

# The Southern Baptist Convention, Adoption, and Orphan Care

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## Introduction

The partnership between Together for Adoption and Southern Baptists has become an exciting development. At the Annual Southern Baptist Convention this year Together for Adoption is working with the North American Mission Board to host a panel discussion on Adoption and Orphan Care with Russell Moore, Tony Merida, Johnny Carr, and David Platt. There will also be a breakout session at the national Together for Adoption conference aimed specifically at Southern Baptists with Tony Merida, Rick Morton, Johnny Carr, and myself. The discussion of adoption and orphan care has picked up quite a bit in the SBC over the past few years. In June of 2009 the SBC overwhelmingly passed a resolution proposed by Russell D. Moore promoting adoption and orphan care, which in part reads:

*That we encourage local churches to champion the evangelism of and ministry to orphans around the world, and to seek out ways to energize Southern Baptists behind this mission.<sup>1</sup>*

Interestingly, orphan care has long been a part of Southern Baptist life. Since our very beginning, Southern Baptists have taken the call to orphan care as a divine mandate. In 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention was formed with two cooperative ministries and one agenda. The two ministries were the Foreign Mission Board (Now the International Mission Board) and the Domestic Mission Board (Now the North American Mission Board). The agenda of the Convention was simple; to combine the efforts of autonomous churches for “one sacred effort” - the propagation of the gospel. Baptists have always been mission minded. As one phrase in the original constitution of the SBC reflects clearly:

*“It shall be the design of this convention to promote Foreign and Domestic Missions, and other important objects connected with the redeemer’s kingdom.”<sup>2</sup>*

While orphan care fell under the banner of ‘other important objects’, it was important none the less. The foundation for such social ministries came from the desire to provide gospel signs amid the rubble of a broken world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution No. 2 on Adoption and Orphan Care, June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Article II, Constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1845.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 22, Isaiah 1.

## **Adoption in Early Southern Baptist Theology**

“Baptists have long been considered a ‘people of the Book.’ Various Baptist confessions demonstrate the way in which the Bible is viewed as the Word of God and is, therefore, authoritative for the faith and practice of every believer and church”.<sup>4</sup> In the larger framework of evangelical Christianity, Southern Baptists have not always been known for their contributions to theology. As one historian put it, Southern Baptists “have been more active than contemplative; they have produced more doers than thinkers”.<sup>5</sup>

Yet searching the work of early Southern Baptist theologians provides a glimpse into the importance of the biblical doctrine of adoption. Baptist Theologian John L. Dagg opens his discussion on the theology of adoption by explaining it as it is practiced among men: “an individual receiving the son of another into his family, and conferring upon him the same privileges and advantages, as if he were his own son.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike Northern Baptist theologian Augustus Strong, who placed adoption as a sub-category of justification<sup>7</sup>, Dagg argued that the theological truth of adoption is a blessing that rises higher than justification because in its relational aspects adoption secures the love of God, the discipline of God, and believers are made heirs of God.

The relational aspect of the doctrine of adoption is further described by Southern Baptist James Petigru Boyce, who wrote that “the sonship ascribed to the believer in Christ, is best understood by considering its gracious origin, its peculiar nature, and the wondrous blessing which it confers.”<sup>8</sup> Boyce noted that one experiences a “closer and more endearing relation to God” because of one’s adoption through Christ. Like today, the stunning reality of one’s adoption in Christ was most likely the theological motivation for the early Southern Baptist’s orphan care endeavors.

## **Orphan Care in Early Southern Baptist History**

If one takes a close look at the denomination’s history they will find that Southern Baptists organized several orphanages across the southern states dating back to the 1860’s, most of which ministered to Civil War orphans. The correspondence of the Domestic Mission Board’s secretary, W.S. Webb, concerning the situation of orphans in Mississippi following the Civil War enables us to see the importance of orphan care in our early history as a convention. Historian Keith Harper notes that Webb “estimated

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<sup>4</sup> David S. Dockery and David P. Nelson, *A Theology for the Church*, Ed. Daniel L. Akin, 140.

<sup>5</sup> H. Leon Mcbeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 675.

