

Give me that big time religion:  
Adrian Rogers as a builder in the Southern Baptist convention, at Bellevue Baptist Church,  
and with his radio ministry Love Worth Finding, 1972-2005

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

As pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church from 1972 to 2005 and three-time President of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in 1979 and 1986-1988, Adrian Rogers (1931-2005) played an integral role in promoting inerrancy within the SBC. His actions not only moved the SBC in a more conservative direction, if not a fundamentalist one, but also shifted Southern Baptists, politically, in the direction of the Republican Party. However, Rogers's role in the SBC went further than just politics. His involvement within the SBC, his leadership at Bellevue Baptist Church and its eventual move to Cordova, Tennessee, suggest that Rogers was actually a builder. Love Worth Finding (LWF), has preserved his legacy after his death in 2005.

As a result, this thesis argues that Adrian Rogers was not only a preacher, popular grassroots organizer within the SBC, or evangelist, but also a builder. If it had not been for Rogers, the "architectural" blueprint for the SBC would never have become a reality. When Rogers became pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church, the church resided in midtown Memphis and had close to 9,000 members. By the time he retired in 2005, the church had 28,000 members and was located in Cordova, Tennessee. Finally, Rogers launched LWF in the midst of the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s. Not only did LWF survive the unseemly televangelist fallout, it continues to broadcast Rogers's sermons today.

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Several people who knew Rogers, both in and out of the Southern Baptist Convention, gave me their time and insight into his life: Jimmy Draper, Jerry Vines, Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler, David Rogers, Janice Edmiston, Joel Jernigan, Bob Sorrell, Larry Lewis, Max Barnett, Fred Luter, Joel Gregory, Bill Sherman, Paul Simmons, Molly Marshall, Nancy Hastings Sehested, Barry Hankins, Joel Carpenter, George Marsden, and Mark Noll who encouraged me to investigate Bellevue Baptist's move to the suburbs.

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## **DEDICATION**

To Steve Dighton, founding pastor of Lenexa Baptist Church (1990-2015) and Vice President of the SBC (2015-2016). He taught me about the influence that Adrian Rogers has had among Southern Baptists and the importance of his contributions.

## INTRODUCTION:

### PASTOR ADRIAN ROGERS, A MASTER RELIGIOUS BUILDER OF THE 1980S

Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church from 1972 to 2005, was not as well known as fellow Southern Baptists Billy Graham or President Jimmy Carter, but Rogers helped Southern Baptists gain visibility and influence within the national media and national politics.<sup>1</sup> First, from 1979 to 1990, Southern Baptists battled over the nature of the Bible. Rogers was a key leader in the battle for inerrancy. His election as SBC President in 1979, at the urging of Paige Patterson, then President of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies, and Texas State Appellate Court Judge Paul Pressler, began a ten year run of inerrantist (one who believes the Bible contains no errors) presidents who appointed other inerrantists to SBC boards and agencies. Rogers served not one term, but three as Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) president, the latter two terms in 1986 and 1987. During the 1985 annual meeting of the SBC, over 45,000 messengers (the Southern Baptist term for delegate) came to the convention held in Dallas, Texas. There, former SBC President Franklin Paschall and layman Charles Pickering called for a “Peace Committee” to determine why Southern Baptists were fighting. Appointments to this committee included inerrantists, non-inerrantists, and those who were on the fence about the

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Graham, the well known evangelist, was a member of the First Baptist Church of Dallas from 1953 until 2009. Graham is more prominent than the Southern Baptist Convention because he has worked with many types of Christians over the years. Consult W. A. Criswell, *Standing on the Promises: The Autobiography of W. A. Criswell* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1990), 185-6; Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 173. Note that Criswell account said that Graham joined the First Baptist Church of Dallas in 1953 and Wacker said Graham joined the church in 1959. I personally believe that Criswell and those at the First Baptist Church of Dallas would know more than Wacker. When Jimmy Carter ran for President in 1976, Southern Baptists and those who claimed to be “born again,” were seen with suspicion from journalists. Consult James T. Baker, *A Southern Baptist in the White House* (Philadelphia, PA: 1977). Because Rogers was a key player in moving the SBC to the right politically and his, as well as other Southern Baptist leaders favorable opinion of President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), I argue that Rogers was more influential to bringing Southern Baptists to national attention than either Billy Graham or Jimmy Carter.



issue. Rogers dominated the discussions and ultimately steered the committee's reports in support of inerrancy between 1986 and 1988.<sup>2</sup>

Second, not only did Rogers's leadership in the SBC help to emphasize Biblical inerrancy, he also increased attendance and grew membership at Bellevue Baptist. As a result, the church relocated from midtown Memphis, the area immediately adjacent to downtown, to Cordova, Tennessee, a suburb of Memphis. When Rogers first came to Bellevue in 1972, he described the predominantly white, elderly congregation as “. . . looking at a snowstorm.”<sup>3</sup> When the church relocated to the suburbs in 1989, they settled on a 376 acre site with a building of approximately 702,000 square feet. Rogers's vision and leadership brought in young families and built a tremendous future for Bellevue Baptist Church.<sup>4</sup>

Third, in 1985, after members of his congregation persuaded him to launch a larger television and radio ministry, Rogers started “Word for the World” which eventually became “Love Worth Finding” (LWF) in 1987.<sup>5</sup> By 2003, LWF had a 21,000 square foot facility where it processed over 1.1 million pieces of mail annually, had more than forty employees, and made over 170,000 audio cassettes each year. That same year, Rogers was inducted into the National Religious Broadcasters Hall of Fame.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, ten years after Rogers's death, LWF appeared on

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Martin Jacumin, “A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee, 1985-1987” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Randall Balmer, *Grant Us Courage: Travels Along the Mainline of American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 85.

<sup>4</sup> Cyndi Richardson, *By His Grace and for His Glory: Celebrating a Century with Bellevue Baptist Church* (Memphis, TN: Bellevue Baptist Church, 2003), 258.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 265-267, 274.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 275-276.

11,000 television outlets weekly and had 2,300 radio programs on stations around the world daily.<sup>7</sup>

At first glance, Rogers's involvement with the SBC, the leadership at Bellevue Baptist Church, and the work of LWF seem disconnected. However, all three elements revolve around Rogers's preaching. If Rogers was not a great preacher, he would not have been able to gather support for the Patterson-Pressler coalition nor increase the membership at Bellevue Baptist. As a result, this thesis argues, all three demonstrate that Rogers was a builder. He laid a foundation for biblical inerrancy within the Southern Baptist Convention, something seminary professors and convention employees must adhere to for employment. Upon that foundation, Rogers built up Bellevue Baptist Church and finally put an antenna atop that structure to broadcast God's Word in his preaching across the country and then the world.

One reason that Rogers preached the Bible so strongly might have been his own need for certainty. Born in West Palm Beach, Florida, September 12, 1931, Rogers was the third of four children.<sup>8</sup> Before mid-way through high school, Rogers was not a great student. He cheated on assignments and tests, used foul language, disobeyed his parents, and got into fights at school. Rogers became a Christian at fourteen years of age when Evangelist Fred Brown preached in his hometown at the Northwood Baptist Church. One night during the revival meeting, Adren Rogers, Adrian's father, walked down the aisle to make a confession of faith. When Adrian saw what was happening, he followed. Even though Rogers became a Christian that night, he was not certain of his salvation. He fell back into old behavior patterns and struggled for two years until one night, on his way home from church, he got down on his knees at the corner of 39<sup>th</sup> and

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<sup>7</sup> Bob Dawkins, interview with author, July 20, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Rogers's parents spelled their son's name "Adrieen." Once he reached college, he changed his name to the more traditional spelling of Adrian. David Rogers, interview by author, July 20, 2015.

Calvin Avenue in West Palm Beach and prayed that if he was not a Christian, God would save him, and if he were a Christian, he would receive assurance from God.<sup>9</sup> Rogers said of the event, “What I did experience was feelings of release, relief, and commitment, and a sense that it was done and I need not look back on it anymore.”<sup>10</sup>

Rogers’s second test of his faith came when he matriculated to Stetson University, a Southern Baptist institution in Deland, Florida. Rogers attended there because the school gave him a football scholarship and his girlfriend, Joyce Louise Gentry, planned to attend the university. Although the school told future pastors not to major in religion (they could focus on that in seminary), Rogers nevertheless majored in religion. He eventually discovered that his professors taught neo-orthodoxy.<sup>11</sup> In his book, *The Incredible Power of Kingdom Authority*, Rogers mentioned what he learned in one of his religion classes. An unnamed professor asserted that there were three major theological camps. The first was “fun-damn-mentalists.” The professor said that they had too much fun, too much damn, and not enough mental. Rogers said, after hearing that, he did not want to be one of them. The second group that the professor mentioned was modernists. He said that modernism jettisoned the beliefs that held Christianity back in the modern age and kept the “vital” truths. The final group that Rogers’s professor mentioned was neo-orthodoxy, which was a compromise between fundamentalism and modernism. Christians could dismiss the miracles of the Bible, but still hold onto the tenets that modernists rejected. After that lecture, Rogers said that he thought that neo-orthodoxy was the

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<sup>9</sup> Joyce Rogers, *Love Worth Finding: The Life of Adrian Rogers and His Philosophy of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 8-9, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-4

best fit for him.<sup>12</sup> However, over time, Rogers gained a better understanding of neo-orthodoxy and commented:

It began as a reaction to modern liberalism. It responded to the liberal emphasis that Jesus was only an enlightened man by emphasizing the sovereignty of God and his difference with man. It was a sort of a “halfway” house between abject liberalism and Bible belief. It teaches that the *Bible is not the objective Word of God* because God cannot be known by mere human words. Rather, the Bible is a channel through which men may encounter God.<sup>13</sup>

Along the way, Rogers had to decide for himself whether his professors were correct and the Bible was what they said it was, or the Bible was correct and what his professors taught was incorrect. Rogers launched his own independent examination on the issue. His study was so extensive, and involved so much time that Joyce told him that if he was not careful, he could flunk out of college. When Rogers finished his investigation, he determined that the Bible was “inerrant” and his professors were wrong.<sup>14</sup>

Rogers’ third answer for certainty came when his third child, Philip Gentry, died of “crib death” after only a few months of life in 1958.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after the death of his son, Rogers visited a man in the hospital. The man asked him, “Are you still serving God after what He did to you?” Rogers told the man that he was indeed; Rogers believed that God was not the cause of sickness

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<sup>12</sup> Adrian Rogers, *The Incredible Power of Kingdom Authority: Getting an Upper Hand on the Underworld* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 117-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. Italics in the original.

<sup>14</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 24. After digging deeper into this point, I was unable to ascertain whether Rogers knew this term going into college or if he learned it during his independent study. I tried reaching out to Joe Boatright, a friend of Rogers during his days at Stetson and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, but did not hear back from him. I emailed Joyce Rogers concerning Rogers’s knowledge of the term “inerrancy” but she did not recall when he learned the term. Joyce Rogers, email to author, November 1, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> By this time, Rogers graduated from Stetson. He dropped his football scholarship to focus on serving God. While in college, he pastored the First Baptist Church of Fellsmere, Florida. Fellsmere is 150 southeast of Deland, and between Cape Canaveral and Miami. After graduation, he attended New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and graduated in January 1958. Philip was the Rogers’s third child. Their two oldest, Stephen Michael (born February 26, 1954) and Gayle Christine (born June 16, 1956) were born earlier. Rogers was the pastor at the First Baptist Church of Fort Pierce, Florida when Philip died.

or death, but the Devil. He believed that Satan introduced sin into the world and death was the end result of sin for humanity. It was only through Christ that man could ultimately defeat Satan.<sup>16</sup> Although this tragedy might have derailed the faith of some, the Rogers family turned to God in their time of sorrow. They were encouraged by the words of II Corinthians 1:3-4 that proclaims, “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.”<sup>17</sup> As a result of this testing, Rogers was confident in his faith and the accuracy of the Bible because He trusted God’s promises over those of humanity.

Rogers first gained attention from Southern Baptists nationally when he was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Merritt Island, Florida, ten miles south of the Kennedy Space Center. Not only did the church experience impressive numerical growth under his leadership (discussed in chapter two), he also made a motion at the Florida Baptist Convention against Stetson in 1966 in hopes that the state convention would defund the university. Although his motion did not pass, he gained recognition as a conservative among Florida Baptists.<sup>18</sup>

In the 2005 biography of her husband, Joyce Rogers mentioned men who indirectly influenced Rogers as a pastor. Robert Greene Lee, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church from 1927 to 1960, and W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas from 1944 to 1990 were those men. However, probably the most interesting man who influenced Rogers was John R.

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<sup>16</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 49-58.

<sup>17</sup> II Corinthians 1:3-4 reads, “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.” King James Version.

<sup>18</sup> “Florida Convention Denies Stetson Federal Aid,” *Biblical Recorder* Cary (North Carolina), November 26, 1966. Accessed through the Z. Smith Reynolds Library, Wake Forest University.

Rice, editor of the newspaper *The Sword of the Lord*. Rogers said that he “devoured” Rice’s book *Prayer, Asking and Receiving*. Rogers wrote to Rice, “At that time [1960-1980], John Rice was criticized and looked down on by denominational leaders because he was an independent and not afraid to critique the denomination in areas where criticism was justified.”<sup>19</sup> According to historian Keith Bates, Rogers told Rice in a letter, “I suppose, Dr. Rice, that you have had as great an influence upon my life as any other man, living or dead.”<sup>20</sup> Not only did Rogers minister near the nation’s space capital, but he also earned a reputation as an inerrantist which served him well as a Southern Baptists builder.

The previous literature on the life and ministry of Adrian Rogers falls into two categories. First are Ph.D. or Th.D. dissertations that focus on Rogers’s homiletic methods. A. Timothy Hight’s Th.D dissertation examines the preaching of Adrian Rogers, Charles Stanley, and Jerry Vines. Hight chose each man because they pastored very large and conservative churches.<sup>21</sup> Michael Pete Montalbano, a former student at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary (MABTS), compares Robert G. Lee, Ramsey Pollard, and Adrian Rogers.<sup>22</sup> Ricky Cummings, a former Ph.D. student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote his dissertation on the

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in D. Keith Bates, “Moving Fundamentalism Towards the Mainstream: John R. Rice and the Reengagement of America’s Religious and Political Cultures” (Ph.D. diss., Kansas State University, 2006), 267-8. ProQuest Theses & Dissertations.

<sup>21</sup> A. Timothy Hight, “A Comparative Homiletical Analysis of Selected Southern Baptist Convention Presidents From 1979 Through 1989,” (Th.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991), 1, 3-4, accessed June 1, 2016. Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Pete Montalbano, “A Critical Comparison of the Preaching of Robert G. Lee, Ramsey Pollard, and Adrian Rogers,” (Th.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993), 1. Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. Robert G. Lee was pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church from 1927 to 1960. Pollard, Rogers immediate predecessor, pastored the church from 1960 to 1972.

evangelistic content of Rogers's preaching from the Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> John Derrick Yelton, in his Doctor of Ministry dissertation, focused on the evangelist content of Rogers's sermons. Yelton argued that Rogers viewed everything that he did as an evangelist, while previous scholars had only focused on Rogers's preaching philosophy and methodology.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Joshua David Bonner's Doctorate of Ministry dissertation focuses on the role of conservative preaching during the SBC inerrancy controversy. Bonner was correct when he asserted that "The struggle for control of the SBC was really about answering one question— Is the Word of God true? Is it trustworthy? Is it authoritative? Is it inspired? Ultimately is it *inerrant*?" Bonner's claim is true, but his focus goes beyond Rogers. Although he examines Rogers's 1980 SBC presidential sermons, explored in chapter one, he also explores sermons by two other SBC conservative leaders.<sup>25</sup>

Although most of the dissertations are about Rogers's preaching, two break the mold. Mark Thompson's dissertation paints Rogers as a leader within the SBC inerrancy controversy, an honorable preacher fighting to maintain the truth, a claim many of his opponents, but not all, would disagree with. However, Thompson's analysis of Rogers, although well done on many fronts, does not go far enough in recognizing what Rogers really was; a builder.<sup>26</sup> Charles Martin

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<sup>23</sup> Ricky C. Cummings, "A Critical Examination of the Old Testament Evangelistic Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers," (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 5-8. Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

<sup>24</sup> John Derrick Yelton, "The Evangelical Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers," (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 2, 4. Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua David Bonner, "An Examination in the Role of Preaching in the Conservative Resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention," (D. Min. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 1, 7-8. Italics in original. Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Thompson, "The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention," (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015). 144. Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Jacumin's dissertation is the first critical examination of the SBC Peace Committee, not focused solely on Rogers, but his work provides valuable insight into the inter-workings of the committee and its meetings.<sup>27</sup>

Second, most of the literature on the SBC inerrancy (I will briefly explain the historiography in chapter one) looks at Rogers as the primary figure, but a subordinate of Patterson and Pressler. Furthermore, most academics would argue that Rogers was not a builder, but a participant in the destruction of the SBC as it was. As Historian Bill J. Leonard maintained in his book on the inerrancy controversy, Southern Baptist infighting during the 1980s was a fragmentation that should have happened decades before. However, what Leonard called a Grand Compromise, made sure neither forces on the right or the left could take over the convention.<sup>28</sup>

According to Leonard, two groups emerged in the SBC in the 1980s. He insisted,

Fundamentalists describe the more liberal moderates as “snakes,” skunks,” and “termites” at work within the Southern Baptist house to destroy faith and undermine the veracity of the Word of God. Moderates view fundamentalists as “totalitarians,” “hit-men,” and “super-apostles,” determined to overturn denominational freedom, trust and cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jacumin, “A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee, 1985-1987,” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008). Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

<sup>28</sup> Bill J. Leonard, *God's Last & Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 8. Leonard wrote on that same page about the Grand Compromise, “. . . ideologues on the right or the left were not allowed to control the center. Southern identity, denominational loyalty and a sense of universal mission combined to create an institution built on compromise and motivated by the rhetoric of pietistic, populist triumphalism. Theology was defined narrowly enough to establish common Baptist identity, but broadly enough to include a variety of historical interpretations relating to faith and practice.”

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, x.



Carl Kell and L. Raymond Camp, both professors of rhetoric, viewed the battle over inerrancy as the rhetoric of exclusion.<sup>30</sup>

These images do not paint a picture of a builder, but rather a destroyer. However, that assessment is wrong because the SBC did not decline during the inerrancy controversy. In fact, the SBC continued to grow numerically. From 1979 to 1990, membership within the SBC went from 13,379,073 to 15,044,413, an increase of 8.9%.<sup>31</sup> And even when Southern Baptist moderates, to be defined in chapter one, formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991, many of its churches still had a dual affiliation with and gave money to the SBC.<sup>32</sup> As a result, I would argue that Rogers was a builder and not part of a demolition crew.

Unlike an architect who designs a plan on paper, a builder oversees the construction of a structure in the real world. Although *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture* indicates that the distinction between architecture and building is no longer recognized, this study separates the two.<sup>33</sup> As this thesis demonstrates, Professor Paige Patterson and Judge Paul Pressler designed the “architectural plans” for the conservative resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention and recruited others to take part in this movement. The builder they chose, Adrian Rogers, was the most important man to the success of the Patterson-Pressler coalition. Rogers even wrote that if he had not been preacher, he would either have been an

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<sup>30</sup> Carl Kell and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>31</sup> J. Clifton Tharp Jr., *Standing Out of Sight: A History of Denominational Statistics in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1882-2009* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2010), 127-8.

<sup>32</sup> Aaron Douglas Weaver, email to author, August 5, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> John Fleming, Hugh Honour, and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture*, 5th ed. (New York: Penguin Publishing, 1998), 22.

attorney or an architect.<sup>34</sup> Historian Walter B. Shurden, former professor of church history at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) contended that the Patterson-Pressler coalition would not have won without Rogers’s ability to communicate with the Southern Baptist masses and call them to action.<sup>35</sup>

Rogers’s ability to articulate his theological view, both within the SBC and his radio ministry, led Billy Graham to refer to him as the Prince of Preachers.<sup>36</sup> Jerry Vines, former pastor of the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, referred to Rogers as “old golden throat.”<sup>37</sup> Former Southern Baptist Preacher Joel Gregory described Rogers as “Tall, Hollywood-handsome, with a voice like a brass register of a rumbling pipe organ, and possessed of a lightning-fast, intuitive mind . . . .”<sup>38</sup> These abilities made him an excellent spokesperson for conservative Southern Baptists. He had a seat on the Religious Roundtable, a conservative political group similar to the Moral Majority created by Ed McAteer (d. 2004), a former Colgate salesperson and member of Bellevue Baptist Church.<sup>39</sup> In 1981, Rogers testified before the Orrin Hatch committee against abortion because of his position as SBC president in 1979, and the

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<sup>34</sup> Adrian Rogers, *The Secret of Supernatural Living* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), 9.

<sup>35</sup> Walter B. Shurden, “Introduction,” ed. Walter B. Shurden, *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), xxix.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 137.

<sup>37</sup> Jerry Vines, *Vines: My Life and Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2014), 111.

<sup>38</sup> Joel Gregory, *Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America’s Super Church* (Fort Worth, TX: The Summit Group, 1994), 229.

