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Love of the Law: The Ethical Christology of Southern Baptist Rhetoric and Language Concerning the
LGBTQ Community

By

Alexander James Ward

Love of the Law: The Ethical Christology of Southern Baptist Rhetoric and Language Concerning the LGBTQ Community The Rural, Religious South

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

The connection between society and a group is a complex and often tangled relationship. The division between the two can be blurred in many cases and therefore the movement of individuals within a particular group within a larger society is something that cannot always be immediately apparent. However, group identity and personal identity play an integral role in understanding how movement and action occur by individuals as they attempt to make sense of culture and its connection to their personal identity. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and its members are no different. This Protestant denomination is one of the most politically vocal and is intensely involved in attempts to shape and mold culture so as to build the Kingdom of God. In particular, their response to a growing acceptance in the culture towards same-sex marriage and its legalization by the Supreme Court of the United States influences how they interact with members of the LGBTQ community. By examining their writings and the writings of leaders within the SBC, it will be shown that there is a shift in rhetoric that has occurred but which continues to uphold the same ethical and moral core, the person of Jesus Christ, that has always characterized the Southern Baptist Convention and its affiliates, such as the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC).

This study will explore three questions. The first is that of hermeneutics: *What are the hermeneutical lenses employed by individuals with regard to the integration of their theology with their political and practical life?* This issue is one that grounds all other questions for my research. This foundation is necessary because I believe that there is a need for a “thick description¹” of actions, as explained by Clifford Geertz. Geertz’s example of a twitch and wink is the perfect example for the importance of context and situational factors. The context determines if these identical eye movements are intentional or an aberration. In the same way, it is only by examining the context of the Southern Baptist Convention (theological, social, historical, political, etc.) that we are able to understand the ways in which its actions are not aberrations to its environment, but rather the natural response of the individual and denomination². Therefore, this question can be stated another way: *How do social, theological, political, and historical (among other) factors affect the responses of individuals and denominations to those communities of marginalized individuals around them?* I specifically highlight the interaction of these lenses with “communities of marginalized individuals” because of the present effect that all decisions of action, inaction, or reaction have for those who exist not only within the group but especially for those outside of it due to differences in location, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, or political affiliation.

The second set of questions is one grouped under the umbrella of moral logics. Specifically, *How do the moral cores of individuals affect the ways in which group identity is*

¹ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.

² Arthur Emery Farnsley II, “The New Southern Baptist Democracies” in *Southern Baptist Politics: Authority and Power in the Restructuring of an American Denomination*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 113.

constructed and maintained while also allowing for a level of difference within the community?

By this is meant specifically, the ways in which the social cohesion of a group is tied to a shared sense of belief or a particular worldview. A level of differentiation is common to all individuals because of different experiences and other factors. However, for any cooperative or group dynamic to exist, a group must exist. Without a shared core of some belief, or commitment to some principle, a group cannot exist. Even if such a group were possible, the ability to be a member would be dominated by a belief that membership was the ability to interact with differences and a commitment to the lack of boundaries for the group. In my own research, this line of questioning has led me to construct a theory for individual identity that uses the analogy of the tree as an explanation for the ways in which the individual is able to incorporate the sense of shared identity with the group while maintaining a sense of personal individuality. It also accounts for the difference that demarcate the individual from the others within the community based on minor differences deemed tolerable.

Each of these questions guiding my research is truly a question of interpretation broadly defined. This question of interpretation looks at how individuals understand their faith in relation to others both inside and outside the fold. Further, it attempts to make sense of denominations attempts to do the same while also explaining the reason behind actions on the part of denominations. How the Southern Baptist Convention defines itself relationally to those both within and outside the denomination is of importance to answering each of these broad categories of questions. Therefore, as this study continues, the question of interpretation must be understood to be the primary guiding question for all other questions.

The Southern Baptist Convention is active at the national level both internally and with the world beyond the denomination. Therefore, my study focused on both the resolutions passed by the National Convention as well as the online resources of the diverse committees within the denomination. Specifically, I chose to look at the writings of the Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention that is tasked with “protect[ing] the stability of marriage and family from cultural shifts like divorce and homosexuality³.” This particular group is one of the many committees within the SBC that is tasked with engaging the culture and equipping local churches to do the same. However, it stands above others on a national level because of its influence as the committee with the most breadth and depth of engagement and interaction with churches. Therefore, my study will draw on both the written scholarship and the legislative writing of these churches. Through an examination of each of these groups of writings, it will be shown that the language used by the Southern Baptist Convention is indicative of the moral nature of their conception of Christ and the ethic that He brought in to the world

Having given foundation for the questions and research methods that form the basis of my research, I feel it necessary to define several important terms and concepts that will frequent this study. These terms frequently appear in the literature often in different ways depending on who has chosen to use it. Further, when used by churches, they may have entirely different definitions. What one SBC church considers evangelical would be fundamentalism for the UMC church down the street. Similarly, the concept of biblical inerrancy might mean only that the Bible is divinely inspired and therefore free from error in

³ “Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed on January 15, 2016.

doctrine yet filled with the intentions and cultural implications of the authors while for another it is infallible for all places and times and is not bound by specific cultural moments. Each of these terms carries a specific meaning and a specific interpretation of the concept. Therefore, to provide clarity for the purposes of this study, it is necessary to establish a base line from which to begin discussion.

The term *Evangelical* is the first of these terms that needs clarification. I follow the lead of Peter Wellman in using the criteria of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (*conversion*), a desire and obligation to share this conversion with others (*missionary activity*), the belief in the Scriptures as the primary authority for belief and action (*Biblicism*), and the emphasis placed on Christ's sacrificial death for atonement of sins (*crucientism*)⁴. While these terms and definitions are only surface indicators, they are distinct enough for the needs of this study. The label is easily applied to the Southern Baptist Convention. Now, while over the course of this study, I will use other terms such as *conservative* or *traditional* to describe the positions held by the Southern Baptist Convention, most generally, I will use this term as an umbrella-term that encompasses each of these meanings.

The use of the terms traditional/conservative and liberal is not meant to create a false dichotomy between diverse groups. It is true that there exist liberal and conservative factions within any group and that there is no easy way to characterize them which completely captures the fluid nature with which individuals within a given denomination understand their role in relation to the theological and political actions of their denomination. However, for the sake of

⁴ Peter Wellman, *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11; Nancy Tatom Ammermon, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990)

study and in an attempt to describe as accurately as possible the positions taken by a majority within each denomination, I have chosen to use these terms with the understanding that in some instances they are not applicable.

Another term that will be useful, though it does not often appear in contemporary writing, is that of *Heresy*. While heresy might be easily defined as an unorthodox position, I choose to employ the definition given by Alister McGrath that “*A heresy is a doctrine that ultimately destroys, destabilizes, or distorts a mystery rather than preserving it... A heresy is a failed attempt at orthodoxy whose fault lies ... in its unwillingness to accept that it has failed.*”⁵ The full implications of this term are detailed in a later section; however, of importance is the way in which this definition shapes the discussion of all theological innovation. Rather than simply state that a heresy is something that contradicts tradition, it focuses on heresy as intrinsically coming from within the Church (it is an attempt at orthodoxy) and an unwillingness to admit that this position is in fact a failed attempt. The point at which the attempt has failed is difficult to define completely. However, I think that at the point where a teaching causes the Church to forego its mandate to serve as the ambassadors and Body of Christ maligns the understanding of this central figure of Christianity, then it can be considered a failure that must be rethought and revised in light of new understanding and a return to orthodoxy.