<sup>6</sup> J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 1857.

<sup>7</sup> A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 1907.

<sup>8</sup> J.P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 1887.

that there were some 5,000 to 10,000 orphans in the state and some 50,000 Baptists whom he chided for neglecting Biblical commands to care for the poor and needy”.<sup>9</sup> Ignoring the call to care for orphans, argued Webb, “would mark [Southern Baptists] with a pusillanimity that would deserve contempt from the world.”<sup>10</sup> While Webb’s challenge went unheeded by some of his specific audience, there were Southern Baptists who took up the call for orphan care. Harper writes:

*Southern Baptist orphanages tried to provide the best possible medical care and education for their children. They also tried to provide a homelike atmosphere that gave orphaned children, in addition to mere shelter, a sense of stability in community.*<sup>11</sup>

Beyond that, Baptists were influential in developing orphan care systems such as the ‘cottage plan’ orphanage (placing children in self-sustaining cottages with a housemother), the ‘placing out system’ (a forerunner to modern foster care), and even the ‘apprenticeship model’ (placing children in specific homes for training in an industrial trade or framing skills) throughout the American south. There is a rich history behind the efforts of orphan care in the Southern Baptist Convention.

## **What Now?**

Though we are currently separated from the founding efforts recalled above by over a century, Southern Baptists still have a divine mandate and a social situation that calls us to care for the orphans. It is interesting to note, as one historian posits, that the controversies of the 1970’s and 1980’s between the conservatives and moderates over the authority of the Bible was more closely tied to the abortion issue, thus the sanctity of human life, than many Southern Baptists realize.<sup>12</sup> However, there seems to be little evidence of an adoption and orphan care movement during this period. Perhaps this was due to the hesitation among conservatives towards social endeavors as an implication of the moderate’s drift towards a theologically bankrupt social agenda. Even still, there has always been a desire among Southern Baptists to seek the welfare of the city<sup>13</sup> and to love one’s neighbor<sup>14</sup> as a sign accompanying the proclamation of the gospel, even if we haven’t gone about engaging these issues in the wisest way. Nevertheless, the divine mandate is still before us. The specific call pertaining to

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<sup>9</sup> Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 165,

<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 29.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 22.

orphan care is well reflected in our current denominational summary of faith, *The Baptist Faith and Message*:

*We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death.*<sup>15</sup>

Since its conception, the Southern Baptist Convention has out grown its name. Our gospel efforts reach far beyond the southern states of North America. Moreover, there is still an orphan crisis. Immediate indigenous situations (like the civil war) are no longer the sole source of the orphan crisis. Globalization has flattened our distance from third world poverty, the AIDS epidemic, and unwanted pregnancies. What then, shall we now do now?

## **Conclusion**

The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest denomination in the United States, with over 44,000 churches in all fifty states, and is now more than 160 years old. If the Church is truly, as Merida and Morton argue, the most powerful force in the world, then we must not remain silent or still.<sup>16</sup> As for the Southern Baptist Convention specifically, according to historian Nathan Finn, the strength and longevity of the convention is evidence that, "...autonomous churches believe that they can accomplish more when they work together than they can as individual congregations."<sup>17</sup> Imagine what it would look like if the churches in the Southern Baptist Convention developed a passion to minister to the orphans in their own cities and throughout the world. This author is not arguing for another institutional structure to be added to the already bloated convention, but a movement within our own tribe that heeds the call to care for the orphan. Now is the time for resurgence in connecting our orthodoxy to orthopraxy. Like our early Southern Baptist theologians, we need to regain a sense of God's heart for the helpless. Moreover, we need to consider the model of early Southern Baptists who saw their mission in terms of both evangelization and social outreach to the less fortunate. My hope is that the partnership between Together for Adoption and Southern Baptists will be fruitful in advocating for the poor, marginalized, abandoned, and fatherless.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article XV.

<sup>16</sup> Tony Merida and Rick Morton, *Orphanology*, 79.

<sup>17</sup> Nathan A. Finn, *Southern Baptist Identity*, Ed. David S. Dockery, 270.

<sup>18</sup> James 1.