

Nettles, Thomas J. *Ready for Reformation? Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005. Pp. 140. \$14.99. Paper.

In 1980, Tom Nettles and Russ Bush provided the conservative movement within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) the historical ammunition needed to call the denomination back to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy with their book *Baptists and the Bible*. Twenty-five years later, the inerrantists have won the battle for the Bible but Nettles fears they may end up losing the spiritual war.

Nettles's influence casts a long shadow across the Southern Baptist landscape. In addition to influential volumes like *Baptists and the Bible* and *By His Grace and for His Glory*, he has been influencing the influencers in the SBC for nearly 30 years, first at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and currently at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His academic credentials and his knowledge of Baptist life have positioned him well to offer a critical analysis of the current state of theological affairs in the SBC and a biblical and historic corrective to some concerns that he believes still exist seventeen years after inerrantists won the high ground in the battle for the denomination.

In *Ready for Reformation?* Nettles shares his conviction that “[r]eformation involves much more, however, than the mere recovery of biblical authority. Reformation penetrates the deep recesses of theological self-perception and purpose in institutions. It involves time, patience, sacrifice, and honest self-criticism” (2). While the issue of inerrancy served as the “formal principle” in the Southern Baptist Reformation of the 1990s, Nettles directs his readers to the material principle which properly arises out of the formal: How does one act and live in light of the accepted doctrine of biblical inerrancy? Nettles argues that “while recovery has been substantial, the work is not yet done” (8). His concern is that for many Baptists the Reformation ended with the election of conservative denominational presidents a quarter century ago. Instead, he reasons, Baptists must be ever vigilant to apply the truths of those inerrant Scriptures to every area of Baptist life.

Nettles dedicates the bulk of the book to the various areas of Baptist life and thought he believes to be most endangered by a stunted reformation, a reformation that has been applied only to the inspiration of Scripture, not its authority. Having determined that inerrancy and doctrine are intricately linked and that theology is important, these convictions must then be applied to all areas of theology and church life, Nettles argues. Practical matters like preaching and evangelism as well as doctrinal issues like a grace-centered theology and the Trinity all reflect the level of commitment one has to the doctrine of inerrancy. To fail at any one level to take the Baptist Reformation to its logical conclusions, he argues, is to fail at reformation itself.

This little volume, just 140 pages in length, proves valuable on a number of levels. First, Nettles's prediction of reformational atrophy proves amazingly true. Writing just a decade and a half after the final conservative victory, Nettles warns, “[when] the disenfranchised reformers finally gain ascendancy, the feeling of power and privilege cuts short many of the former ideals” (6). To illustrate this prophetic point, the author foresees a day in which “a culture of preeminence and control can be created into which few may penetrate.” The annual meetings of the SBC in Indianapolis (2004) and Greensboro (2006) reveal that accuracy of that prediction.

In 2004, a grassroots movement arose which contested the election for president for the first time in nearly a decade as some in attendance expressed a concern over the self-perpetuating nature of the conservative leadership within the denomination. While the candidate nominated

from the floor lost that election, 2006 saw the election of a local pastor, Frank Page, who many perceived to be the electoral dark horse in another contested vote.

The convention of 2006 also saw another predictive comment from Nettles come true. He prophetically suggests in this work that the day might come when the level of one's giving to the Cooperative Program, not one's theology, would be determinative in one's bid for denominational service. "Churches creating optional missions emphases [will again be] labeled as disloyal and their ministers as unworthy of denominational recognition" (7). At the Greensboro meeting of the SBC, the man many saw as the political appointee of the conservative leadership, Ronnie Floyd, was soundly defeated by the grassroots candidate, Frank Page. The dark cloud which swirled around Floyd's candidacy? The issue was not his clear connection with the existing leadership of the denomination but the low level of support given to the Cooperative Program by his church which has opted to fund a variety of evangelistic efforts outside of the denominational mission agencies. In both cases, that of a "culture of preeminence" and that of the Cooperative Program as a measure of one's commitment to the SBC, Nettles was right.

Nettles is also to be commended for his holistic approach. He is not interested in doing theology for theology's sake. He desires to see every area of church life addressed in the Baptist Reformation. Southern Baptists, he contends, "[M]ust recapture with candor and honesty the love for consistent, coherent truth" that characterized early Baptist life and identity (12). To make his case, Nettles overlooks not one major area of theological concern that relates directly to the life and mission of the church and through the church the denomination as a whole. From the lofty peaks of Trinitarian theology to the nitty gritty of church membership, all fall under the purview of this little book.

Finally, Nettles should be applauded for his insightful use of Baptist history, not to make his case—for that he turns to the Bible—but to support his case. He successfully interweaves historical anecdotes and precedence to reveal the historic Baptist positions on those things he finds vital for the continuation of reformation. That is, those things to which he is calling the SBC are things that had been abandoned or forgotten during the years in which the Bible was demeaned. To no surprise, Nettles surveys the entire 400 year history of the Baptists, drawing on the English and the Americans, the General and the Particulars. Names like Smyth, Fuller, and Spurgeon appear with regularity. Men like Furman, Johnson, and Broaddus (and Broadus) speak again to issues still important. Thanks to the breadth of Nettles's familiarity with his topic this short book is replete with examples from the breadth of the Baptist past.

That helpful aspect of Nettles's work, his familiarity with the life and times of other Baptists, provides both an aid and a curiosity to the volume. Unlike most other books that include a theological and/or bibliographic glossary at the end of the book to aid the uninformed, *Ready for Reformation?* offers this at the very beginning, before any concepts or characters are introduced. While this isn't problematic, it is certainly out of the ordinary and one wonders why Nettles opted for this approach.

The inclusion of that glossary highlights one of the great ironies of this book. On the one hand, Nettles assumes that his readers may not be familiar with many of the theological terms or the individuals of Baptist history past. On the other hand, Nettles assumes too much.

He refers to the Baptist battles of the recent decades in short order and moves on, as his thesis suggests, to the issues of today. The historical nearsightedness of most Baptists, however, suggests that many have forgotten how far we have come or from what depths we have arisen. Untold numbers of others who would profit greatly from a reading of this book have no idea whatsoever of the true nature of the Baptist Reformation. While it may be true that many other

fine books discuss these issues at length, it is unlikely that they've been read by all who need to read this one. While Nettles rightly assumed that most of the rank and file Southern Baptists who might approach this volume have little, if any, knowledge of Baptist luminaries like Andrew Fuller and Charles Spurgeon, should he have assumed that they truly understand what has taken place so recently yet so far from the pews in which they sit every week? *Ready for Reformation?* lacks immediate historical context that would make Nettles's legitimate concerns all the more poignant.

Are Southern Baptists ready for reformation? Many would say that the reformation has come and gone, that the SBC is presently enjoying the glow of sweet victory now that it's all over but the crying. Tom Nettles would say "no," the fat lady isn't ready to sing yet. Instead, he rightly argues that the changes initiated in 1979 with the election of Adrian Rogers or the subsequent defeats of Dan Vestal represent not the end of a revolution in Baptist life but the beginning. Those shots which were heard around the ecclesiastical world launched a reformation which remains incomplete, the conclusions not yet drawn, history not yet written. Historians will someday determine whether the Baptist Reformation was a success or not. Historian Tom Nettles rightly asks Baptists today if they are *Ready for Reformation?* because much difficult ground remains to be won.

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