

What Contemporary Southern Baptists Can Learn from T. T. Eaton
and the Nineteenth Century Baptist Controversies

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Driving through rural Alabama last year from a preaching engagement, I noticed a sign for a small independent Baptist church off the highway. The sign promised a congregation that is independent, fundamentalist, Landmark, committed to the 1611 King James Version and to the “old songs.” Noticing that it was nearly time for the evening service, I stopped the car, hid my newfangled Bible translation under the seat, and walked in the front door. The church was about what I expected. A rack of Jack Chick tracts greeted me in the foyer. The old songs indeed were sung, with “old” meaning 1950s gospel tunes. The people were warm and welcoming, and the pastor preached the gospel—combining a strong, biblical call for repentance from sin with a welcoming offer of forgiveness through the shed blood of Jesus. Sitting in the pew, however, something caught my eye that signified how hard it is to walk in what these brothers and sisters would consider the “old paths.” What I saw was an offering envelope, with a Scripture reference on it, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.” I lived through enough Sword Drills to know that King James isn’t afraid to say the word “soweth.” The church—committed to the 1611 KJV—was receiving its offering to the Lord in an envelope bearing what the pastor would probably consider a New Age Bible translation, the New International Version. Upon further investigation, I noticed that the envelope was printed in Nashville, by our own LifeWay Christian Resources church supplies division. The church—committed to being independent—would never send its money to what they probably consider the hopelessly compromised bureaucracy of the Southern Baptist Convention, but, nonetheless, was receiving that very money in a product of said bureaucracy. I noticed the congregation turning to look at me, to see why I was staring so intently at the envelope, probably hoping I was a quirky billionaire under conviction as to how much of my fortune I should leave to the church.

It’s appropriate that an offering envelope should prompt my mind to the subject at hand, that of T. T. Eaton and the nineteenth-century Baptist tradition, since Eaton was, among other things, a pioneer of the technology of the offering envelope. Historian Ferris Jordan notes that Eaton, as pastor of the Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, devised a system of offering envelopes to prompt church members to self-

consciously set aside their giving to the cause of global missions.¹ Eaton (1845-1907) also served as a pioneer when it came to educational innovation. His father, Joseph Eaton, served as president of Union University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, while the younger Eaton taught mathematics and science at Union. T. T. Eaton served as a trustee of the Southwestern Baptist University, here in Jackson. It was due to his influence that the university in Jackson took the name and the heritage of Union University, this happening the year of Eaton's death. Union University owes much to Eaton, including the donation upon his death of his library, considered to be one of the finest in the South, a fact for which Southern Seminary is only now ready to ask forgiveness for our envy.² T. T. Eaton is not remembered primarily now for his pivotal role in the emergence of Union University, nor for his pioneering work in the field of offering envelopes, but instead for his role as denominational controversialist. Eaton served as pastor of the historic Walnut Street Baptist Church, while also serving as editor of the *Western Recorder*, the state newspaper of Kentucky Baptists. It is from this post that Eaton passed through—indeed often ignited—some of the most incendiary debates of the Southern Baptist Convention, as the denomination moved from a century of war and “Reconstruction” to the twentieth century, and its promise of progress.

Eaton's controversies are not in the past, however. Many of them still burn—and some simmer under the surface. Eaton is not a hero; nor is he a villain. He was a hell-deserving sinner, who often gave the world empirical proof of his theology of total depravity. He was also, however, a man of the church—who, in the words of William F. Buckley in another context—stood athwart history, yelling, “Stop,” with a Bible in his hands. Contemporary Southern Baptists stand much where Eaton stood—a new century is before us. A civil war is behind us—not a national conflict but a denominational one, and as with Eaton's South it is not really as behind us as we choose to think. In many ways, being Baptist means controversy, and always has (that's why the Landmarkers call it the Trail of *Blood*). So what can we learn from Eaton's life in the middle of Baptist controversy?

Eaton and the Recovery of Baptist Identity

When T. T. Eaton was felled by the heart attack that would kill him at a train station in 1907, his first response was to cry out not “Is there a doctor in the house?” and not “Are there any Christians here?” It was instead, “Are there any Baptists here?”³ That's fitting for a man who spent his life arguing for the perpetuity of Baptist churches from the Jordan River to the present day and for the local church, the local Baptist church, as the meaning of “church” in the New Testament. Strongly influenced by Landmark leaders such

¹C. Ferris Jordan, “Thomas Treadwell Eaton: Pastor, Editor, Controversialist, and Denominational Servant” (Th.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1965), 69.

²James Alex Baggett, *So Great a Cloud of Witnesses: Union University 1823-2000* (Jackson: Union University Press, 2000), 83.

