

**RELIGION AND ECOLOGY:
MISSISSIPPI SOUTHERN BAPTISTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

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This Thesis for the Master of Environmental Studies Degree

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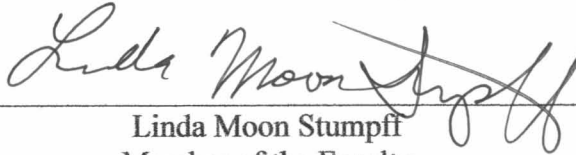
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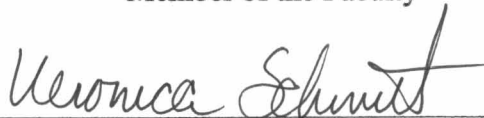
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ABSTRACT

Religion and Ecology: Mississippi Southern Baptists and the Environment

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This study examines how Southern Baptist cultural and theological beliefs influence Southern Baptist thought in relation to the environment and environmental problems. Religion and Ecology is an emerging new field of academic study and is defined as ethical, moral and religious tendencies that relate to ecological issues. The field of Religion and Ecology studies the complex relationships between human beings, their diverse religions and the earth's living systems. The purpose of the study is to assess current perceptions and knowledge about environmental problems by Mississippi Southern Baptists in the context of environmental degradation. Seven pastors or academics participated in an ethnographic study. Semi-structured interviews provided new information about the beliefs of Mississippi Southern Baptists from both an insider and outsider perspective. The study worked to understand the beliefs of this population from their points of view. The results show there is a lack of knowledge and understanding about environmental problems by Mississippi Southern Baptists. In addition, the study shows that Mississippi Southern Baptists have limited reception to current Ecotheological literature, or reinterpretation of Biblical scripture and religious implications in regard to ecological issues. The Dominion Theory, an Ecotheological theory of human dominion and control over all species and nature, is not found to be an entirely correct characterization of Mississippi Southern Baptists. Although Southern Baptists exhibit dominion characteristics, such as an anthropocentric view of reality in which God is primarily interested in human beings; other factors, mainly eschatological, are more significant in explaining the lack of knowledge and understanding about environmental problems by Mississippi Southern Baptists. Future work needed includes more research in the lay community, outreach to the Southern Baptist community by the environmental community, and development and distribution of environmental literature appropriate to this population and their religious beliefs.

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Preface

This writing is devoted to the study of religion and ecology and is designed, in a broader sense, to explore this very complicated relationship. My primary purpose (the thesis) was to look deeper into Southern Baptist culture in Mississippi to assess the present depth of knowledge and interest in “environmental literacy” within this denomination. Through my own experiences growing up in South Mississippi in the heart of Southern Baptist culture, I found that there seems to be a lack of awareness about environmental problems from the Southern Baptist community. As my interests grew in the direction of religion and ecology, I found myself wanting to discover if this denomination had some understanding of or expressed any concern for environmental problems. I was also interested in how Mississippi Southern Baptists would respond to and interpret specific ecological or environmental theologies, specifically the Dominion Theory. Although Southern Baptists exhibit some dominion characteristics, other factors are likely to be more significant in explaining the lack of knowledge and understanding about environmental problems by Mississippi Southern Baptists.

Because I have used two different approaches, I have divided the book into two parts. Part I is an attempt to provide a foundation, or framework, upon which this thesis is built; and includes Chapters One through Five. Chapter One discusses some of the present literary contributions and work in the area of religion and ecology; and is

more general in nature. Chapters Two, Three and Four are designed to provide the reader with a contextual understanding of Southern Baptist ideology, theology and culture. Chapter Two provides a brief history of the denomination, Chapter Three provides the foundational principles of the Southern Baptist Convention and Chapter Four discusses some of the most important social issues in Southern Baptist culture. These chapters are more descriptive rather than analytical in nature, as I felt that analysis of these topics was not the primary purpose of this writing. A brief Conclusion, Chapter Five, provides some analysis and conclusions and ends this section. I felt that it was extremely important for the reader to understand certain aspects of Southern Baptist life, as they see themselves, in order to fully understand and appreciate the results of the study; for they are intrinsically related.

