

James L. Sullivan addresses

What's going on in Southern Baptist life today? That question is a puzzle to most Baptists. Not understanding the background of the people involved, some are perplexed, others upset, some angered and still others are downright disgusted. What causes the turbulence?

"I have 30 minutes to deal with history, personalities and circumstances with which I have been personally connected or have personally observed and in outline form try to describe what is happening today in Southern Baptist life that brings about the present situation of questioning, condemnation, criticism and slowdown in our forward movement.

"If we could just get Southern Baptists to calm down enough to think with their brains instead of their emotions, we'd be over 90 percent of our present-day problem. For example, Babe Ruth, who had more home runs than any other man for a generation, also struck out more than any man in American baseball. So whether you see him as the home-run king or the strike-out king depends on how you look at him.

"I came across this denominational problem in 1970. That was nine years before it surfaced and became public. I discovered that a man whom I knew quite well in a state on the Eastern Seaboard was an associate editor of a magazine publishing things that weren't precisely true. I called him and asked for a conference and spent several hours in his presence to try and pick his mind and see how he was thinking. Among other things, he said, 'We're going to do whatever it takes to take over the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention, and we intend to do it as quickly as it can be accomplished.'

"First, he stated that he was mad with the system by which trustees were elected, not at us as an institution. But he attacked the institution to get at the trustees.

"The second thing was his determination to control both state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention, and he was not secretive or apologetic about it. The third thing was that he identified some of the leaders by name. To show how well they have succeeded, he named four men to me. One became a parliamentarian almost immediately and three others are now serving as trustees on Southern Baptist



James L. Sullivan, retired president of the Sunday School Board, spoke to employees on Anniversary Day in May. (Photo by Jim Veneman)

boards and agencies in fulfillment of his stated determination. I asked him how he was going to accomplish his purpose, and he said, 'We're going to organize the losers of every election and cause of Southern Baptist history we can identify.'

"He said, 'Winners soon forget but losers never do. The South is still fighting the Civil War. The North forgot there ever was one.' He felt if they could identify and organize the losers, they would have the majority.

"Next, I said, 'Under what special issue are you going to fly a flag?' He said, 'We haven't picked it yet, but when we pick it, it will be one that no one can give rebuttal to without hopelessly getting himself into controversy.' That was the summary of our conversation.

"This experience caused me to watch the movement closely for a period of several years as it worked silently, not exactly underground; for they were stating their purpose and method clearly. They were not publicizing it yet, but they were organizing and identifying the people they wanted to pull together in a very loosely knit coalition of losers of the past in order to control the agencies through their newly elected trustees. That's the background under which the controversy started seven years before it openly surfaced.

"The first time we see the controversy

surfacing is at the Southern Baptist Convention in Houston in 1979 where they accomplished some of their objectives. In Houston there were vicious public attacks upon agencies, especially the seminaries. There were attacks on every ex-president of the Southern Baptist Convention. There was an attack on Duke McCall, who had been nominated for the convention presidency. They called him an alcoholic even though he had served as president of the United Dry Forces in Kentucky. Criticism had gotten out of hand. Criticism is the vehicle of change in a democratic process, but it must be kept under control and it must be truthful.

"It was in Houston that two of these lost causes emerged publicly. One of them was the argument about the use of the word 'infallibility' as it concerns the Bible. And the implication was if you do not use the word infallibility that is prima facie evidence that you do not believe the Bible. This was implied over and over again and that became the main issue. This means they did not examine and report history accurately, for in the 1920's this question arose when our first statement of faith was being developed.

"Dr. E. Y. Mullins had opposed writing any denominational doctrine statements of faith on the grounds that history has proved

question of SBC turbulence

that if Baptists formulate a statement of faith, within the foreseeable future it will be looked upon as a creed. It would be used to judge and discipline others rather than to merely confess our own faith.

"When they came to a statement on the Bible, Mullins set forth his theological point of view as the greatest theologian among Baptists. His position was that the Bible does not claim infallibility for itself. Rather, it stresses our relationship to it, instead of what it is. His position was that the Bible and the Holy Spirit both magnify Jesus.

"Criticism which can be used constructively in a democracy has gotten out of hand—I've watched it closely. What has been the result? As we look at the controversy, we see that there have been boycottings of speakers and booings from time to time. There is a tragic dissipation of our energy in argument. We magnify the weaknesses of other persons rather than their strengths. We send instructed messengers to the Convention when instructed messengers are actually delegates and under Southern Baptist polity they should not be seated.