³B. T. Kimbrough, *The History of the Walnut Street Baptist Church* (Louisville: Walnut Street Baptist Church, 1949), 167.

as J. M. Pendleton—also a Union University professor—Eaton did hold to the perpetuity of Baptist churches from the apostles until the present day. This is why he led the charge against the views of William Whitsitt, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, when Whitsitt wrote that Baptist churches discovered immersion in 1641 and that, perhaps even more jarring, Roger Williams, the celebrated American Baptist founder, was probably “baptized” by affusion. As Eaton wrote at the time, he believed that Baptists discovered immersion in A.D. 30 and have practiced ever since.

Eaton did not believe in the perpetuity of Baptist churches for historical reasons—nor did he seek to buttress his argument historically. He didn’t trace a “trail of blood” from the first century to the present day. Indeed he believed that such a project was dangerous to the faith. As Eaton put it in the *Western Recorder*: “For our part, we think Baptists have reason to be grateful to the Holy Spirit that the succession has not been accurately kept. If it had, tradition would have the same power over Baptists as it has over Catholicism. If the church at Jerusalem had continued in an unbroken line to this day, instead of going straight to the New Testament, as we ought to do, we should be inquiring anxiously what the Jerusalem church taught about it.”⁴ Eaton believed that since Jesus promised that the “gates of hell” would not prevail against his church and since the Lord’s Supper is given as an ongoing proclamation “till I come,” then one must infer that there were churches, rightly ordered, in every generation. Eaton was surprised that there would be controversy over such a notion: “We take it that no Baptist is opposed to others being Baptist, no matter in what age of the world they might have lived,” he wrote. “We do not see how a man can be a Baptist and be opposed to the existence of Baptists in all ages.”⁵ Responding to Whitsitt’s citation of a historian who knew of no immersions in England before 1641, Eaton simply responded, “Elijah was certainly a better witness as to Israel than was this unknown writer as to England; and Elijah said there were no true worshippers in Israel, while God said there were ‘seven thousand.’”⁶ Nor did Eaton believe in succession—that is an unbroken chain of Baptist churches, with each congregation giving birth to another. He simply believed that somewhere at any given time since the ascension of Jesus, there was a body of regenerate believers, practicing biblical baptism, church membership, and the Lord’s Supper—and preaching the authentic gospel of grace.

For some contemporary Southern Baptists, the Landmark debates seem irrelevant—because Landmarkism seems so far away. Most of us do not hold to Eaton’s view of perpetuity or to the more traditional successionist view—and I reject both as well. But often we think of Landmarkism as patently ridiculous, completely unreasonable, as though Landmarkers held that somewhere in the medieval world there were Acteans, or perhaps a Centrifuge somewhere in the pre-Reformation Alps. On the other hand, some contemporary Baptists see Landmarkers everywhere, identifying as Landmarkism doctrines that almost

⁴T. T. Eaton, “Editorial,” *Western Recorder*, 7 May 1896, 8.

⁵T. T. Eaton, “Editorial,” *Western Recorder*, 21 January 1897, 8.

⁶T. T. Eaton, “Preface,” in John T. Christian, *Did They Dip...or...An Examination into the Act of Baptism by the English and American Baptists before the Year 1941*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1896), 11.

everyone on either side of the nineteenth century arguments would have agreed—such as the idea that Jesus was, in fact, immersed by John or that baptism is a prerequisite to the Lord’s table and church membership or that baptism is a church ordinance and not simply an individual profession of faith. We need to ask not only what Landmarkers and their critics believed, but why. At the center of the nineteenth-century Baptist concern was a conviction that the ordinances matter. Eaton offered a thousand dollars to anyone who could find an example of *baptizo* in any Greek text, biblical or non-biblical, that meant anything other than immerse.⁷ Moreover, he—like almost all Baptists of his day—believed that baptism was a pronouncement not just of the individual but also of the church itself. This is why he rejected, along with most other Baptists, the immersions of individuals baptized in Campbellite churches in which the baptism is seen as part of the salvation of the believer or in paedobaptist churches in which the immersion is a condescension to the individual preference or conscience of the candidate, rather than the testimony of the church to the witness of baptism to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and the unity of believers in Him.