The last of the important terms is that of an ethical prophet as described by Max Weber in his *Sociology of Religion*. Weber detailed a distinction between ethical prophets and exemplar prophets. The distinction between these two prophets is primarily due to the belief structure that they convey to their followers. The ethical prophet is one who has “received a

⁵ Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 31.

commission from god, [and] he demands obedience as an ethical duty⁶.” This prophet demands obedience to the ethical and moral obligations placed on devotees by the divine power. The exemplar prophet differs in that he (or she) does not come with a set of ethical obligations. Instead this prophet “recommend[s] to them [followers] the same path as he himself traversed⁷.” The distinction of these two prophets will frame the discussion of the interpretation offered by the Southern Baptist Convention of the person of Christ. The Evangelical ethos is synonymous with that of the ethical prophet. The creation of a worldview and ethos around this particular understanding of an individual has profound implications for the way in which the denomination is to act within society.

The final key to understanding this denomination and its political actions in response to theological positions is that of my theory of the creation of moral logics. My study of the Southern Baptist Convention has caused me to reconsider different theories for understanding decision making in the life of the religious individual. The use of an organic model such as an onion surpasses inorganic models (such as Peter Berger’s toolkit) because it captures this organic understanding of growth and change, yet it too fails to describe the complex nature of the growth of moral logics⁸. Therefore, I have chosen to augment the organic model with that of the oak tree to capture this evolving nature of moral logics.

The choice of the oak tree rather than some other is deliberate. The Oak is steadfast, strong, and synonymous with endurance. In the same way, the moral logics and worldviews of individuals are often not subject to change with regard to foundational beliefs short of a

⁶ Max Weber, “The Prophet,” in *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Peter Wellman, *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59-60.

cataclysmic event. Similarly, the heart of an oak tree is made up of the oldest portions of the tree that gave rise to all other rings. The oak grows from the outer layers, not the inner layers. Therefore, it is possible to see the experiences of the tree by an examination of the rings (a fire would leave a blackened ring while drought would be evidenced by slimmer rings). However, as the tree continues to grow those experiences are “moved” more centrally and become more crucial to the tree’s stability. In the same way, the ideologies of each of these groups is impressed on to individuals and what begins as an encounter with this ideology becomes a more central belief the longer it is held. It is for this reason primarily that I choose to use the metaphor of an oak rather than that of an onion to describe the nature of moral worldviews for individuals. Throughout this study, I will refer to the “moral cores” of individuals. By this, I mean those foundational and central beliefs from which all others originate. It is possible to change these, but it is only by a Kuhnian shift in worldviews. Further, the tree model allows for periods of dormancy and vitality within the life of the individual not afforded to the onion model. While an onion cannot survive a drought, a tree can if it is sufficiently rooted in the soil. In the same way, the individuals of the Southern Baptist Convention can maintain an identity even without constant growth and interaction.

This metaphor of the oak tree frames all of these understandings of the denominations. The terms of *Evangelical* constitutes one of the central rings of the moral core. The rings of *Orthodoxy* and *Heresy* help the individual to determine at what point a belief set is incompatible with her or his moral core. Finally, Weber’s prophetic models frame the most central ring, that of the person of Jesus Christ. Individuals of the Southern Baptist Convention, along with all evangelicals, define themselves in relation to the person of Jesus Christ. In the

most general sense, this relationship is defined in terms of upholding the ethical standards taught by this individual as the revelation of God. The understanding of the person of Jesus Christ becomes ever more crucial to describing why this group and its individuals act as they do. Understanding however, is not easy to attain. As McGrath states emphatically, “If there is a heartbeat of the Christian faith, it lies in the sheer intellectual delight and excitement caused by the person of Jesus Christ. Here is one whom the church finds to be intellectually luminous, spiritually persuasive, and infinitely satisfying...”⁹ Jesus Christ and a conception of who He is and what His purpose is for His followers is the question that has dominated the trajectory of all denominations. As I delve deeper into this group, I hope to show that it holds a robust understanding of this “intellectually luminous” person and that this Jesus has so shaped and disrupted the moral cores of individuals as to make their actions the only possible recourse. The power that the moral core of this conception of the God-Man Jesus Christ inspires is a loyalty among devotees that dictates and governs all other decisions and identities that they possess.

⁹ Alister McGrath, *Heresy*, 1.

Love of the Law: The Southern Baptist Moral Core of an Ethical Christ

*“...the Convention expressly disavow any disposition to interfere with political affairs and have regard solely to the question of religious liberty”
(1866 SBC Resolution on Religious Liberty)*

Moral worldviews and ethics do not arise in a vacuum. The political action and Christological foundations for the Southern Baptist Convention is no different. Therefore, I will show that the actions taken are the result of particular historical trends within this movement. I do not believe that socio-cultural factors are the only factors motivating the individual. Religious experiences and interaction with the sacred also play a part. However, to deny the specific moments that have brought this faith tradition to the present is to miss an integral part.

The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination within the United States. According to its national website, they claim over 15 million members worldwide¹⁰. The sheer size of the denomination is enough to give it considerable power and influence. Size alone is not the only factor that has contributed to its power and influence in the political system. In fact, I will show that while the denomination is the largest in the US in terms of numbers, its relative small size within the overall population of the United States creates the perfect environment for the political action that characterizes Evangelicals in general and Southern Baptists in particular.

Born out of the conflict over the question of slavery, the Southern Baptist Convention has since its beginning held an intimate connection to national politics. While the quote at the

¹⁰ “Fast Facts About the SBC,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 15, 2016.

beginning of this chapter might indicate the contrary, the Southern Baptist Convention has regularly sought to ensure that the state cannot interfere in the life of the church and further that the religious liberties given to one church be extended to another. In fact, the Baptist commitment to the autonomy of the churches was critical to many of the religious liberties that churches of all faith traditions enjoy.¹¹

Even though the denomination has held firmly that the state should not intervene in the affairs of the church, the reverse has not always been true. For a length of time, the Southern Baptist Convention did not interfere with politics. The Convention bordered more on the realm of fundamentalism than evangelicalism. The difference is the level of involvement within the broader culture. In fact, the perceived breakdown of the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative and orthodox doctrine led to a rebellion within the convention that pitted the fundamentalist and conservatives (who most likely represented the majority of individuals) against the moderate and (possibly) liberal factions that occupied the leadership of the seminaries and committees¹².

This takeover of the 70s and 80s was the moment when the Southern Baptist Convention assumed the form that is so familiar today. The problem arose from a question of how to define the inerrancy of Scripture. Should inerrancy mean that the Bible is wholly true at all times for all people? Alternatively, could the doctrines of the Bible be true while the historical and scientific conclusions be false? One could ask why there was the need to define

¹¹ For a detailed study of this commitment to religious liberty and a tracing of its history, see Barry Hankins' "Religious Liberty in a Hostile Culture" in *Uneasy in Babylon*: University of Alabama Press (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2002).

¹² Mark E. Gaskins, "Cracks in the Wall? : Changing Attitudes Toward the Separation of Church and State Among Southern Baptists," *Baptist History and Heritage* (Summer/Fall 2008), 97-98.

theology so narrowly. Barry Hankins explains "... the conservative leaders came to believe that America, including the South, was in the throes of a cultural crisis that necessitated a warlike struggle against ... [those] ... hostile to evangelical faith¹³." Abortion was the issue that catalyzed conservatives within the denomination to begin a war for the convention leadership positions¹⁴. The conservatives, who set about systematically restructuring the convention to be in line with a version of history that they believed to be more orthodox, took the Southern Baptist Convention, after a period of struggle between the two groups¹⁵. The irony of this takeover was that the Baptist commitment to the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers was in some ways overlooked. This doctrine, which concerns the ability of individuals to have direct access to God without an earthly intermediary, creates opportunities for personal interpretation of the Biblical material. It does not follow that those interpretations are necessarily valid, but the interpretations themselves can result from this lack of reception of divine messages. While outwardly upholding that individuals are capable of interpreting the Scriptures with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they were at the same time arguing that the same individuals' interpretation of particular passages was so dangerous that it required action and response.

