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Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago

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Confessions of a Resolution Recidivist

by Bruce N. Shortt

Like the children of almost all evangelical denominations, the children of Southern Baptists overwhelmingly attend government schools. Nevertheless, the last three Annual Meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have involved a public discussion of how we as Christians ought to educate our children. In each case, the discussion was engendered by resolutions that called for removing, or for preparing to remove, the children of Southern Baptists from government schools.

As you have probably heard reported, none of these resolutions passed. What is usually not reported, however, is that *none of the resolutions could have passed because the leadership of the SBC prevented the resolutions from reaching the floor of the Annual Meetings for debate and a vote.*

As a co-sponsor of each of the resolutions, I can tell you that we fully expected that the resolutions would be bottled up in committee. Given that we knew this, you might be asking yourself why someone would bother introducing any resolution regarding education to the SBC let alone three. The answer has to do with the media and “therapy.”

Resolutions As Therapy

Conservative evangelicals will generally tell you that they are dead set against sin. Southern Baptists are no exception. My Baptist brethren, however, tend to specialize in denouncing the sins that the overwhelming majority of us don’t commit, such as entering into homosexual “marriages.” In a recent outburst of moral courage, the messengers at our 2006 Annual Meeting discussed with great intensity and passed a resolution that both condemned drinking alcoholic beverages and recommended barring drinkers from holding any position of leadership within the SBC.

Now, like the vast majority of Southern Baptist men, I married a woman, and I don’t drink alcohol. Nevertheless, I must admit that even though I generally don’t commit the sorts of sins that we Southern Baptists publicly denounce, I am a sinner. In fact, there are days when I feel as if even my sins have sins.

As a denominational group, however, our besetting, but not only, sin is our disobedience in the education of our children, *and this we will not discuss.*

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In fact, raising this issue among Southern Baptists is considered by many to be in poor taste, sinful (bearing false witness against the government schools), and perhaps even un-American. From personal experience, I can assure you that anyone who suggests to a gathering of Southern Baptists that the government schools are harming our children is likely to be treated to howls of execration and antiphonal chanting of “Our children are salt and light!” and “Our schools are different!”

Despite mountains of evidence that government schools are destroying our children spiritually, morally, and intellectually, Southern Baptists, like evangelicals generally, simply prefer to deny that the problem exists. Moreover, we are shocked when someone suggests that our government school habit is sin.

Consequently, my cosponsors and I have tended to view our resolutions strategy as analogous to the beginning of a “twelve step” program: before we can recover, we need to admit that we have a government school sin problem. This is why we have drafted the resolutions in uncompromising terms and have coupled them with press releases. Drawing secular and Christian media into the process has allowed us to challenge complacent evangelical leadership publicly and incite a debate among the Christian grassroots regarding how we educate our children.

Progress

So, what has been accomplished? Before the SBC 2004 Annual Meeting the question of whether we are being faithful in the education of our children generally wasn’t even on the radar of the Southern Baptist leadership and laity. As a direct result of the 2004 and 2005 resolutions, however, these issues have received a great deal of media and denominational attention.

While the predominant view among the SBC leadership continues to be that government schooling is biblically acceptable, our leaders are increasingly questioning what is

being done to our children in government schools, and several leaders within the SBC have begun to speak out on the need to rescue our children from government schools. As a “consciousness raising” exercise, the resolutions have been quite successful.

Outside of the SBC, the 2004 and 2005

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resolution efforts led to similar efforts to raise this issue in the PCA and elsewhere. Moreover, the 2005 resolution on homosexual activism in the government’s schools attracted support from many state chapters of the American Family Association, Concerned Women For America, Eagle Forum, and Focus on the Family.

What About 2006?

This year the Moran/Shortt “Exit Strategy” resolution was not reported out of the Resolutions Committee. Most of you probably know that two of the members of the Committee publicly indicated their strong support for the Moran/Shortt resolution, but we have reason to believe that two influential members were opposed. Evidently, this resulted in an impasse.

Nevertheless, the Committee’s internal debate over the education issue was sufficiently intense that the Committee reported out an unprecedented two resolutions on education. (Prior to 2004, the SBC Annual Meetings had only spoken on education once every 5–7 years or so. From 2004 to 2006 the Annual Meetings have spoken on education four times).