<sup>39</sup> James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Dallas, TX: Criterion, 1986), 105.

committee recognized him as the representative of Southern Baptists.<sup>40</sup> He also supported the right of students to pray in public schools. As SBC president in 1986, he was present when President Reagan signed the 1987 National Day of Prayer Proclamation on December 22, 1986.<sup>41</sup> Rogers also flew on Air Force One from Washington D. C., to Memphis, Tennessee on November 22, 1989, at the invitation of President George H. W. Bush.<sup>42</sup> In 1992, Rogers, along with fourteen alumni from his high school were inducted in the West Palm Beach High School hall of fame. Actors Burt Reynolds and George Hamilton were among their number. Over the course of his lifetime, Rogers also received six honorary degrees.<sup>43</sup> With all of Rogers's honors and accolades, in many ways he brought respect, or at least recognition, among the convention's critics that the Southern Baptists were a powerful force within American culture.

Although Rogers's involvement within the SBC has been well documented, the growth at Bellevue Baptist Church and its move as well as the ministry of LWF are more obscure, at least from an academic standpoint. As this thesis unfolds, it will examine the three areas mentioned above concerning Rogers's life and ministry and his expert ability to build. Perhaps the most impact Rogers had during his life was in the fight within the SBC during the 1980s, a battle that

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<sup>40</sup> Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Committee on the Judiciary, HRG-1981-SJS-0090. Constitutional Amendment Relating to Abortion Vol. 1. 97th Cong. 1st session, 481. Obtained through ProQuest Congressional.

<sup>41</sup> "Public Signing of the 1987 National Day of Prayer Proclamation," Bellevue Baptist Church Archives. Box 3, folder 101.316.

<sup>42</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 114.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 39. The six schools from which Rogers received honorary doctorates were: Trinity College in Dunedin, Florida (1972), California Graduate School of Theology in Garden Grove, California, (1979), Toccoa Falls College in Toccoa Falls, Georgia (1984), Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Missouri, (1985), Hannibal LaGrange College in Hannibal, Missouri, (1985), and Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, (2003).

not only ended in victory for the conservatives, but determined the future course of the convention.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Rogers died unexpectedly in 2005. In June he announced to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention that he had colon cancer. Although doctors removed the portion of his colon where the cancerous polyps were, the cancer had already spread to his liver. Roger was optimistic that, even with chemotherapy, he would be preaching in some capacity for many years to come (Like his predecessors, he planned to remain a member of Bellevue Baptist Church). However, in November, Rogers's condition deteriorated. He developed pneumonia in both lungs as a result of the chemotherapy he received for his cancer. He died November 15, 2005. Yelton, "The Evangelical Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers," 63-4. When Jimmy Draper, then president of LifeWay Christian Resources and a longtime friend of Rogers, learned of Rogers's death, he found a place to be alone and wept. Jimmy Draper, Telephone interview with author, May 19, 2015. Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority said of Rogers's passing, "A might oak has fallen in God's forest, and personally, I've lost one of my dear friends." Cited in Thompson, "The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention," 1. Rogers's death was front page news in *The Commercial Appeal*, the major newspaper of Memphis. The paper reported that Rogers's successor, Steve Gaines, visited Rogers the night before he died and he had told Gaines that he was at peace. James Dowd and Tom Bailey Jr., "Baptist beacon: Magnetic preacher led thousands to Bellevue; shaped national church doctrine," *The Commercial Appeal* Memphis (Tennessee), November 16, 2005. Ten thousand mourners attended Rogers's funeral. The 7,000 seat sanctuary could not hold all of them, the remainder watched the service in other rooms around the church equipped with video feed. Speakers at the service included James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, Jerry Vines, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, and the Rogers children.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE DEVOTED BUILDER:

#### ADRIAN ROGERS'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION, 1979-2000

In June of 1979, W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, and a man Adrian Rogers admired, declared, “We will have a great time here, if for no other reason than to elect Adrian Rogers as our president.” Those in attendance clapped heartily.<sup>1</sup> Historian Walter Shurden believed that Criswell’s words brought an end to the convention as it had been. Shurden wrote, “Those apparently casual, throw-away words by W. A. Criswell during the introductory comments . . . brought the SBC house down with cheers and applause. More pessimistic observers would simply say those words brought the SBC house down!”<sup>2</sup> Bill Leonard, a former historian at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) agreed with Shurden’s assessment. Leonard believed that the SBC could decline as easily from a more conservative position as it could from a moderate position.<sup>3</sup> Although it is outside of this chapter to analyze the current state of the SBC, Rogers’s actions within the SBC did not stop the upward numerical growth of the SBC as his critics suggested.<sup>4</sup> This chapter argues that Rogers was the

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<sup>1</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, the Pastors Conference energized the conservative base during the SBC inerrancy controversy.

<sup>2</sup> Walter B. Shurden, *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 1995), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 179. Leonard’s claims that the SBC would decline in 1990 did not come to pass. The SBC continued to add new members until 2003 when it reached a high of 16,315,050 in 2003. Consult J. Clifton Tharp, Jr., *Standing Out of Sight*, 128. By 2014, membership in the SBC stood at 15,499,173. This was a decline of five percent from the 2003 high. Consult John Mark Yeats, “More than Fifteen Million Southern Baptists? Recovering Regenerative Church Membership,” In *The SBC and the 21st Century: Reflection, Renewal & Recommitment*, ed. Jason K. Allen (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2016), 95.

<sup>4</sup> A possible explanation for the decline of SBC membership in recent years might have to do with a group called the non-affiliated. Sometimes called the “nones,” this group is composed of atheists and agnostics, but the

builder for the plan that “architects” Patterson and Pressler designed for inerrancy within the SBC. His actions as SBC President in 1979, especially his convention sermons in 1980 as well as his decision to refuse a second term at the time, helped the inerrantist movement begin a ten year run that culminated in a way for Rogers and the Patterson-Pressler Coalition. In addition, Rogers’s actions on the SBC Peace Committee and his leadership role on the Baptist Faith and Message (BMF) 2000 Committee demonstrate that Rogers was a builder within the SBC. To fully understand what Rogers and his inerrantist colleagues fought for, it is essential to examine some of Rogers’s theological beliefs.

### Defining Key Terms

While lengthy, this section is essential to understanding what follows, not only from a historical context, but also because the terms defined determined how each faction in the SBC inerrancy controversy understood one another. At the heart of the vicissitude was the Bible. Most Protestants believe in “Biblical authority.” Scholar Hugh McDonald wrote, “The authority of the

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vast majority of them would classify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” In 2012, this group made up 20% of the total United States population. Not only that, while this group is made up of a majority of people who see themselves as aligned with the Democratic party, a growing number of them are now Republicans. According to the Pew study, there are four reasons why this group now commands prominent influence within the United States. First, the rise of the Religious Right is one explanation. Since the 1980s, many who identify themselves as non-affiliated believe that churches are more concerned about money and power than they should be. Second, Pew asserts that the rise of the non-affiliated might have to do with people getting married later in life. Third, Pew asserts that another reason for the rise of the “nones” could be social disengagement. People promoting this argument claim that Americans are not participating in as many communal gatherings as they did in the past such as attending church. Scholar Robert Putnam described this phenomenon as “bowling alone.” Fourth, the secularization theory postulates that with industrialization and technological development, societies become more secular and less religious. This theory became popular during the 1960s. In recent years, advocates of this position are more subtle. They argue that nations which experience hardships such as famine, are more religious while those with economic stability are less religious. As a result, the secularization theory states that the more secular a society becomes, the better it is for humanity. The problem with this theory, at least historically, is that the United States has been an exception to the rule.

Bible is established by its own claims.”<sup>5</sup> Because the Bible testifies of Jesus Christ, Christians, and Protestants in particular, believe that the Bible is authoritative.

Infallibility builds on the concept of biblical authority. Theologian and inerrantist J. I. Packer argued that “Infallibility signifies the full trustworthiness [of the Bible] . . . that is not deceived and does not deceive.” He indicated that confessional statements, used by Christians to frame their doctrinal beliefs based on the Bible for millennia, have used the word “infallible,” or implied it through the language in confessions.<sup>6</sup> However, Scholar Millard J. Erickson, a former professor at Baylor, wrote that while infallibility is “. . . un failing in its purpose. . . . In some usages of the term, the Bible’s authority may be restricted to matters of salvation.”<sup>7</sup>

Inerrancy is a form of infallibility, inerrantists (those who adheres to inerrancy) believe that the Bible does not contain error, however, they also believe that the Bible is accurate when it speaks on the origins of humanity as well as science. Southern Baptists, like Adrian Rogers, believed in what Erickson referred to as “Absolute Inerrancy,” the idea that the Bible speaks clearly and decisively on all subjects and it is trustworthy in every area whether it be seven-day creation or miracles.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hugh Dermot McDonald, “Bible, Authority of,” ed. Walter Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 154.

<sup>6</sup> J. I. Packer, “Infallibility and Inerrancy of the Bible,” eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson & David F. Wright, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 337.

<sup>7</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 100

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, note there is a doctrine called “Limited Inerrancy” that states that inerrancy is limited in certain areas. The definition between “Limited Inerrancy” and “Infallibility” are extremely similar, although, according to Erickson, inerrancy can limit parts of salvation. In Erickson’s more complete work on theology, Erickson himself defines absolute inerrancy listed above, but based on his account, Erickson seems to doubt absolute inerrancy. Erickson wrote, “Thus, apparent discrepancies can and must be explained. For example, the description of the molten sea in 2 Chronicles 4:2 indicates that its diameter was 10 cubits while the circumference was 30 cubits. However, as we all know, the circumference of a circle is  $\pi$  (3.14159) times the diameter. If, as the biblical text says,

Inerrancy is a tenant of fundamentalism, a movement that started in the late nineteenth century. Fundamentalism was a reaction to liberal belief and a defense of orthodox Christian doctrines. In 1910, the General Assembly of the Northern Presbyterian Church formulated five key doctrines that most fundamentalists believe in some form today; that the Bible is inerrant, that Christ was born of a virgin, that Christ died on the cross for the sins of humanity, that Christ was resurrected on the third day, and that Christ performed miracles.<sup>9</sup>

Although fundamentalists are concerned with right belief, there is also a connotative definition that describes their personality traits. Historian George Marsden, a leading expert on fundamentalism, argued that fundamentalists, especially during the 1920s, were “. . . evangelical Christians, close to the traditions of the dominant American revivalist establishment of the nineteenth century, who in the twentieth century militantly opposed both modernism in theology and the cultural changes that modernism endorsed.”<sup>10</sup> Fundamentalists eventually separated themselves from the Protestant establishment or Mainline Denominations that gained acceptance in society at large.<sup>11</sup> Since the 1920s, fundamentalist, in society at large, is a word for a militant,

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the molten sea was circular, there is a discrepancy here, and an explanation must be given.” Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 191.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy P. Weber, “Fundamentalism,” ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 463.

<sup>10</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>11</sup> George Marsden, *Twilight of the Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xxvii. The 1950s was the last decade of growth for the Mainline Christian churches. The term took its name from a main rail line that ran through Philadelphia. It connotes churches that are part of the “Protestant Establishment.” Mainline churches consist of the Episcopal Church, Congregationalists, and certain kinds of Presbyterian churches. For the sake of this study, I include the United Methodist Church (which gained that name in 1968 when the Methodist Church and Evangelical United Brethren united), the Disciples of Christ (it does not see itself as a denomination, rather, the group refers to themselves as “Christians”; nevertheless, they are usually seen by outsiders as a denomination), Evangelical Lutheran Church (formed in 1987 out of American Lutheran Church Lutheran Church in America, and Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches), and the Presbyterian Church USA. Some Baptist groups are part of the Mainline churches, but many are not. The American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. (formerly known as Northern Baptists) are part of this group because some of their churches accepted



bigoted individual, who wants to restrain the moral freedoms of others. As a result, Historian Joel Carpenter maintained, “But fundamentalism, even apart from its popular misuse as a synonym for bigotry, fanaticism, or anti-intellectualism, is an elusive term. The problem is that *fundamentalist*, like *puritan*, has become a word of wide usage and immense symbolic power.”<sup>12</sup> Fundamentalism can mean anything from anti-intellectualism to pre-millennialism (the idea that the world will continue to decline morally until Christ returns), to the inerrancy of the Bible. Perhaps the most succinct cultural definition comes from Marsden, who asserted that a fundamentalist is an “. . . evangelical who is angry about something.”<sup>13</sup>

Based on the denotative and connotative definitions, many would—and have—described the winning party in the SBC Controversy as fundamentalists. Marsden even termed Adrian Rogers a fundamentalist.<sup>14</sup> Rogers, on the other hand, did not view himself that way because he believed that society had misused the term over the years. In his book, *The Incredible Power of Kingdom Authority*, arguably Rogers’s best work, he insisted,

I hesitate to use the word *fundamentalist* because it conjures up ugly images in most people’s minds. Plus, the word has lost much of its original meaning. Today, most people caricature a fundamentalist Christian as someone who is rigid, hate-filled, arrogant, and fanatical. Of course, if that’s what it means to be a fundamentalist, count me out.<sup>15</sup>

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theological liberalism and experienced numerical declines like the other churches listed above. Consult Leland E. Wilshire, “Mainline Churches,” ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 700-1; Constant H. Jacquet, Jr., ed. *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 1990* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 262-3; Craig D. Atwood, Frank S. Mead, and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* 13th ed (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 106.

<sup>12</sup> Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> George M. Marsden, email to author, February 25, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Rogers, *The Incredible Power of Kingdom Authority: Getting an Upper Hand on the Underworld* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 119.

Rogers compared what he believed to a football player practicing the fundamentals of the game of football. Rogers asked, “Have you ever heard a sportscaster criticize an athlete for being a fundamentalist? It’s all right for football—just not for Christianity, it would seem.” Ultimately, Rogers claimed that if someone called him a fundamentalist because he believed in the inerrancy of the Bible, he was fine with that. He personally believed that the word “fundamentalist” had “. . . been so tarnished and distorted and loaded with baggage that I now just refer to myself as a Bible-believing Christian.”<sup>16</sup>

Baptists of every stripe are prone to fight over anything from theological beliefs to how they view church membership. Shurden eloquently wrote, “Baptists were born in the bosom of radicalism! They are born fighters because they were born fighting.”<sup>17</sup> Before the SBC inerrancy controversy, Baptists fought for religious freedom and slavery. Southern Baptists in particular fought about when their origins began, whether parachurch organizations should send out missionaries or only the local church, how to relate to non-Baptists, and almost everything in between. In light of their historical past, it is not surprising that Southern Baptists launched into a massive fight; however, this battle over the Bible was probably the largest imbroglio that Southern Baptists have been through before or since.

Not only did Southern Baptists fight about the nature of the Bible, they also fought over what to call themselves. Most scholars acknowledge that nearly all Southern Baptists were conservative, but once they began fighting over inerrancy, two groups emerged. The Patterson-Pressler coalition preferred the term “conservative.” Journalist James C. Hefley defined

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>17</sup> Shurden, *Not a Silent People*, 1.

conservatives as inerrantists. He wrote, “They believe divine inspiration protected the Biblical writers from error of any form, historical, scientific, doctrinal, theological, or philosophical.”<sup>18</sup>

Leonard, a critic of the Patterson-Pressler coalition, referred to conservatives as “fundamentalists” and strict inerrantists. He contended,

. . . the term ‘fundamentalist’ refers to those persons within the Southern Baptist Convention who accept a doctrine of biblical inerrancy as the only method of defining biblical authority and who seek to participate in a concerted movement to make that doctrine normative, particularly for those employed by convention-supported agencies and institutions.<sup>19</sup>

According to Leonard, that meant “fundamentalists,” to use his term, wanted to creedalize inerrancy on all Southern Baptists.

The party that lost during the SBC Controversy described themselves as moderates. Hefley defined moderates as those who believed “. . . the Bible speaks to truth, it is without error, though scientifically or historically it may be incorrect.”<sup>20</sup> Hefley most likely meant that moderates might not believe in the accuracy of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Moderates were broad and diverse in their beliefs. Although some of them might believe in inerrancy, many of them did not. According to Leonard, “Some have been influenced by such theological movements as neo-orthodoxy and the social gospel . . . Their primary goal is to affirm what they view as traditional Baptist doctrine . . . missions, evangelism, soul competency, and religious freedom—while resisting fundamentalist doctrine.”<sup>21</sup> Most conservatives, like Rogers, referred

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<sup>18</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Leonard, *God’s Last & Only Hope*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 14-5.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard, *God’s Last & Only Hope*, 7.

to moderates as “liberals.” With this in mind, this chapter now turns towards the SBC Controversy.

### Background on the SBC Inerrancy Controversy

The SBC Controversy is the most documented event in the life of Adrian Rogers and perhaps that of the Southern Baptist Convention. The scholarship on Southern Baptist infighting from 1979 to 1990 falls under two different historiographical interpretations. The first is the moderate interpretation, which explains the inerrantist, or conservative victory, as a reaction to loosening moral standards and the rise of liberalism in the 1960s.<sup>22</sup> The second is the conservative interpretation, by those who prevailed in the SBC Controversy, which has a much smaller body of scholarship regarding their victory. The two main conservative proponents argue

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<sup>22</sup> This interpretation by far encompasses the largest portion of the literature. Because so many books and articles have been written from this perspective, only a few are worth noting. Bill Leonard argued that it was amazing that Southern Baptists did not divide before the late 1980s. He argued that Southern Baptists united around missions and that this “Grand Compromise” allowed for diversity within Southern Baptist belief large enough to encompass conservatives (who he calls fundamentalists) and moderates. Historian Walter B. Shurden, formerly at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, before he joined the faculty at Mercer updated his book on Southern Baptist infighting to cover what he called the Southern Baptist “Fundamentalist-Modernist” controversy. Shurden argued that Southern Baptists have argued about almost everything through their history and that the biblical inerrantists in the 1980s almost brought the Southern Baptist house down. *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Company Inc., 1995). Sociologist Nancy Tatom Ammerman examined Southern Baptists based on their educational and socio-economic background to determine where they stood in the 1980s. She found that Southern Baptists with higher levels of education tended to support the moderates while those with less education supported the conservatives. On top of that, conservatives tended to be younger than their moderate counterparts. *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, paperback ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). David T. Morgan, who was sympathetic to the moderate side in the controversy argued that Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson were not the first ones to attempt to organize Biblical inerrantists within the SBC, rather it was North Carolina Pastor M. O. Owens and William Powell, a resident of Chicago. Other than his first section on these two men, his work follows a rather standard cultural argument *The New Crusades, The New Holy Lands: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1969-1991* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1996). Historian Barry Hankins’s work, although different from the bulk of the cultural literature, examines conservative Southern Baptist views on the culture. Once Southern Baptists were comfortable in their cultural Zion, but by the late twentieth century, Southern Baptists believed that the South had become too liberal and that they needed to stand up against government “encroachment” such as banning prayer from schools and allowing abortion. *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2002). For more on the historiography of the Southern Baptist controversy consult Barry Hankins, “History Is Written By The Losers: A Case Study in Historiographical and Religious Conflict” *Fides et Historia* 3 (Fall 1997); Barry Hankins, “Southern Baptists and the F-Word: A Historiography of the Southern Baptist Convention Controversy and What It Might Mean,” In *Through a Glass Darkly: Contested Notions of Baptist Identity*, ed. Keith Harper (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2012).

that the embroilment was not about a reaction to the secular liberal culture of the 1960s, but rather a “reformation” or course correction to steer Southern Baptists back to their “historical” roots. This scholarship maintains that Southern Baptists have always believed in inerrancy, whether or not such a term existed at the time.<sup>23</sup>

The SBC inerrancy controversy really began in June of 1961 when Ralph Elliott, then a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, published a book entitled *The Message of Genesis*. He argued that the first eleven chapters of Genesis were allegorical. His claim angered many Southern Baptists.<sup>24</sup> At the 1962 convention held in San Francisco, messengers voted to form a committee to update and revise the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message (BFM). Herschel Hobbs, then pastor of the First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, chaired this committee. The 1963 BFM committee confirmed the 1925 BFM statement on scripture. However, the phrase “. . . truth, without mixture of error, for its matter. . .” became a sticking point. Inerrantists insisted that this statement applied to all scripture. Moderates believed that the statement applied only to faith, not science or history.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Journalist James Hefley’s six volume works on the controversy with the SBC were the standard “conservative” works for quite some time. Hefley, a graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary eventually taught at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Hannibal, Missouri, a Baptist College where then president of the School Larry Lewis asked Hefley to write a work on the controversy. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 1986. Historian Jerry Sutton picked up where Hefley left off. Not only does Sutton provide more analysis and interact with the pro-moderate body of scholarship, he also analyzed events much more thoroughly than Hefley, even though he had a tendency to use excessive block quotes. *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Probably the most influential critic of Elliott’s book was K. Owen White, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Houston, Texas, and SBC president in 1964. White referred to it as “death in the pot . . . liberalism pure and simple . . .” Cited in Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> James Sullivan, then president of the Baptist Sunday School that ran Broadman Press, publisher of *The Message of Genesis*, had issues with some of the content in Elliott’s book. However, at the time, Broadman wanted to provide Southern Baptist seminaries with books published by the SBC. Before then, Southern Baptist seminaries purchased textbooks from other publishers. James T. Draper and John Perry, *LifeWay Legacy: A Personal History of LifeWay Christian Resources and the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 246-9.