While this short history would seem to indicate that the Southern Baptist Convention places at the center of its moral core the inerrancy of Scripture, this would be only a surface understanding. In reality, what the struggle reveals is not a question of the inerrancy of

¹³ Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 42-44.

¹⁵ David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, The New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969-1991*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1996).

Scripture, but rather of who is allowed to interpret Scripture and in so doing interpret Christ (who is the *Logos* of God: the incarnate Word of God¹⁶). The moderate position is one that wished to allow for innovation to a certain degree. There is little truth to the claim by conservatives that the moderate position destroyed the authority of scripture. Rather, the moderates within the convention were more willing to allow that it was possible that God could have acted through the process of evolution rather than a literal six-day creation as the fundamentalists contested¹⁷. The conservatives however argued for a strict interpretation of scriptures as inerrant and literal in all instances. What was said about the Garden was literal: Adam and Eve ate literal fruit after being tempted by a literal serpent resulting in literal banishment from the presence of God. What is at stake for the fundamentalists is an interpretation of Christ. The logic of the fundamentalists assumed a slippery slope argument in which it was believed that if America was to be restored to some Edenic past of moral uprightness, then the convention must be retaken and the seminaries placed firmly under conservative control because it is the controlling party controls the lens of hermeneutics and interpretation within the convention¹⁸.

Returning to my tree analogy, the distinction between these two groups would appear as superficial to individuals outside of the convention perhaps, much as the difference between maple and oak would appear to someone with no knowledge of carpentry. However, to those within the convention, this struggle was not a pitting of one possibility against another. Rather

¹⁶ John 1:1 (All Scripture references are taken from the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise noted).

¹⁷ David Stricklin, "The 'Return' of Southern Baptist Fundamentalism" in *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 142-161.

¹⁸ Thomas M. Huebner, Jr. "A House Divided: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Southern Baptist Convention," *The Journal of Communication and Religion* (1991), 38.

it was a war for the very soul of the convention itself. To identify as a Southern Baptist was to bring with it certain markers. Further, to identify as a Southern Baptist outside the South was a conscious choice to uphold those ideals: “In the south, Southern Baptists were a cultural constant, but in California or Oregon or Michigan, ‘Southern Baptist’ was a conscious identification that one could not take lightly.¹⁹” Therefore, at the core of the conservative tree is the belief that this Christ is who He literally said he was. Therefore, when he literally addresses topics such as Noah²⁰, Jonah and the great fish²¹, and the Creation account²², they too are understood literally. To admit that this individual could have been mistaken when he referred to them as literal events would be to construct a Christ whose every statement is based in a misunderstanding of fact. Therefore, to fight for this individual and retake the convention, the fundamentalists were diligent to ensure that after their efforts, the convention would be committed to the inerrancy of Scripture.

If we were to construct a picture of the tree for the Southern Baptist Convention after the conservative takeover, then this event would prove to be like a fire that marks the tree and actually leads to further growth. The conservative takeover was a moment of group identity construction and affirmation. There was a clear understanding of who was in and who was outside the bounds of proper Southern Baptist doctrine. Lester Kurtz describes a similar phenomenon within the Catholic Church and declares, “what people do not believe is often more clearly defined than what they do believe, and it is through battles with heresies and

¹⁹ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785-1900*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.

²⁰ Luke 17:27

²¹ Matthew 12:38-45

²² Mark 10:6

heretics that orthodoxy is most sharply delineated.²³ The conservative take over was built around this question of what do we believe and more importantly, that we do not believe that the Bible is errant in any way.

This struggle for the Southern Baptist Convention appears to be an internal question that is primarily about Southern Baptist life. However, it is as much a question of the broader political and cultural context as it is of the microcosm of the Southern Baptist Convention. This struggle was birthed in the aftermath of one of the most controversial decisions in the history of the Supreme Court of the United States: the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*. The political and legal events spurred on the conservatives to believe that the country was on the brink of going too far. The Church became a prophet calling the nation back to a time before the decision of the court. The language of the Southern Baptist Convention preceding the decision (1971 *Resolution on Abortion*) and the year following the decision (1974 *Resolution on Abortion and Sanctity of Human Life*) are evidence of a position that does not condone the practice and does not condemn it in all its forms. These resolutions call for government to uphold the sanctity of all human life, and at the same time allow for exceptions of rape, incest, fetal deformity, and extreme distress of the mother (emotion and physical). The 1976 *Resolution on Abortion*, which was reaffirmed every year for the next five years, however made no such exceptions; rather than condemn abortion, although the sentiment is present, it chose to condemn the circumstances leading to abortion. Expectant mothers were to receive the “full range of medical services and personal counseling for the preservation of life and health.”²⁴

²³ Lester R. Kurtz, “The Politics of Heresy,” *American Journal of Sociology* 88.6 (1983), 1085.

²⁴ “Resolution on Abortion,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed on January 15, 2016.

The Convention in the middle of a culture that had shifted dramatically saw its mission as intricately tied to the question of returning America to an ethical foundation.

The decision of the Supreme Court to uphold a woman's right to privacy in matters of reproduction was the catalyst that brought the conservative movement to the forefront, but the Southern Baptist Convention did not remain fixated on this one issue. There have been resolutions affirmed on transgenderism²⁵, genetic testing and cloning²⁶, racial reconciliation²⁷, and a number of other issues. The SBC takes a stance on most issues that arise in the political arena. In the words of Keith Ward, "Some people like the church to have a clear moral view on every difficult and moral question, so that at least 'the church knows what it thinks.'²⁸" If this is the desire of the individuals within the SBC (and it must be for it is members who propose resolutions), then this is accomplished in the form of these resolutions. A hermeneutic of certainty, ethical absolutism, of moral black and white is the core of the conception of Christ at the moral core of the Southern Baptist Convention.

These brief overviews of the history of the Southern Baptist Convention highlight the ways in which societal pressures created an environment that shaped the denomination. The theology of the denomination is best revealed in the writings and resolutions that are passed by the National Convention. In these meetings, members discuss the historical and societal influences and then vote on a doctrinal position in the context of the theological tradition of the group. Therefore, my examination of the denomination will look at the resolutions of

²⁵ "On Transgender Identity," Southern Baptist Convention, accessed February 2, 2016.

²⁶ "Resolution on Genetic Technology and Cloning," Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 15, 2016.

²⁷ "On Racial Reconciliation," Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 15, 2016.

²⁸ Keith Ward, "The Church as a Moral Community," in *Religion and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 232.

conventions as well as the Baptist Faith and Message, which is of special importance to the denomination. In doing so, it will be shown that the moral core of the denomination is evident in the writings and that it shapes all aspects of the decision making of that denomination.

The Southern Baptist Convention recognizes no creed or confession as authoritative other than the Bible. However, the convention does have a standard that succinctly summarizes the major beliefs of what constitutes a Southern Baptist. The Baptist Faith and Message (BFM) is a concise document that has been revised and changed only three times²⁹, with the most significant changes (in terms of length) occurring between the first and second revision. These revisions were not in disagreement with the first statement, a comparison actually shows that the second and third revisions are just longer or more nuanced versions of the first.