Eaton was wrong on perpetuity, I think—although I can cooperate cheerfully with those who agree with him—but he, and his interlocutors, understood that the relationship between the church and salvation, the church and the ordinances in obedience to Christ were not minor issues, the equivalent of debates between pre- and post-tribulational Rapture views. If we are to be Baptists, and not just a collection of community churches (SBC), we must recover baptism and church membership. Yes, this means restricting church membership to those who have been baptized. This means explaining to those visiting our churches that we invite only baptized believers to the table—just as does every other major wing of Christianity—and then explaining what we believe baptism to be. This means recovering the gravity of baptism. Rather than walking out into the water with a candidate and explaining what we don’t believe about the ordinance, we instead should be pointing to the fact that this is a proclamation—to the individual, to the church, to the world, to the principalities and powers that accuse him—that we believe this person is crucified with Christ, buried with him, raised in union with Him, seated in the heavenly places. When baptism is that defining, that significant, one does not simply joke about the temperature of the water and then slosh the candidate in and out.

It also means recovering the Lord’s Supper. Why do we take the joyous victory feast our Lord has given us—that points to his coming messianic banquet in celebration of the defeat of all of his enemies—and turn it into a funereal drudgery in which we chew tiny bits of what seem to be Styrofoam and cough back shot glasses of juice, while scrunching up our faces and trying to feel sorry for Jesus? Jesus doesn’t want you to feel sorry for Him; through His Supper he is giving a victory party in advance, and declaring that you’re invited.

The recovery of Baptist identity means that we must take seriously what all sides of the Landmark controversies understood—that being Baptist means a regenerate church

⁷T. T. Eaton, “Preface,” in J. M. Martin, *The Little Baptist*, new ed. (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1904), 4.

membership. If church membership is a declaration of the church of a credible profession of faith, then the persistence on our church rolls of so many who do not attend or who openly reject the faith is not just a scandal to the gospel, it is anti-evangelism. We would not go door-to-door announcing to whoever opens the door, “Congratulations, you’re going to heaven.” But we do the exact same thing when we count as members those who do not, in the words of the apostle John, love the brethren. The admonition in Hebrews to “forsake not the assembling of yourselves together” (Heb 10:25-31) is not an encouragement, a helpful slogan for Friend Day. It is a warning passage. Just as there is not a Greek word for infant baptism, there is not a Greek word for inactive member. Yes, there are some churches that handle discipline badly. Some separate baptism virtually endlessly from profession of faith. We all know of the churches whose pastors “purge the rolls” without ever leading the congregation in this direction—perhaps just sending a letter to members who haven’t attended in a year with “expel the fornicator from among you” across the top of the page. Discipline is not given to pastors, but to congregations—and congregations must be led by pastors to hear the whole counsel of God on this. Otherwise, the debate will not be over whether there were any Baptist churches in the Europe of the tenth century, but whether there are any Baptist churches in the Alabama of the twenty-first.

Moreover, Eaton was concerned about a loss not just of the ordinances or of biblical membership, but also of love for the church itself. Many scholars locate the tension between Eaton and Whitsitt not first to the historical controversy that cost Whitsitt his presidency, but to their conflict over such parachurch organizations as the Baptist Young People’s Union and Woman’s Missionary unions—organizations Eaton believed would replace the primacy of the church. Again, Eaton was wrong about BYPU. Training Union actually helped preserve Baptist identity through the twentieth century, and we are impoverished by its loss. But Eaton’s fear was not wholly unfounded. Baptist identity has indeed plummeted as American culture has embraced a hyper-Protestant individualism, in which parachurch organizations often take the place of the churches in instruction, discipleship, even community. This is increased by the vast array of parachurch organizations—often out of necessity, in flight from apostate denominations—that came with the post-war evangelical movement.

When Southern Baptist liberal Foy Valentine famously said that “evangelical is a Yankee word,” he was referring to more than just Mason-Dixon Line tensions. He feared the rootlessness, the churchlessness of a parachurch world that is accountable more to a donor base than to the churches to which Jesus has given all authority in heaven and on earth. More and more of the students at our seminaries—not just mine—are saved in campus ministries on secular college campuses and more and more of them are discipled by parachurch campus ministries. For this, I praise God for the evangelistic and teaching zeal of these ministries. But why are so few of our young people being called to ministry because of the example of a godly pastor? Why do so few of our young Christians point to their churches as the place where they first grasped the awe and mystery of Christ? There are exceptions, but they are far too few. The decline of Baptist identity is not the fault of Joyce Meyer or Joel Osteen, Wheaton or Colorado Springs. It is the fault of local congregations who refuse to teach and mentor. If more churches taught Titus 2 women’s discipleship, there would be less need for Beth Moore DVDs. If more churches taught men

to keep their promises, there would be less need to rent stadiums. If more pastors preached the Bible with passion and insight, if more churches actually crusaded for Christ on the campuses in their community, there would be less need for Campus Crusade for Christ.

