AN ANALYSIS OF THE BAPTIST FAITH AND MESSAGE 2000

By Russell H. Dilday

I. Historical Review

In 1998 and again in 2000, major revisions have been made in the Southern Baptist Convention’s Confession of Faith, BFM63, which is the only doctrinal statement the Southern Baptist Convention has had in its 153 year history. First approved in 1925, and editorially revised in 1963, this Confession of Faith called "The Baptist Faith and Message" has generally been considered adequate until now.

Historically, Southern Baptists have had an aversion to creeds. In 1925, only reluctantly after eighty years, in an effort to squelch a controversy, the SBC adopted its first statement of faith. Basing it largely on the New Hampshire Confession of 1833, the framers carefully pointed out that the statement was merely a "confession" of what most messengers at the annual meeting understood to be the general beliefs of Baptists. The preamble made clear in 1925 and again when
minor editorial revisions were made in 1963, that the statement was not intended to be a creed, nor was it to be used to enforce conformity of belief.

Baptists say their only creed is the Bible, and until recently, they have defended tenaciously the privilege of every believer, with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to interpret Scripture according to his or her own conscience. This deeply engrained anti-creedal sentiment so characteristic of Baptists lies behind the negative reactions to the newly revised document.

Some have built-in suspicions of BFM200 because it was crafted by the "party" who succeeded in a two-decade effort to take control of the SBC. One Baptist editor describes the implied scenario behind this distrust:

Twenty-one years ago a master plan for the repositioning of the SBC would have looked something like this. Elect SBC presidents sympathetic to fiercely conservative principles. Appoint like-minded trustees to govern SBC institutions. Hire to the staffs of convention agencies employees who buy into the SBC’s rightward shift. Create a new SBC infrastructure that reflects a more conservative direction. Rewrite the history of this era with the victor’s spin. Revise the SBC theological statement, the 1963 BFM, to codify the new, more fundamental, direction of the SBC. With the release of the report of the Committee on the BFM last week the final stage of this reimaging is set in motion (Religious Herald, May 25, 2000, p.8).

Reinforcing these suspicions is the fact that the revision committee was made up exclusively of
those who are sympathetic with the new leadership. In fact most were active in the effort to control and redirect the SBC. It is not surprising then, that reactions to the statement have largely followed political dividing lines - those who support the new convention leadership and direction favor the document, and those who oppose what they call "the take-over of the SBC" challenge the document.

II. Positive Factors in the 2000 Revision

Certain positive elements in BFM2000 should be acknowledged.

1. To the surprise of many, the committee did not insert the controversial language of "inerrancy" into the section on Scripture, further dividing the constituency. It does seem curious, however, that since so much of the twenty year controversy centered on the use of the term "inerrant" to describe the nature of the Bible, it was now apparently deemed unimportant.

2. Neither did the revisers insert more restrictive views of eschatology, such as dispensationalism, as some had feared. In the past, seminary professors who did not hold to dispensational eschatology were criticized as liberals and were cited as examples of why the take-over was necessary. But, again, this was now not considered important enough to include.

3. At the last minute, following growing criticism of its deletion, the committee did strengthen the document by reinserting a statement that Baptists honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers. However, critics point out...
that the use of the plural form "believers" misses the true meaning of the "priesthood of each believer" (see number 2 below).

4. The revised statement does reaffirm most historical Baptist convictions. Unlike some mainline groups who have too often adopted cultural trends as church polity and embraced wide spectrums of belief instead of making critical theological distinctions, Baptists have been courageous in expressing their convictions. If a new proclamation of Baptist convictional courage was needed, then this document forthrightly addresses that need.

5. The new document does speak to issues that the revisors consider to be of contemporary concern – soteriological inclusivism (Section IV), family (Section XVIII), gender (Section III), sexual immorality, adultery, homosexuality, pornography, and abortion (Section XV). However, the inclusion of such current specifics can also be seen as a weakness (see number 9 below).

6. It closes ranks and defines the new version of the SBC more specifically. If there remains any ambiguity about the future direction of the SBC under its current leadership, this document boldly clears the air. Everyone can now tell what the new SBC is and what it will be.