With respect to the LGBTQ community, it is the second BFM that makes the first reference to the family in a section added in 1998. The BFM was revised two years later and minor points of clarification in the other sections were made. The only change from the second to the third with regard to the section entitled “The Family” is the statement that:

Baptist Faith and Message 1963
(1998 Addition)

Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel for sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

Baptist Faith and Message 2000

Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to **reveal the union between Christ and His church and** to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

²⁹ The BFM has been revised two times (1963 and 2000) with an addition on Marriage and Family placed in 1998.

(Addition highlighted)³⁰.

The significance of this inclusion is that it moves the discussion from a societal consideration, as the former language allowed, and grounds this discussion squarely in the realm of ethics and theology. Marriage is not primarily about the man and woman, but rather is about Christ and His Church. This is a theological rather than a societal view of marriage. Now, the question of why a church should not ground their understanding in theology rather than society is valid. However, the importance of this inclusion reinforces the focus of the SBC's core values, namely an ethical interpretation of the Law of God in light of a social change.

There are two significant points where this section makes an appeal to ethical standards. The first is the addition within the first sentence that grounds the discussion squarely within the realm of theology rather than society. By doing so, the SBC sets marriage beyond the realms of societal definition and therefore inseparable from a traditional definition of marriage as between "the man and the woman." The second is that this section limits sexual expression "to biblical standards." Again, the language used reinforces the ethical standards of the denomination.

The rhetorical use of a language of ethics is that it carries within itself a level of exclusion. There are those who are carriers of the moral ethic and those who are outside the ethical bounds. Much as the lepers of ancient Israel were excluded because of their disease, the SBC's rhetoric frames the discussion in terms of those within and without of the camp³¹.

³⁰ "Comparison of 1925, 1963, and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message," Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>.

³¹ Carl L. Kell and L. Raymond Camp, "The Rhetorics of Silence and Abomination: The Troublesome Issue of Homosexuality," in *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 102.

This rhetoric can be useful in constructing a group identity constructed around a shared ethic of morality, but it also limits the inclusiveness of the group because by narrowly defining the ethic within a traditional definition, then others are outside of the fold. For example, the language of the BFM would exclude those who practice polygamous marriage because it defines marriage as between “the man and the woman.” While there is no biblical condemnation of the practice³², the language within the BFM would exclude those from within the realm of the ethical standard.

In addition, because of the first addition, this ethical standard is rooted directly in the Christology of the SBC. The Christological section of the same BFM describes Christ as one who “... honored the divine law by His personal obedience...”³³ The language within this section speaks more of Christ as the atoning sacrifice for his people more than any other aspect of his divinity. In emphasizing this particular aspect of the work of Christ, the SBC has chosen to articulate the work of Christ as primarily that of an ethical prophet. The BFM even describes Christ as the one who “perfectly revealed and did the will of God.”³⁴ The language of the BFM (2000) speaks of Christ as primarily the upholder of a perfect standard and as the sacrifice for the sins of humanity. To construct a language of Christ where this is the central focus emphasizes that this particular aspect of the nature of Christ is the defining characteristic of this individual. Even the return of Christ and his judgment of the world is the end of a “redemptive mission.” Redemption (and by implication an ethical standard) is the goal of Christ.

³² While not condemned, the New Testament Church upheld monogamous relationships, at least in terms of qualifications for church leaders (1 Tim. 3).

³³ “Comparison,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 15, 2016.

³⁴ *Ibid*

The other resolutions of the SBC follow a similar pattern. They each begin with an appeal to scriptural references and are followed by an appeal to both the members of the SBC and the broader culture to conform to these standards. The language of ethics is exemplified in the use of scripture as a foundation for the resolutions: “Homosexuality is immoral, contrary to the Bible (Leviticus 18:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10)³⁵,” “The Bible teaches that every human life has sacred value (Genesis 1:27)³⁶,” and ““Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Proverbs 14:34 NAS)³⁷.” Language is a framework that guides action. Peter Wellman describes in his study of Evangelicals and Mainline Christian congregations within the Pacific Northwest, how language structured action and in turn was reinforced by that action: “Words and actions function reciprocally; the two cannot be separated from each other. In other words, belief and ritual function in tandem related to and shaped by cultural context.³⁸” When viewed in light of the more constant Baptist Faith and Message, the resolutions become the rituals “function in tandem” with the belief. The BFM acts as a conduit through which all other resolutions must appropriate the metaphors and language. Because the BFM when discussing the family and Christ is primarily concerned with the ethical standards of Christ and His revelation of the perfect will of God, the other resolutions must also appropriate similar language. In so doing, they reaffirm the language and positions of the Baptist Faith and Message and in so doing, reaffirm the moral core of the convention as a whole of the ethical prophet of Jesus Christ.

³⁵ “Resolution On The President’s Executive Order on Homosexual Federal Employees,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed February 2, 2016.

³⁶ “On Capital Punishment,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed December 20, 2015.

³⁷ “Resolution on the Moral Character of Public Officials,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed February 2, 2016.

³⁸ Wellman, *Evangelical vs. Liberal*, 33.

In the writings of the Southern Baptist Convention, there is a distinct emphasis placed on the prophetic way in which Christ reveals a worldview ordered and structured by God to bring about a holy kingdom on earth. Following in the tradition of individuals such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and St. Augustine, the Southern Baptist Convention recognizes a distinct difference between the world of the divine and the world of the mundane (the Augustinian influence) and the way in which the two interact (drawing on Bonhoeffer). George Okeeson's brief study of global evangelical voices with respect to institutions explores Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of institutions, specifically labor and marriage, which is applicable to the Southern Baptist Convention as well. Bonhoeffer claims that governmental authority and mandates carry within themselves the divinely given mandates that are preexistent. Further, governments cannot "produce life or values. It is not creative."³⁹ In the same way, the Southern Baptist Convention recognizes that the government, though instituted by God is not capable of creating rights and mandates, but rather can only recognize those that already exist. This informs the way in which the Southern Baptist Convention understands how the church and state are to be separate. The state is to recognize, not create, the rights given by God and also uphold the ethical standards of this moral deity

The Southern Baptist's Convention draws upon one of the primary descriptions used of the offices of Christ, particularly that of Priest. This image shapes the moral core in particular ways. For example, the moral core of the Baptist who places the standards of Christ at the center drives him or her toward enacting those standards through their enshrinement in law. This is because the image of the Priest when viewed in its historical location of the New

³⁹ Gregg A. Okeeson, "A Theology of Institutions: A Survey of Global Evangelical Voices," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 40.1 (2016), 36.

Testament and Judaism is that the Priest is the guardian of the Law in order to protect God's honor.⁴⁰ The priest offers sacrifices on behalf of the individual to provide a ritual cleanness and therefore access to the temple. By emphasizing the priestly role, and Christ's sacrificial death (*crucientism*), the Southern Baptist Convention constructs an ideal of Jesus Christ that necessitates societal action.

I have chosen to describe the Southern Baptist Convention as "Love of the Law" because the attempt to replicate and uphold the moral law guides the convention. The definition with which I began for evangelicals emphasized the sacrificial nature of Christ's death (*crucientism*). To this, I would add that an emphasis on the sacrificial nature of Christ's death must include a discussion of the legal and ethical standards that lead to and from that work. The Southern Baptist Convention emphasizes the priestly nature of Christ in their description of him as a sacrifice and revealer of the will of God. This moral core lends itself to the other rings that encircle it. The Baptist commitment to the separation of Church and State would appear to be a contradiction to this moral core. However, separation does not mean that the Church is unable to influence and dictate moral positions. It only means that the Church is free from the intervention of the state. Therefore, the Church can seek to influence the culture and shape it in such a way as to create a society of a particular *ethos* without becoming an official church for the state. Similarly, other rings such as a commitment to the sanctity of life and an anti-abortion political stance are based in this commitment to the laws of God and the upholding of a law that recognizes the *Imago Dei* of the individual.