The 1963 BFM did not settle the issue of inerrancy within the SBC. Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary ultimately dismissed Elliott, not because he taught that the first eleven chapters of Genesis were myth, but due to his efforts to re-publish his book with another press, an action that the trustees at Midwestern considered to be insubordination.<sup>26</sup>

Within six years of Elliott's dismissal, another dispute ensued over the nature of the Bible. At the 1969 convention in New Orleans, some Southern Baptist messengers were unhappy with the first volume of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* published by Broadman Press, the official Southern Baptist publisher. The section on Genesis, authored by scholar and British Baptist G. Henton Davies, treated the first eleven chapters of Genesis similar to Elliott's *The Message of Genesis*. In addition, Davies said that Abraham misheard God when he told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22).<sup>27</sup> James Sullivan, then president of the Baptist Sunday School Board, insisted that the commentary did not express the official view of the SBC, something inerrantists disagreed with because the press was the official publishing arm of the convention. The Sunday School Board asked Davies to revise his work. At the 1971 SBC annual meeting held in Saint Louis, Missouri, the convention voted to remove Davies's portion of the commentary from the Genesis/Exodus volume of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* (Roy Honeycutt authored the Exodus portion). Clyde T. Francisco, then a professor at SBTS, wrote the Genesis portion of the revised first volume. However, not everyone was happy with the improved commentary. Adrian Rogers, then pastor of First Baptist Church, Merritt Island, Florida, told the convention, "Let's not waste a lot of money rewriting something that will not be

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<sup>26</sup> Ralph H. Elliott, *The "Genesis Controversy" and Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992), 127-31.

<sup>27</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 54-5.

swallowed by Bible believers.” Rogers did not see the revision of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* as a victory for inerrantists. The revision ensured an uneasy peace, but that truce did not alleviate the misgivings of many inerrantists within the SBC.<sup>28</sup>

In the early 1970s, a group of pastors and laymen concerned with what they considered to be a liberal drift in the SBC, created the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship (BFMF). Led by William Powell, editor of the *Southern Baptist Journal*, the BFMF first met at the First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, pastored by Charles Stanley. The group held to the 1963 BFM’s statement on the Bible that declared it was, “. . . truth, without any mixture of error for its matter. . . .” which they interpreted as inerrancy. When Powell asked Rogers if the BFMF could use his name as a promotion tool for the BFMF, he agreed, even though he thought the move would prevent him from working in the SBC in the future.<sup>29</sup> During this time, Rogers even considered withdrawing Bellevue Baptist Church from the SBC because of what he perceived as the growth of liberalism in the convention. If the members of Bellevue did not want to break their ties with the SBC, he planned to resign rather than remain in a “liberal” body.<sup>30</sup>

Although the BFMF did not have much of an impact as a group, William Powell shared a plan with Paul Pressler, then an appellate court judge in Houston, Texas, about how inerrantists could gain influence in key posts of the SBC. In 1975, Pressler learned from Powell that if a group of likeminded men could control the SBC presidency, they could appoint inerrantists to various convention boards and agencies. Pressler used this knowledge and strategized with Paige

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<sup>28</sup> Cited in Mark Thompson, “The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 122; Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 58-9; Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 95-6.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, “The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” 117.

Patterson, then president of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies. This meeting led to an organized movement and a complex “architectural design” in which to rebuild and remodel the SBC. They eventually found their builder in Adrian Rogers.

### Rogers’s Presidencies

Rogers never pursued a leadership role within the SBC; others sought him out for the job. Rogers, then pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, initially did not want to be nominated as SBC president when Patterson and Pressler asked him. His wife, Joyce (Gentry), did not want him to be president. After praying about it the night before the election, Rogers said it would be okay if he were nominated. He won on the first ballot against five other candidates; an impressive feat. His election made him the president of the largest group of Protestants in the United States.<sup>31</sup>

According to H. Leon McBeth, when Rogers became SBC President, the office did not gain any new power. Rather, the president used his office in a new way when he selected certain types of trustees. Rogers’s appointment of inerrantists was the first time an SBC president used his assignment power to affect change in the convention.<sup>32</sup> Rogers ultimately initiated the plan that Patterson and Pressler drew up. Rogers built Patterson and Pressler’s plan in the convention and Rogers’s successors ultimately solidified it.

One of the smartest decisions Rogers made within the Patterson-Pressler coalition was his “strategic” decision to refuse a second term in 1980. His detractors said that he refused a second

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<sup>31</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> H. Leon McBeth, “Patterns of SBC Presidential Authority,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 2 (Summer 1996): 20. The SBC President is mostly an honorary title. The president does not have a special office in the SBC headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee, nor does he (there has never been a woman president) receive a salary from the convention for his service. The power of the president comes through his appointment to boards and agencies. R. Albert Mohler, preface to *The Sacred Trust: Sketches of the Southern Baptist Convention President* by Emir Caner and Ergun Caner (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers), ix.



term because it would be harder to elect an inerrantist at the 1981 convention in Los Angeles, a location outside the inerrantist base. Hefley reported that Rogers refused a second term because he wanted to spend more time with his family.<sup>33</sup> Joyce Rogers wrote that after her husband had his gallbladder removed, he refused a second term while recovering in the hospital.<sup>34</sup> Rogers's opponents said his move was political, an assessment that Historian Bill Leonard agreed with when he wrote,

I have no doubt that his decision not to seek a second consecutive term as SBC president was due to the political advice of the 'group' and the desire to save him in case they needed a big win in order to hold 'moderates' at bay one last time. It was an insightful decision. But I don't know his actual motives for that decision. I suspect it was such a move however.<sup>35</sup>

Leonard's thoughts on Rogers came with hindsight. His opponents accused him of playing politics, but no one will ever know for certain.<sup>36</sup>

One thing is for certain; Rogers's 1980 convention sermon illustrated how he saw the issue of inerrancy and his views about the growing conflict within the SBC. In his sermon entitled "The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny" (his text came from Revelation 3:7-8), Rogers exhorted that the 1980s would be a time of great opportunity but also great obstacles. Although Rogers focused on the great things Southern Baptists could do, he also focused on the issues at hand. Rogers said that God had given Christians His word and that Christians have a responsibility to keep it. He asserts, "We dare not and cannot call him Lord and at the same time fail to keep his Word. Southern Baptists must ever be a people of the Book. We have not need of

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<sup>33</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 78.

<sup>34</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 107.

<sup>35</sup> Bill Leonard, email to author, July 1, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 78-9.

a creed because we have the Bible. Who can improve that? But without an infallible word from God, we have nothing but a holy hunch.”<sup>37</sup> Not only did Rogers articulate his belief in the trustworthiness of the Bible but also quoted notable Southern Baptists to further his point. Rogers quoted Herschel Hobbs’s position that the Bible was “truth, without any mixture of error for its matter” and that the Bible was the “inerrant” word of God. Afterward, Rogers recounted the story of a conversation Lee Scarborough (1870-1945), former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, had with B. H. Carroll (1843-1914), the founder of the institution, on his deathbed. Carroll told Scarborough, “You will be elected president of the seminary. I want you, if there ever comes heresy in your faculty, to take it to your faculty. If they won’t hear you, take it to the trustees. If they won’t hear you, take it to the conventions that appointed them. If they won’t hear you, take it to the common Baptists. They will hear you.”<sup>38</sup>

If Rogers’s comments were not clear enough, he closed his message with a warning to Southern Baptists. Three statements he made are worth repeating. The first had to do with the decline of other Christian groups as a result of humanism. Rogers maintained,

There is the hurt of humanism and liberalism. Led by an educated, polished, juiceless, and spiritually anemic brand of preachers, Americans are dying from spiritual malnutrition. These blind leaders of the blind have substituted rationalism for revelation and have turned once lion-like denominations into domesticated house cats drinking the cream of self-satisfaction.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Adrian Rogers, “The Decade of Decision and the Doors of Destiny,” in *The Sacred Desk: Sermons of the Southern Baptist Convention Presidents* ed. Ergun Caner & Emir Caner (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 273.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 276. Although some might disagree with Roger’s definition of “lion-like denominations,” he most likely referred to the Mainline Protestant Establishment of the 1920s that had been losing membership since the 1960s. Most of the declines in the mainline bodies started in 1965. Within ten years of that time, the Disciples of Christ decreased from 1,918,471 to 1,302,164, down 32.1 percent. The Episcopal Church decreased from 3,429,153 to 2,857,513, down 16.7 percent. The Evangelical Lutheran Church decreased from 5,684,298 to 5,384,271, down 5.3 percent. The Presbyterian Church USA decreased from 4,254,460 to 3,535,825, down 15.7 percent. The United Methodist Church, formerly the Methodist Episcopal Church and the largest Protestant group in the United States, lost that distinction to the SBC. The United Methodist Church decreased from 11,067,497 to 9,861,028, down 10.9

Rogers admonished Southern Baptists not to get nasty in their disagreements over the Bible. He asserted, “Don’t talk to me about your orthodoxy or denominational loyalty if your heart is headquarters for hate. Whatever problems Southern Baptists have, they will be settled in the context of love, or they will not be settled. The Bible is a sword but not a club.” He continued, “And in all of your discussions, we must ever remember that a world is out there watching. They may not be able to understand the subtleties of our debates, but they can readily read our spirit. Hold your convictions, but be loving. It is unchristian to judge heart motives. You may disagree with what a brother does, but leave it to God to judge why he does it.”<sup>40</sup> Moving forward, the SBC inerrancy controversy became more heated and even the charismatic preacher with good intentions would depart from his words in a battle to preserve Biblical truth.

Although men like Adrian Rogers won the SBC presidency, it did not mean that inerrantists did not face resistance. Cecil Sherman, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Ashville, North Carolina, wrote to twenty-five pastors, asking them to meet with him in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, on September 25, 1980. Sherman wanted to discuss a comment that Pressler made regarding his blueprint for inerrancy within the SBC. He had told the congregation at Old Forest Road Baptist Church of Lynchburg, Virginia, that “The lifeblood of the Southern Baptist Convention is the trustees. We need to go for the jugular—we need to go for the trustees.”<sup>41</sup> At

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percent. The American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. actually experienced an uptick over the period. Although its membership numbers are not as precise as the other groups mentioned in this footnote, American Baptist increased from 1,538,998 in 1966 to 1,593,573, an uptick of 3.5 percent. Constant H. Jacquet, Jr., ed. *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 1990* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press), 262-3. For information on American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., consult the link in footnote three as well as “American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.” The Association of Religion Data Archives, accessed October 18, 2016, [http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D\\_1454.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1454.asp).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 81.

the meeting Sherman hosted, the men discussed plans to counter the inerrantists. They referred to themselves as “denominational loyalists,” but their critics referred to them as the “Gatlinburg Gang.”<sup>42</sup> The war of words between conservatives and moderates rose to a new level in 1984 when Roy Honeycutt, then president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a supporter of Sherman’s, said in one of the seminary’s chapel services that “independent fundamentalists” were out to take control of the SBC. He added that the convention needed to declare “holy war” against “unholy forces.”<sup>43</sup> Although Honeycutt did not name Patterson, Pressler, or Rogers by name, his statement implied them.

The 1985 Southern Baptist Convention, held in Dallas, Texas, proved to be the battleground for Honeycutt’s “holy war.” Sherman’s supporters, as well as members of the Patterson-Pressler coalition, urged Southern Baptists to send messengers to Dallas because it was a critical year for the convention; there were even rumors that the SBC might divide. As a result of all the campaigning and the fear of collapse, over 45,000 messengers descended on Dallas. Moderates rallied behind Winfred Moore, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Amarillo, Texas. Supporters of the Patterson-Pressler coalition backed Charles Stanley for a second term. However, an unexpected event occurred the Monday before the election. A telegram from evangelist Billy Graham, supporting Stanley, leaked to the *Dallas Morning News*, the major Dallas newspaper. Graham’s endorsement guaranteed a victory for Stanley, who won 55.3 percent of the votes cast for SBC president. After the election, in a surprising move, Stanley

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<sup>42</sup> Cecil Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2007), 150-5.

<sup>43</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 108.

called Moore to the podium and asked Moore if he would accept the nomination for first vice president of the SBC in an appeal for unity. Moore won two-thirds of the vote.<sup>44</sup>

Before Southern Baptist messengers left Dallas, Franklin Paschall, a former president of the convention, asked the SBC to form a committee to determine why Southern Baptists were fighting among themselves and how they could resolve the conflict. It was during the meetings of the SBC Peace Committee, which met periodically from 1985 to 1988, that Rogers sealed his legacy as a builder within the SBC. His first term as SBC president was important in terms of staking the claim, but it was on the Peace Committee that Rogers began to lay the foundation for biblical inerrancy.<sup>45</sup>

### The SBC Peace Committee

Although Rogers did not chair the Peace Committee, he was the most active participant. Charles G. Fuller, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Roanoke, Virginia, chaired the committee. The Peace Committee had twenty members, two of whom were women.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, it was two men who dominated the discussions; Adrian Rogers and Cecil Sherman, by this time pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>47</sup> On December 10, 1985, the Peace Committee addressed the issue of whether the seminaries should have parity between inerrantists and non-inerrantists. Rogers argued against parity; he insisted that only inerrantists

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 126-8. The first vice president does not have the power to appoint people to boards or agencies.

<sup>45</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Committee members included: Jodi Chapman, William Crews, Jim Henry, Ray Roberts, Adrian Rogers, Charles Stanley, Jerry Vines, and Ed Young, who were conservatives. Robert Cuttino, Christine Gregory, William Hull, Winfred Moore, Cecil Sherman, and Daniel Vestal were moderates. Harmon Born, Doyle Carleton, Herschel Hobbs, Charles Pickering, and John Sullivan were neutral.

<sup>47</sup> Jacumin, "A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee, 1985-1987," 64-5,

should be able to teach at the six institutions. He insisted that professors adhere to his interpretation of the 1963 BFM. Sherman disagreed. He believed that one could adhere to the BFM and draw conclusions other than those of Rogers's. Sherman revered the Bible, but contended that it was not consistent or inspired in all areas. For example, Sherman argued that the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament did not have the same level of inspiration as the Gospel of John.<sup>48</sup> Jerry Vines, by this time co-pastor at the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Florida, recalled that Sherman and Rogers strongly disagreed. Vines remembered that Rogers told Sherman that if it were up to him, Sherman would not be able to teach at a Southern Baptist seminary. Rogers also told Sherman that he would not even let Sherman instruct the Sunbeams (the preschool-aged Sunday school children) at Bellevue Baptist Church.<sup>49</sup> On December 10, the Peace Committee formed sub-committees to visit the six Southern Baptist seminaries as well as other SBC agencies. Rogers joined the sub-committee headed by William Crews, then a pastor in Riverside, California, to investigate the SBTS and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. This sub-committee also included Winfred Moore and Cecil Sherman.<sup>50</sup>

Rogers, Crews, Moore, and Sherman visited the SBTS on January 9 and 10, 1986. Roy Honeycutt and three others representing the seminary met with this sub-committee. Before the sub-committee visited, it wrote the school stating that it had concerns about six professors.<sup>51</sup> At the meeting January 9, Rogers expressed his concerns about two additional professors at the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>49</sup> Vines, *Vines: My Life and Ministry*, 148.

<sup>50</sup> Jacumin, "A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Peace Committee," 73; Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning*, 182.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859-2009* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 449.

seminary along with President Honeycutt.<sup>52</sup> Rogers believed that the eight seminary professors, two more than the committee initially reported, had lied when they said they adhered to the BFM.<sup>53</sup> Historian Gregory Wills asserted that Rogers also discovered that Honeycutt did not affirm the historical accuracy of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Rogers told Honeycutt that he believed many Southern Baptists did not want to fund a seminary that denied the accuracy of the Bible.<sup>54</sup> Sherman thought that Rogers's actions were deplorable. Sherman believed that Honeycutt and those representing the seminary had answered Rogers's charges thoroughly. According to Sherman, Rogers spent nine hours on January 9 going through a briefcase full of papers accusing professors at Southern of liberalism. The next day, Rogers spent five more hours going over his remaining evidence. At one point during the second day of interrogation, Sherman interrupted Rogers to apologize to Honeycutt. Sherman maintained that this did not deter Rogers; he continued his questioning. The sub-committee composed of Rogers and Sherman also visited New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, but the visit was not eventful because there were very few professors accused of liberalism, and Rogers, according to Sherman, enjoyed visiting his alma mater.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. The eight professors Rogers criticized were: Joseph Calloway, Eric Rust, Kenneth Chafin, Alan Culpepper, Roger Omanson, E. Glenn Hinson, Molly Marshall-Green, and Paul Simmons.

<sup>53</sup> At this time, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary did not adhere to the BFM but rather a document called "The Abstract of Principles" created at the founding of the seminary.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 450-1. Wills explored four professors that the SBC Peace Committee had concerns about at Southern. E. Glenn Hinson, a professor of church history argued in his book *Jesus Christ* that Jesus doubted his mission. Molly Marshall, then known as Molly Marshall-Green's dissertation suggested that she believed in universalism (that all humans go to heaven) and that people can go to heaven outside of faith in Jesus Christ. Paul Simmons was a pro-choice in his views on abortion and he did not believe that homosexuality was a sin. Ken Chafin suggested on his appearance on *The Phil Donahue Show* with Paul Pressler that Jews could go to heaven apart from Christ. Consult Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, 454-60.

<sup>55</sup> Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning*, 194-5.

When the SBC Peace Committee met in May of 1986, it discussed the meeting the subcommittee had with Honeycutt at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The seminary submitted their own report to Fuller and the entire Peace Committee as a whole before the subcommittee that visited Southern had a chance to publish their own findings. As a result, Rogers believed the seminary betrayed the Peace Committee. During this session, Moore asked Rogers when he would find the seminaries acceptable. Rogers responded that when they abided by the BFM, particularly the statement on the Bible, he would find the seminaries satisfactory. In that same meeting, Rogers insisted that convention employees should also believe in inerrancy in order to work for the SBC. The meeting ended when William Poe, a moderate member of the group, told Rogers if he believed that, then many seminary professors at several schools must be terminated.<sup>56</sup>

The next meeting of the Peace Committee occurred at the SBC conference center in Glorieta, New Mexico, in October of 1986. The six seminary presidents also attended. At one of the sessions there, Milton Ferguson, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, read an agreement among the seminary presidents now known as the Glorieta statement. It read, “We believe the Bible is fully inspired; it is ‘God-breathed’ (2 Tim 3:16), utterly unique. No other book or collection of books can justify that claim. The sixty-six books of the Bible are not errant in any area of reality. We hold to their infallible power and binding authority.”<sup>57</sup> After Ferguson read this statement, Sherman felt betrayed. He had stood up for the seminaries and now he believed the presidents had caved to inerrantist pressure. During a break for refreshments,

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<sup>56</sup> Jacumin, “A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee,” 84, 87.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning*, 206-7.



Sherman asked Russell H. Dilday, then president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, why he had agreed to the Glorieta Statement. According to Sherman, Dilday tilted his head towards Rogers and some of his friends and said, “Cecil, you are more trouble to us than those people are.”<sup>58</sup>

To all parties concerned, whether conservative or moderate, the statement that Ferguson read meant Biblical Inerrancy. Although his statement did not explicitly use that term, it was mostly likely Ferguson’s intent. Sherman was so distraught by the seminary president’s statement that he went back to the cabin he was staying at thought about Dilday’s comments. The next morning, Sherman confronted Randall Lolley, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, the school with the most liberal professors according to the inerrantists. Although Sherman did not remember what Lolley said, he lost his temper, slammed his fist down on the table and said, “You didn’t tell the truth. You didn’t tell the truth!” Sherman resigned from the Peace Committee soon afterward because he knew that the Glorieta Statement endorsed Biblical Inerrancy.<sup>59</sup>

After Sherman resigned, Rogers continued the fight for Biblical inerrancy. In February of 1987, the committee met again. Rogers wanted to know exactly what the seminary presidents meant by the language of the Glorieta Statement and when the six schools planned to teach inerrancy. Herschel Hobbs, formerly pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and chairman of the 1963 BFM committee, interrupted Rogers, “Adrian, you are not

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<sup>58</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 207.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 207-8.

willing to give at all!” Rogers responded, “You are correct, I will not give an inch, and I will fight till I can fight no longer.”<sup>60</sup>

Daniel Vestal, a moderate member of the Peace Committee, indicated that Rogers was on the committee to fight for his view of the Bible and that he would do all he could to win. Vestal asserted,

The fundamentalists didn’t want peace. They wanted control. I remember on several occasions I saw Adrian Rogers, Ed Young, Jerry Vines, and Charles Stanley meeting before and after the committee meetings. I was disillusioned and disappointed because I thought we were being transparent with each other in seeking peace. I realized that these gifted and powerful pastors [sic] were meeting secretly and working to plan strategy. Adrian Rogers was the dominant person in the Committee. He talked more than anyone else and dominated the debate. No moderate could “match” him except Cecil Sherman, and then only on occasion. Adrian’s personality and presence “sucked the air” out of the room. There were several on the Committee who had excellent theological minds and rhetorical gifts, but Adrian was a “street fighter,” and they were no match for him. He would alternate between humor and intense declarations. I had never seen anyone like him in a small group of gifted leaders. He could argue forcefully and persuade emotionally and then in the next moment be laughing and smiling. He would be intimidating in one minute and warm in the next.<sup>61</sup>

Rogers would have agreed with Vestal’s assessment in one area; it was never about peace, but rather about orthodoxy. Even Sherman did not believe in “peace at any cost.”<sup>62</sup> Rogers said many times throughout his years as a pastor, “It is better to be divided by truth than united in error.” Rogers even had a card he kept in his office that read “There are some things you can’t be

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<sup>60</sup> Cited in Jacumin, “A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee,” 111.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel G. Vestal, email to author, October 3, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Jacumin, “A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee,” 89.

dogmatic about, but others things you can be bulldogmatic about.” Rogers had to cement inerrancy within the bureaucracy of the SBC.<sup>63</sup>

At the 1987 SBC annual convention in St. Louis, Missouri, Charles G. Feller announced to the gathered body of messengers the findings of the Peace Committee. Their evaluation concluded that the fighting among Southern Baptists had to do mostly with the Bible, but it also had political elements. The document found that there were two interpretations of the 1963 BFM, particularly when it said that the Bible was “truth without any mixture of error for its matter.” The report stated the first “. . . means *all* areas—historical, scientific, theological, and philosophical. The other holds that the ‘truth’ relates only to matters of faith and practice.”<sup>64</sup> Although the document did not use the term “inerrant” to describe the Bible, the committee’s conclusions suggested that Southern Baptists held to inerrancy. Fuller cited Herschel Hobbs who said that the 1963 BFM cited II Timothy 3:16 to mean that Scripture was “God breathed” and that meant the entire Bible. Hobbs said, “. . . a God of truth does not breathe error.”<sup>65</sup> The report continued, “We affirm that the historic accounts of the miraculous and the supernatural are truthful as given by God and recorded by the Biblical writers.”<sup>66</sup> The evidence suggests that committee members who remained after Sherman left, believed the Bible was inerrant, even if the report did not use that word.