7. Editorial changes, such as the use of gender-inclusive language, improve the form of the statement.

III. Troubling Factors in the 2000 Revision
Negative concerns about BFM2000 seem to cluster around twelve issues:

1. The deletion of the Christocentric criterion for interpretation of Scripture.
2. The diminishing of the doctrines of soul competency and the priesthood of the believer.
3. The trend toward creedalism.
4. The diminishing of the doctrine of autonomy and freedom of the local church under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.
5. The trend toward Calvinism and mistrust of personal Christian experience.
6. The trend shifting Baptist identity from its Anabaptist, free church tradition to a reformed evangelical identity.
7. The narrow interpretation of the role of women in marriage.
8. The narrow interpretation of the role of women in the church.
9. The "Pandora’s box" concern – a fear of repeated future revisions to include favorite opinions.
10. The trend toward including a catalogue of specific sins.
11. The false accusation of neo-orthodoxy.
12. Inconsistency.

1. The deletion of the Christocentric criterion for interpretation of Scripture.

BFM63 says, "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." BFM2000
substitutes, "All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is himself the focus of divine revelation."

BFM2000 also deleted from BFM63, "Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, and today, and for ever. Therefore, the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures."

This seems to many to be a serious rejection of a very important hermeneutical principle. Baptists (and most evangelicals) have valued what is called the theological principal of Biblical interpretation. This principle teaches that the Bible is a book of faith, not just history or philosophy. Therefore, the Bible cannot be fully understood from the outside by grammar, logic, rhetoric, and history alone. It must be understood from its center – Jesus Christ. This Biblical center yields itself best to those who have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ and who are indwelt by the Spirit of God. Because of this personal relationship with Jesus, the believer knows personally the author of Scripture and has the promise of illumination from the indwelling Christ.

This theological principle, expressed in the Christocentric language of BFM63, "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ," declares that the guiding key to Biblical interpretation is Jesus Christ. Through Him as a criterion, or standard, the Bible becomes unified, self-consistent and coherent. Jesus said, "The Scriptures … bear witness to me" (John 5:39). Therefore, we are to interpret the Old Testament
and the rest of the Bible in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus in the New Testament, illuminated by our own direct experience with the living Christ. It is through Jesus as the criterion that we interpret the Old Testament prophecies, the ceremonial, civil, dietary, and moral laws of the Old Testament. As Martin Luther insisted, the Bible is always to be understood from its center – its heart – its Christ.

The intentional deletion of this Christological principal of Biblical interpretation is, to many, the most serious flaw in BFM2000. It appears to elevate the Bible above Jesus and to weaken the idea that He is Lord of the Bible. Critics have responded:

"This amounts to nothing less than idolatry." It is pure bibliolatry." "I’ll bow down to King Jesus, but I will never bow down to King James." (Quotes from article in Biblical Recorder, July 29, 2000, p. 11)

The committee defended its deletion in their press release of June 5, 2000: "This statement (Jesus is the criterion) was controversial because some have used it to drive a wedge between the incarnate word and the written word and to deny the truthfulness of certain passages." Ken Hemphill calls the Christocentric language "a loophole to avoid the plain teaching of certain Biblical texts which persists among moderates…. it is used by some unprincipled Baptist scholars to ignore difficult texts which they did not believe to reflect the character of Jesus" (Baptist Standard, February 26, 2001, p. 3).

But surely this crucial Christological principle
treasured by Baptists over the years should not be abandoned just because some misguided interpreters are said to have abused it.

Reflecting on this change, an editorial in Christianity Today says, "BFM2000 is poorer without the rich Christocentric language of the earlier statement. Jesus Christ is surely the center of Scripture as well as its Lord. One can affirm this while also welcoming the clear affirmation of the Bible as God’s infallible, revealed word" (August 7, 2000, p. 36).

2. The diminishing of the doctrines of soul competency and the priesthood of the believer.

"Soul competency" is the view that individual Christians may go directly to God through Christ without any other mediator. "The priesthood of the believer" is the view that through Christ each believer is a priest – both clergy and laity – responsible to God for interpreting and following the Bible and for interceding on behalf others. Both E.Y. Mullins and Herschel Hobbs called soul competency Baptists’ most distinctive doctrine.

But seminary President Al Mohler, a major voice, if not the primary composer, on the revision committee, has recently raised concerns about the historic Baptist convictions called "soul competency" and "priesthood of the believer" – especially as they were espoused by previous president of Southern Seminary, E.Y. Mullins.