"These seminars and rallies have been sponsored and used very largely to promote a particular cause in the conflict even when the Peace Committee has requested that they cool it. We see an inexperienced leadership who do not understand the background and therefore make glaring blunders. We see lawsuits. These are just some of the things that have grown out of the controversy so carefully planned and executed."

Sullivan contrasted the present situation with the union in the late 1700s of Particular Baptists, who emphasized formal worship and an educated clergy, and Separate Baptists, who emphasized informality and premillennialism. Particular Baptists came from England and started congregations such as First Baptist Church, Charleston, S.C. Separate Baptists had their beginnings in Sandy Creek, N.C., under the leadership of Shubal Stearns.

"These two operated separately, but they had most of the things in common," said Sullivan. "They believed in Christ. They magnified the church. They believed in evangelism.

"Gradually, leaders began to see that to-

gether they could build a greater denomination," Sullivan said.

"We need to examine in all of this where Southern Baptists are. On one side are the ultra-liberals who look on the Bible as little more than a Sears and Roebuck catalog. Next, you have the liberals who have a lesser concept than we do about the Bible, but they believe parts of it and reject others. Then you have the conservatives who like to take the Bible as it is but recognize that there are some things in it that are not to be taken literally, like 'If your right hand offends you, chop it off.' As far as you can go to the right are the ultra-conservatives. There you have the Pharisaical legalists, extreme literalists and snake handlers. They're the ones who say you have to be baptized to be saved. They're the ones who say the wine and bread are the body and blood of Christ. We don't go that far.

"We Southern Baptists are all conservatives, except for a few. Terminology is the problem. What do you call those on each side of our conservatism? Perhaps we should call them Leftists and Rightists. But unfortunately, we've had about 5 percent to break out of these borders on either side. I talked at length with a leader of the present controversy. He says not more than 5 percent of the Southern Baptists disbelieve the Bible. I agree. But there are a few.

"The Peace Committee has had a problem of trying to identify the groups involved. They're both out of bounds. And it's 5 percent either way. So, here we are trying to operate as a denomination with these dynamic forces at work. We are people who believe in the Bible. We are people who preach it.

"When you get a controversy going, here's what happens. You have these two groups within the conservative spectrum. One begins to argue and that side widens. As they argue the center diminishes. Institutions get caught in the middle in a narrowing field where if they say anything, it's attacked by the opposite extreme. And there's our condition in our present situation. The thing that is producing the most of the misunderstanding at this present moment is that the present group in charge of things apparently has determined that nobody will be elected a trustee of any South-

ern Baptist institution who does not belong to this extreme rightist group. The historical policy of our Convention has been that we should have trustees that represent the total conservative group in order that they can minister to the total constituency.

"What's going to be the outcome? If we continue the argument, we don't get anywhere. We are in a tug of war. We reach an impasse. We waste our energy. We wear each other down and the only result is exhaustion. We mustn't continue to do this.

"Solutions proposed by the Peace Committee may actually win out. They may come up with a permanent solution. God help them. I hope they do. Their main contribution thus far has been to try to quell the disturbance and announce the reality of diversity. If you want to know who the extremists are at each end of the SBC spectrum right now, you identify the ones who are holding rallies during the time that the Peace Committee has asked them not to. They've refused to cooperate with the Peace Committee that's trying to quiet the volcanic emotion. The Peace Committee knows full well that one can whip up emotion beyond a certain point; human judgment then shuts off. That's what makes a mob. The Peace Committee is trying to quiet it down, which is the wise stand. If they could only take quiet time and understand the problem, I think we can come out of it.

"One other thing is possible. We can then regain our sense of direction which I hope will be the answer. The Sunday School Board doesn't try to minister to the extremists who are out of bounds at each end. But insofar as it can it needs to minister to the totality of conservative Baptists.

"It is the lack of one fact that can make us misunderstand. We need to get to Southern Baptists with facts and they will respond correctly. Then we must follow up with intensive training and indoctrination in our history, beliefs, practices and stands. What we need is to advance forward. This is the right direction. It is not to pull this way, that way, or another. Our direction must be upward, forward, onward. That's where God is, and that's where the future for Southern Baptists must be."