Eaton and the Recovery of Evangelistic Confessionalism

Ironically, T. T. Eaton, despite all of his conviction, could hold to a covenant theology that would put the Westminster Confession to shame. In a book advising fathers about looking for suitors for their daughters to marry, Eaton advised that the father and the young woman look for “good blood.” In this bizarre case of Baptist eugenics, Eaton argued that one should look for good stock, not of wealth or ability, but of one who has “the longest line of pure and upright forefathers.” As Eaton put it, “That man has the best blood in his veins who comes of a race of men and women who have been alike stainless in purity and inflexible in truth and honesty.” He wrote: “Bad training is more easily overcome than bad blood. It is far more important that people should be thoroughbred than that horses should be so. The laws of heredity are no mere theories, they are laws of nature, inexorable as death and sternly enforced to the third and fourth generations.”⁸ One must wonder whether the pagan ancestry of Abram or the pharisaical forefathers of Saul, not to mention the Gentiles of Ephesus and Galatia, would be considered “thoroughbreds.”

Despite this anomaly, Eaton combined a rigorous theology with a confrontational zeal for world missions and personal evangelism. He argued for verbal inspiration and biblical inerrancy, seeing the winds of Darwinism and German higher-criticism heading for the South. Eaton challenged the liberal scholars, in light of the view that the truth of the Bible is “so mingled with the wrong and the crude notions of those times, that only a twentieth century critic can distinguish the true from the false” to “eliminate all they regard as false from the scripture and add such things as have been inspired since the canon closed, so as to furnish an up-to-date Bible.”⁹ One can only wonder if a Jesus Seminar participant dug up this statement in some Baptist archive, and then attempted to take Brother Eaton up on his challenge.

Eaton was a Calvinist, who along with his sister, (in the words of one observer) revered the Philadelphia Confession next to the Bible itself¹⁰ and who said, “I believe with Spurgeon that the Bible is soaked through and through with Calvinism, and take that out and you have very little of the Scriptures left.”¹¹ But, like Spurgeon, Eaton did not abstract his view of God’s sovereignty or of individual election from the context of the

⁸T. T. Eaton, *Talks on Getting Married*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1906), 37.

⁹T. T. Eaton, *Faith and the Faith* (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1906), 66-67.

¹⁰This observation came from the unedited typescript that was later published as the edited *Memoirs of John R. Sampey*. John R. Sampey, “Persons and Institutions I Have Loved: Memoirs of John R. Sampey,” vol. 1, Archives and Special Collections, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, p. 7.

¹¹As quoted in Jordan, “Thomas Treadwell Eaton,” 41.

Great Commission. Theology was not a hobby for Eaton or for his nineteenth century contemporaries, nor was it a quest for partisan identity. The theology fueled the mission, and the mission fueled the quest to know God. Despite all the flaws of T. T. Eaton, there is something that crackles with Book of Acts fervor when one reads a letter from the great Southern Baptist theologian James P. Boyce telling his colleague John Broadus in a letter that Eaton “objected to my speaking last Sunday because he was to take up Foreign Missions Collection, but agreed to my having next Sunday morning.”¹² There’s something to be learned here by contemporary Southern Baptists, including in our debates over Calvinism.

There is room for a variety of views within the Southern Baptist Convention on how divine sovereignty relates to human responsibility and freedom. As a weird hybrid—who believes in personal election and in a universal atonement; who wants both the best of theological rigor and revivalism—I hope both sides win, but in different ways. There would be fewer objections to the so-called “doctrines of grace” in our congregations, if more Calvinist pastors spoke of election not in the abstract, but the way the apostle Paul speaks of it, to destroy human pride, to grant assurance, and to fuel our people to understand that there are no people groups or individuals who cannot be reached by the Gospel, so therefore we must press the free offer on all of them. I wonder how many church members would be less inclined to fear the doctrine of election if they heard from a pastor they love and trust that election isn’t about memorizing a catechism or joining an interest group; it’s simply the words of “Victory in Jesus”: “He sought me and bought me with his redeeming blood.” I suspect a less abstract preaching of the biblical doctrine of election would result in more Calvinists in the SBC, not just among seminary students, but among pulpwood haulers and kindergarten teachers too. I think Eaton would ask his fellow Calvinist pastors to preach John 3:16 *and* 1 John 2:2—and there are many who do—sing “Just As I Am,” and cancel the guest theologian one week in order to rally your people to take up a missions offering—even if the guest theologian is James P. Boyce.