In his Founder’s Day address at the seminary,
March 30, 2000, Mohler said that Mullin’s emphasis on soul competency has "infected" the SBC with an "autonomous individualism" that undermines Biblical authority to this day. He blames Mullins for steering the SBC off course by making personal Christian experience more important than Biblical authority. He warned that soul competency "serves as an acid dissolving religious authority, congregationalism, confessionalism, and mutual theological accountability" (Southern Seminary Magazine, June, 2000).

An even stronger denunciation of these two doctrines appeared in the Winter, 1999 issue of the seminary’s theological journal by Sean Michael Lucas, associate director of the Southern seminary’s Center for the Study of the SBC:

For over 70 years, Southern Baptists have harvested the shallow discipleship and vapid theology that resulted from sowing Mullins’ theological seeds of experience. It is time to return to the founders of the SBC trained in the hardy doctrinal tradition of the Princeton theology.

Following this line of thought, BFM2000 originally deleted the following references to these doctrines in BFM63:

Baptists emphasize the soul’s competency before God, freedom of religion, and the priesthood of the believer. However, this emphasis should not be interpreted to mean that there is an absence of certain definite doctrines that Baptists believe, cherish, and with which they have been and are now closely identified.
After growing criticism of this deletion, the following reinsertion was made less than an hour before the report was brought to the convention for approval:

We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers, affirming together both our liberty in Christ and our accountability to each other under the Word of God.

While this change was welcomed by critics, it was soon discovered that the reinserted wording had been subtly changed. The singular form in BFM63, "priesthood of the believer" had been changed to "priesthood of believers." Here again, the revisors expressed their mistrust of personal, individual experience, focusing instead on accountability to an approved belief system. This in essence rejects the historical Baptist emphasis of the priesthood of each individual believer (singular), replacing it with a more Reformed doctrine of the priesthood of believers (plural).

Al Mohler defended the reinterpretation, "It is dangerous to say the priesthood of the believer. It is not just that we stand alone; it is that we stand together – and we stand together under the authority of God’s word." Other defenders of the plural form say the singular form is "a kind of private interpretation which, while adhering to an ambiguously crafted "criterion" of Jesus Christ, eviscerates the Biblical doctrines..." (Biblical Recorder, July 29, 2000, p.3). But one Baptist editor countered:

While I am content to stand before God under the authority of Scripture, I can do so whether I’m alone or in a crowd of all 15.8 million Southern
Baptists. While I appreciate the committee’s efforts to at least partially restore a pair of key Baptist doctrines, I am confident it is not dangerous to be a lone priest/believer in the presence of Almighty God through the power of his Holy Spirit (Baptist Standard, July 17, 2000).

The end result of these omissions, reinsertions, and changes seems to many to indicate a lack of appreciation for – even a rejection of two very important Baptist ideals.

3. The trend toward creedalism

BFM2000 deleted the following passage from BFM63 that was intended to protect the statement from becoming a creed to enforce doctrinal uniformity. "Such statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority" (Preamble).

Adding to this concern is the insertion in BFM2000 of language never before used in a Baptist Confession of Faith: "Baptist churches, associations, and general bodies have adopted confessions of faith as a witness to the world, and as instruments of doctrinal accountability. We are not embarrassed to state before the world that these are doctrines we hold precious and as essential to the Baptist tradition of faith and practice" (Introduction).

As Jim Dennison says, "For the first time, the denominational faith statement is intended to be an ‘instrument of doctrinal accountability.’ For whom? By whom?… And for the first time, this
faith statement is said to be ‘essential to the Baptist tradition of faith and practice.’ Essential for what? For whom?… Simply put, a document which elevates such a human statement of faith to this level of authority cannot be understood to be Baptist" (Sermon, July 15, 2000).

Some say, these changes, along with the minimizing of local church autonomy (number 4 above), show that the new SBC is in the process of becoming an authoritarian body that wants to legislate to local churches. They fear this document will be used improperly to restrict representation on SBC committees and boards, and to judge orthodoxy in associations and local churches.

Already, tensions have arisen in state conventions where efforts are being made to enforce compliance with the SBC by adopting BFM2000. Headlines are being made in at least two Baptist associations where local churches are threatened with dismissal on the basis of BFM2000 (Florida and North Carolina).