The Committee’s first education resolution, Resolution No. 9 “On Off-Campus

Biblical Instruction,” clearly recognizes in its “whereas” clauses that there is something wrong with the way in which we are training up our children, and it calls on all school boards in all school districts to recognize and accommodate parents, churches, and other faith-based organizations that wish to provide off-campus biblical education *during the school day*.

We have been referring to this resolution facetiously as a “partial exit strategy.” Needless to say, it’s mildly amusing to contemplate the likely reaction of the overwhelming majority of school boards across the country to parent or church requests that their children be allowed to disappear from the government school from, say, 10 am to noon during the school day in order to receive biblical education at the First Baptist Church of Wherever. Of course, it would also be interesting to know how many of our 43,000+ SBC churches actually make such proposals during the 2006–2007 school year. My guess is that the percentage would not be far from zero.

The Committee’s second resolution, Resolution No. 10 “On Engaging the Direction of the Public School System,” also recites in its “whereas” clauses many of the problems we have raised with the government schools, but takes a reformist direction by urging the members of our churches to run for school board positions.

While this might have been an effective strategy for changing schools in 1906, it is hardly an effective strategy in 2006. Today school boards, administrators, and teachers have far less power to determine what goes on within their schools than they did even ten years ago. Few evangelical parents or leaders know or are willing to acknowledge that most of the power over education that once resided locally has flowed steadily to the state and federal governments, the teachers’ unions, and the courts. Moreover, Resolution No. 10

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reflects no awareness that in many areas of the South and Midwest the school boards are already majority Christian, as are the faculties and administrators. Unfortunately, having a Christian majority on a school board does not change the fact that government schools by law are prohibited from teaching a Christian worldview.

Plano Independent School District is an excellent example of this. The community served by PISD is overwhelmingly Christian and politically conservative. Not surprisingly, this is reflected in the composition of the school board and the school employees. Nevertheless, PISD gained some unwanted attention in 2004 when it was reported that not only had it renamed Christmas vacation as “Winter Break,” it was also being sued over aggressive efforts by PISD to suppress any recognition of Christmas—even down to telling children not to bring such things as red and green napkins to the “Winter Break” party because the colors might remind someone of Christmas.

Overall, this year’s resolutions demonstrate that even the Committee recognizes that there are serious problems with the government schools. Unfortunately, the Committee proposed irrelevant solutions.

The LifeWay Motion

When Roger Moran and I learned that the Resolutions Committee was effectively deadlocked on our resolution, Roger introduced a motion directing LifeWay to investigate various issues that we have been raising regarding children, our churches, and government schools, and to report back on them at the Annual Meeting next year. The motion passed *exactly* as Roger wrote it.

The motion may prove to be a major breakthrough because, as already noted, many

of our leaders and pastors still try to deny that the problems within the SBC and American evangelicalism arise from our disobedience in the education of our children. If LifeWay looks honestly at the existing research, and we believe that it will under the leadership of Dr. Thom Rainer, we are confident that the Convention will be forced to admit that what we have been saying is correct.

Getting the Convention to act on the education issue requires conviction, and the motion gives us an excellent opportunity to develop the necessary conviction within the Convention.

Finally....

While many factors contribute to the embarrassing condition of American evangelicalism, no factor is nearly as culpable as our government school habit, nor is discussion of any topic as studiously avoided by mainstream evangelicals as that of whether we are being faithful in the education of our children. Government schools are truly the Golden Calf of American Christianity.

Nevertheless, there are many reasons to be optimistic. The systemic pathologies of

the government school system are becoming almost impossible to conceal, even in “good” school districts; more and more Christian and non-Christian parents are

opting for private schools or homeschooling; more Christian leaders are speaking out on the need to provide Christian children with a Christian education; and pastors and parents are increasingly having to confront whether our government school habit is sin.

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Mr. Shortt and T. C. Pinckney were co-sponsors of the Christian Education Resolution that was submitted for consideration at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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...many of our leaders and pastors still try to deny that the problems within the SBC and American evangelicalism arise from our disobedience in the education of our children.

All too often, those of us committed to Christian education have been reluctant to speak out about the sin of educating our children in schools that are effectively pagan seminaries. By speaking boldly to our friends and neighbors and in our churches and communities about the need to rescue our children from the government’s schools, we will be sowing the seeds of reformation and revival in our homes, churches, and culture. This is something we simply must do. Returning American Christians to faithfulness in the training up of their children is a hill worth dying on.