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<sup>63</sup> Thompson, “The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” 117. To see the card, please consult the Adrian Rogers room at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, Tennessee.

<sup>64</sup> Charles G. Fuller, “Southern Baptist Convention ‘Peace Committee’ Report,” in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), 528.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

Although the Peace Committee's findings strongly suggested biblical inerrancy, the document was inconsistent. The committee insisted that the 1963 BFM was not a creed because Baptists are non-creedal. They maintained that Baptists should not impose ". . . a man-made interpretation of Scripture on others."<sup>67</sup> The document recognized that there was a difference in opinion among Southern Baptists; it stated, "We must never try to impose upon individual Southern Baptists nor local congregations a specific view of how Scripture must be interpreted."<sup>68</sup> Seven times the Peace Committee asserted that the Bible is inerrant when it spoke on areas of science and reality.<sup>69</sup> Even though the Peace Committee's conclusions were inconsistent, the Glorieta Statement reinforced inerrancy.

At the SBC Peace Committee meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, in May of 1988, Rogers told the group that he planned to call for a motion to disband the committee at the upcoming SBC annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas. Members of the body voted unanimously to dissolve. They met for the last time on June 6, 1988.<sup>70</sup> Rogers's maneuvering at Peace Committee sessions and his persistence in advocating for inerrancy resulted in a victory for his cause. When Rogers started, he was part of a coalition that advocated for inerrancy; one that wanted to see it become a major part of Southern Baptist belief, at least for hiring convention employees and seminary professors. By 1990, two years after the dissolution of the Peace Committee, inerrantists had a majority on all SBC boards and agencies. Moderates realized that they had no chance to win the SBC back from the conservatives. As a result, moderates formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) in 1991. Rogers had obtained a major victory for the Patterson-Pressler

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 534.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 527, 531, 535-6.

<sup>70</sup> Jacumin, "A Theological and Historical Analysis of the Southern Baptist Peace Committee," 187-9.

coalition. He would finish construction on the inerrancy project when he chaired the BFM 2000 committee.

### Rogers and the Baptist Faith and Message 2000

After Rogers's time on the Peace Committee, he recounted to an audience of Southern Baptists in the late 1990s, his response to lawyer and fellow Peace Committee member William Poe. When Poe asked if Rogers would be willing to compromise on the Bible, Rogers answered,

I'm willing to compromise about many things, but not the Word of God. So far as getting together is concerned, we don't have to get together. The Southern Baptist Convention, as it is, does not have to survive. I don't have to be the pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church. I don't have to be loved; I don't even have to live. But I will not compromise the Word of God.<sup>71</sup>

Southern Baptists rewarded Rogers's stand for inerrancy. In 1998, at the SBC annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, messenger T. C. Pinckney asked the convention to consider revising the BFM of 1963. Messengers voted on and approved his motion. Paige Patterson, elected SBC president that year, appointed Rogers to lead this committee.<sup>72</sup> Patterson said of that decision, "I asked Adrian Rogers to chair it for the simple reason that I think he is the most respected man and probably the smartest man in the Southern Baptist Convention."<sup>73</sup>

Rogers's goals for the committee were to address the challenges that Southern Baptists faced entering the twenty-first century. According to Mark Thompson, a recent Ph.D. from Mid-

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<sup>71</sup> Cited in Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 109-10. Although Rogers never named the man who asked him to compromise, Cecil Sherman's autobiography suggested that William Poe wanted Rogers to compromise. Rogers's account said that a lawyer asked him if he were willing to compromise. Sherman recounted that there were two lawyers on the Peace Committee and Sherman only liked one of them. Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning*, 183.

<sup>72</sup> The committee members for the BFM 2000 included: Max Barnett, Steve Gaines (the current pastor of Bellevue Baptist), Susie Hawkins, Ruby Hernandez, Charles Kelley, Heather King, Richard Land, Fred Luter, Al Mohler, T. C. Pinckney, Nelson Price, Adrian Rogers, Roger Spradlin, Simon Tsoi, and Jerry Vines (the only other member of the Peace Committee on the BFM 2000 Committee).

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Thompson, "The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention," 167.

American Baptist Theological Seminary, Rogers thought the biggest issue for the BFM 2000 committee was to address “moral decay” in American culture.<sup>74</sup> Rogers also planned to address doctrinal issues. He said, “Our recommendation [on amending articles in the BFM] is intended to clarify our doctrine for this present age and to define our beliefs against the backdrop of modern confusion.”<sup>75</sup>

The biggest revision that the committee made to clarify the BFM related to the first article on the Bible, the same article that caused so much confusion on interpretation between conservatives and moderates during the 1980s. The men and women on the “Statement of Faith” committee, the original name for the group, decided to remove the phrase “the record of” from the first sentence to eliminate confusion about Biblical authority. The 1963 version asserted that the “Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is a record of God’s revelation of himself to man.” The 2000 version insisted that the “Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of himself to man.” This language suggested that the Bible was more than just a “record” of his work, but was his revelation to man.<sup>76</sup> The committee also struck out the portion identifying Jesus as “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted” due to the phrase’s ambiguity objected to by conservatives and moderates alike. Committee member Simon Tsoi, a Chinese American, was the wordsmith of the group. According to Susie Hawkins, a member of the group, he advocated for stronger wording and clearer grammatical structure to

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>75</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> “Comparison of 1925, 1963, and 2000 Baptist Faith and Message,” sbc.net, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>.

avoid errors. Hawkins said of Tsoi, “There were several editors and authors on the committee, but we were all in awe of his command of English.”<sup>77</sup>

During one of the committee meetings, Rogers shared a letter which Larry Lewis, retired head of the Home Mission Board, had written to Rogers about the BFM. Lewis wrote that he had attended a meeting at the Ridgecrest Conference Center several years before and heard Morris Ashcraft, dean of theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1981 to 1988, say that he did not believe in a personal devil or that God ordered the Israelites to destroy entire villages. According to Lewis, an unnamed person in the audience asked Ashcraft how he justified his beliefs in light of what the Bible taught. Ashcraft replied that Jesus was the perfect revelation and then quoted the final sentence of article one of the BFM 1963 that said “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, Ashcraft said that God would not allow the Israelites to destroy entire villages because God is loving and not vengeful. Lewis recommended to Rogers, “It is my strong opinion that liberals were responsible for the last sentence being added to Article I. They have used it consistently through the years to justify their aberrant theology.” He continued, “Adrian, I would like to encourage you and the study committee to prayerfully consider recommending the deletion of the last sentence in Article I of the Baptist Faith and Message.”<sup>79</sup>

The BFM 2000 Committee followed Lewis’s recommendation. Al Mohler, a member of the committee and current president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said of the group’s decision, “Simply put, because 30 years of abuses and attacks upon the integrity of the

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<sup>77</sup> Susie Hawkins, email to author, August 30, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Larry Lewis to Adrian Rogers, October 25, 1999. Obtained through Max Barnett, a member of the BFM 2000 Committee.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Bible made clear that some were using this language to deny the truthfulness and authority of the Word of God.”<sup>80</sup> Mohler believed that the group of moderates that he identified held that the Bible was a faulty record and that the biblical stories of creation and miracles were mythical.<sup>81</sup> Even though the revised statement of faith did not use the term “inerrant” or inerrancy,” it was heavily implied.<sup>82</sup>

Unlike the SBC Peace Committee where members fought over theological issues like inerrancy, the BFM 2000 Committee lacked internal conflict. Fred Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church and the only African-American member of the group, said that no one dominated the discussions. Luter maintained that Rogers’s leadership of the committee was “stellar, inspirational, compassionate, but also stern when he needed to be.”<sup>83</sup> Max Barnett, retired student pastor of the Baptist Student Union at the University of Oklahoma, said Rogers was not dictatorial on any issue and that “He [Rogers] could not have been more gracious.”<sup>84</sup> Another member of the committee, Susie Hawkins, a laywoman, said that Rogers guided committee discussions, but in no way dominated the discussions.<sup>85</sup>

The BFM 2000 was unfavorable to those outside the SBC. Daniel Vestal, a moderate member of the SBC Peace Committee and by this time president of the CBF said the BFM 2000 was “. . . based on a bad interpretation of Scripture, an insensitivity to the Holy Spirit and an

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<sup>80</sup> Cited in Thompson, “The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” 170.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-70.

<sup>82</sup> C. Douglas Weaver, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 194.

<sup>83</sup> Fred Luter, email to author, April 19, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Max Barnett, telephone interview with author, July 23, 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Susie Hawkins, email to author, August 30, 2016.



unwillingness to see what God is doing in the world today.”<sup>86</sup> Most secular criticism came from the BFM’s stance about the household roles of men and women. Rogers said that the *New York Times*, in their coverage of the amendment to the BFM made Southern Baptists out to be “Neanderthals, and the convention was portrayed as a relic from the past.”<sup>87</sup> Robert Parham said that the BFM “. . . pulls up a drawbridge into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and padlocks Southern Baptists into a 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural castle.”<sup>88</sup>

Like most religious bodies throughout history, women did not have the full rights and privileges as men in Southern Baptist churches, even though they had higher membership rates in SBC churches. However, Southern Baptist women were better at raising money for church projects than men, especially though the annual Lottie Moon Christmas offering for international missions and the Annie Armstrong Christmas offering for projects within the United States. These missions-conscious women eventually formed the Women’s Missionary Union (WMU). Although women had little formal power, they had financial power within the convention. By the mid-twentieth century, some Southern Baptist churches began ordaining women pastors, but their numbers remained infinitesimally small in relation to male pastors within the SBC.<sup>89</sup> During the 1980s, conservatives attempted to gain control of the WMU because of its views on women preachers. However, conservatives were unable to do this because the WMU is a auxiliary agency to the SBC. Eventually women critical of the conservative position left the

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<sup>86</sup> Cited in Thompson, “The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” 172-3.

<sup>87</sup> Adrian Rogers, *The Incredible Power of Kingdom Authority*, 149.

<sup>88</sup> Cited in Thompson, “The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” 173.

<sup>89</sup> Wayne Flint, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 170-5, 535-6.

convention and their replacements fell into line with conservative positions on women in ministry.<sup>90</sup> As a result, few members of the Patterson-Pressler coalition took issue with the BFM 2000 position.

Southern Baptists, as a whole, thought highly of the statement. Al Mohler said of the statement, “Those who oppose the revisions adopted this year [2000] by the convention are out of touch with Southern Baptists, out of step with the great tradition of faithful Christians through the centuries and out of line in their intemperate language.”<sup>91</sup> Like the other two editions of the BFM, this statement on the Bible did not use the word inerrancy, but it was heavily implied. However, Rogers used the word inerrant in a report leading up to the 2000 convention; he said, “The Bible is inerrant, infallible, and it our sole authority for faith and practice in the Church. As Herschel Hobbs repeatedly declared to the Convention, this was all implied in the 1963 statement. We made these affirmations clear in our proposal.”<sup>92</sup>

The SBC affirmed inerrancy through the BFM 2000. Before 1979, most Southern Baptist seminary professors and convention employees believed in biblical authority, but not inerrancy. Rogers’s service as chairman of the BFM 2000 committee ensured that inerrancy was the criteria for employment within the SBC because convention employees must sign a document that states that they affirm the BFM 2000. However, did Rogers’s work within the convention make the SBC stronger or did his actions weaken the largest non-Catholic body in the United States? Once

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<sup>90</sup> Morgan, *The New Crusades, The New Holy Land*, 127.

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Thompson, “The Role of Adrian Rogers in the Recovery of Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” 173.

<sup>92</sup> “Committee Response to Initial Feedback: The Baptist Faith & Message,” Southern Baptist Convention, posted May 26, 2000, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmfeedback.asp>.

inerrantists won in the SBC, did Southern Baptists return to their cultural Zion or did they fight over other issues?

### An Assessment of Rogers as an SBC Builder

Ten years before he gave a powerful speech in support of Adrian Rogers, W. A. Criswell gave a speech before the Georgia Baptist Convention in Atlanta, condemning “liberals” within the SBC as “termites who destroy the church.”<sup>93</sup> This is an apt description of how Rogers saw moderates within the SBC inerrancy controversy. The Elliott Controversy and the Broadman Bible Commentary Controversy confirmed to inerrantists like Rogers that things were uneasy in the Southern Baptist Zion. Something needed to be done about it or he would leave the convention. When Rogers agreed to implement the architectural plan for the Patterson-Pressler coalition, he brought the skills of a taskmaster, a determined inspector, and as his time on the SBC Peace Committee demonstrates, the ability to “exterminate” what he believed to be unorthodox termites who eroded the SBC before 1979, as well as eliminate those who threatened his plan for a new structure. Rogers’s decision not to accept a second term as SBC president in 1980, whether political or not, let conservatives gain traction before defeating the moderates on the SBC Peace Committee. Even though the evidence suggests that Rogers was better equipped in his plans and a better debater than Cecil Sherman, Sherman was no pushover. As the leader of the moderate movement, he organized those who opposed the Patterson-Pressler coalition, but Rogers’s more aggressive and assertive position left Sherman unable to effectively combat Rogers’s points.

That said, Rogers was not always dogmatic; those who served on the BFM 2000 Committee disagree with that assessment as would Nancy Hastings Sehested. Sehested, then

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<sup>93</sup> Associated Press, “Criswell Urges Liberals to Quit,” *Corsicana Daily Sun* Corsicana (Texas), November 11, 1969. Obtained through newspapers.com February 27, 2016.

pastor of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, faced a hearing by the Shelby Country Baptist Association to determine whether to dismiss Prescott Memorial from the association. When Sehested went to speak in defense of her church, some in the audience said it was too late, but Adrian Rogers intervened. According to Sehested, Rogers said, “Mr. Moderator, in the name of Christian courtesy, I think we should allow this lady to speak.” Sehested said after the event, “Because of Adrian Rogers, I was able to offer my testimony. I am still grateful.” Although Rogers did not believe that she should be a pastor based on his understanding of the Bible, he defended her right to speak that night.<sup>94</sup>

It would be easy to argue that Rogers was dogmatic based upon his actions; he stood strong for what he believed to be Christian orthodoxy. For Rogers and other likeminded Southern Baptists, inerrancy was the concrete foundation that would have to remain opposed to abortion, gay marriage, and other contested issues. Daniel Akin, currently the president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote that if it had not been for Rogers, Southern Baptists would have bigger problems than just discussing Calvinism; instead they would be debating universalism, homosexuality, and feminism.<sup>95</sup> Recall that Rogers warned against spiritual malnutrition in his 1980 convention sermon and attacked rationalism, which he believe destroyed once great Christian denominations in the United States go from being powerful forces for the gospel into groups that kept hemorrhaging members. Many like historians Walter B. Shurden and Bill Leonard argued that Rogers and the conservative resurgence of the SBC would destroy the SBC and begin massive declines, but those declines did not materialize, at least when

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<sup>94</sup> Nancy Hasting Sehested, email to author, July 23, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> Daniel L. Akin, “Answering the Call to a Great Commission Resurgence,” In *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2008), 258.

both men suggested they would. Ultimately, Rogers took the mantle of SBC builder because he saw the rejection of inerrancy as opening the floodgates to religious and cultural liberalism.

Rogers remodeled and rebuilt the SBC on the foundation of Biblical inerrancy and in many ways reshaped and remolded the SBC. The steel beams, reaching out from the concrete, were his sermons. His preaching built Bellevue Baptist Church and Patterson and Pressler looked to Rogers for help because of this. One of the best qualities Rogers possessed was his ability to communicate his beliefs in a clear, succinct, and effective manner. Once Patterson and Pressler persuaded Rogers to be nominated for SBC president in 1979, he oversaw not just his church or the office of SBC president, but a movement that changed how the largest Protestant group in the United States did business. Before the SBC inerrancy controversy, people were elected or appointed to posts within the convention based upon their dedication and previous experience in the convention, however that all changed after 1979. It no longer mattered how long someone had been serving the convention, but what they believed about the Bible and other culturally-sensitive topics. Grady Cothen, former head of the Baptist Sunday School Board wrote in 1995, “Individuals and churches must now accede to the mandated method of participation or be excluded from the fellowship.”<sup>96</sup> To put an architectural slant on it, in the past there had been some flexibility in the materials used within the Southern Baptist framework, now the materials, especially the pillars of theological belief, as Rogers understood them, are rock solid.

Not only did Rogers remodel and renovate the SBC, he also grew Bellevue Baptist Church to the extent that the church could not remain in midtown Memphis. As a result, the

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<sup>96</sup> Grady C. Cothen, *The New SBC: Fundamentalism's Impact on the Southern Baptist Convention* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 1995), 66.

church decided to move to suburban Memphis outside of the city center. Chapter two examines the growth of Bellevue Baptist Church under the leadership of Adrian Rogers.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A CHURCH CONFRONTS WHITE FLIGHT:

#### BELLEVUE BAPTIST CHURCH AND ITS MOVE FROM MIDTOWN MEMPHIS TO CORDOVA, TENNESSEE, 1983-1989

Ten thousand gallons of paint, 1,285 doors, a million feet of sheetrock, eighty-seven public telephones, twenty kitchens, forty restrooms, and 10.3 acres of plush carpet is what historian Randall Balmer found when he visited Bellevue Baptist's Cordova campus in the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Although updated since then, Bellevue Baptist has always done things on a large scale. Under the leadership of Adrian Rogers, pastor from 1972 to 2005, the church's membership increased significantly. However, while the congregation grew by leaps and bounds, the church had to consider whether it could properly expand in midtown Memphis. Compounding that, from the 1970s to the 1980s, the midtown community experienced "white flight" when African Americans began moving into traditionally white neighborhoods. When whites left their former communities, many of their churches also relocated.

Most white flight literature on places of worship concentrates on Roman Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues.<sup>2</sup> A modest portion of that scholarship examines white flight in

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<sup>1</sup> Balmer, *Grant Us Courage*, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Etan Diamond's study of white flight in Indianapolis concentrates on Catholic churches, Jewish synagogues, and non-Southern Baptist churches moving to the suburbs: *Souls of the City: Religion and the Search for Community in Postwar America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003). Sociologist Mark Mulder's study examines Christian Reformed Churches in the Chicago neighborhoods of Englewood and Roseland in *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015). Historian Kevin Kruse examines at the rise of the Republican Party in the South during the latter half of the twentieth century in *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Sociologist Rachael Woldoff focuses on a neighborhood called Parkmont in an unnamed city. Parkmont experienced white flight during the 1990s, outside the usual time frame of the mid-twentieth century: *Black Flight/White Flight: The Dynamics of Racial Change in an America Neighborhood* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). Amanda Seligman's study of Chicago's west side maintains that whites moved for multiple reasons and both whites and blacks faced an urban crisis. Even before whites moved to the suburbs, their former neighborhoods were run-down. Some community members believed that dilapidated housing did not have anything

connection with Southern Baptist churches within Memphis, Tennessee, but none of it concentrates on Bellevue Baptist Church, the largest church in Memphis.<sup>3</sup> At one time, Bellevue Baptist was the second largest Southern Baptist church in the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Three scholars in particular asserted that Bellevue Baptist moved owing to white flight. Sociologist Andrew Trundle wrote, “The church certainly had the means, and Dr. Rogers certainly had the appeal. . . . Dr. Rogers could have made a point of staying in town and embracing the changes in the city’s population. Instead, his church became the largest monument to Southern Baptist white flight in Shelby County.”<sup>5</sup> Balmer noted that Bellevue Baptist moved to maintain a growing membership and to overcome its limited parking space, but lamented the fact that Bellevue’s former midtown campus stood empty, a monument to white flight.<sup>6</sup> Barry Hankins, a historian at Baylor, argued that Bellevue Baptist caught a “demographic wave” and moved closer to most of its members. According to Hankins, the move was white flight.<sup>7</sup>

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to do with race, but with income levels. *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago’s West Side* (Chicago, IL: The University Press of Chicago, 2005), 41, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Mulder, correspondence with author, September 22, 2015. Other than Andrew Trundle, “Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County, Tennessee,” *Rhodes Journal of Regional Studies* 2 (2005): 90. Donald R. Dunvant wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Southern Baptist churches and evangelism in Memphis, but he did not mention Bellevue Baptist Church: “Churches Confronting the Challenge of Changing Communities: Selected Case Studies of Southern Baptist Churches Located in Transitional Neighborhoods in Memphis, Tennessee” (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991). Mark Newman, “The Tennessee Baptist Convention and Desegregation, 1954-1980,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 57 (Winter 1998): 249.