⁴⁰ Louis Berkhof, "The Priestly Office" in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).

The use of the term Love in my descriptor is not merely because of a desire to be witty or pithy. Rather, it is because this term describes the intense devotion with which the denomination holds these beliefs. The BFM describes marriage as the “covenant commitment⁴¹” of a man and woman. In the same way that a marriage between two individuals radically shifts their lives, these beliefs radically shift the life of the individual from the life of service to sin to a life in service of the king. The love that I use to describe this attachment to the law is not the love of emotion (although there is an emotional aspect to it) but rather one of obedience and action. As already mentioned, actions and deed reinforce and reaffirm one another⁴². Therefore, disconnecting word and deed is not total devotion, or to use the language of marriage, it is a breaking of the covenant.

To construct a moral core for the Southern Baptist Convention there must be a melding of the law and gospel. The Law is not separate from the Gospel, but rather is its complement and the only true way to understand it. Thomas Johnson’s analysis of the interpretation of Reformation theology hinges on the way that these two terms are related. He says, “while the New Testament is preeminently a book of gospel, that gospel is properly understood only in relation to the moral law contained in both testaments.⁴³” The Southern Baptist Convention attempts to meld these two together through a commitment (that is present in all evangelical denominations) to the spreading of the gospel and the upholding of God’s law⁴⁴. Therefore, in evangelizing, there is a need to show the individual how they have erred against this law. With

⁴¹ “Comparison,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 15, 2016.

⁴² Wellman, *Evangelical vs. Liberal*, 33.

⁴³ Thomas K. Johnson, “Law and Gospel: The Hermeneutical/Homiletical Key to Reformation and Ethics,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 36.2 (2012), 151.

⁴⁴ This has a Biblical warrant in Matt. 28:18ff. Those sent out are to “go” (evangelize) and “make disciples” (those who embody the teachings of a master).

regard to the LGBTQ community, the entirety of their life (unless they choose to live in celibacy) will be outside that law as understood by the SBC. Therefore, the outreach of the SBC must include making this known. It would be impossible for the Southern Baptist Convention to attempt to share the gospel (defined as the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross for the sins of humanity) without acknowledgement that to live as a non-celibate homosexual is to be outside the law of God. At the heart of the moral core is this understanding that as evangelicals, they do indeed value the sharing of the gospel. It is only in the sharing of the gospel in conjunction with the law that there is a hope for true conversion. Only when the individual faces the extent of their sinfulness can they accept the need for a sacrifice given by this Jesus Christ.

The particular moral logic of the Southern Baptist Convention is deeper than a simple commitment to rule upholding. Rather it is an attempt to imitate Christ through the replication of His teachings. By placing the ethical nature of Christ in the center of the moral core of the SBC oak tree, it becomes clear that they are not bigots or misogynists who have no reason for the actions that they take. This is not to say that those actions are correct. However, when placed in the correct cultural context, the twitch becomes the properly understood wink.⁴⁵ The actions are the attempt of the denomination to fulfill the ultimate goal of building the kingdom of God. However, the moral core not only affects individuals within the community, but those beyond it as well. The way in which the SBC conveys this message in a world that in some regards has moved beyond Christianity, or at least traditional definitions of Christianity, is also uniquely framed and is the topic of the second half of this study.

⁴⁵ Geertz, "Thick Description," 7.

Living in a 5-4 World: Life after the SCOTUS Decision

“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were.”
(Majority Position in Obergefell v. Hodges)

The decision by the Supreme Court on June 26th, 2015 recognizing the right of same-sex couples to marry is a watershed moment in religious communities across the country. It creates a shift in culture as dramatic as that of *Roe v Wade*. How are denominations supposed to live in this 5-4 world? How are they to understand their role now? The SBC has effectively lost the debate about same-sex marriage. Does this mean that it has lost the battle for the soul of America? While this decision is still relatively new and there is little scholarship on the response of the SBC, there is at least internal evidence that indicates how they see themselves moving forward in this new world. Just as historical and theological foundations are grounded in core conceptions of Christ as a bringer of ethics, these trajectories indicate the direction in which future action will be taken by the denominations.

The link between evangelical ideology and conservative politics is well documented sociologically⁴⁶. There is also a specific link between Republican (and conservative) politics and the Southern Baptist Convention⁴⁷. The Southern Baptist Convention is not alone in its position with regard to homosexuality and same-sex marriage. In fact, the United Methodist Church,

⁴⁶ See the work of Koch and Curry (2000), Van Geest (2007), Gray (2008), and Whitehead (2012).

⁴⁷ Oran P. Smith, “Conclusion: Baptist Republicanism, Southern Conservatism, and American Politics,” in *The Rise of Baptist Republicanism* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

the largest Mainline denomination within the United States is also committed currently to a definition of marriage that is traditional (one man and one woman)⁴⁸. However, what are the ways in which a religious denomination is to make sense of this core identifier when it has been struck down by law? The SCOTUS decision is a legal recognition of the shift within the public sector of attitudes towards same-sex marriage. Is there a reason to believe that the same shifts that have occurred outside the denomination will occur within it? I would argue that this is unlikely given the historical, theological, and sociological trends and trajectories of the denomination. However, as will become obvious through examination of the writings of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the way in which the SBC attempts to speak prophetically within a culture, which is now overwhelmingly in favor of this definition of marriage, has shifted. Rather than a call for a return to the ethic of the past, the writings indicate that the focus has shifted from society to individuals. Rather than attempt to rebuild Zion, the language is indicative of a mentality that recognizes the minority position and attempts to maintain an identity within the denomination. The Southern Baptist Convention recognizes that it no longer lives in a Zion of moral uprightness, but rather is in the midst of a Babylon that is hostile to its belief structure.

At the 2015 National Convention, just prior to the ruling, the SBC emphasized both its “doctrinal and public beliefs concerning marriage⁴⁹.” The resolution opens with a statement about how marriage is created by God and is supported with Scriptural annotation. The discussion is primarily one of theology. While there is a shift toward the end of the resolution

⁴⁸ “Book of Resolutions: Oppositions to Homophobia and Heterosexism,” The United Methodist Church, accessed January 16th, 2016.

⁴⁹ “On the Call to Public Witness of Marriage,” Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 15, 2016.

to social factors such as the “bringing forth [of] children,” the discussion is primarily that of an ethic. Even when discussing their own reactions regardless of the decision, they ask Southern Baptists and all Christians “to stand firm on the Bible’s witness on the purposes of marriage...” As should be clear by now, the SBC in speaking into culture does so with an ethical standard, specifically the perfect life of Christ as recorded in the Scriptures.

