

G. C. Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention? A Memoir of the Controversy* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993) 378 pp.

The 14.5 million Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) began in the shadow of looming civil war. In the 1980s SBC had its own civil war: 'conservatives' versus 'moderates'. The Southern Baptists have always been a conservative denomination? Why this lurch even further to the right?

Grady Cothen is well positioned to answer the question. His years of deep SBC involvement included service as a seminary president, and as president of the Baptist Sunday School Board.

According to Cothen, two men, Paul Pressler, an appeals court judge, and Paige Patterson, president of the Criswell Centre for Biblical Studies, mastered a takeover of SBC. They noted that the SBC president appoints the Committee on Committees. This committee nominates the Committee on Boards. This latter committee nominates the personnel of all the SBC agency boards. A president of a certain persuasion could use this power to stack all appointments with trustees of the same persuasion. Pressler and Patterson wanted a fundamentalist denomination.

Through Pressler's lobbying the election for SBC president became extremely politicised, to the point of organising the bussing in of delegates to support conservative voting. After 1979 each president was fundamentalist, holding to the inerrancy of Scripture. Pressler was ruthless: he acknowledged that 'conservatives' are "going for the jugular" in their campaign to get control of Southern Baptist institutions. After 1979 Baptists holding to the authority of Scripture could not gain nomination to boards unless they were also inerrantists. The right wing nature of the change was signaled in 1986 when Patterson argued that the hiring of SBC employees must be tied to their position not only on abortion, euthanasia, and school prayer, but even on federal budget reduction! However, the main issue was inerrancy.

Ironically, the *Criswell Study Bible* of 1979, based on inerrantist views of Scripture, and produced by Patterson as managing editor, says that the Egyptian rods (Exod 7.12) were really

snakes, and that the River Nile did not really turn to blood (Exod 7.17-19) but only appeared to do so. Major numerical discrepancies between 1 Chron 19.18 and 2 Sam 10.18 were explained as rounded numbers, and 'transcriptional inadvertency'. All this from an inerrantist, anathematizing non-inerrantists!

Cothen includes a powerful article by a non-Christian reviewing the controversy. She notes that battle-lines were being drawn over fundamentalism, but that Christian fundamentals relate to trust, love and restoration. She asks 'How does a God of love fit into this kind of push-and-shove theology?' and suggests that 'the fundamentalists are more into rules, regulations, anger, and judgment than the basics of the first four books of the New Testament - in any translation.'

Cothen's book must be read cautiously, because it reflects one side's point of view. However, there are sufficient source details for its main presentation to be credible. At times one wants more background detail, e.g. why did the Criswell Centre later want to dismiss Patterson (was he not conservative enough)? However, we cannot expect more from something claiming only to be a memoir.

The book made me want to read more. What do the other side say? What has happened since 1993? It is a gripping but tragic story. Cothen ends his story with these words, 'Out of my dim literary memory there arises the story of a man who burned down his house to roast a pig. The metaphor seems appropriate to what has happened in the SBC.'

Laurie Guy

## Notices

The following historical information is sought:

**J.K. Archer:** any photographs and letters which may be used for the purposes of a biography.

**Harry Jones:** does anyone know the whereabouts of the diaries of this important N.Z.B.M.S missionary?

The editor would be pleased to receive any responses.