<sup>4</sup> Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Trundle, “Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County, Tennessee,” 90.

<sup>6</sup> Balmer, *Grant Us Courage*, 85-6. The problem with this is that by 1996, Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church bought the property in 1992. Balmer’s account does not add up. This mishap may be due to the fact that Balmer neglected to update his account of his visit to Bellevue Baptist that he wrote in *Christian Century*.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Hankins, “White Flight, Shift to the Right: Bellevue Baptist Church and Memphis (paper presented at the Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting, Memphis, Tennessee, November 4, 2004), 2. Barry Hankins provided the author a copy of his paper through email July 19, 2016.



Nevertheless, Balmer, Hankins, and Trundle fail to mention the steadfast attempt Bellevue Baptist made to remain in midtown, the area immediately adjacent to downtown.

Although the claim that white flight occurred is true, Bellevue's move was much more complicated. The evidence reveals that Bellevue Baptist had no racial animus toward African Americans. The church moved to be closer to its congregants, most of whom resided in the eastern suburbs of Memphis. Bellevue experienced a growth in its membership under the leadership of Pastor Rogers, a man who wanted to increase the number of congregants, which he accomplished, but who did not want the church to leave midtown. When Bellevue Baptist could not obtain more property to expand in midtown in 1983, Rogers, church leaders, and the church's deacons decided to move from a neighborhood declining in population to one that made church attendance more convenient for most of its members.

Not all churches that confronted issues of limited space departed the city center. First Baptist Church of Dallas, pastored by W. A. Criswell from 1944 to 1990, wished to remain there. Wealthy members at First Baptist procured land and buildings to expand in downtown. Although First Baptist and Bellevue Baptist faced a similar situation concerning changing neighborhoods around their properties, congregants returned to the urban core each Sunday. These two churches, albeit in similar communities, differed in their response to integration, the ability to gain property, and membership growth. After this chapter analyses the different responses of the two congregations, it surveys the construction of the current Bellevue Baptist Church in detail.

### The Southern Baptist Convention and the Civil Rights Movement

Baptists across the South created the SBC in Augusta, Georgia, in May 1845. Messengers came primarily from Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia. It formed in response to the national American Home Baptist Mission Society barring James Reeves, a slaveholder, from serving as a

missionary, because the Society's board had an abolitionist majority. After the Civil War, Southerners lost their slaves, but they initially held onto racist views.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, the SBC experienced phenomenal growth and expanded outside the American South. As the convention grew, it established new boards and agencies. One such agency, the Christian Life Commission (CLC), supported the Supreme Court's ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Former head of the Baptist Sunday School Board, Grady Cothen, said that the CLC “. . . has been the conscience and ‘lightening rod’ of the Southern Baptist Convention . . . . The commission became prominent during the civil rights controversy. It recommended fairness and rights for minorities at a time when that was not particularly popular.”<sup>9</sup> Not only was the CLC ahead of its constituency on an unpopular issue, three Southern Baptist seminaries had desegregated before *Brown v. Board*.<sup>10</sup>

Southern Baptist views on race and integration have further advanced since the mid-twentieth century. On February 21, 1956, W. A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, addressed the South Carolina Baptist Evangelism Conference in support of segregation. He said that integrationists were “. . . a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up.”<sup>11</sup> However, his views, at least publically, changed when he became president of the SBC in 1968.<sup>12</sup> It was

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<sup>8</sup> Jerry Sutton, *A Matter of Conviction: A History of Southern Baptist Engagement with the Culture* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2008), 63, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention?*, 350.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 71. The three seminaries were; The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky; Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas; and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>11</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, "'Never Had I Been So Blind': W. A. Criswell's 'Change' on Racial Segregation," *The Journal of Southern Religion* 10 (2007): 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Freeman argues that Criswell changed his views because he became SBC president in 1968, and, at the time, the SBC released a strong statement against racism.

Southern Baptist leaders such as Foy Valentine, head of the CLC during the 1960s, and Porter Routh, head of the Executive Committee from 1951 to 1979 (the board that still manages the SBC outside its annual meeting), who took courageous stands against segregation and helped to change the attitudes of Southern Baptists who opposed integration. The SBC officially apologized in 1995 for its past views on slavery, thus officially repudiating its history of supporting slavery and segregation.<sup>13</sup>

### Defining White Flight

Around the time that the SBC dealt with issues raised by the civil rights movement, many whites left the urban core for the suburbs as African Americans moved into what had traditionally been white communities. According to historian Etan Diamond, “Middle-and-upper-middle-class whites, when faced with new black neighbors, more than not, simply left the neighborhood.”<sup>14</sup>

Many churches relocating to the suburbs employed “code language” to convince their congregations of the need to move, often invoking “safety” as the reason.<sup>15</sup> Sociologist Mark Mulder’s study of Christian Reformed Churches (CRC) in the Chicago neighborhoods of Englewood and Roseland shows that these churches used innuendo to discourage church members about the impact of changing neighborhood demographics. During the 1960s, for example, the Third Roseland CRC noted, “*For reasons that are obvious*, the Roseland area in

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<sup>13</sup> “Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary Of The Southern Baptist Convention,” Southern Baptist Convention, Atlanta, GA, 1995. Accessed May 23, 2016, through [www.sbc.net](http://www.sbc.net). Some believe that this apology was “too little, too late.” However, it seems that Southern Baptist held to the position long before releasing an official statement.

<sup>14</sup> Diamond, *Souls of the City*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

recent years, lost some [white] families who moved to the Oak Lawn and South areas . . . .”<sup>16</sup>

This statement clearly implied that white families moved owing to African Americans moving into the neighborhood.

When white flight occurred in the twentieth century, whites viewed it as more than just fleeing incoming blacks in their neighborhoods, some whites saw it as their ability to choose to relocate to the suburbs.

### The Neighborhoods of Downtown Dallas and Midtown Memphis

The First Baptist Church remains in downtown Dallas to this day, but there were two occasions when congregants considered moving. The first was in 1924. Some members believed the church could not properly expand downtown. However, Pastor George W. Truett and most members wanted to remain there. The church eventually voted against the motion to relocate. Truett often said, “We will build *up*, rather than *out*.”<sup>17</sup>

When Truett died in 1944, many feared the downtown church would close its doors because its congregants would attend other churches. According to former First Baptist staff member Robert C. Rohm, the primary reason churchgoers remained was their devotion to Truett and his preaching ability.<sup>18</sup> When W. A. Criswell succeeded Truett as pastor, the church experienced new growth and expanded at opportune times. Yet the main reason First Baptist remained downtown was Criswell’s determination to keep the church there. Over the years, people asked him why the church refused to sell its multi-million dollar property and build a

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<sup>16</sup> Cited in Mulder, *Shades of White Flight*, 72. Italics mine.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Leon McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas: Centennial History (1868-1968)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968), 163. Italics mine.

<sup>18</sup> Robert C. Rohm, *Dr. C.: The Vision and Ministry of W. A. Criswell* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1990), 28.

large worship center in the suburbs. He responded that if the church relocated, “The property would not be the only thing we would be selling out. To us, we would be selling out God and our heritage from the past.” Criswell believed that if First Baptist relocated, it would neglect its mission to downtown. He continued, “We are downtown because we choose to be downtown and we stay there because the Lord God in Heaven has laid this ministry, deep as life, upon our soul.”<sup>19</sup> Criswell observed in 1969 that eight congregations had moved from downtown Dallas since he became pastor of First Baptist in 1944. *The Amarillo Globe-Times* reported, “First Baptist Church in Dallas is said to be the only big inner-city church in America that continues to grow and achieve while others are abandoning their fields—moving to the suburbs or going out of existence.” The church’s success came through evangelism and the fact that new members joined each week. The article concluded, “. . . that the edifice [the church building] will never be dismantled by man.”<sup>20</sup>

While the church remained downtown, white flight occurred around First Baptist. In 1950, six years after Criswell started as pastor, census tract twenty-one, containing First Baptist, had 1,323 residents, 1,235 of whom were white, or 93.3 percent. By 1980, this census tract had just 165 residents, only ninety-three of whom were white, a decrease of 92.5 percent. Two factors were thus in play: both the population as a whole and the percentage of the white population declined in census tract twenty-one. Examining the six contiguous census tracts, whites made up 21,012 of 38,421 living in the area, or 54.7 percent in 1950. In 1980, the white population for those same census tracts fell to just 4,138 of 13,418 people, a decline of 80.3

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas*, 265-6.

<sup>20</sup> Tex Keirse, “How Does An Inner-City Church Flourish?, Criswell’s Keys: The Gospel Truth,” *The Amarillo Globe-Times*, Amarillo (Texas), June 26, 1969. Obtained through newspapers.com.

percent.<sup>21</sup> By the 1980s, over 80 percent of worshippers attending First Baptist drove twenty minutes or more to get to church.<sup>22</sup> Even though it had officially integrated, only 2 or 3 percent of the active members at First Baptist were African American in the early 1990s, according to former staff member Joel Gregory.<sup>23</sup> It is possible that blacks did not join First Baptist because they attended their own churches. Twice in its history, First Baptist might have moved to the suburbs, but ultimately it remained downtown.

Like the area around First Baptist, the neighborhood around Bellevue Baptist experienced white flight. In 1970, two years before Rogers became pastor of the church, census tract thirty-six (containing Bellevue Baptist) along with the eight contiguous census tracts had a total of 21,599 whites of 28,866 residents, or 74.8 percent of the population. By 1980, there was a sizable shift. The number of whites living in the census tracts dropped to 14,682 out of 25,869, a decline of 32 percent.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the population of Cordova, home to Bellevue's current campus, had a population increase of 5,553 in 1970 to 13,517 in 1980, an increase of 243 percent.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *1950 United States Census of Population*, U. S. Bureau of Census. Volume III, Census Tract Statistics, Chapter 14 (Washington D. C., U. S. Government Printing Office, 1952), 8-9. The contiguous contracts include, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty-two, and thirty-one; *1980 Census of Population and Housing*, U. S. Bureau of Census, Dallas, TX., Final Report PHC80-2-131 (Washington, D. C., U. S. Government Printing Office, 1983), P-187.

<sup>22</sup> Ella M. Rosenberg, *The Southern Baptists: A Subculture in Transition* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Joel Gregory, telephone interview with author, October 17, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> *1970 Census of Population and Housing*. U. S. Bureau of Census. Memphis, TN. Final Report PCH(1)-127 (Washington, D. C., U. S. Government Printing Office, 1971), P-4 – P-5, *1980 Census of Population and Housing*, U. S. Bureau of Census, Memphis, TN. Final Report PHC80-2-239 (Washington, D. C., U. S. Government Printing Office, 1983), P-8 – P-9. The census tracts include, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, and forty-six.

<sup>25</sup> Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right," 8.

Although both urban areas experienced a declining population, Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church for thirty-three years, took a friendlier stand toward integration than had Criswell. Rogers told his congregation that he wanted Bellevue Baptist to welcome people of all races. According to the official account of Bellevue Baptist's history by journalist Cyndi Richardson, one Sunday in 1973 an African American teenager came forward to make his confession of faith. Although at the time he did not request formal membership, one elderly lady objected when she thought the church was voting about whether he could become a member (Baptist congregations vote on nearly everything). Rogers invited the woman to come forward and then asked why she objected. The unnamed woman replied that she did not want a "negro" joining the church. Rogers responded by telling her, "Before I came to Bellevue, I said that if anybody ever came forward and was presented for membership and they were turned away because of the color of their skin, that day I would no longer be your pastor."<sup>26</sup> Roland Maddox said of the event, "It was like everyone was stuck with a pin; they just immediately stood up and applauded . . . . The beauty of that was that the race issue was settled once and for all and has never been an issue again in the church."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 193.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Ibid. Janice Edmiston, one of Adrian Rogers's daughters confirmed this in a telephone interview with the author, August 3, 2015. Historian Barry Hankins also mentioned Rogers stand on race, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*, paperback edition (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 269. Although this event is well documented, Cecil Sherman asserted that Rogers was a racist. During a break in one of the peace committee sessions, Sherman asked Rogers about his beliefs in Biblical Inerrancy and what he believed about the Bible regarding slavery. According to Sherman, Rogers paused a moment and said, "Well, I believe slavery is a much maligned institution; if we had slavery today, we would not have this welfare mess." Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning*, 189. There are many ways to interpret this comment. First, this conversation occurred between two people who are both now dead. Sherman mentioned that Jerry Vines was in the room with him and Rogers at the time, but Vines does not remember Rogers making that comment. He believed that Sherman took Rogers's statement out of context. Vines, email to author, April 15, 2015. Second, Sherman wanted to smear Rogers's reputation. Sherman claimed that Rogers referred to him during Peace Committee meetings as "our liberal friend." Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning*, 188-9. Sherman was the leading moderate on the committee and eventually left the committee due to irreconcilable differences. Sherman was devastated and saddened by what he believed was the demise of the SBC as he knew it. He eventually became the first leader of the Cooperative Baptist

According to Bellevue Baptist Librarian Paul Adams, Alfie Hardin claimed to be the first African American member of the church; she joined on November 1, 1975. Several others followed. Phillip Pinkston joined in 1982, serving as volunteer preschool director and as a deacon starting in the early 1990s, a post he still holds today. Bernice Bright and Berneta Miles joined the church in the early 1980s, both singing in the choir, and Ms. Miles often sang solos during church services.<sup>28</sup> Bellevue Baptist did not have a large number of African Americans congregants because there were many black churches within a few miles of Bellevue's midtown, but this circumstance did not mean that the church discouraged African American membership.<sup>29</sup>

Bellevue's integration foreshadowed the eventual sale of its midtown location to Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, an African American congregation, on February 11, 1992. Like Bellevue Baptist, Mississippi Boulevard did not want to relocate, but increased membership prevented it from staying in its small South Memphis campus. According to John Belfuss, a reporter for *The Commercial Appeal*, the major newspaper of Memphis, Bellevue Baptist initially wanted \$12.5 million for its former property, but it settled for \$3.5 million. The article continued, "Rogers said his congregation was glad another church would use the property because 'These walls are stained with our prayers, and every fabric is woven with our love.'"<sup>30</sup> The photograph in the paper showed a jovial Adrian Rogers with several staff members of

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Fellowship. Third, Rogers's views on the issue of race may have changed since 1973, if it did, it was a turn for the worse. Fourth, Rogers's beliefs on race were expressed differently in private than they were in public. Ultimately Sherman's story cannot be verified because this occurred behind closed doors and neither man is alive to clarify the claim.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Adams, correspondence with author, February 24 and February 25, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, "Church Growth (And Decline) In a Southern City," *Review of Religious Research* 23, no. 4 (June 1982), 378-9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3511807>.

<sup>30</sup> John Belfuss, "Miss. Blvd. plans school in Midtown," *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), February 12, 1992.



Mississippi Boulevard. Bellevue Baptist could have received a higher price for its property, but it agreed to less in order to help another congregation expand.

#### Lack of Space in Midtown Memphis

Bellevue Baptist was unable to build in midtown Memphis, but First Baptist in Dallas had no problem acquiring money or land. First Baptist bought one building and constructed two others during the 1950s. One was the Criswell Activities Building, completed in 1953 at a cost of \$2 million dollars. With the help of Mrs. Minnie Slaughter Veal, the church purchased vacant property from the Central Christian Church in 1953. When Criswell learned about the availability of Central Christian, he knew First Baptist needed it. However, the deacons were skeptical and did not want to add to the church's million dollar debt. Criswell prayed about the situation and soon received a call from Veal. She bought the property for the church at a cost of \$260,000 and ultimately gave a total of more than \$1.7 million for the completion of the Veal Parking and Recreation Building. The final structure the church acquired during the 1950s was the Burt Building. The 90,000 square foot edifice had previously housed the professional offices of many prominent church members. Its owner, R. E. Burt, informed the church that he would sell it for \$1 million, which, according to historian H. Leon McBeth, was well below market value. The church bought the Burt building in 1958 and gained full access in 1961.<sup>31</sup> First Baptist benefited not only from acquiring land to expand, but it also profited by contributions from wealthy congregants. The three buildings the church constructed or acquired in the 1950s cost a total of \$4,755,500. First Baptist had members from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, but members such as Minnie Slaughter Veal enabled the church to acquire valuable real estate the downtown campus needed.

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<sup>31</sup> McBeth, *The First Baptist Church of Dallas*, 267-70, 282-3.

On September 16, 1982, Bellevue Baptist Church's Long Range Planning Committee released its plan for expansion. The design included building a new auditorium, seating 6,000 up to 10,000 people, as well as a parking garage on the east side of its midtown property. Bellevue Baptist predicted that by 1992, the church would have 25,000 members with 17,542 enrolled in Sunday school.<sup>32</sup> In order to prepare for future expansion, Bellevue Baptist began purchasing land surrounding the church.

Between 1981 and 1983, Bellevue Baptist procured five different parcels of land to the east and south of its midtown location for a total cost of \$978,000, a significantly smaller sum than First Baptist Dallas paid for its real estate.<sup>33</sup> Bellevue Baptist made strides towards its goal, but it ultimately ran into financial and physical roadblocks. The church purchased three apartment complexes and attempted to acquire a fourth. However, according to longtime Bellevue Baptist member Gene Howard, the owner of the fourth apartment complex wanted an exorbitant sum of money. The owner knew that the church needed the land so it could build on the site.<sup>34</sup>

Money was not Bellevue Baptist's biggest obstacle. The church's plan for expansion drew criticism from *The Commercial Appeal*. On May 27, 1983, the paper reported that Bellevue Baptist had evicted residents living in the apartment buildings. Sister Mary Ann Guthrie, a nun in the Catholic diocese of Memphis, claimed that Bellevue Baptist intended to make midtown into

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<sup>32</sup> "Pastor Introduces 10-Year Plan," *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, September 16, 1982, Vol. 22, No. 37, 2-4. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives. Box 2, folder 101.672. The two parking garages planned would have cost \$12 million. See Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 240.

<sup>33</sup> The properties included, 27 and 27 N. Claybrook, 24 N. Montgomery, 1270-1284 Madison Avenue, and 1220 Madison Avenue. For more information consult The Shelby County Register of Deeds, <http://register.shelby.tn.us>.

<sup>34</sup> Gene Howard, telephone interview with author, February 18, 2016.

an “asphalt jungle.” Although midtown was already commercially built up, her critique of the church evicting residents led Bellevue Baptist’s Senior Associate Pastor, Bob Sorrell, to say, “. . . the church is not in the business of building parking lots or displacing people.” The article continued, “Dr. Adrian Rogers, Bellevue Baptist’s nationally prominent pastor, said at the time that church leaders considered moving inasmuch as Bellevue draws members from the entire tri-state area, but decided to commit to downtown and midtown.”<sup>35</sup>

On October 24, 1983, *The Commercial Appeal* reported that Bellevue Baptist might move to Countrywood, a neighborhood about a mile and a half east of Bellevue Baptist’s current location in Cordova.<sup>36</sup> Commenting on the news article, Roland Maddox, a member of Bellevue Baptist’s Long Range Planning Committee—established to study the church’s future needs—said that *The Commercial Appeal* “knew just enough to be dangerous.” The paper tipped off the general public to Bellevue Baptist’s new plans before church members knew about the decision, something that could have caused anxiety among churchgoers not expecting the church to relocate. Earlier in the year, the Long Range Planning Committee had selected Maddox and Morris Mills, both real estate professionals, to find a parcel of undeveloped space on which to construct a large church. When Maddox and Mill made this purchase, they concealed the identity of the buyer, fearing that the price would skyrocket.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Clark, “Bellevue Baptist To Build Future On Land Parcels,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), May 27, 1983. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.672.

<sup>36</sup> William C. Bayne, “Bellevue Baptist mulls move to tract out east,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), October 24, 1983. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.673.

<sup>37</sup> Roland Maddox, telephone interview with author, October 8, 2015. The parcel of land the church eventually purchased was a combination of several plots that it bundled together. Historian Randall Balmer stated that the property was 376 acres. Balmer, *Grant Us Courage: Travels Along the Mainline of American Protestantism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 77.

The land the church acquired in the suburbs, through the help of Maddox and Mills, cost \$1.5 million. According to the *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, if the church had acquired all the property needed to expand in midtown, it would have cost \$2.5 million. Pastor Rogers wrote of the Cordova purchase, “It has become so plain to us now. Had we been able to secure the two acres we thought we needed and built at the present location, we would have overbuilt that area and underbuilt our needs.”<sup>38</sup> The Cordova real estate presented possibilities Bellevue Baptist could not have realized if it had remained in midtown. After moving from midtown, Bellevue Baptist built a \$30 million dollar structure in Cordova. The sanctuary sat 7,000 and the choir loft had room for over 300 people. According to longtime member Bob Dawkins, the church raised \$10 million for the construction and borrowed \$20 million.<sup>39</sup>

#### Bellevue Baptist Moved to Accommodate its Growing Membership

Both churches had congregants who gave large sums of money to their churches annually. Not only was their giving impressive, but each also gained new membership frequently. Adrian Rogers said of membership increases, “We [Bellevue Baptist] don’t want to stop growing. I believe when a church stops growing, it’s dying.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Claiming Our Canaan: A Special Message from our Pastor,” *Bellevue Baptist Messenger* vol. 23, no. 45, 2. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives. Box 2, folder 100.400.