But how is this ethic to be understood when it is becoming increasingly clear that with regard to this issue, the denomination is in the minority. According to the Pew Research Center, in 1996 (2 years prior to the Family Amendment to the BFM) 65% of the population opposed same-sex marriage. However, in 2015, this number had dropped to 39%⁵⁰. Further, some 70% of Millennials are in favor of same-sex marriage according to the same study. The shift has been dramatic. The response of the SBC takes an approach similar to that of the Old Testament prophets. They follow the example of Isaiah (before the fall of Jerusalem) and Jeremiah (after the conquest of Jerusalem). Isaiah in his time of prophecy called the culture to repent to avert the wrath of God. However, Jeremiah writes after the fall of Jerusalem and he encouraged the Jewish Diaspora to take root in the culture while remaining set apart to God⁵¹. The distinction is the location. Isaiah preaches in a Zion and calls it back to God. Jeremiah preaches to those in Babylon and calls the Diaspora to be in the culture but retain a distinct identity. Similarly, the SBC easily maps on to the same practices. The SBC can be characterized by the likes of Al Mohler who seek to reclaim a lost nation or Paige Patterson whose style is more “concerned [with] how to be a witness within a fractured culture...” or “more like that of

⁵⁰ “Gay Marriage,” Pew Research Center, accessed on January 15, 2016.

⁵¹ Jer. 29:5-7

an alien living in a foreign land⁵².” Given the shift in culture, the Jeremiah model seems to be the more appropriate, and in some regards can be more useful.

A model of religion that understands that it is a minority is an intense group identity. It is one thing to identify as a Christian who opposes same-sex marriage when it is socially acceptable. It is another when you are the only one of your group of four college age friends who does so. However, at the same time, it creates a strong sense of group identity: “I am a Southern Baptist and that means that I believe these very specific things.” While this is not to say all Millennial Southern Baptists are opposed to same-sex marriage, it does point to the power of the ability to create a group identity. The understanding that Southern Baptists no longer live in a Zion (whether this was ever the case is questionable), is no longer relevant, instead they are members of a culture that views traditional Christian beliefs as archaic and incompatible with a modern society. The SBC is faced with deciding which model is to be more effective. However, I am convinced that as this watershed moment continues the denomination will not only accept its minority status, but also see it as further proof of the moral decay of the culture surrounding it. However, rather than retreat from culture, they will seek to engage that culture in new ways. Rather than lobby for legislative means of creating the Kingdom, which I predict will continue, the SBC will move to a much more individualist approach. I predict this because the intensely Christocentric theology of the Southern Baptist Convention is built around a theology that cannot be separated from action. To use the definition of J.K. Riches, “Theology is a meditation on the mystery of the divine love in its

⁵² Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 51-52.

engagement with the world as revealed in Jesus Christ.⁵³ Theologian William Ames also describes theology in both practical and mental terms: “the nature of theological life is living to God. Men live to God when they live in accord with the will of God, to the glory of God, and with God working in them.⁵⁴” Both of these definitions focus on the way in which theology is not just meditation but praxis. Theology is cerebral (Meditation) but it is also engagement with the world by living to God. Engagement in the world shapes and determines the focus of the Christology of the SBC.

The evangelical definition with which I began focused on a conversion experience and a missional desire to replicate that conversion experience in the life of others. By moving the denomination toward this more individual idea of personal holiness and ethical standards, the ERLC appears to be making a shift similar to that of their own convention. A brief examination of the articles of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission indicate not writings about the state of the nation at large after the SCOTUS decision, but rather an intense focus on individuals. For example, titles such as “Is Your Church a Safe Place For Those Who Experience Same-Sex Attraction⁵⁵,” “A Word to Pastors Preaching in the Aftermath of the SCOTUS Decision⁵⁶,” and “Ministering in the New Normal⁵⁷” reflect the move away from society and toward individuals and how they should respond. The language reflects a rhetorical choice to return to the evangelical position of individuals being the key to societal reform. In other

⁵³ J.K. Riches, “What is a ‘Christocentric’ Theology?” in *Christ, Faith and History*, eds. S.W. Sykes and J.P. Clayton, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 231.

⁵⁴ William Ames, “The Definition or Nature of Theology” in *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden, (Grand Rapids, MI: United Church Press, 1968) 77-78.

⁵⁵ “Is Your Church a Safe Place for Those Who Experience Same-Sex Attraction,” Brad Hambrick, accessed on March 25, 2016.

⁵⁶ “A Word to Pastors Preaching in the Aftermath of the SCOTUS Decision,” Denny Burk, accessed on February 2, 2016.

⁵⁷ “Ministering in the New Normal,” Dean Inserra, accessed on February 2, 2016.

words, if there is a large enough number of Christians who respond in a particular way, the society can be shaped to uphold (or at least accommodate) those beliefs.

In addition, the emphasis placed on the individual is in relation to the local church. The question of “Is your church a safe place for those who experience same-sex attraction” assumes that the individual is involved within a local church. This assumed rhetoric actually creates a sense of identity between individuals because there is a shared connection that transcends location: “My church, as a member of the SBC, faces these questions just as much as your church, which is also a member of the SBC.” Further, the calls for how to “minister” in this new world are calls for individuals and congregations to adapt to this new climate. It is not enough to produce rational arguments and exegetical texts that nuance the Hebrew and Greek of a few passages. Rather, the articles at the ERLC focus on how to treat members of the LGBTQ community as individuals. Many of them have sections where they include practical advice for the pastor or individual who must talk about this issue with others. There are even calls to “build relationships with gay people.⁵⁸” The Southern Baptist Convention does not appear to be shrinking from the task of discussing the issue. However, the movement from a Zionistic mentality to that of a Babylonian ideology shapes the response.

Another thing of importance is the way that the Southern Baptist Convention chooses to frame the discussion of the LGBTQ community. Often the term used is “same-sex attraction.” The choice of this term as opposed to homosexuality does two things. The first is that it describes it in terms of possibility rather than action. A person does not dictate attractions and predispositions; they can dictate actions. I think that this minute move of distinction within the

⁵⁸ Dean Inserra, “Ministering in the New Normal.”

Southern Baptist Convention is actually a monumental shift in terms of their response to the community at least within the walls of their own church. By addressing the topic in this way, they allow for individuals who do not practice homosexuality to be members of the community. In addition, by placing the descriptor in the realm of possibility, there is the acknowledgement that individuals are not required to act on those desires. This opens up much room for discussion about the inclusion of these individuals within the community with some qualifications. These individuals would not be allowed to act on their desires and be fully included members of the community. However, they could enjoy membership in the church and the benefits of the group identity so long as they subscribe to the official position of the local congregation and the national convention on sexual practice.

This inclusion is a minor shift, but it at least breaks the rhetoric of silence and abomination that Kell and Camp argue characterizes the Southern Baptist Convention with regard to this issue. According to Carl Kell and Raymond Camp, LGBTQ individuals have traditionally occupied a role of condemnation (or a language of abomination) within the community.⁵⁹ However, the movement toward more inclusive language, even as limited as it is, holds the hope that there can be a breaking of silence. Kell and Camp continue by asserting that the future of the LGBTQ community might be that of the ceremonially unclean of the Old Testament: the lepers. (“If homosexuals are unclean, perhaps diseased, because of their abominable behavior, then perhaps they are the equivalent of the Old Testament leper.⁶⁰”) However, I believe that this is a limited concession. Lepers are still held outside the community (Kell and Camp even acknowledge, “Leviticus authorizes the banishment of lepers from the

⁵⁹ Carl Kell and L. Raymond Camp, “Rhetorics of Silence.”

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 102.

community of believers.⁶¹”), and they are not allowed access to religious services. The lepers are allowed back in to the community only after they have been ceremoniously cleaned, (at which point they would cease to be a leper). While this analogy is poor because it equates a physical disease with an internal knowledge of sexuality, it does point to the possibility of inclusion. Even though people cannot be cured of homosexuality the way that a leper may be cured of their disease, the point that they occupy a liminal space both within and beyond the community is important to note. The language used by both the SBC and the ERLC would seem to indicate that the convention is ready to welcome individuals who are attracted to the same sex in to full membership within the church so long as they either choose to forego acting on those desires or those desires are changed. In either case, the individual has made a conscious choice about acting on desires that makes this not a matter of biology but action. However, whether it is choice or psychology or biology (or some combination of each), the distinction made between inclusion within or exclusion from the community is the extent to which the individual chooses to subordinate their desires to the ethical standards and the person of Jesus Christ that form the core of the SBC worldview and tree.