At the same time, if more non-Calvinist pastors would preach how the Bible fits together, they would present a compelling vision of God’s purposes that answers the deep questions of this and every age. If they would present a vision of a sovereign God and the purpose of history and of individual lives in their pulpits, there would be more non-Calvinists among the younger generation of Southern Baptists. There are many young people in this Convention who do not believe in unconditional election and who don’t see how Calvinism fits with the free offer of the Gospel. If they hear a compelling alternative from pastors they respect not just emotionally but intellectually, if they see missions not just as being part of a good program but part of a vast global outworking of God’s purposes from their non-Calvinist pastors, they will listen. A good example of serious-minded, theologically rigorous Arminianism is to be found at the Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville. The first time the president, Matthew Pinson, and I met I sensed an immediate kinship. He is wrong, I think, on apostasy and libertarian freedom and conditional election,

¹²James P. Boyce, letter to John Broadus, 23 December 1887, Broadus Papers, Archives and Special Collections, James P. Boyce Centennial Library, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

but our differences are subsumed by a common vision of ecclesial renewal and biblical literacy. And no one could accuse him or his faculty of being “man-centered” in their theology. In chapel, they sing the great old hymns of the faith right along with contemporary hymns from, of all things, the Sovereign Grace church movement of C. J. Mahaney. Pinson told me he agrees with almost all the lyrics of these songs, precisely because they exalt the grace of God in Christ. “Besides,” he said. “No one writes apostasy hymns.” I suspect if there were more SBC non-Calvinist pastors like Pinson (but without the apostasy stance, of course), they would gain a hearing among Baptists young and old.

Eaton held to a robust theology, but he was not afraid of impassioned, persuasive, invitational preaching. Take, for instance, this plea in his book to children: “What will be your fate, little boy? Little girl? It is for you to decide. No friend can get salvation for you; no enemy can prevent your being saved. You can and must decide for yourself, and decide ere the blast of death comes to take you away. Many of you will never see the summer of manhood, and many more will not come to the autumn of old age. When you do fade as a leaf, how will it be with you?”¹³

Eaton understood too that theology is not an intellectual exercise, nor is it the terrain of adults. Theology has everything to do with children. Eaton, one of the most recognized preachers and writers in the Convention, wrote a book for children. This was not a hyper-propositional catechism, nor was it a handbook of moralism. Eaton argued that anecdotes followed by Aesop’s fable-style moral truths were not the means of conforming our children to Christ. His *Talks to Children* keep the narrative flow of the text. They engage what Russell Kirk called the moral imagination. They sought to show how every passage points to Christ. They dealt with the whole counsel of God: a children’s lesson on the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter! And they grappled honestly with issues of sin, atonement, damnation, and reconciliation. To children, mind you, Eaton wrote the following words: “Wicked men do not like to be told of their wickedness and to be asked to become good. They like to be praised and to be told what fine fellows they are. They do not like to be told how angry God is with the wicked and what terrible punishments are coming upon them. They prefer to hear pleasant things. Many people in this day are angry when preachers talk of their wickedness and tell them of the awful punishment in hell those must suffer who refuse to repent of their sins. They wish preachers to say nothing about such disagreeable things, but to tell how beautiful heaven is, as if it made any difference to a man who will not repent whether heaven is beautiful or not.”¹⁴

Our forebears were often just as pitiful as we are at children’s evangelism—see some of the maudlin, sappy children’s novels of the nineteenth century. But Eaton seemed to understand what we must grasp, that a *Veggie Tales* gospel cannot save. The message of the Bible is not “David was courageous; you be courageous” or “Noah cared for pets; you care for pets.” The message of the whole Bible is the gospel of Jesus Christ. We teach our children to think of their forerunners in the faith, the types of Christ Himself, as cartoon

¹³T. T. Eaton, *Talks to Children* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1887), 184-85.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 133-34.

vegetables, and we wonder why we lose them in high school if they don't like youth camps, and in college, if they do. What children, and all persons made in the image of God are aware of is that something is not right, with the cosmos, with themselves. They need, like all of us, to understand what this cosmic conspiracy is all about, what the mystery of all existence is, that the point of everything isn't a "What" but a "Who." If we send our children to hell with kept True Love Waits cards; if we prepare them to be thrown into the outer darkness singing, "I am a C, I am a C-h, I am a C-h-r-i-s-t-i-a-n"; then we have no business calling ourselves evangelical. The conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention is not about the Evangelical Theological Society but about Vacation Bible School. This is why I would rather have a faculty member write a LifeWay Sunday school lesson which points to Jesus Christ as the pinnacle of all of Scripture, that presents clearly the Gospel to both believing and unbelieving children or teenagers, than to have him write another article for *Novum Testamentum*.