<sup>39</sup> Bob Dawkins, telephone interview with author, September 13, 2015. Although First Baptist had wealthy, high-profile donors, its total giving was not as high as Bellevue Baptist. When First Baptist acquired and erected new buildings, giving fluctuated from a low of \$562,100 in 1950 (or \$5,530,294 in 2016 dollars) to a high of \$1,762,599 in 1953 (or \$15,652,869).<sup>39</sup> During their respective building projects, Bellevue Baptist’s congregants gave more, collectively, than members of First Baptist. When Bellevue Baptist began its expansion, receipts increased from \$8,610,553 (or \$20,498,563) in 1983, to \$14,491,919 by the close of the 1989/1990 fiscal year (or \$26,290,692). For figure on Bellevue Baptist’s membership and giving from the 1950s see John E. Huss, *Robert G. Lee: The Authorized Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), 244; Rohm, *Dr. C*, 157-8; “Bellevue’s 19 Years of Growth (Since Dr. Adrian Rogers became pastor).” Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.770. Bellevue Baptist lists its figures for a fiscal year, First Baptist for the calendar year. Each inflation calculation is rounded to the nearest dollar. For inflation calculations, consult [www.usinflationcalculator.com](http://www.usinflationcalculator.com).

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Peter Alan Harper, “Bellevue move is approved,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), October 31, 1983.

Under the pastorate of W. A. Criswell, First Baptist's membership increased from 7,804 in 1944 to 27,580 by 1989, an increase of 253.4 percent. Much of this growth began when Criswell reorganized the Sunday School program at First Baptist. He also founded the Criswell Bible College, a school connected with First Baptist. Although Bellevue Baptist had a close relationship with Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, it did not financially support the school like First Baptist did with Criswell College.<sup>41</sup>

Rogers increased membership at Bellevue Baptist through special campaigns. Even before he arrived at Bellevue Baptist in 1972, his leadership promoted church growth. While Rogers led Parkview Baptist Church in Fort Pierce, Florida, membership increased from 529 to 1,338 from 1957 to 1964. During the years 1964 to 1972, he pastored the First Baptist Church of Merritt Island, Florida, and membership rose from 1,548 to 4,037.<sup>42</sup> When Rogers arrived at Bellevue Baptist, it was already the second largest Southern Baptist church by membership in the nation.<sup>43</sup> Although the church had many people, most of them were elderly when Rogers started. Bellevue Baptist's main sanctuary, built in 1952, seated 3,000 worshippers, but it was only half-full on a good Sunday.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting back on the elderly white congregation, he said it was like “. . . looking at a snowstorm.”<sup>45</sup> However, that did not last long because Rogers launched campaigns to attract more churchgoers. The first was “Miracle Day.” The goal was to attract 3,800 people for Sunday school on May 13, 1973. As a result of this campaign, attendance

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<sup>41</sup> Rohm, *Dr. C*, 157-8, 68-71, 108-12.

<sup>42</sup> “Dr. Adrian Rogers – Years of Ministry.” Bellevue Baptist Church Archive, Box 2, folder 101.933.

<sup>43</sup> “Florida Pastor to Bellevue?,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar* (Memphis) August 10, 1972. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 101.102, folder 101.437.

<sup>44</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 65.

<sup>45</sup> Balmer, *Grant Us Courage*, 85.

exceeded 3,800 with 4,567 in Sunday school. Another such occasion, called “Feeding of the 5000,” came on October 26, 1975. Bellevue Baptist wanted to remember the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with two fishes and five loaves (Matthew 14:13-21). Matching the success of “Miracle Day,” the event exceeded expectations and fed 5,400.<sup>46</sup>

From 1972 to 1981, church membership increased from 9,506 to 12,484. Bellevue Baptist led all Tennessee Southern Baptist churches in baptisms every year over that span except in 1974. The only year membership did not increase was in 1978, when the church’s membership list was updated to ensure information on the congregation was accurate.<sup>47</sup> Rogers preached one service each Sunday morning when he became pastor. In 1977, the church added a second morning worship service and a third by 1982. Bellevue Baptist’s growth was exceptional under Rogers’s leadership.

In 1982, Bellevue Baptist’s Long Range Planning Committee predicted that church membership would increase to 25,000 and Sunday school enrollment to 17,542 by 1992.<sup>48</sup> In addition, Bellevue Baptist’s attendees lived all across the Memphis metropolitan area. The committee’s study reported that only 7.8 percent of its congregation lived in midtown in 1982, while 8.4 percent lived in Mississippi (Memphis is within miles of the Tennessee/Mississippi border), 12.2 percent lived in east Memphis, and 8.3 lived in Bartlett, Tennessee, east of

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<sup>46</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 99, 187.

<sup>47</sup> “Bellevue’s 19 years of Growth (Since Dr. Adrian Rogers became pastor).” Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.770, and Dianne Mills, email with author, November 24, 2015. Mills is the head of the Bellevue Baptist Historical Committee.

<sup>48</sup> See footnote number 32.

Memphis.<sup>49</sup> As a result, the church maintained that if it moved, its new location would decrease drive times for 60 percent of congregants.<sup>50</sup>

By the 1980s, Bellevue Baptist had become a regional rather than a local congregation. Scholars Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler have shown that regional churches organize around transportation arteries running throughout cities. For example, Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, moved at about the same time as did Bellevue Baptist. Dauphin Way relocated to a nineteen-acre site at the corner of Dauphin Street and Interstate-65. The church estimated that 60,000 vehicles passed through that intersection daily. Another church, Prestonwood Baptist Church, initially located in north Dallas, moved to Plano, Texas. One of the reasons the church cited to justify its relocation was inadequate parking space in Dallas, which had caused membership declines. At the new location, Prestonwood created over 5,000 parking spaces.<sup>51</sup> The largest church in Loveland and Wheeler's study was Bellevue Baptist Church.

#### The Construction of Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tennessee

When Maddox and Mills bought the property where Bellevue Baptist is not located, there was nothing there but a few groves and two ponds, but within only seven years, that empty property housed one of the largest churches in the country. As he had done at the midtown location, Rogers set this new building on the foundation of inerrancy.<sup>52</sup> On June 27, 1984, the church's Site Selection and Building Committee chose architect Darrell Howe, a resident of Los

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<sup>49</sup> "Long Range Planning Committee," Roland Maddox, Chairman, Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.672.

<sup>50</sup> "Claiming Our Canaan: A Special Message From our Pastor," *Bellevue Baptist Messenger*, Vol. 23, No. 45. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives. Box 2, folder 100.400.

<sup>51</sup> Anna C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 129-30.

<sup>52</sup> Photograph of property. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 3, folder 101.897.

Angeles, California, to design Bellevue Baptist's new building. He was initially tasked with overseeing the entire project including the design and construction of the facility.<sup>53</sup> However, Howe's firm was unable to complete their proposed plan.<sup>54</sup> While Bellevue Baptist tried to determine how to solve this problem, Roe Messner, a native of Wichita, Kansas, contacted the church. He said that his firm, Commercial Builders of Kansas, could complete the sanctuary. The church chose Messner's firm on June 21, 1987. Commercial Builders of Kansas had built 1,209 churches before it agreed to finish Bellevue Baptist.<sup>55</sup>

On July 19, 1987, less than a month after selecting Messner's company, Bellevue Baptist members gathered at the property in Cordova, Tennessee to "Claim their Canaan." Like "Miracle Day" and "Feeding of the 5,000 Day," this celebration united the church behind the new building campaign. This special event recalled the story in the book of Numbers where Moses sent out twelve spies to survey the promised land. After the spies returned from their mission, most of them told the Israelites they could not enter into the land of Canaan because giants lived there and the people of Israel would be like grasshoppers in their midst. Of the twelve spies, only two, Joshua and Caleb, said they could conquer the land for Israel. They believed anything was possible with God.

Rogers viewed the construction of a new sanctuary like Joshua and Caleb saw taking the Holy Land. At the event that 5,500 people attended, including Memphis Mayor Richard C.

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<sup>53</sup> "Chronological Review of Canaan," Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.568.

<sup>54</sup> Roland Maddox, telephone interview with author, October 8, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> "Draft of Press Release." Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, Folder 101. 673. According to the document in pencil up at the top, the church did not release this report. There are conflicting dates within documents of the Bellevue Baptist Church Archives. The one listed for this footnote says that the church chose Messner on July 21, 1987. However, the chronology of "Claiming Our Canaan" said that the church voted on Commercial Builders of Kansas on June 21, 1987. Because the church held a massive rally at the current location on July 19, 1987, this chapter went with the June date.



Hackett and U. S. Congressman Don Sundquist, Rogers introduced those in attendance to Maddox and Mills, referring to them as Joshua and Caleb.<sup>56</sup> Children who attended sat near the front as ten people dressed as grasshoppers told Pastor Rogers why the church could not begin this construction project. The giants in the land that these “grasshoppers” referred to were plywood cutouts about ten feet tall and bore slogans that read fear, unbelief, selfishness, bitterness, strife, hate, laziness, pride, carelessness, and prayerlessness. When Rogers asked the children gathered if the plywood cutouts and what they represented would prevent the congregation from building a new sanctuary, they said “No!” As the kids said that, a bulldozer from behind the tree line came forward and demolished the “obstacles” in the church’s way. The Commercial Builders of Kansas started construction the next day.<sup>57</sup>

According to Roe Messner, Adrian Rogers was very involved in the construction of Bellevue’s Cordova campus and his influence is evident one approaches the main entrance to Bellevue Baptist. For example, they drive under a porte-cochere supported by columns that support the pediment inscribed “One Lord,” “One Faith,” “One Baptism,” “One God,” and “One Word.” It was Rogers’s idea to place the phrases from Ephesians 4:4-6 on the columns. However, the idea that there should be sixty-six doors that lead to the sanctuary, one for each book of the Bible, was Messner’s.<sup>58</sup> On the pediment is a stained glass image of the continents of the world. Right above the land masses, yellow beams of light representing a heavenly glow illuminate the world. Below the glass is Psalm 43:3 that proclaims “Send out thy light and thy

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<sup>56</sup> Bellevue Baptist Church, *Crossing the Jordan* (Memphis, TN: Bellevue Baptist Church, 1987). Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.413.

<sup>57</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 246-7, “Chronological Review of Canaan,” Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.568.

<sup>58</sup> Roe Messner, email to author, August 31, 2015.

truth.” This element is a reminder to the members of Bellevue Baptist Church to share the Gospel of Christ. This stained glass image that sits at the front of the church was almost shattered before it got to Memphis. The day after the manufacturer shipped it from California, an earthquake hit the building that made the glass, destroying the facility.<sup>59</sup>

As November of 1989 approached, construction on the new facility sped up. Two-hundred-twenty-five construction workers labored ten-hour days, six days a week. The sanctuary itself covered 500,000 square feet.<sup>60</sup> When Bellevue Baptist held its first morning worship services in Cordova on November 19, 1989, 14,000 attended.<sup>61</sup> Rogers intended to have only one worship service each Sunday morning, but so many people attended that the church began offering a second service in February of 1990.<sup>62</sup> Not only did Bellevue Baptist build a new sanctuary, it also constructed a retirement community called Bellevue Woods that opened in December of 1990. The church also bought a plot of land off of Interstate-40 and gave it to the state of Tennessee to build an exit ramp to give commuters a closer exit to reach the church.<sup>63</sup>

Bellevue Baptist’s membership increased from 18,852 in 1989 to 21,784 in 1991. By 2003, membership stood at 28,000.<sup>64</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Bellevue Baptist expanded its Cordova facility to include a children’s wing, a recreational complex with four basketball courts and a weight room, and soccer and baseball fields. The church finally had the space it lacked in

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<sup>59</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 244.

<sup>60</sup> “Church Construction,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis (Tennessee), July 8, 1989. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.673.

<sup>61</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 251.

<sup>62</sup> “Chronological Review of Canaan,” Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 2, folder 101.568.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> “20 Years: Thank You!, Dr. Adrian Rogers 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as Pastor and People 1972-1992,” pamphlet; Bellevue Baptist Church Archives; Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 113.

the city center. Adrian Rogers said about the church's attempt to remain in midtown, "We moved heaven and earth to stay here. We were just stonewalled. We just could not get more property."<sup>65</sup> If the church had remained, most likely membership would have declined as happened with other Southern Baptist churches in and around midtown.

#### Midtown After Bellevue Baptist's Move

After Bellevue Baptist moved east, many other Southern Baptist churches in Shelby County, Tennessee, followed. According to sociologist Andrew Trundle, twenty-five churches relocated to the eastern suburbs from 1988 to 2003. At the same time, SBC churches that remained in the urban core waned numerically. Two reasons account for this decline. First, in the 1990s, the population of Shelby County changed from majority white to majority African American, who had their own churches. Second, churchgoers at many SBC churches were elderly. For example, Speedway Terrace Baptist Church, located about a mile north of Bellevue Baptist's former location, had 1,203 members in 1991; in 2003 it had only 266. This decrease resulted from the death of elderly congregants and the failure to attract new people.<sup>66</sup>

Another growing difference between Memphis proper and the suburbs was the socio-economic characteristics of the residents. In 2000, Cordova had 50,000 residents, 86% of whom were white and only 9% percent African American. The median income in Cordova was \$66,000 and about 45% of Cordovans had earned a bachelor's degree or advanced degrees. By contrast, Memphis proper had a population of 650,000, 61% were African American and only 34% white.

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Kelley, "Bellevue Baptist says farewell to Midtown," *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis), November 13, 1989. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives. Box 2, folder 101.673.

<sup>66</sup> Trundle, "Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County, Tennessee," 85-7.

The median income of Memphis residents was \$32,000 a year, less than half of what those in Cordova earned. Slightly more than 20% of those in Memphis held a four-year degree.<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, Bellevue Baptist's move encouraged continued expansion. Relocating to the suburbs drew criticism from some, such as Andrew Trundle and Randall Balmer, who asserted that Bellevue Baptist moved as a result of white flight. At face value, their assessment appears accurate; however, Bellevue's move was more than simply white flight. The church, at least under Rogers's pastorate, did not have racial animus towards blacks and it wanted to remain in midtown. If it had not gained new congregants so quickly, it might have been able to expand incrementally. Nevertheless, because of Bellevue Baptist's gains, the church had to move or it would lose members.

#### Leading his Congregation to the Promised Land: An Assessment of Rogers as a Church Builder

Reflecting upon those who influenced his ministry, Adrian Rogers said of W. A. Criswell, "Dr. Criswell greatly influenced me because of his courageous stand for the inerrant Word of God."<sup>68</sup> Both men built large churches and each held to Biblical inerrancy. However, the men differed in their public persona. When it came to matters of race, Criswell, at least initially blasted integrationists as "infidels dying from the neck up." This proclamation characterized many of the pronouncements Criswell made over the years when it came to topics like separation of church and state and his view of SBC moderates. Rogers, in contrast did not lead Bellevue Baptist in such a manner. He took a more subtle approach. He did not beat people over the head with politically controversial statements in the public square. He made his public

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<sup>67</sup> Hankins, "White Flight, Shift to the Right," 9.

<sup>68</sup> Cited in Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 125.

comments in a more prudent way. Unlike Criswell, when Rogers confronted the issue of race at Bellevue Baptist, he took a tough stand against anyone who opposed integration.

Both men led churches that were as different as the men who led them. First Baptist Church of Dallas had wealthy members who gave to the church generously such as Minnie Slaughter Veal. For a time, First Baptist claimed Oilman H. L. Hunt, referred to as the richest man in the world, as a member. Bellevue Baptist had members with smaller financial profiles, but who gave more toward their building projects than churchgoers of the Dallas church. A possible explanation may have to do with the wealth in Dallas from the oil business. A good example of the prosperity Dallas enjoyed in the early 1950s came when the Dallas Texans, a now defunct NFL franchise that played only half of 1952, played the Los Angeles Rams. A Los Angeles sportswriter wrote of the team from Dallas, “Oh, give me a home where the millionaires roam/And three hundred grand is just hay.”<sup>69</sup> No one could make a similar claim about Memphis. Bob Dawkins, Roland Maddox, and Gene Howard all described the socioeconomic status of the church’s membership as working class or middle class.<sup>70</sup>

When it comes to the middle class churchgoers who attended Bellevue Baptist, the evidence suggests that scholars who argue that Bellevue Baptist moved owing to white flight oversimplify the church’s relocation. If the church wanted to move due to changing racial demographics, why would it pay for architectural designs for an expanded campus in midtown and spend close to a million dollars purchasing land surrounding the original church? Perhaps the best argument against the claim that the move was the result of white flight is evident in the sale

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<sup>69</sup> Cited in John Eisenberg, *Ten-Gallon War: The NFL’s Cowboys, The AFL’s Texans, and the Feud for Dallas’s Pro Football Future* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 21.

<sup>70</sup> Bob Dawkins, telephone interview with author, September 13, 2015; Roland Maddox, telephone interview with author, October 8, 2015; Gene Howard, telephone interview with author, October 9, 2015.

of its former property to Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church. If the church had held racial animus towards African Americans, it could have made sure not to sell them the property or not budge from the original asking price of \$12.5 million. Secondly, the church might have sold the property for \$3.5 million because it had no other option and no other potential buyers, so the church took what money it could to cut its losses. Or it is possible that Bellevue Baptist wanted another church to use the midtown property to advance the cause of the Gospel in midtown Memphis after Bellevue Baptist had left. Ultimately, critics of Bellevue Baptist have minimized or oversimplified Bellevue Baptist's efforts to remain in midtown.

Concomitant with his building efforts within the SBC, Rogers built the new Bellevue Baptist Church on the foundation of Biblical inerrancy which the church had believed at least since Robert G. Lee became the pastor in 1927. Rogers built through his Biblical preaching and his conviction that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God. He held special campaigns that focused on stories from the life of Jesus. His goal was not just to draw curious people to the church, but to reach people for Christ in that endeavor. Rogers said, "I think everything I do is evangelism."<sup>71</sup> These two factors brought increasing numbers of people to the church and kept them coming.

Even though Rogers was a conservative pastor with a talent for growing the church, it was ultimately his ability as a builder that allowed him to expand Bellevue Baptist Church. Once the church proposed and eventually approved a move to the suburbs, members fully supported the relocation effort. Rogers assumed the role of Moses, leading the people of Bellevue to their promised land, a property that eventually became home to a spacious church campus. Scholars Roger Finke and Rodney Starks argue that the success of Christian denominations and subgroups

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<sup>71</sup> Cited in Yelton, "The Evangelical Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers," 3.

has been due to the ability of churches to compete in the religious marketplace. They asserted that religious groups which ask their members to sacrifice have higher attendance than those that ask little or nothing of its congregants.<sup>72</sup> The move not only unified churchgoers around a common goal such as raising money for the completion of the project but also leaving midtown for Cordova, Tennessee. Rogers spent sixteen years preaching at the Bellevue Baptist campus. In that sixteen years, Bellevue Baptist not only “conquered the land” and defeated the giants, but built a large campus and a community for Christians around Christian fellowship, the Word of God and Rogers’s preaching.

At the persuasion of others, Rogers began a broadcast ministry that would go beyond the services of Bellevue Baptist on local television. This new endeavor would reach around the globe and enable people worldwide to hear the Word of God.

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<sup>72</sup> Roger Finke and Randy Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (1992; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 17.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PRESERVING THE LEGACY OF A SOUTHERN BAPTIST BUILDER:

#### ADRIAN ROGERS AND LOVE WORTH FINDING

Since 1990, many ministerial students have written about Adrian Rogers's preaching style and his homiletic method.<sup>1</sup> Although all provide background on Rogers's service at Bellevue Baptist Church and his leading role in the SBC Controversy, they offer little, if any, information about Love Worth Finding (LWF). LWF not only broadcasts Rogers's sermons over radio and television stations around the world, it preserves his legacy. In doing research for this thesis and talking to churchgoers in various places across the United States, two observations about Rogers continuously arose. Those who had heard of Rogers said that he was an excellent preacher and that his sermons still speak to the current dilemmas that our culture faces and many did not realize Rogers has been dead since 2005. The messenger may be dead, but the message continues to be broadcast throughout the world over a decade later.