I am also confident that the SBC will experience a reshaping of sorts in the way in which it learns to live alongside members of the LGBTQ community. In a culture in which there is no need to talk about a minority, it is easy to dismiss the importance of interactions with that minority. However, this is not the case with the current landscape. Individuals interact (whether knowingly or unknowingly) with gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual (along with a host of other groups) individuals on a daily basis. I think that as these interactions become

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 106.

more pronounced and visible there will be an increase in toleration within the SBC toward these individuals. Toleration is a word that often carries different connotations depending on who is using it. What would appear to be an ideal to some is a word that drips with condescension and a hidden agenda of forced belief for others. However, as I use the term, I use it in a very traditional sense that “toleration simply recognizes the existence of an idea or person without malice or discriminatory action in law.⁶²” As I stated before, Southern Baptists are part of the reason why there is an intense separation between Church and State as well as many of the religious freedoms enjoyed by many faith traditions. In fact, “Historically, Baptists have learned that in the long run, recognizing those of different ideas, races, and social behaviors, while difficult, is within the best tradition of being an American.⁶³” The Southern Baptist tradition is one that holds as a central ring the autonomy of individuals and the prophetic role of the Church. This intense individuality and the commitment to the right of individuals to interpret Scripture with the guide of the Holy Spirit will continue to shape the way in which the individuals respond to their culture.

I am encouraged that individuals within the ERLC and the SBC have attempted to speak out and speak to their cultural moment. Mario Ribas describes the Brazilian Christianity as a “Church in the closet” because it “is afraid to exercise its prophetic role ... [it] conforms to the socio-political reality, while it denies its vocation to be a counter cultural movement.⁶⁴” While Ribas calls the church of Brazil to be more affirming of LGBTQ individuals, his statement stands as a call for the SBC as well. The Church is to “exercise a prophetic role” and is to be a “counter

⁶² *Ibid*, 112.

⁶³ *Ibid*

⁶⁴ Mario Ribas, “The Church in the Closet,” *Theology and Sexuality* 10.2 (2004), 84.

cultural movement” in the sense that its message is countercultural in this moment. However, the purpose of the Church is ultimately to move individuals to the worship of God. From that worship arises an ethical living that may at times be countercultural. This does not mean that the SBC should be countercultural just to be a minority, but rather, they continue to uphold their interpretation of their faith tradition by maintaining an ethical core and interpretation of Jesus Christ. In this culture, it is easy to see how the SBC is in a minority position with regard to this particular issue. Further, to frame the discussion in purely social or cultural terms is to deny for many Christians an important lens through which they view the world.⁶⁵ The breaking of the silence on a national level will begin to work its way into the local congregations and in so doing open doors for inclusion, at least at the table for discussion with those who were before kept at arms’ length. This nature of a Christology is described in Robert Hood’s work on the Christology and the political praxis of Karl Barth. According to Hood, the Church fulfills “the role of advocate by ... Providing a model and patterns within itself as a service to the state and community surrounding it.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵Bruce L. Shelley, “Rootless Immigrants in a Sick Society,” in *Church History in Plain Language*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 447.

⁶⁶ Robert E. Hood, “Political Christology and Praxis” in *Contemporary Political Orders and Christ: Karl Barth’s Christology and Political Praxis* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1985), 175.

Conclusion: Queering the Discussion of the LGBTQ Community

The blanket statements that to be an evangelical is to be committed to bigotry or that the Southern Baptist Convention adheres to archaic beliefs do not capture the complexity of the denomination. These blanket statements are generalizations that are often used in conversation and news soundbites as a way to make caricatures of the debate occurring within and between denominations and the world surrounding them. However, these descriptions are just that, caricatures. The Southern Baptist Convention has constructed a worldview that is the result of specific biblical, historical, and cultural ideologies. I am not prepared to say that all differences are the result of culture and therefore relative, but it is worth noting how these positions did not arise within a vacuum. Having acknowledged the historical and sociological factors, there are also deeply held beliefs about the relationship of theology and its praxis in the lives of individuals.

The connection of theology and politics is one that creates a contradiction for the modern American mind. In a country in which there exists a "Separation of Church and State," the intervention of theology in to politics would appear contradictory. Given the intense belief in Southern Baptists of religious freedom and the absence of state intervention within the Church, it would almost appear to be paradoxical for this group. However, given the particular core logics surrounding their Christology, it is in fact the natural conclusion for them. A prophet who brings a system of ethics (which are laws of an objective morality) necessitates that the individuals seek to make those ethics the law of the land (although this is only truly achievable

in a theocratic state). Not to do so would be to concede that there is possibly some merit within the differing ethical systems of others. We see this in the world of non-religious issues. Is it not the imposition of such a system of ethics that causes individuals to campaign for the end of female genital mutilation? Sex trafficking? Income inequality? A system of ethics that comes from one claiming divinity carries an even more pressing need for enshrinement in law.

The Christology of the SBC is foundational to all other aspects of action both theological and political that are taken by the denomination. It is not enough to consider only the role that their interpretation of Scripture or Tradition takes, although these are important. At the heart of the moral trees of each of this denomination and its individuals is a person, not a set of ideas. This person is viewed through a particular lens that shapes and creates the language and options available to individuals. The conception of Jesus Christ, affirm McGrath's conclusion that in this person is found someone "intellectually luminous, spiritually persuasive, and intensely satisfying."⁶⁷ So bright is the light of this luminous individual that the physical Damascus Road experience of Paul pales in comparison. An encounter with Christ so blinds and overpowers a person so as to orient their life in a particular way.

This blindness and discovery of Christ has led to different conceptions and ideas. While the term and sentiment are not as prevalent after the SCOTUS decision, the idea lingers in some instances that any innovation on the part of theology is necessarily heresy. However, orthodoxy is not orthodoxy because it is "right" necessarily. By this, I mean that orthodoxy is not the result of discovery much like a math problem where the sum presents itself if particular rules are followed for addition of integers. Rather, it is right because it robustly contains within

⁶⁷ Alister McGrath, *Heresy*, 1.

itself the seeds of the mystery of faith⁶⁸. A dynamic understanding of this God-Man Jesus Christ is necessary, just as is true for an understanding of any individual. Just because I know whom you were when I was a child, does not mean that I know you in the same sense when I am an adult. You have changed. I have changed. In both instances, we have gone through new experiences that have shaped our current perceptions of one another. In the same way, an experience of Christ at one moment is not the same at another point in time. It is not that Christ has changed, as the writer of Hebrews makes clear⁶⁹ (“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”). Rather, the individual is different and experiences a new dimension of Christ.

For this reason, the term heretical is not one that should be used by the contemporary Church. While it is true that an understanding of Christ in a contemporary setting may be different from the traditional understanding, that does not make it wrong. Because of the ambiguity (and arguable irrelevance for Protestants⁷⁰) of the term heresy, I choose instead to use the term “non-traditional.” A non-traditional understanding defies and questions normalization. It asks believers to question not only what they believe, but also the assumptions, experiences, values, and social constructions that have led to the point of articulating that belief. It is not an errant belief (nor is it necessarily an inerrant belief). However, the importance of the belief is that it questions and does not allow stagnation. Therefore, non-traditional beliefs, in this sense are those doctrines and expressions of faith that

⁶⁸ Alister McGrath, *Heresy*, 24.