Eaton and the Recovery of Countercultural Family

The issue of gender roles and family is now a persistent point of controversy in Baptist and evangelical life. Sometimes people imagine that those emphasizing such things are really longing for a more simple time, the 1950s or even the nineteenth century when hierarchy and stability in family life were more recognized. And yet, the life of T. T. Eaton shows us that the biblical witness on the family is always controversial, and always countercultural. The Whitsitt controversy itself had something to do with Ephesians 5. Eaton charged that Whitsitt had denigrated the church by suggesting that a Baptist woman married to a paedobaptist man should attend his church since the family was of more importance than the church. Eaton argued that genuine submission stopped where a command of God was concerned, a charge that Whitsitt apologized for in the trustee minutes published in the SBC Annual.¹⁵ I suppose one can hear Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn singing, "Southern Baptist woman/ Paedobaptist man/ We get together every time we can/ The Jordan River can't keep us apart."

Despite this, Eaton was clear on male headship in the church and home. He was also clear that this headship is not one of privilege. It is not, "Woman, get me my chips" but a self-sacrificial leadership that recognizes women, as Peter does, as both heirs with you of glory and as weaker vessels. Therefore, he warned women against marrying men given to drunkenness or to unfaithfulness or to indolence, precisely because of the wrecked lives it would bring. At the same time, he called, directly, men to account for their self-serving passivity and their self-serving tyranny. He writes of being in a hotel lobby in Louisville, of a man seeing a woman's skirt at the top of the stairs, and of him screaming, "Why in the world can't you get ready sooner?" When the woman descended enough for the man to see who she was, Eaton writes, the man took off his hat and said, "I beg your pardon, madam, I thought it was my wife." Of this, Eaton writes: "Alas, alas, that a man should talk angrily to the one woman in the world who cannot help herself and must take whatever he chooses to say to her. If you have any manhood in you, and you want to talk

¹⁵*Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Atlanta: Franklin Printing and Publishing, 1897), 15.

insultingly to some woman, select one whose husband, or father, or brother can resent her wrong and protect her from your insults, rather than select the woman you have solemnly pledged yourself to love and protect, and who has confided her life to your keeping.”¹⁶

Eaton saw the issue of the dual-income household as harmful to women and to children. While recognizing that there were single mothers or those in extreme hardship situations who needed to work, Eaton lamented the loss of male responsibility to provide for wife and children. As he put it: “It is because so many of our men are worthless, that so many of our women have to earn their bread. To glory over this fact, as some apostles of ‘progress’ are doing, is to glory in our shame... It is a crying shame upon the men of any community, when any considerable proportion of the women are wage-earners.”¹⁷

I have argued elsewhere that most Southern Baptists are intellectually in favor of a complementarity of gender roles as summarized in the *Baptist Faith and Message*, but they live practically more in conformity with *Ms. Magazine* and any given script of the television comedy “Everybody Loves Raymond.” There are going to be women—especially single mothers—in our communities who due to hardship and abandonment must leave their children to work. Where are the pastors who will challenge churches to care for them, while challenging women to see the glory of motherhood and men to see that modeling provision and protection may mean doing without an extra car or living in a less desirable place, but that no Christian woman will say at the end of her life, “I just wish we had put the children in daycare”? It also means recognizing that the American economy that enables us to do so many commendable things for the sake of the Gospel, also can fuel a Mammon-slavery that can only be confronted by straight—and controversial—biblical preaching that moves beyond platitudes about happy homes to direct application that there are things more important to a man than the American Dream, and their pictures are right there in his wallet. Eaton’s example is also relevant when it comes to taking on the abuse and mistreatment of women—whether physical or emotional abuse or abandonment. Right now in America a man who divorces his wife, ends up often with a better income, a streamlined budget, and a younger trophy wife, while a woman ends up more likely in poverty and in despair. And often they are sitting on opposite sides of our churches, with no word of discipline or warning. As Eaton would remind us, this is not “progress”; it is a foretaste of hell.

The self-sacrificial leadership of men extended with Eaton, as in the Bible, to the church as the household of God as well as to the home. And, again, this was a matter of controversy then, as now. He addressed all the rebuttals one might find today from contemporary evangelical egalitarianism or cultural feminism. And, he identified, rightly I think, the root of such a flattening of male and female roles: conformity to cultural rebellion against authority. Writes Eaton: “I answer that the Scriptures are given to us for all time, that so far from changing Scripture teaching to suit the Nineteenth Century, it is

¹⁶T. T. Eaton, *Wives and Husbands* (Louisville: W.P. Harvey, n.d.), 26-27.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 4-5.

our business to change the Nineteenth Century to suit Scripture teaching.”¹⁸ Then, as always, the argument centered over 1 Timothy 2, a passage that addresses not simply who has “Reverend” in front of whose name, but who is to teach men in the context of the church. Eaton spoke directly then against the practice of women teaching Sunday school. “Let it be remembered that the New Testament teaching is really binding on women—binding on them in church, in Sunday school, everywhere—just as binding on them as on the men,” Eaton wrote. “But it is said again that some of us are inconsistent. Well, suppose we admit it, what then? Does our inconsistency change the teaching or authority of Scripture? Suppose we are inconsistent, does that authorize us to violate the divine command? If we are inconsistent, the proper thing to do is to remedy the inconsistency, and not to make that inconsistency a plea for going contrary to Scripture.”¹⁹