A related question arising from the concern over creedalism is, "Should seminary professors be required to sign revised versions of BFM?" Seminaries accredited by ATS are expected to have a statement of faith as an objective standard by which they evaluate the teaching of professors. In a sense, such a procedure protects professors from unfounded accusations of heresy. All six of the SBC seminaries had adopted BFM63. (In the case of Southern Seminary, The Abstract of Principles is an additional statement of faith.)

Traditionally, SBC seminary teachers agree to
"teach in accordance with and not contrary to the statement of faith." This language is intentionally used to discourage the use of the BFM as a creed, violating individual conscience. A teacher might have disagreements with the statement, but could agree nevertheless to teach in accordance with it. However, if the gap between a teacher’s conscience and BFM became so great that the teacher could not in good faith and honesty continue to teach in accordance with the statement, then the teacher would be expected to leave, or disciplinary action could be taken.

But now, after 153 years, two quick revisions have been made in BFM. This unprecedented action raises two issues for SBC seminaries. First, should current teachers who were contracted to teach under the 1963 guidelines be forced to sign the 1998 and now the 2000 revisions? It would seem illegal, at least unethical, to require such compliance. While new teachers employed after the revisions were made could legitimately fall under the new guidelines, those already contracted should be "grand fathered" – allowed to continue under BFM63.

Second, should teachers be forced to affirm the BFM "as a matter of conscience" or, as in the past, should they be asked "to teach in accordance with the statement?" Al Mohler at Southern Seminary has recently shifted from the historical position and now requires his teachers to "hold these convictions as personal beliefs and commitments, not merely as contractual obligations for teaching" (Southern Seminary advertisement in Christianity Today). Some, who acknowledge the right of seminaries to expect teachers to comply with the institution’s faith statement, believe
Mohler’s approach moves into serious creedalism.

Ken Hemphill’s recent message on Southwestern Seminary’s web page appears to be contradictory. He states, "The revised BFM is not being forced on anyone," and then he says it will be required of all faculty at the seminary.

In summary, some Baptists believe these changes in BFM2000 signal a clear drift toward making the denominational statements of faith more creedal – contrary to a long history of Baptist aversions to creeds.

4. The diminishing of the doctrine of the autonomy and freedom of the local church under the leadership of the Holy Spirit

Other critics see in the BFM2000 an apparent weakening of the historic conviction that each local Baptist congregation is free and autonomous under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning, Baptists have resisted any kind of denominational hierarchy, any form of "top-down" governance from a central denominational office. They have fiercely defended the right of every congregation to make its own decisions as they believe God leads them – even if others believe they are wrong.

This does not mean that a local church can believe anything and still have the right to participate in associations or conventions. Baptist conventions and associations are also autonomous and can set limits and criteria for participation. But to some, the BFM2000 seems to signal a trend toward more authoritarian control – even if subtle and
informal - over local congregations.

As an example of this trend, critics point out that along with the deletions discussed above, BFM2000 also deleted from BFM63: "The church is an autonomous body..." In place of a separate declaration of this principle, one word was inserted in the first sentence of the existing article on the church, giving it what critics believe is a less important emphasis: "A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus is an autonomous local congregation..."

Of concern also is the prohibition in BFM2000 limiting who can be called to be the pastor of a local congregation. This is seen as a direct intervention in the church’s freedom to choose its own leaders, another violation of local church autonomy. This issue will be discussed further in number 7 below.

5. The trend toward Calvinism and mistrust of personal Christian experience.

There are features in BFM2000 that some believe give, for the first time, a distinct Calvinistic slant to the statement. Since Al Mohler, a leading shaper of BFM2000, claims to be a Calvinist, it is easy to suspect that some of the changes have more to do with Calvinistic theology than Baptist history. It appears to be an effort to redirect SBC theology to what Mohler calls the Calvinism of the original founders of Southern Seminary - in contrast to the more balanced theology of E.Y. Mullins and later seminary leaders.

When Mohler was asked in a Texas meeting in
September, 2000 if he were a "five-point Calvinist," he replied "I will fly my colors boldly. If you ask me if I’m a Calvinist, I’m going to have to answer yes, but that is not the first, second, third or even fourth term I would use." He said his beliefs are better described as in the Reformed tradition. "Every Christian, every Baptist has to believe in predestination, he said. There’s not a person in this room who doesn’t believe in limited atonement – as opposed to universalism…. The difference is in how it is limited…."