LWF continues to broadcast the sermons of Adrian Rogers for two reasons. It is a way for Christians to reach non-Christians with the Gospel and, to a much greater extent, the ministry helps listeners become more dedicated Christians. Although Rogers cannot preach new sermons, LWF edits some of his material to make his messages more applicable today (something that is rarely necessary).<sup>2</sup> LWF is still successful today because Rogers's sermons touch on timeless

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Pete Montalbano, "A Critical Comparison of the Preaching of Robert G. Lee, Ramsey Pollard, and Adrian Rogers," (Th.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993); Ricky C. Cummings, "A Critical Examination of the Old Testament Evangelistic Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers," (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013); Joshua David Bonner, "An Examination in the Role of Preaching in the Conservative Resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention," (D. Min. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016); A. Timothy Hight, "A Comparative Homiletical Analysis of Selected Southern Baptist Convention Presidents From 1979 Through 1989," (Th.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Bob Sorrell, telephone interview with author, September 14, 2016.



truths. Recognizing the value of Rogers’s preaching, the staff at both LWF and Bellevue Baptist Church enabled Rogers to be a pastor first and not a celebrity preacher. This allowed him more time to prepare his sermons. By staying focused preaching on God’s Word and on the needs of his church, he avoided the temptations that plagued televangelists such as Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart in the late 1980s. This chapter opens with a brief history of Christian radio and television broadcasting before examining Bellevue Baptist’s involvement in airing its services over the radio and on television. Rogers did not attribute his broadcast success to his efforts, but wrote shortly before his death, “Please know that the strength of this ministry was and is not Adrian Rogers. It is the power of the Holy Spirit working through the proclamation of His Word. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

#### A Brief History of Christian Radio and Television

Radio not only made communication faster, it provided a large listening audience the ability to hear recorded or live speeches over long distances.<sup>4</sup> Historian Tona J. Hangen argues that Christian radio allowed listeners to interpret a sermon in their own way. Before the advent of radio, hearing sermons had been a communal event; congregants sat before the preacher in a sanctuary full of other churchgoers. According to Hangen, radio made a sermon more like a personal conversation. Some of those who listened to radio preachers were farmers or others who

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<sup>3</sup> Letter to the staff of Love Worth Finding from Adrian Rogers. The letter is not dated, but mentions that it was to be read upon his death. Obtained through Cathy Allen, a staff member of Love Worth Finding. Obtained from Cathy Allen through email, August 31, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> When this chapter refers to Christian radio, it does not refer to Gospel music, but sermons preached over the air waves.

had to travel long distances to attend church. It was during the 1920s that Christian radio demonstrated that fundamentalist Christians could be modern, but not modernists.<sup>5</sup>

The first Christian group to broadcast over the radio began airing its sermons in 1921. Within two years, that number rose to ten.<sup>6</sup> However, as the 1920s progressed, the press and other news media turned against fundamentalist and conservative Christians who used radio to spread their message. With the fallout of the Scopes Trial in 1925, the press painted fundamentalist Christians as backward country bumpkins, and as obstacles that stood in the way of progress.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the federal government worried that communists would use radio broadcasts to cite insurrection against the established order. This led to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), the forerunner to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), to classify programming that was suitable for airtime. Radio stations provided free airtime shows deemed beneficial for the welfare of the general public, but disliked narrow interests such as labor unions, political parties, and many religious organizations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 1-2, 5, 10.

<sup>6</sup> When fundamentalist and Northern Baptist John Roach Stratton acquired radio time for his sermons at Calvary Baptist Church in New York City, he said of the momentous occasion, "I shall try to continue doing my part . . . tearing down the strongholds of Satan, and I hope that our radio system will prove so efficient that when I twist the Devil's tail in New York, his squawk will be heard across the continent." Cited in Bob Lochte, *Christian Radio: The Growth of a Mainstream Broadcasting Force* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2006), 21.

<sup>7</sup> The famous Scopes Monkey Trial began when a group of evolutionists sought someone to challenge the Tennessee law against teaching the theory of evolution in the state. Ultimately the group told high school substitute John T. Scopes that they would pay for his bail and defense if he violated the law, which he ultimately did teaching at the high school in Dayton, Tennessee. The guilt of Scopes was never in doubt, but the case turned into a media circus when William Jennings Bryan offered his services for the prosecution and atheist Clarence Darrow did the same for the defense. For more information about the Scopes Trial consult Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006). The claim that the media made about fundamentalists was not true. Consult Bradley J. Longford, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, & Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 221.

<sup>8</sup> Lochte, *Christian Radio*, 22-3.

Major radio networks applied the government's standards for religious broadcasting. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) made gaining airtime harder for fundamentalist Christians to obtain when the network formed a partnership with the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) in 1926. When NBC formed, it established a friendly relationship with the FCC in part because both of their offices were located in New York City. The network even let the FCC form a list of "five fundamental principles of religious broadcasting" which stated that religious broadcasting must not be sectarian and that Christian programming must appeal to more than just one religious or denominational group. The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), created in 1927, followed NBC's policy for Christian shows. By 1929, the FCC quit issuing licenses to Christian broadcasters.<sup>9</sup> As a result, radio preachers whose messages did not align with the FCC, protested. Since the major networks would not carry their sermons, the only option available for them was to purchase airtime on local stations.<sup>10</sup> From the 1920s until the end of World War II in 1945, there were two fundamentalist preachers who dominated the airwaves. The first was Paul Rader (1879-1938), pastor of the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle who aired *The Breakfast Club* on Chicago's WHT.<sup>11</sup> The second, who Rader influenced, was Charles E. Fuller (1887-1968), who started broadcasting fulltime in 1929 in the Los Angeles area.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Rader, who died in debt and obscurity, Fuller's program, *The Old Fashioned Revival*

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<sup>9</sup> Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 22-6; Lochte, *Christian Radio*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 28; Lochte, *Christian Radio*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> "Paul Rader," *Prime Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting* by: J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Jon R. Stone (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997), 272-3. Rader got support from Chicago Mayor William Hale Thompson. He owned WHT.

<sup>12</sup> Fuller first heard Rader at the Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles in 1916 and, as a result, became a Christian. Soon after his conversion, Fuller felt convicted that God wanted him to become a minister. So he enrolled in the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) and took classes under fundamentalist Ruben A. Torrey.

*Hour*, became a fixture in the fundamentalist community. The program first aired in 1936 on the Mutual Broadcasting System. By 1943, the program had an estimated listenership of 20 million, aired on 1,000 stations, and paid \$35,000 a week to broadcast.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to his achievements as a broadcaster, Fuller did three things for conservative Christians during the 1940s. First, he played a key role in forming the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1942. After the Scopes Trial of 1925, fundamentalists separated themselves from mainstream culture. Over time, a group of fundamentalists, then dubbed “neo-evangelicals,” wanted to separate themselves from hardline fundamentalists, but also wanted to counter the efforts of the FCoC. Neo-evangelicals who participated in the NAE were Evangelist Billy Graham, theologian Carl F. H. Henry, and the pastor of Park Street Congregation Church in Boston, Harold J. Ockenga.<sup>14</sup> Second, because of his radio success and the fact that other conservative Christian broadcasters faced pressures from radio networks, Fuller also played a role in the formation of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), a group that grew out of the NAE in 1943.<sup>15</sup> Third, Fuller, along with his good friend Ockenga, founded Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, in 1947. Historian Timothy B. Weber said that Fuller and Ockenga “. . . envisioned a school that could effectively engage modern theological scholarship, further world-wide evangelism and reform some of strict fundamentalism’s most unattractive

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<sup>13</sup> *The Old Fashioned Revival Hour* started out as the *Radio Revival Hour*. Mutual Broadcasting System did not initially want to air Fuller’s program, but because the network needed cash, and Fuller’s program provided a steady supply of cash, the network made an exception.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-5. For background on the NAE consult, Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 141-60; Richard C. Cizik “National Association of Evangelicals,” ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 793-4.

<sup>15</sup> Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial*, 104-5; Howard F. Vos, “National Religious Broadcasters,” ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 800-1.

elements.”<sup>16</sup> Based on these three contributions, Fuller’s career and ministry impacted Christians for generations to come.

By the early 1950s, the major network ban against fundamentalist and conservative broadcasters began to crack. In 1949, William Randolph Hurst had his newspaper “puff” Evangelist Billy Graham after his successful Los Angeles Crusades. Soon after, Graham started a program with footage from his evangelistic meetings called *Hour of Decision*. By 1956, the American Broadcasting System (ABC) was the first major network to lift the ban on non-FCoC religious programs. NBC and CBS, now television stations, followed in 1957.<sup>17</sup> In 1960, Marion G. “Pat” Robertson started the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) which eventually became a Christian “empire.” Not only did Pat Robertson become a major name in Christian broadcasting, but two employees of his network, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, had a puppet show in 1964 so successful that they eventually formed their own Christian television talk show called Praise The Lord (PTL) and then a theme park, Heritage USA, leading to their own religious empire in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> By 1986, Heritage USA brought in \$126 million for PTL.<sup>19</sup> The Bakker’s empire imploded when Charles E. Shepard, an investigative reporter, discovered that Bakker had paid church secretary Jessica Hawn to keep quiet about a sexual encounter that occurred between the two of them in a Florida hotel room in 1980. That impropriety led to a

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<sup>16</sup> Timothy P. Weber, “Fuller Theological Seminary,” ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 460-1.

<sup>17</sup> Grant Wacker, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 74-5; Mark S. Ward Sr., *Air of Salvation: The Story of Christian Broadcasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 81, 83, 90.

<sup>18</sup> Ward, *Air of Salvation*, 96, 99-100; Charles E. Shepard, *Forgiven: The Rise and Fall of Jim Bakker and the PTL Ministry* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), 37-9.

<sup>19</sup> Shepard, *Forgiven*, 438-40.

much larger one. Bakker had promised his ministry “partners” that if they gave enough money, they could stay in a hotel room at Heritage USA a number of days each year for life. However, Bakker sold more timeshares than there were hotel rooms. The IRS said that Bakker was running a Ponzi scheme.<sup>20</sup>

When the Bakker’s scandal threatened to topple the ministries of other televangelists, Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority and whose program, *The Old Time Gospel Hour*, aired on 300 television stations and 180 radio stations, bringing in \$32 million in 1977, decided to intervene.<sup>21</sup> Once Falwell confirmed the rumors about the Bakkers, he visited with Jim Bakker in Palm Springs, Florida, and confronted Bakker on his marital infidelity. Ultimately Bakker handed control of PTL over to Falwell. However, soon afterward, Bakker accused Falwell of stealing the ministry from him. By the end of 1987, PTL filed for bankruptcy.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Jimmy Swaggart, another Assemblies of God televangelist and competitor of the Bakker’s, also had a fall from grace. Before his encounter with a prostitute in a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, motel room, Jimmy Swaggart Ministries aired in 145 countries in thirteen different languages and brought in over \$141 million annually. Within a year of his maudlin on-air confession, viewership of his program declined from two million to 851,000.<sup>23</sup>

Charles Stanley appears to have been the most successful televangelist since the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s. A fellow Southern Baptist and SBC president from 1984

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<sup>20</sup> Bakker eventually served prison time. The Bakkers had an extravagant lifestyle. In 1982 they bought a \$90,000 yacht and not long after that, a \$46,000 Mercedes.

<sup>21</sup> “Jerry Falwell,” *Prime Time Religion* by: J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Jon R. Stone, 93-5.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Dean Winters, *God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized The American Right* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 306-8, 310, 313.

<sup>23</sup> “Jimmy Swaggart,” *Prime Time Religion*, J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Jon R. Stone, 340-1.

to 1986, Stanley started In Touch Ministries in 1982. By the early 1990s, it received \$35 million in sales and had offices in Brazil, the Philippines, and Russia. By 2013, In Touch's total revenue was over \$90 million dollars, a jump of 300%. Stanley spent the majority of his time overseeing In Touch and rarely spent time at the First Baptist Church of Atlanta, where he was the senior pastor, or with his wife. The latter ultimately resulted in a divorce which the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* covered extensively in 1995. This incident led to a vote at the First Baptist Church of Atlanta as to whether the church should retain Stanley as senior pastor or go in another direction. The church voted to keep Stanley as its pastor. As a result, Stanley's radio ministry succeeded, but at a great cost. Still, Stanley's success in broadcasting demonstrated that the broadcasts of a local church could propel a pastor onto national radio and television outlets.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Broadcasting Ministry of Bellevue Baptist Church

LWF got its start in the midst of the televangelist scandals of the 1980s. Before that, Bellevue Baptist Church had a long history of broadcasting. Bellevue Baptist began airing its services over the radio in 1929.<sup>25</sup> As television became popular in the 1950s, Bellevue Baptist

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<sup>24</sup> Graham Weaver, "The Baptist Prince," unpublished paper (2014), 17, 25, 14, 8. Many believe that In Touch survived Stanley's divorce, something extremely taboo for a minister to go through, because of its sheer size. Bob Dawkins said that when he toured the facility that he realized that First Baptist Church of Atlanta is built around IN Touch. Dawkins said that In Touch records Stanley's sermons and then immediately takes the footage to In Touch for editing. Bob Dawkins, interview with author, July 20, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Bellevue Baptist sought a radio station to broadcast Dr. Lee's sermons over the airwaves. On November 21, 1928, the church's board of Deacons appointed J. E. Dilworth to sign a contract with WREC to air the church's evening services for a year. WREC began airing Dr. Lee's sermons January 1, 1929. Through November of 1929, the church spent \$4,765.74 on airtime and spent \$921.70 more than it expected to fulfill its yearly contract with the station. After 1929, Bellevue Baptist had some ups and downs with WREC. By November 4, 1931, Bellevue's deacon board voted to cancel its contract with WREC and gave the station thirty days notice. Eventually the motion went before the church's membership that ultimately voted that the Finance Committee deal with the problem and that body ultimately cancelled the contract. The church broadcast certain services sporadically until the church signed a contract with WDIA to air the church's worship service from 11 a.m. to 12 p. m. and paid \$40.00 a week. This agreement began December 7, 1947. By 1950, the church's morning meeting aired on WDIA and the evening services on WHBQ. The latter aired from 7:45 to 8:45 in the evening. I obtained this information through a document entitled "Radio Broadcast History" obtained through Paul Adams, the librarian of Bellevue Baptist Church through email on August 18, 2016.

member Hugh Dyer suggested in 1957 that the church broadcast its services to bring local television viewers to Christianity. Associate Pastor J. Ralph McIntyre supported Dyer's proposal. Dyer and McIntyre acquired television statistics from Bob Lewis, a member of Bellevue Baptist and an employee of WHBQ-TV in Memphis. Dyer and McIntyre went before the deacon body and told them that if they broadcasted Bellevue's services on television, the church could reach fifty counties and a potential audience of 60,000 to 70,000 over a 120 mile radius. The deacon body approved the proposal. Afterward, the proposal to air Bellevue's services on television went before the congregation for a vote. Church members approved of the idea and voted to invest \$52,000 to televise Bellevue's 10:50 a.m. service. McIntyre contacted RCA in Camden, New Jersey, so the church could buy recording cameras. The company was hesitant to sell products to a Southern Baptist church, but when it learned that Bellevue Baptist had a 3,000 seat sanctuary and its 120 member choir, RCA agreed.<sup>26</sup> After the church got the approval it needed from the FCC, Dyer spent many hours over a period of weeks installing the equipment. With the aid of several others, his team converted the organ room into a television studio. The local station that aired Lee's sermons estimated that it would take the church three to six months before it would be ready to air its services. However, Dyer's team beat the odds and began broadcasting after only thirty-five days.<sup>27</sup>

When Bellevue began televising services, the church became the first to have its own television gear. According to the official history of Bellevue Baptist written by Cyndi Richardson, "Other churches in large cities televised their services . . . but with rented or studio equipment. Renting equipment was not an option for Bellevue because only one TV studio in

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<sup>26</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 266-7.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.



Memphis owned remote equipment.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, the church claims it was the first in the world to own television cameras.

As Americans transitioned from black and white to color television sets, Bellevue Baptist updated its television cameras. In 1970, Bellevue Baptist’s pastor Ramsey Pollard recommended that the church take up a special offering to purchase new cameras. The goal of the special gift was \$100,000. The church planned to gain another \$20,000 for equipment through selling its old cameras. However, the leadership at Bellevue Baptist decided instead to donate the cameras to the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission for use in Taiwan.<sup>29</sup>

Adrian Rogers had broadcasting experience before he became pastor of Bellevue Baptist in 1972. His first opportunity to have a program on the radio came when he was a student at Stetson. He bought airtime on station WARN in Fort Pierce, Florida, for his radio show “The Closer Walk Hour,” which aired for thirty minutes on Sunday afternoons. His show lasted until he graduated from Stetson. After receiving his degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 1958, Rogers returned to Fort Pierce and broadcast a fifteen minute devotional show called “Daybreak,” that aired live at 6:45 a.m.<sup>30</sup> This second show lasted until Rogers left Fort Pierce to become pastor of the First Baptist Church in Merritt Island, Florida, in 1964. Bill Cochran, a member of First Baptist, Merritt Island, helped Rogers with a cassette ministry. Rogers recorded his sermons at Cochran’s house and took the tapes down to the local station that aired his sermons.<sup>31</sup> According to John Derrick Yelton, a former seminary student at the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 271, 269.

<sup>30</sup> John Derrick Yelton, “The Evangelical Emphasis in the Pastoral Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers,” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 60. Obtained through ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

<sup>31</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 117-8; Bill Cochran, Telephone interview with author, January 9, 2015.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Rogers's radio and tape ministry helped him reach out to those who otherwise did not attend church. Yelton wrote in his dissertation, "During his early years in broadcast ministry, for example, Rogers noted that he often received personal letters from people who thanked him for his messages and many people shared with him how his radio ministry was instrumental in leading them to faith in Christ or contributing to their spiritual growth."<sup>32</sup> With the experience Rogers had broadcasting in Florida, he was prepared to preach to an electronic audience when he arrived at Bellevue Baptist.

Rogers was a successful preacher because he went to the pulpit with confidence and he preached like a teacher. He believed that the Holy Spirit gave him the authority to preach from the Bible. He did not believe that it was the preacher's responsibility to draw crowds to a church, but the work of God that allowed a preacher to grow a large church. According to Rogers, Jesus worked through the message the pastor preached from the Bible. Rogers's approached preaching as an instructor teaching his flock or as an apologist who attempted to reason with churchgoers in the pew. According to Rogers, Biblical Inerrancy allowed him to preach with power. As a result, he was rarely a fire-and-brimstone preacher.<sup>33</sup>

Hugh Dyer was so impressed by Rogers's preaching that he started recording Rogers's sermons on a tape player. Not much later, people started asking Dyer for copies of the sermons he had recorded. Dyer's project ultimately became Bellevue's tape ministry that launched in 1973. Hugh and his wife Pearl began making tapes in the basement of Lee Auditorium for people

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<sup>32</sup> Yelton, "The Evangelical Emphasis in the Preaching of Adrian P. Rogers," 60.

<sup>33</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 155, 161, 165-6.

to purchase; the cassettes included recordings from the morning and evening service and sold for a dollar.<sup>34</sup>

In 1979, something unexpected happened at the church during one of the broadcasted sermons. When Rogers was preaching on the local ABC affiliate on June 17, 1979, a man named William E. “Mickey” Cotton rushed the pulpit. Cotton came forward shouting and cursing, and kicked over a flower arrangement before attempting to attack Rogers. According to the newspaper report, a dozen men wrestled Cotton to the floor after he exchanged punches with Leonard Garland, a member of Bellevue Baptist’s choir and an amateur boxer. Memphis Police charged Cotton with two counts of aggravated assault as well as one count of disturbing a religious gathering.<sup>35</sup> The most interesting thing about the whole incident was how local news channels covered the attack. Bob Lewis, a member of Bellevue Baptist and program director for the local ABC station that aired the church’s sermons, cut the feed to viewers at the start of the attack. However, the local NBC affiliate had its own footage of the melee and aired it on the 10:00 p. m. news Sunday night. At the time, the station planned to air a story on Rogers’s election as SBC president at the 1979 convention in Houston, Texas, but the NBC affiliate got more than they bargained for. Since the ABC affiliate would not release their footage of the attack, NBC released theirs.<sup>36</sup> Cotton’s actions did not stop Bellevue from recording their services or conducting church services. Gene Howard, then chairman of the church’s 111 active-

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<sup>34</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 274.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 273; “Charge At Rogers Prompts Security Move At Bellevue,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis (Tennessee), June 19, 1979. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 3, folder 101.184. In Joyce Rogers’s account of the event, she painted the man to be demon-possessed and in need of Jesus. She recounted that Rogers viewed this as a witnessing opportunity. Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 104-5.

<sup>36</sup> John Knott, “Fracas at Bellevue Service Tang IV Tape,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis (Tennessee), June 19, 1979. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 3, folder 101.184.

member deacon body, said the church had security in its services. “We put into motion several options for security, but they will definitely be very low key, very low profile. We have some things in effect now, but if you walked into church services you wouldn’t notice anything different. We do not expect to have armed guards anywhere.”<sup>37</sup> The report concluded that the man had been at the church before. Rogers did not comment on Cotton’s assault except to say that Cotton had been at the church before and exhibited strange behavior such as walking through the church in a baptismal robe.<sup>38</sup>

Although this bizarre attack occurred at the church, the incident did not stop Rogers’s sermons from being broadcast on local television. In 1977, several members of Bellevue Baptist began praying that Rogers would start a television and radio ministry that would reach beyond Memphis. One of Bellevue’s members, Buck Jones, who encouraged Rogers to expand his ministry, said of his preacher, “I knew that in my lifetime I have never heard anyone present the Gospel so clearly . . . . His messages cut across economic, age, racial, educational, and sociological lines. People understand who Jesus is when Adrian Rogers preaches.”<sup>39</sup> In 1985, Rogers launched “Word for the World,” which became an arm of Bellevue Baptist’s media ministry. Its headquarters were located close to the church’s midtown location in an old dental laboratory. Buck Jones was the first president of the fledgling ministry.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Cited in “Charge At Rogers Prompts Security Move at Bellevue,” *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis (Tennessee), June 19, 1979. Bellevue Baptist Church Archives, Box 3, folder 101.184.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 274.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

## A History of Love Worth Finding

One of the most important reasons that LWF succeeded was that Bellevue Baptist Church and LWF valued Rogers's time and wanted him to spend his time preparing his sermons. In 1982, Robert L. Sorrell, a former assistant plant manager for Harvesters International and deacon at Bellevue Baptist, left the corporate world and became the senior associate pastor of Bellevue Baptist. Not only did Sorrell play a major role in helping the church move from midtown to Cordova, Tennessee, but he conducted the church's business meetings.<sup>41</sup> When LWF came into existence, Rogers only spent a limited amount of time there and when he was there, he usually made multiple recordings.<sup>42</sup> Although LWF had humble beginnings, it ultimately became a respectable television and radio ministry.

