, and hence we form churches that are distinctively and exclusively baptistic. Similarly, we do not deny that some evangelicals embrace the ordination of women to all ministries, but we believe that our denomination and churches will be stronger if they adhere to the scriptural mandate that limits the preaching office to men. Finally, limiting the faculty to those who draw the line on women's ordination is wise in our current cultural environment. Massive cultural forces are at work that attempt to erase the God-ordained differences between men and women. I have observed institutions that are allegedly committed to hiring people from both sides on the ordination of women. Such an ideal may succeed initially. But cultural forces are great. Women who seek to be pastors begin to be admitted as students. They feel injured by faculty that do not agree with their sense of calling. The faculty begins to be dominated more and more by those who think women can be pastors. Faculty that support the

traditional view get quieter and quieter, fearing that voicing their views "discourages" women students. As the years continue fewer and fewer faculty who support the traditional view are hired. Is it a conspiracy? No. The faculty of a school gradually changes so that the traditional view is slowly pushed to the margins. Very few defenders of the traditional view on women serving as senior pastors existed at Southern, Southeastern, and Midwestern before the resurgence. I believe, in our cultural context, that if a school does not take a clear stand here it will gradually accept women as senior pastors.

The matter of women's ordination is contentious, and we are pleased to offer a sermon by Mark Coppenger on the text of 1 Timothy chapter 2. This is of particular significance because in his book, Barry Hankins analyzes the way some conservative leaders, including Mark Coppenger, interpret this biblical text. Finally, David Dockery provides an illuminating biographical study of a theological conservative of a previous generation—Herschel Hobbs. I must apologize to our readers and Dr. Dockery that I mistakenly wrote in my last editorial that the article by Dockery would appear in the previous issue. I am very pleased that our readers will now have the pleasure of learning about the life of Hobbs. Since I am mentioning oversights, I should also note that the article by John Piper about John Newton that was printed in the last issue previously appeared in a book published by Crossway, titled *The Roots of Endurance*. We are immensely grateful to Crossway for permission to publish the essay by Dr. Piper.