In the same meeting, Paige Patterson said he and Mohler hold opposing views on the doctrines of election and predestination and he in fact finds no Biblical basis for the position Mohler embraces. "However," Patterson said, "Calvinists strongly affirm the authority of the Bible, and that’s a greater point of agreement than the two points of disagreement.. I’d rather have Dr. Mohler hanging around my seminary than someone who had doubts about the Scriptures" (Baptist Standard, Internet news release, November 12, 2000, p. 4).

One evidence of this Calvinist tone is the apparent mistrust of personal experience expressed in several of the revisions of BFM2000. (i.e. the removal of Jesus as the criterion of interpretation, diminishing of soul competency and priesthood of the believer, greater emphasis on creedalism and weakening of local autonomy, narrower expression of God’s fore-knowledge) Strict Calvinism minimizes individual Christian experience. It prefers to think of the essence of Christianity as a set of unrevisable doctrinal propositions rather than a direct experience of grace, an encounter with the living Christ.
In his conference at Southern Seminary in February, Al Mohler attempted to simplify the divisions in the SBC by saying the two camps are the "truth party" vs. the "liberty party" – the first emphasizes the authority and inerrancy of Scripture while the second emphasizes personal autonomy (Baptist Press, March 22, 2001).

His analysis echoes the Calvinist preference for doctrinal propositions and its mistrust of personal Christian experience mentioned above. It also sheds light on Mohler’s strong criticism of E.Y. Mullins’ emphasis on Christian experience. Mohler blames Mullin’s view for contributing to the "present state of theological ‘anemia’ among Southern Baptists." Mullins "set the stage for doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism. He was near the liberals in his approach" (Introduction in The Axioms of Religion – Library of Baptist Classics, Broadman & Hollman, 1997). This mistrust of experience may have been one motive for revising BFM63 and to the minimizing of such doctrines as soul competency and the priesthood of the believer in BFM2000.

To suggest, however, E.Y. Mullins put personal Christian experience above the Bible as authority, or that he made experience the central organizing principle of his theology is to misread or distort Mullins’ view. While rightly giving great importance to each believer’s personal encounter with Christ as a powerful apologetic tool, and while identifying a personal relationship with the living Christ rather than a list of propositional truths as the essence of faith, Mullins always made it clear that experience was under the authority of the Bible.
He said Christian experience must never be used to test the Scriptures. The experience of the Christian can at best only confirm them. He wrote, "Experience would ever go astray without the ever-present corrective influence of the Scriptures, but the authority of the Scriptures would never become for us a vital and transforming reality apart from the working of God’s redeeming grace among us" (The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression p. 27). He declared, "For Baptists there is one authoritative source of religious truth and knowledge. It is to that source they look to in all matters relating to doctrine, to policy, to ordinances, to worship, and to Christian living. That source is the Bible" (Baptist and the Bible, cited by Dilday, p. 67).

A second evidence of a Calvinist drift is the inclusion for the first time in the SBC statement of faith a stricter definition of God’s foreknowledge. In the section on God, the revisors of BFM200 added: "God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures." Also, in the sub-section on God the Father, the new statement adds, "all knowing" to the other attributes.

Many, maybe most, Baptists believe God could control everything and everybody, but chooses to be in charge rather than in control of everything all the time as strict Calvinists propose. The Bible teaches that God often chooses to limit Himself in His relationship with the world. The SBC has historically drawn from the best of both Calvinist
and Arminian theology, benefiting from a continuing dialogue between proponents of both views. But these new additions tend to shut down any healthy theological discussion of God’s knowledge by an arbitrary vote of the Convention. This led the editor of Christianity Today to warn:

Historically, orthodox Christians – Catholics, and Protestants, Arminians and Calvinists – have affirmed God’s complete knowledge of all future events. More recently, however, some theologians have advocated an openness-of-God theology that claims God’s knowledge of the future is limited. The new SBC confession affirms that God’s ‘perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of his free creatures.’ … Shutting down the debate by convention fiat runs a serious risk. Though openness theism clearly runs counter to historic Christian theology, it draws on certain aspects of the Biblical witness that not all mainstream theologians have integrated into their teaching. The ongoing debate gives these teachers a chance to make their theology more fully Biblical while remaining true to the tradition (August 7, 2000, p. 37).