Contemporary Southern Baptists must address this issue. The *Baptist Faith and Message* statement on the male-only pastorate speaks to this issue because the New Testament does so in terms of teaching and of church authority. This militates against everything our culture teaches both girls and boys. The antithesis at this point will only increase. It is perhaps the gender issue more than any other that signals the collapse of Southern Baptist churches as southern culture at prayer, and that signals an opportunity to model a truly countercultural—indeed “retro-cultural”—model of community. We must be unafraid to preach what the Bible teaches here, and we must be ready to train young men to be preachers and leaders and to train women to disciple and teach women—and we had better be ready, perhaps in the near future, to find an attorney at our door, and perhaps even one day the police—when we do so.

Eaton and the Recovery of Principled Controversy

The Whitsitt controversy in Baptist life wasn’t just a contest between two ambitious and strong-headed men. Nor was it an academic debate. Eaton, after all, was Whitsitt’s pastor at Walnut Street Baptist Church. Eaton baptized Whitsitt’s wife.²⁰ On the Baptist Young People’s Union debate, Whitsitt wrote in his journal, that his wife sided with Eaton against her own husband when it came to the tactics employed.²¹ A denomination was at stake; with so many missionaries and the enormous Baptist presence in the South, in many ways the Gospel itself was at stake. This is where Eaton’s golden courage melts away into what seems to be wood, hay, and stubble. The *Western Recorder* was involved in various controversies, many of them about important matters and on many of them Eaton was right. Nonetheless, he often resorted to innuendo, albeit restrained, and he allowed his sister, Josephine Peck, to write sometimes gossipy and often bombastic pieces in the newspaper,

¹⁸T. T. Eaton, *The Bible on Women’s Public Speaking* (Louisville: Baptist Book Concern, 1895), 23-24.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰Kimbrough, *History*, 125.

²¹Charles Basil Bugg, “The Whitsitt Controversy: A Study in Denominational Conflict” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 93.

under the pseudonym of “Senex.”²² Eaton was nasty at times, but, for the most part, dealt simply with the issues involved—including in the Whitsitt controversy—and not with personal destruction.

The role of various media in Baptist controversy is a live issue at the turn of this century, as well as the turn of the last. With several very notable exceptions, state newspapers are no longer the focal point of controversy. Some have suggested that the blogosphere has replaced the terrain of the *Western Recorder* and the *Baptist Standard* when it comes to Baptist brawling and bawling. In some important respects, that’s true. It is also not as true as some of us might hope, and some of us might fear. Some Baptist bloggers speak in euphoric, revolutionary terms about the possibilities of blogging in building community, transforming the Convention, and so forth. Sometimes they speak of themselves almost as a caucus within the Convention. Southern Baptist leaders sometimes also think in the same terms, only with nervousness as to what “the bloggers” are up to. In reality, however, to paraphrase the Scripture, “they are not all bloggers who are called bloggers.” Most blogs are not the widely-read blogs saved on Bloglines accounts all over the Convention. Most consist of posts by young pastors or seminary students who are providing a forum for what they think about, for instance, a biblical text through which they are working, or how to apply the Gospel to a specific situation in their churches or lives. Even among the widely-read blogs, many of them are read specifically because of commendable content. There are others that criticize Southern Baptist leaders regularly—sometimes with good reason (Southern Baptist leaders as all leaders occasionally do stupid things), but they do so without guile or malice. Even some of the most infuriatingly catty blogs have been known to mellow, as the bloggers themselves start to spend more time pastoring churches, raising families, and writing from the overflow from that. Some bloggers move from pastoring churches of only elderly people who aren’t Internet savvy to churches in which people actually understand that Google can be a verb—and in which these people would wonder why their pastor is sitting in a Starbucks in the middle of the day commenting endlessly about whether Bono is a five-point Calvinist or whether Barack Obama is the one to come or should we wait for another or whether Rick Warren is the False Prophet of Revelation 13. There’s nothing venal there. The blogs, in this case, serve the function of a seminary cafeteria conversation. I am glad that the blog option didn’t exist when I was at New Orleans Seminary in the mid-1990s, because I know exactly how viciously I would have lobbed criticisms at chapel speakers, late registration fees, and so forth. I did the same thing on the telephone and in hallway conversations that I might have done with a Blogspot account.