Rogers prepared his sermons with the belief that they should "confront, convict, and comfort men and women through the preaching of biblical concepts."<sup>43</sup> For Rogers, the purpose of preaching was not only exhortation of biblical truths, but to effect a transformation in the lives of the hearers. Throughout his years as a pastor, Rogers preached an average of six sermons a week and was on the lookout for illustrations he could use to hammer home a point from the biblical text he preached from. As a result, he kept an ever expanding file where he deposited newspaper clippings, cards, and sermons notes from others. Rogers kept an extensive cross-referencing system and used file cards when he studied exegetically for a sermon, spending four

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 188. Sorrell ran the church's administration and he joined the staff of Bellevue Baptist when the church needed him the most. On Mondays throughout the week, Sorrell held an executive meeting with senior staff members at the church. On Tuesday, he met with Rogers at 10:00 on Tuesday mornings to update him on what took place at the Monday meetings. The meetings with Rogers usually lasted between an hour-and-a-half to two hours. After that, Rogers ate lunch with ordained staff members and used that as a time to get to know the other ministers at the church better and to mentor them. Bob Sorrell, telephone interview with author, September 14, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Bob Dawkins, interview with author, July 20, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 194.

to eight hours on each one, often forty-eight hours a week preparing his sermons. As a result, Rogers needed as much time as possible to complete his work. Since the church and LWF allowed Rogers this precious time, his sermons spoke for themselves each Sunday.<sup>44</sup>

LWF began operations in 1987 with a small staff and few radio stations, but gained prominent recognition from the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) early on. In the first year, LWF had a staff of nine and a mailing list of 7,900 people. The next year, LWF set up a broadcasting contract with Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). Rogers's first sermon to air on the network was "The First Christmas Sermon." The next year, LWF received recognition from the NRB when it awarded LWF the NRB Television Broadcast Ministry of the Year award.<sup>45</sup>

Within the next few years, LWF focused its attention on reaching an international audience. In 1992, Rogers's radio ministry began airing on television in Middle Eastern nations. "When Bankruptcy Become a Blessing" was the first message LWF broadcast in the region. In 1993, LWF began airing Rogers's sermons on TransWorld Radio that reached audiences in the South Pacific and Africa. Along with the expansion overseas, LWF debuted its first bi-monthly newsletter entitled "Ministry Moments" and subsequently launched a website and online store in 1995.<sup>46</sup>

By 1996, LWF aired daily on 350 stations across the United States and in fifty countries worldwide. At that time, LWF broadcast on 1,600 cable systems and had an estimated listener and viewership of 93 million households.<sup>47</sup> In 1997, LWF began airing in South America and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 194-5, 203.

<sup>45</sup> "Historical Timeline of LWF," page 1. Obtained through email from Cathy Allen, August 31, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> "Adrian Rogers," *Prime Time Religion: An Encyclopedia of Religious Broadcasting* by J. Gordon Melton, Phillip Charles Lucas, and Jon R. Stone (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1997), 295-6.

lwf.org started streaming audio of Rogers's sermons daily. Over the course of the next two years, it began airing sermons in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mongolia, the Philippines, and South Korea through TBN. The only area LWF was not being broadcast was Europe, however that changed in 1999 when LWF began airing Rogers's messages on Premiere Radio in London. LWF demonstrated that it could keep up with the times and technology to reach broader and more diverse audiences with the Gospel through Rogers's sermons. In 1999, LWF began closed captioning on its television program and launched daily devotionals via email in 2000. Within a year of starting email devotionals, LWF had 16,414 signed up for a word from Adrian Rogers.<sup>48</sup>

By 2003, LWF received 1.1 million pieces of mail annually from listeners. Letters contained prayer requests, of which they received around 10,000, or orders for Rogers's sermons on cassette or CD. Volunteers at LWF sent the orders out with handwritten replies. LWF produced 170,000 cassette tapes, 5,000 VHS tapes, and 40,500 CD's.<sup>49</sup> LWF's biggest international success has been its radio and television programming in Latin America where LWF is known as *El Amore Que Vale*. In 2003, *El Amore Que Vale* had 355 radio outlets and 1,555 television stations. Only independent stations carried LWF more and, out of the television outlets, only Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) and Inspiration Network aired more of Rogers's sermons.<sup>50</sup>

That same year, Rogers became a member of the NRB Hall of Fame, joining other Christian notables such as Focus on the Family's James Dobson, In Touch's Charles Stanley, CBN's Pat Robertson, Old Time Gospel Hour's Jerry Falwell, Old Fashioned Revival Hour's

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<sup>48</sup> "Historical Timeline of LWF," 2.

<sup>49</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 275.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

Charles Fuller and Breakfast Club's Paul Rader. The award is the highest prize that the NRB offers to recognize "warriors for Christ who live exemplary lives of valor and compassion, blazing trails and leaving paths for succeeding generations to follow. . . ." The NRB presented this award to someone who made an "invaluable contribution to the field of Christian communications, exhibition of the highest standards, and evidence of faithfulness in Christ."<sup>51</sup>

Another facet of LWF, at least during Rogers's lifetime, was the Adrian Rogers Pastors Training Institute founded in the early 2000s. Over the years, many pastors had asked Rogers how he had so much success. Rogers formed the Pastors Training Institute to teach younger preachers what he had learned through decades of experience. The most important piece of advice that Rogers gave in those classes was that being a pastor is like a relay race. Throughout a pastoral career, pastors had transition zones where they moved from one phase of their career to another. Rogers explained that if they did not do well in what he called the "transfer zone," then they might not last as a pastor. To help him with manage the Pastor's Training Institute, Rogers enlisted the aid of Steve Rogers, his eldest son.<sup>52</sup>

Rogers's messages broadcast through LWF had more applications than typical radio broadcasts. For example, a couple in British Columbia, Canada, hosted forty to fifty people weekly for worship services that centered around Rogers's sermons ordered through LWF. This unnamed couple not only showed that Rogers's sermons were good to listen to for devoted

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<sup>51</sup> "2017 Special Service and Media Awards Descriptions," National Religious Broadcasters, accessed August 21, 2016. <http://nrb.org/membership/media-awards/categories/>.

<sup>52</sup> Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 119. At the time that Joyce Rogers wrote this book, the Adrian Rogers Pastors Training Institute only held one meeting. Since this book came out within months of Rogers's death, it is likely that Rogers only held one meeting of the Pastor's Training Institute before he died. The institute's offices are in North Palm Beach, Florida, and it is not likely that it is connected with LWF, however, both work closely together as Steve Rogers is preparing to make his father's sermons available online for a subscription rate to the Adrian Rogers Pastors Training Institute.



Christians, but also demonstrated the timeless principle that, through audio and visual media, a group of people did not have to be in a sanctuary to hear a preacher expound on the Bible. They could still get the benefit of a sermon without a preacher present.<sup>53</sup>

#### The Death of Rogers and Plans and Love Worth Finding after 2005

After Roger's death from complications of pneumonia and colon cancer in 2005, the messages continued. James Dowd, a reporter for the *Commercial Appeal*, captured the vision Rogers had, not just for LWF, but for all the organizations he participated in, whether it be the SBC or Bellevue Baptist Church, when he wrote, "Throughout his ministerial career, Rev. Adrian Rogers proved a brilliant strategist for those who shared his vision and a formidable opponent for those who didn't. And despite his death Tuesday at 74, many believed the influence of the Southern Baptist who engineered the overhaul of America's largest non-Catholic religious group will live on."<sup>54</sup> At the time of Rogers's death, LWF received 75,000 calls annually as well as 20,000 hits on its website lwf.org. Dowd predicted that, based on the materials Rogers had from his years at Bellevue Baptist, LWF had at least three years of never before heard material yet to air. Bill Skelton, then vice president of LWF, said that "Adrian Rogers developed this ministry in a way to preach the message of salvation to those who may not know about Jesus . . . . The messenger may be gone, but the message will continue."<sup>55</sup>

After the death of Rogers, his ministry continued to move forward. Cary Vaughn, the current president of LWF, said that although LWF acknowledges that Rogers is now dead, LWF

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<sup>53</sup> Richardson, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 275.

<sup>54</sup> James Dowd, "Rogers' influence will span generations: Years of fresh TV Broadcasts alone," *Commercial Appeal* Memphis (Tennessee), November 17, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

does not have any “smoke and mirrors and we don’t make a secret about that.”<sup>56</sup> In the years after Rogers’s death, LWF has released podcasts that have had 2,163 downloads within the first month. LWF has also kept up with the advent of social media. In 2009, it created a Facebook and Twitter account. By 2011, LWF had 1.7 million podcast downloads and 1.3 listeners online.<sup>57</sup> As of 2016, Roger’s radio ministry estimated that it spent \$206,000 a month on radio broadcasts and that Rogers’s messages reached an estimated 578 million households worldwide.<sup>58</sup>

LWF has grown since its inception in 1987. In 1988, Rogers’s messages broadcast on 268 radio outlets daily. By 1996, that number had increased to 350, a jump of 30.6%. From the late 1990s until 2007, LWF increased its daily radio broadcasts by leaps and bounds. By 1999, LWF could be heard on 540 stations, an uptick of 54.3%. In 2001, that number increased to 1,137 stations, a surge of 111%. Finally, by 2007, the number reached 2,100, a jump of 85%. However, ultimately that number decreased to just under 2,000 in 2013.<sup>59</sup> It may be that this decline was directly related to the LWF losing its contract with the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). LWF had aired their television programs on TBN since its inception in 1987. However, in 2013, Paul Crouch, the founder of TBN died. When his wife took over the network, she decided to cut LWF from TBN’s airtime. As a result, LWF lost one and a half million dollars in revenue and dropped from a budget of \$7 million to \$5.5 million. One reason that the loss of airtime on TBN hurt LWF so much was that TBN was LWF’s biggest television carrier. Eventually LWF was

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<sup>56</sup> Cary Vaughn, telephone interview with author, August 30, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> “Historical timeline of LWF,” 3.

<sup>58</sup> Cary Vaughn, telephone interview with author, August 30, 2016; Love Worth Finding, “Legacy of Love,” vol. 23, no. 4, September/October, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Adams provided me with these figures through numbers he had from the Bellevue Baptist Church Archives. Telephone interview by author, August 18, 2016.

picked up by DayStar, but LWF had to shorten its broadcasts to half an hour. Before the switch, LWF had an hour time slot on TBN.<sup>60</sup> As a result of the format change, LWF finally leveled out and upped its daily radio networks to 2,300 daily. Its television outlets now stand at 11,000 weekly, most of which air on Sundays. The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) shows that from 2013 to 2015, LWF's revenue fluctuated between \$6,616,860 in 2013 before dipping slightly to \$6,004,871 in 2014 and then jumping to 6,355,314 in 2015.<sup>61</sup> Even in light of the recent decline due to TBN dropping LWF from their programming, with its new half-hour television format on DayStar, it appears that LWF will prosper yet again.

#### Building through Surrogates: A Conclusion About LWF

Cary Vaughn, the current CEO of LWF said that “Rogers was a pastor first and we [LWF] respected it. He spent more time in his Bellevue offices first. LWF guarded his time carefully . . . Rogers probably knew that everything stemmed from the church.”<sup>62</sup> Rogers's preaching started at his church and those recordings ultimately became the messages that LWF broadcast. Unlike Rogers's building projects within the SBC and at Bellevue Baptist Church, his building program through LWF was focused on spreading the Gospel to the world. Just as a lighthouse shines a beacon of light out into the darkness atop a tower of bricks and mortar, Rogers's sermons are broadcast from towers (and now satellites) to those anxious who hear God's word through his preaching. A big part of his success as a broadcaster came not only from his great speaking voice, but also from the rigorous preparation he dedicated to each of his sermons. Rogers's involvement within the SBC, although crucial, only took place at certain

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<sup>60</sup> Dawkins, interview with author, July 20, 2016.

<sup>61</sup> “Love Worth Finding Ministries,” Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, accessed August 20, 2016, <http://www.ecfa.org/ComparativeFinancialData.aspx?ID=7385&Type=Member>.

<sup>62</sup> Cary Vaughn, telephone interview with author, August 30, 2016.

times throughout the year. With the executive staff in place at Bellevue Baptist Church, Rogers could cast a vision for the church through his special campaigns, but most importantly through his preaching, which LWF allowed Rogers the time to construct with quality craftsmanship. Rogers did not focus on building a media empire like Charles Stanley. Stanley's obsession in expanding *In Touch* ultimately cost him his marriage. Nor did Rogers intervene in an area outside of his church or convention like Jerry Falwell when he tried to save PTL from bankruptcy. He stayed focused on what mattered most.

Based on the number of CDs and cassette tapes ordered of Rogers's messages, it is evident that his sermons spoke to the lives of many Christians across the country and the world. If not, then the group in British Columbia that built a Bible study around his messages would not have survived or they would have found another preacher. If there was no interest in Rogers's sermons, LWF would not have expanded from 268 radio outlets to over 2,000 within a twenty-five year period. This evidence alone demonstrates that Rogers spoke on issues that individuals need to hear in order to become better Christians or to convert others to Christianity. Rogers's sermons usually focused on the life of Christ or other Biblical texts, but at various times throughout the year, such as Christmas and Easter, LWF broadcasts sermons related to the birth of Christ and his death, burial, and resurrection. In an interview with Bob Sorrell, former senior executive pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church and currently the chairman of the board at LWF, he said that during the 2016 presidential campaign, LWF is broadcasting Rogers's sermons about America and politics in an effort to inform listeners on how a Christian should vote.

Rogers's success in terms of being a Christian broadcaster places his work within the larger framework of conservative and fundamentalist Christian radio. Since the birth of Christian radio, sectarian groups and those who preach a conservative evangelical message have faced

roadblocks amongst the major broadcasters, which is why from the late 1920s to the early 1950s, these broadcasters had to turn to alternative networks to air their messages. Billy Graham helped conservative evangelical Christians gain access to airtime on major television and radio networks. This allowed Christian broadcasters to gain success and prominence, especially during the 1980s, but this success, for many, came crashing down with the scandals of the Bakkers and Jimmy Swaggart. Rogers did not get mired in scandal and his sermons had been well received when broadcast throughout the Memphis metropolitan area, so he had a base of viewers already in place when he launched LWF in 1987.

At that time, Rogers did not have recognition outside Memphis or the SBC like the big time televangelists. As a result, Rogers was able to cut a niche into Christian broadcasting because he was not the typical televangelist. It is true that Rogers was friends with Jerry Falwell, that he was involved in conservative politics and stood for conservative biblical doctrine, but he did not seek the same things as Falwell, Robertson, the Bakkers, Stanley or Swaggart. Rogers saw himself as a simple preacher sharing the message of Jesus with others, whether that be at Bellevue Baptist Church or through LWF.

The biggest part of Rogers's success was his ability to communicate with the person in the pew like he was having a personal conversation with them. Recall that Buck Jones said, "I knew that in my lifetime I have never heard anyone present the Gospel so clearly . . . . His messages cut across economic, age, racial, educational, and sociological lines. People understand who Jesus is when Adrian Rogers preaches."<sup>63</sup> Bob Sorrell believes that the Holy Spirit spoke through Adrian Rogers as he preached.<sup>64</sup> It could have been that God moved through his

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<sup>63</sup> See footnote 39.

<sup>64</sup> Bob Sorrell, telephone interview with author, September 14, 2016.

preaching, but it is more likely that Rogers knew the hurts of his congregations and society at large. For Rogers, the only answer to society's woes was accepting Christ as savior and becoming a Christian. There are many who preach the Bible, but there are only a few who can communicate in the way Rogers did.

## **CONCLUSION:**

### **ASSESSING THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SOUTHERN BAPTIST BUILDER**

Some, such as historian Walter Shurden, believe that Rogers tore down the largest Protestant group built in the United States. Moderates like Shurden would argue that Rogers was part of a demolition crew that destroyed the diversity within the SBC before 1979. However, as this thesis has argued, Rogers was actually a skilled builder. The majority of those who have written on the SBC inerrancy controversy viewed Rogers's efforts on behalf of the Patterson-Pressler coalition as a fundamentalist takeover that excluded those who believed that women had the right to preach in a Southern Baptist pulpit, and saw conservatives (or fundamentalists) as exclusionary, hierarchical, and doctrinaire. However, Rogers did not see his actions that way. He believed that he was fighting against "liberalism" that had crept into the SBC over the decades and he was determined to stop it from dominating the SBC and "taming" another Christian group. Rogers had not wanted to get involved with the battle in the SBC; he had even considered removing his church from the SBC, and if the members had voted against that, he would have resigned his pastorate there. Fortunately, Rogers did not have to do so, because he ultimately became a leader in the fight to "right" the SBC.

A big reason Rogers attracted people to the Patterson-Pressler faction of the SBC, and to a lesser extent Bellevue Baptist Church and LWF, was that Rogers offered an alternative to what his followers believed was the free love, counterculture, and drug culture in the 1960s. Many parents and grandparents of baby boomers watched in horror as their children and grandchildren protested the Vietnam War, experimented with LSD and other drugs, fornicated with members of the opposite sex, or in some cases, members of the same sex. To these conservatives, the moral values Rogers preached were the Bible's timeless truths. His message of Biblical inerrancy,

even when scholars questioned the Bible's reliability and accuracy, brought certainty to those in doubt. Rogers embodied these values and preached them to his local congregation and over the airwaves, and took a stand within the SBC. As a result, his audience grew. When Rogers preached at the Pastors Conference or gave the SBC presidential address at the annual meeting of the SBC, he let his words spoke to people across the country who helped him form a national movement. He built a following that ultimately expanded from Southern Baptists and non-Southern Baptist Christians and other listeners around the world. As a result of this extraordinary outreach, Rogers gained recognition from American political figures. Former President George H. W. Bush said of Adrian Rogers, "There are many who presume to speak for the evangelical movement, but surely Dr. Rogers is one of the handful who truly represent them. Here is a great man with a lot of influence and a lot of wisdom."<sup>65</sup>

Although Rogers represented white conservative evangelicals through his political affiliations, he did not hold the racist beliefs that many academics, such as Randall Balmer, argued he held.<sup>66</sup> Rogers made a strong statement when it came to welcoming blacks into Bellevue Baptist in 1973. No one will know if he would have kept his word to resign from the church if his congregation had not concurred, but his statement had a tremendous impact. Although Bellevue Baptist moved from a racially changing neighborhood to a white neighborhood, race was not the reason for the move.

Rogers's skill as a church builder and as foreman of the Patterson-Pressler coalition not only demonstrated that he could get things done within the SBC and at Bellevue Baptist church.

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<sup>65</sup> Cited in Rogers, *Love Worth Finding*, 140.

<sup>66</sup> Balmer has argued that the Religious Right and the Moral Majority was founded by racists who supported Bob Jones University's ban against interracial dating. Balmer insisted that Christian conservatives and fundamentalists did not want to federal government to tell them what to do in regards to their policies on race. For more information consult Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 13-7.



It also confirmed that a white pastor can still have prominence in the community. In the African American community, historically, black pastoral leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Jessie Jackson, and Al Sharpton, have had tremendous influence. At the community level, Rogers often got praise from civic leaders in Memphis. From 2000 to 2002, Rogers had weekly articles in Memphis's *Commercial Appeal* and during the week of his death in 2005, the newspaper ran at least a dozen articles reporting on his legacy and impact. The question remains; How does this thesis differ from others about the life of Adrian Rogers?

First, the majority of the Ph.D. dissertations on Rogers offer a “scientific” analysis of his preaching. A key factor in his success was how his preaching touched his listeners, but to simply produce a homiletical analysis to be studied by professors of rhetoric or seminarians sells short the legacy of Adrian Rogers. He was a builder. Rogers used his preaching not just to share the truths of the Gospel or rally Biblical inerrantists to fight for their beliefs within the SBC. He used it to build the foundation the SBC rests on today, the Bellevue Baptist Church was built upon, and from which LWF broadcasts.

Second, the majority of the literature on the SBC inerrancy controversy frames the Patterson-Pressler coalition not as an architectural firm with Rogers as the lead builder, but rather as a demolition crew. Rogers did not see it as his mission to destroy the SBC. Once he became involved in the inerrancy controversy, he saw it as his mission to return the SBC to its conservative roots which he believed seminary professors, presidents, and convention employees had eroded. Moderates within the SBC claimed that the Patterson-Pressler coalition, along with Rogers, excluded moderates from appointments for SBC boards and agencies, but Rogers saw it as a measure to prevent further decay. In many ways, Rogers remolded the SBC to support his doctrinal belief of Biblical inerrancy. The plan that Rogers enacted for the SBC was one that

filled holes in the walls and strengthened the structure. To Rogers, swaying that allowed for doctrinal diversity was not a preventative measure against an earthquake, it was a sign that the house which was the SBC was on its way to collapsing.

When Jesus gave what is now known as the Sermon on the Mount, he told his listeners:

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon the rock: And the rains descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. And everyone that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man: which built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.<sup>67</sup>

As Rogers understood it, he was following the words of Jesus Christ. He built the SBC, Bellevue Baptist Church, and Love Worth Finding upon the rock of Biblical inerrancy. In doing so, he solidified his legacy as a good and faithful servant.

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<sup>67</sup> Matthew 7:24-27. King James Version. Rogers preached his sermons out of the King James Version of the Bible.

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