Many Baptists believe the statement of faith is more useful if it deals with central core doctrines, leaving believers free to differ over more peripheral details.

6. The trend shifting Baptist identity from its Anabaptist, free-church tradition to a reformed evangelical identity.

Some see the general tone of the document’s
changes as a watering down of historic Baptist distinctives in order to join the circle of evangelical reformed theologians, "embracing their schools, and promoting their books." In order to join the circle, Baptists have to de-emphasize such beliefs as the individual soul’s direct access to God, freedom from political or religious coercion in all matters of faith, free church in a free state, and the supremacy of Scripture over all creeds, councils, confessions, conventions, or religious authorities" (Wayne Ward, Western Recorder, February 12, 1999).

This shift obscures the rich heritage Baptists draw from the English Separatists, Anabaptist and free church roots of our denomination and link it with evangelicalism. Unlike Baptists, the Evangelical churches often "claim descent from one of the Protestant reformers, require adherence to a particular creed, or worst of all, seek political power to establish their church as a national church" (Wayne Ward, cited above). This is not the Baptist way.

A further basis for this fear are the changes in statements about the Bible which more clearly align the SBC with the view set forth in the evangelical "Chicago Statement on Inerrancy." Also cited is as evidence is the defense of BMF2000 by Southern Seminary staff member Sean Michael Lucas: "it is time to return to the founders of the SBC trained in the hardy doctrinal tradition of the Princeton Theology" (Cited above in number 2).

7. The narrow interpretation of the role of women in marriage
Included in BFM2000 is the amendment on the family adopted by the SBC in 1998. The amendment aroused strong criticism focused mainly on two concerns.

The first is balance. The newly added statement on the family is longer and more detailed than the sections on God, Jesus Christ, The Holy Spirit, and the Scriptures. BFM is intended to be a simple, condensed summary of core Biblical doctrines, leaving individuals free to apply and draw out the significance of these basic truths into more specific applications as cultural changes require. In the view of some, the new article is an "over-statement" giving unbalanced emphasis to one area above others of even greater importance.

The second criticism is that the new statement is based on deficient Biblical interpretation, adding some words not in the Scriptures, and selectively omitting other Biblical teachings on the same subject. The amendment does not make clear that the primary passage used (Ephesians 5:21-33) begins with the statement "Submit yourselves to one another." While it refers to the husband’s responsibility to love his wife, the amendment does not explain that the word for ‘love’ (agape) means an unselfish submission to another. Properly understood then, the passage also calls for equal, if not greater submission of husband to wife.

As it stands, some see the revision as a faulty expression of a one-sided male authoritarian role in marriage that is not Biblical. It seems rather to be another rendering of the hierarchical authoritarian pattern (God - man - woman - child)
popularized in the seventies and eighties by groups such as "Basic Youth Conflict Seminars."

The 1998 revision was included in BFM2000, and some see that as a weakness.

8. The narrow interpretation of the role of women in the church

BFM2000 introduces a more restrictive view of the role of women in the church. In section VI on The Church, after minimizing the statement on local church autonomy, the revision adds, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture." This is the first time a Southern Baptist statement of faith has expressed such a limited interpretation of this issue on which Baptists have always felt free to differ.

Defending the new statement, the committee claims, "The Bible is clear in presenting the office of pastor as restricted to men. There is no Biblical precedent for a woman in the pastorate, and the Bible teaches that women should not teach in authority over men" (Baptist Standard Internet report, November 11, 2000, p.2). Paige Patterson dismissed those who disagree with the statement by saying, "The problem is they have to argue with God, not with us."

Such language gives the impression that those who framed BFM2000 believe their interpretation is the only orthodox one. It cavalierly dismisses the viewpoints of other equally conservative, equally pious interpreters who have an equally
high view of the authority of the Bible

For example, other conservative interpreters believe the passage in I Tim.1:8-15 which is usually translated "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent," is actually a prohibition not against all women, but against a wife exerting authority over her husband in the church. They believe the passage is intended to protect the marriage relationship, not to limit a woman’s leadership role in the church.

Similarly, in I Cor. 14:34, "The women should keep silence in the churches," the word "silence" used here means "be silent in this one instance." In verse 30, the same word is used for men who are to keep silent when another is speaking. Some conservative believe the passage means wives are not to correct their husbands publicly in church. This is Paul’s way of preserving the marriage relationship.