The difference between the blogosphere and the nineteenth century Baptist world is one of accountability and responsibility. T. T. Eaton was restrained in his attacks against Whitsitt at the personal level, precisely because he had something to lose. In order to have a voice, he had to have subscribers. Churches had to continue to support the newspaper. A board of trustees would hold him to account, and over-the-edge gossip or character assassination would have ruined him. Like the state papers, the blogosphere can be an arena for every manner of sin, but the blogosphere brings with it unique temptations related

²²John R. Sampey, *Memoirs of John R. Sampey* (Nashville: Broadman, 1947), 79-80.

to the immateriality of the Internet, the immediacy of the potential writings and response, and the Darwinian nature of the competition (the one with the most gossip or the most hateful rhetoric gets the most hits, both from the gossip-loving fans and from train-wreck observing onlookers). Most blogs are able to avoid this, precisely because the bloggers themselves see their primary accountability to their flesh-and-blood families and churches and communities. The rules of the blogosphere in denominational controversy ought to reflect the warning of the apostle Paul: “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal 5:15 ESV). The Whitsitt controversy was bad enough; it took the Southern Baptist Convention years to recuperate, and churches and families were ripped apart. And yet, T. T. Eaton was not consumed with hatred at William Whitsitt, or vice-versa. Of course, there were impure motives and unfortunate moves, on both sides. But there was not a personal vendetta, fueled by envy or covetousness or vengeance. Right now, there are churches within the Convention with Internet sites devoted to compiling anonymous lists of grievances against the pastors and church leadership. This is already moving to smaller churches, and what a whirlwind we will reap. Whatever our disagreements about Convention leadership or entity policies or even about blogging itself, we know that the Holy Spirit is not at work in anonymous letters or hauling lost people to business meetings in churches, and we know that He is not at work in sites devoted to tearing apart with glee a man, a church, or a Convention. Within the conservative resurgence, there were occasional pugilists who came along, men who hated the leadership of the SBC more than they loved biblical inerrancy. The conservative resurgence would not have succeeded if these men and women had led the movement. Instead, the leaders were theologians such as Paige Patterson, pastors such as Adrian Rogers, men who people in the churches saw preaching the Bible, evangelizing the lost, shepherding churches, and living lives. They didn’t do so perfectly, but they weren’t the point. The people listened to them because they were believed to be men of God. They were not a coalition of everyone who had a grievance against Cecil Sherman.

The blogosphere is a perfectly acceptable place to discuss important issues—just as the state papers were the place for Eaton and Whitsitt to discuss Baptist origins and Baptist identity. We can debate, for example, whether or not the International Mission Board ought to have any policy at all on charismatic revelatory manifestations. If the churches want the SBC to move toward neo-Pentecostalism, that’s what will happen. If not, it won’t. We can survive the debate. What we cannot survive is a Baptist semi-cessationism, one that claims all the gifts of the Spirit are still operative, but the fruits of the Spirit ceased with the apostolic age.

Conclusion

T. T. Eaton was right about many things, and wrong about some others. But I am still drawn to the offering envelopes. Before I knew about T. T. Eaton’s role in the pioneering of the offering envelope, I found an old offering envelope, in a Bible I hadn’t used since high school. It was written on, I would like to say with diagrams of the last days or lists of the kings of Israel, but it had tic-tac-toe games and questions back-and-forth with a friend about who was cuter, Melanie or Angel, in our home church youth group. On the other side was the logo of my church, Woolmarket Baptist, and the opportunity to give to

all the things that made us Baptists. I thought of that offering envelope when I read recently Eaton's words to children, pleading with them to give up some candy or a toy to send money for the evangelization of the Heathen. He wrote: "I haven't time to tell you of all the ways they suffer, about which you know nothing, but they lead hard, suffering, lives. The only thing which can make them happier in this world, is to teach them to trust Jesus and to love God. And that will not only make them happier here, but will make them happy in heaven. It will make little difference to them if they can be saved, how hungry and sick and poor and suffering they were in this world. And you can send them the Gospel if you will."²³

That offering envelope I saved tells me a great deal about me, for better or for worse. The handwritten side reminds me that I'm human and fallen and frail. I'm able to write about nonsense while a man of God preaches of Christ and redemption and mercy. The other side reminds me that I'm a Baptist, and that I'm a part of a people who are human and fallen and frail. The offering envelope reveals something of our denominational braggadocio, something of the way we can make a program even out of reading the Bible. But it also reveals a people who, like Eaton before them, believe the Bible when it warns of hell, who believe the Father when he says He loves the world, who believe Jesus when he says to baptize the nations, and who believe the Holy Spirit when He says He will protect the church of Jesus—even from Baptists like us.

²³Eaton, *Talks to Children*, 59-60.