⁶⁹ Hebrews 13:8

⁷⁰ I think that McGrath makes an excellent argument for the reasons why it is inapplicable to all Protestant circles except in terms of classical heresies (Pelagianism, Donatism, Arianism, etc.). However, it is most certainly not a term that can be applied to an issue about which many well-meaning Christians disagree without an appeal to something that can validate one reading of the scripture over another.

ask individuals to interrogate and test tradition in an attempt to see if it can robustly contain and explain to a new generation and context the ineffable mysteries of the faith.

A faith that can accept the appearance of these doctrines while simultaneously entering into a dialogue with them is one that can accomplish this mission of articulating faith to a new generation. I do not view this as a call of innovation for the sake of innovation. Nor is it a wholesale rejection of the past on the belief that it is wrong. However, believers must be willing to examine what they believe and why if they are to move past the milk of the faith and be able to address the “meatier” issues of today. Questions such as *What is the role of Intersex individuals within the Church? Can Christians attend the wedding ceremony of friends or family and maintain that they do not approve of the homosexual lifestyle? What is a Christian response to illegal immigration/sex trafficking/poverty/female genital mutilation?* These questions may not have an easy answer in the sacred halls of the Protestant tradition. However, a theology that examines normative understandings of theology can actually accomplish the radical goal of encouraging new and relevant expressions of faith that are able to meet these modern challenges while maintaining a connection to the traditional doctrinal positions. The issues that face the Church today are not going to disappear. The battle over the legality of same-sex marriage may be over, but that does not mean that the LGBTQ community will slip quietly into the background. Rather, the issues will become ever more practical issues. The Church must be prepared to answer to an ever more vocal and visible community the question of *How do I fit within your worldview and what are my rights as an individual?*

While this study focused on the writings and positions espoused by the Southern Baptist Convention and its Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, it is in fact incomplete because of its lack of interaction with a broader range of people. My inability to conduct research at the annual SBC limited the ways in which I was able to examine this denomination first hand beyond my own anecdotal experience as an individual raised within this faith tradition. However, this gap leaves many opportunities for others to augment my research, primarily with regard to how messengers, who are chosen to represent their individual churches and conferences, choose to speak about their own beliefs concerning the LGBTQ community and the level of belief shared with their fellow church members. A deeper study would look not only at the language employed by messengers, but also the differences between location and generation. The break between younger Southern Baptists and older Southern Baptists, both within the denomination and within the broader culture would be useful in further defining the ethical core of this denomination. Finally, areas of deeper research would attempt to position the denomination in conversation with both other evangelical denominations as well as fundamentalist and mainline traditions to measure the different ways each particular subculture responds to sociopolitical stimuli. Living in this "5-4 world" will create a tension for the denomination as it attempts to navigate the new realm of its existence. Within the last few decades, there has been a seismic shift in public approval for same-sex marriage. The SBC is coping with this shift in in both new and traditional ways. Deeper study would look at the ways in which the SCOTUS decision impacts further actions by groups such as the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC as it attempts to "equip churches" to fulfill one of its stated missions of defending the institution of marriage.

The role of faith and society are a complicated and interlocking realm for individuals. The stances that a particular church or denomination takes influence people. This question of what the church is to do in regard to the LGBTQ community is one that is complex with no easy answers. As Kevin DeYoung says in the opening pages of his overview of the defense for a traditional view of marriage and homosexuality:

“The question ‘What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality?’ It’s about a great many things. It’s about Jesus’s view of marriage, and the point of Romans 1, and the sin of Genesis 19 (whatever it was), and the abiding relevance (or not) of laws found in Leviticus. It’s about the meaning of a few disputed Greek words and the significance of procreation. It’s about the nature of same-sex behavior in the ancient world and whether the nature of personhood and personal fulfillment are defined by sexual expression. It’s about how we change, and what can chance and what cannot. It’s about big themes like love and holiness and justice. It’s about personal hurts and hopes and fears and longings and duties and desires. It’s about faith and repentance and heaven and hell and a hundred other things.⁷¹

DeYoung’s statement, is an honest assessment of the case for and against homosexuality. It is true that this is about more than just one set of verses but ultimately a question of “a hundred other things.” While I may not entirely agree with the conclusions that DeYoung reaches in his brief overview of the topic, I am grateful for his willingness to admit the tension that exists within many believers over what they shall do. Unfortunately, we are not given a vision of Peter who commands us to “Repent and be baptized⁷².” The easy answer is not given, no matter how much we would wish that it were. However, what is given is a commitment to understanding this tension, interrogating the source of it, and in so doing an attempt at finding out a way to encounter and make sense of that tension. Christianity has had to deal with

⁷¹ Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Say About Homosexuality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 1.

⁷² Acts 2:38

contentious issues since its inception. From the questions of circumcision and the keeping of the Torah found in Galatians, to the controversy between Athanasius and Arius over the divinity of Christ, to an angry monk's attempt to cleanse the Church of a perceived cheapening of grace, to a modern church which must contend with questions of ecological preservation, sex trafficking of individuals, and the meaning of a few words in specific places in the New Testament, each of these controversies has been one that created problems and possibly more than were solved. However, the Church emerged from these dialogic encounters with two things. First, it emerged with a clearer definition of what constituted orthodox Christian teaching and what constituted the realms of tolerable difference and the limits of acceptance. The second is that the Church emerged often to experience periods of growth and vibrancy. This growth is indicative of the tree model that I described for the Southern Baptist Convention. Both fire and flood are destructive, however, if the tree survives, not only does it bear a record of the catastrophe; it bears within in it often a greater vibrancy. The carbon and soot left behind after a fire are very beneficial for the soil and act as nutrients for the surrounding flora. In the same way, these controversies create opportunities for greater growth and vibrancy further down the road⁷³.

As I look to the future of both of these denominations, and Christianity more generally, I am aware that this topic is one that will eventually fade. However, the person of Jesus Christ will continue to be relevant to discussions of Christianity regardless of the cultural and social context around the group. I am inclined to agree with DeYoung that "Although homosexuality is one of the most pressing and painful controversies of our day, it's not what the church has

⁷³ Lester R. Kurtz, "The Politics of Heresy," *American Journal of Sociology* 88.6 (1983).

been singing and praying and preaching about for two thousand years.⁷⁴ Christianity will move beyond this topic. However, it cannot move beyond its moral core that frames all other discussions and questions. The person of Jesus Christ is the person whom the Church has been singing, praying, and preaching about for two thousand years and whom they will continue to do so. However, let the church sing and pray to Christ in all of his three offices: “We never outgrow our need for Christ as our Priest ... [but] ... He is also the Prophet who not only reveals God’s will for our lives, but who exemplifies that in his own earthly life. And He is the King whose law of love has a present validity for the Christian.”⁷⁵ While Noble’s statement and study are primarily concerned with the theology of John Wesley, they are applicable to this denomination and to evangelical groups in general. The emphasis of one particular aspect of Christ’s nature may be useful for a time and cultural moment, but to do so long term is to divide a complex individual into a caricature. Christ is Priest, Prophet, and King. Let the Church remember this and hold a more holistic vision, one that is capable of capturing for a brief moment the “luminous person” of Jesus Christ, and that will present a Christology able to meet the needs of any generation.

⁷⁴ Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible*, 14.

⁷⁵ Thomas A. Noble, “John Wesley as a Theologian: An Introduction,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 82.3 (2010), 245.

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