In I Cor.11: 2-9 Paul acknowledges that women are to "pray and prophesy" in church, but he admonishes them to do so in proper apparel or with proper hair styles.

Surely these alternate conservative interpretations of these passages should not be prohibited.

A recent article in Christianity Today (September 4, 2000, p. 105) reminds the revisors of BFM that denominations like The Church of the Nazarene, Church of God, Evangelical Friends, Free Methodists, The Salvation Army, and The Wesleyan Church all take their Bibles seriously, but they all share a long heritage of women pastors and preachers. They base their view on
careful exegesis of the Scriptures. The article further points out that James Dobson’s grandmother was the "primary pastor" of a local church, that Focus on the Family’s position allows women ministers (Same Article, p. 107).

In the light of these varied conservative interpretations, the revisors of BFM2000 should in all humility admit that theirs is not the only legitimate view. Other conservative, evangelical, Biblical positions on the role of women in the church are equally permissible. Contrary to some defenders of BFM2000, there is no "clear" statement in the Scriptures prohibiting women from serving in any office of the church.

An editor of Christianity Today, after acknowledging that the view expressed in BFM2000 restricting the role of women in the church is in line with Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic doctrines on the priesthood, warns:

Elevating this matter to the level of confessional status seems to us an unnecessary departure from the historic Baptist traditions: no previous Baptist confession has spoken to this matter directly. … Clearly some SBC critics fear that the revised statement will become a litmus test. "Instead of building a consensus statement, they are using it as a club to drive out people they disagree with," one SBC leader said (August 7, 2000).

Curiously, no parallel prohibition was included in BFM2000 against the ordination of women to be deacons, although the New Testament names the diaconate along with the pastorate as an office of the church.
9. The "Pandora’s Box" concern: a fear of repeated future revisions to include favorite opinions.

Another source of dismay about BFM2000 has been labeled "the Pandora’s box" concern. Those who believe BFM63 did not need to change, worry about the recent trend of frequent revisions, tightening up the confession of faith with more details. Believing "Pandora’s Box" has been opened, they wonder "What’s next?"

In the past, traditional Baptists have allowed and even encouraged diversity of opinions on secondary theological issues not considered core Biblical doctrines. Within the broad parameters of BFM63, teachers, theologians, and denominational leaders, led by the Spirit, were free to hold varied interpretations on such issues as women in ministry, Calvinism, worship styles, millennial views, the nature of Biblical inerrancy, and church-state relations.

According to one evangelical writer, confessions serve better when they focus more strongly on the central affirmations of the Christian faith, the faith once delivered to the saints. Confessions not only err by being too loosely constructed, they also err by being too tightly drawn. We must remember we are called to preserve the peace and unity of the church as well as its purity (Christianity Today, cited above).

Kentucky Baptist Leader, S.M. Noel, said in 1826 about confessions: "They should be large enough to meet the exigencies of the church by preserving her while in the wilderness, exposed to trials, in
peace, purity, and loyalty. And they should be small enough to find a lodgment in the heart of the weakest lamb, sound in the faith" (Christianity Today, cited above).

In a similar vein, Baptist theologian, Roger Olson, offers a useful analysis of theological categories (The Story of Christian Theology, Intervarsity Press, 1999, p. 17). He says Christian beliefs through the years can be grouped into three levels:

(1) Dogmas – the great essential Christian convictions about the trinity, incarnation, creation, sola scriptura, et.al. These define the essence of Christian belief and are worthy of serious and heated defense.
(2) Doctrines – denominational distinctives such as immersion of believers, once saved always saved, congregational church government. These are crucial, but those who hold them would not denounce those who don’t as unchristian.
(3) Opinions – such as details of events surrounding the second coming of Christ, worship styles, the exact nature of angels, and dates for creation. Protestant reformers labeled this category adiaphora, from a latin term for "things that don’t matter very much." One might include in this level some features of Calvinism and various views about women in ministry. Baptists have always allowed differences in this area of opinions.

Olson suggests that believers get in trouble when they try to elevate "opinions" to the level of doctrine or dogma.

Given the legalistic tendency of ultra-conservatives to impose narrow doctrinal
interpretations, some fear there is a danger, even a likelihood, that other hard-line opinions will soon be added as future SBC committees keep tinkering with the statement. One can understand the anxiety on the part of Bible-believing conservative teachers whose careers are in the hands of powerful and often unpredictable hardliners.

Remember, one of the new SBC leaders who had a major influence in revising the BFM2000 said, "If we say ‘pickles have souls.’ then the seminaries must teach that pickles have souls" (Fort Worth Star Telegram October, 1998). What will the next round of revisions bring? This is one reason some Baptist bodies are refusing to adopt BFM2000, preferring to stay with BFM63.

10. The trend toward including a catalogue of specific sins

As stated above, BFM is intended to be a simple, condensed summary of core Biblical doctrines, leaving individuals free to apply and draw out the significance of these basic truths into more specific applications as cultural changes require. This is why the BFM63 was reluctant to list specific sins to be opposed, focusing instead on general concepts (greed, selfishness, vice). To list, as the revised statement does, a specific catalogue of contemporary sins will soon draw objections from others who want their list of sins included also, ad infinitum. Critics of BFM2000 see this as a weakness.

11. The false accusation of neo-orthodoxy
BFM2000 dropped the term "record of revelation" from Section I on the Scriptures, explaining that the term is an example of "fuzzy, neo-orthodox-sounding language." By this, they mean that those who call the Bible a "record" of revelation are thereby diminishing its authority. While it is true that the Bible is a revelation from God, it is also true that it is a record of God’s revelation. This is a valid evangelical and Baptist idea – not a term belonging exclusively to the neo-orthodox movement.

Critics of BFM2000 defend the term. They say that describing the Bible as a record of revelation helps clarify the fact that revelation came through God’s mighty acts and words in the history of Israel and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the supreme revelation of Himself to humanity. The Bible shares in that revelation, but it is, first of all, an inspired record of that divine revelation. They believe the term "record" belongs in BFM.

12. Inconsistency

Finally, a relatively minor criticism is raised about inconsistencies in BFM2000. In their introduction and defense of the new revisions, the committee declares the need to boldly challenge a hostile culture with a new announcement of Christian convictions, yet revisors seem to have yielded to that "hostile culture" by weakening the statement in Section VIII The Lord’s Day. The strong, traditional language of BFM63 calls on believers to refrain from "worldly amusements, and resting from secular employments, work of necessity and mercy only being excepted." This was replaced by
a more "liberal" accommodating suggestion in BFM2000: "Activities on the Lord’s Day should be commensurate with the Christian’s conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ." This seems to contradict the pronouncement by Adrian Rogers that the revisions were needed to offset a "pervasive secularism that has infected our society" (BCE Critique on internet newsletter, May 10, 2000).

Another inconsistency is seen in the fact that this revised wording, "Christian’s conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ," sounds very much like the freedom of individual experience under the Lordship of Jesus to which the revisors object in their removal of the Christocentric principle of hermeneutics.

Further inconsistencies are noted in the frequent references in BFM2000 to the importance of peace, Christian unity, voluntary cooperation, and harmony while at the same time moving in a more restrictive direction that creates disharmony and division.

**Conclusion**

Southern Baptists have always been and always will be what John Newport called, "constructive conservatives" in theology. However, it is easy for this constructive form of conservatism to degenerate into rigid extremism. Southern Baptists should heed the warning of J.I. Packer in the book, Power Religion. The book exposes an evangelical drift into what he calls "Carnal Conservatism" whose characteristics are telling:

1. Authoritarian styles of leadership.
2. The use of secular political strategies to organize and take control (II. Cor. 6:7, 10:3-4).
3. Fanning emotional fears by supposed conspiracy theories.
4. Government entanglements that reduce the church to nothing more than another special interest group.
5. The use of peer pressure to enforce conformity, ganging up, ostracizing, withholding rewards from those who refuse to go along.
6. The total defeat of those who disagree (which he calls an ugly denominational version of ethnic cleansing).

Several years ago, Al Mohler expressed similar concerns about the future of the SBC. Although he has been less than irenic both in the rewriting and in the defense of BFM2000, this earlier plea is worthy:

The future shape of the Convention must avoid the twin dangers of obscurantist, angry, and separatist fundamentalism on the right and revisionist compromise on the left. In between lies the evangelical option – an irenic, bold, and convictional posture which combines concern for orthodox doctrine with a spirit of engagement with the larger world and a missionary mandate (Christianity Today editorial cited above).

To these words, most Baptists would say, "Amen."