Part Two presents the actual study and includes Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. Chapter Six discusses the method used to conduct the study, which is ethnographic in nature. Chapter Seven interprets and reports the results of the data collected in the study. Chapter Eight analyzes and discusses the findings, and offers some very humble suggestions for progress.

In reference to some of the more general material found in Chapters One and Two, the reader should be aware that the focus of this thesis is Southern Baptists and their relationship to the environment; and while foundational information is provided, it is beyond the scope of this writing to provide in-depth information in every area. In

Chapters Three through Eight, references to Christians, the Bible and churches should be interpreted and understood in the context of Southern Baptist theology. Should the reader desire more information on any specific topic, references can be found in both End Notes and in the Bibliography, which may be used to pursue more in-depth research in areas of individual interest.

This project was exploratory in nature and seeks to provide new and interesting information that might in some way make a positive contribution to the field of Religion and Ecology research and study. I have made a concerted effort to present the most relevant and accurate information, and that which I believe to be essential in order to most adequately and effectively convey this message. I admit that I felt a responsibility to tell the story of Mississippi Southern Baptists from their point of view, so it is subjective in that sense; however, I have tried to provide the most objective interpretation of actual evidence and results revealed by the study. This project was a quest, of sorts, for answers about a powerful denomination with the ability to lead an environmental crusade, I believe; but who, for their own reasons, seem unconcerned with the environmental crisis this planet seems to be facing.

I would like to express my most sincere appreciation and gratitude to all those who made this work possible through their patience, participation and contributions – thank you so much to the informants, my readers, my friends and family - especially my husband, Mark.

PART I

Introduction to Religion and Ecology

Religion and Ecology is a relatively new field of study that has developed over a period of time. Within the last twenty years it has seen more rapid development and garnered a great deal of interest and attention. In his book, *Ecology and Religion*, David Kinsley describes the convergence of the two areas as (1) philosophical, theoretical or structural, and (2) moral, ethical or spiritual. Kinsley uses the term *ecological spirituality* to further define this area as ethical, moral or religious tendencies that relate to ecological issues.¹ Great strides have been made in acknowledging that this is a credible and important academic and cultural area of study, and it is now being recognized as an academic field. Some academic institutions offer specialized studies through the departments of religion and anthropology, as well as in other academic programs. This chapter will offer an explanation of the various aspects of the emerging field of Religion and Ecology. Note that more attention will be paid to the area of Christianity, since it is most important to this writing.

Religion and Ecology

The field of Religion and Ecology is dedicated to examining the complex relationships between human beings, their diverse religions and the earth's living systems. In addition, there is ongoing discussion regarding ethically appropriate relationships between all species and living systems.

Scholarly interests are noted as early as the 1960s, becoming more intense in the late 1990s. Emerging fields of Environmental Ethics and Ecological Anthropology have contributed to the interest in and development of Religion and Ecology as a field. Aside from work by the American Academy of Religion, a number of prominent religious leaders, such as Thomas Berry and Steven Rockefeller, initiated conferences and public presentations to promote the protection of nature as a religious duty.

One of the most important developments came in the form of a series of conferences hosted by The Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University. The purpose of the conference series was to create a common ground for different religious cultures to share information about the environmental sustainability of societies.

In order to continue the efforts of these conferences, the Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE) was established in 1998, and is affiliated with a number of universities and colleges. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, a husband and wife team and both professors at Bucknell University, played dominant roles in organizing the conferences and were instrumental in the establishment of FORE. They continue to be recognized for their ongoing support and distinguished work in this field. The Forum is active in the exploration of religious worldviews and is an international organization that conducts research, provides educational materials and has an outreach program. As many as sixty-five non-profit

organizations and engaged projects of many denominations are listed on the FORE website.

One further accomplishment worth mentioning came, when in 2003, the University of Florida implemented an emphasis area of Religion and Nature in its Ph.D. program in the Religion Department.² Many other very important faith-based and environmental organizations are working to create partnerships and outreach programs that can effectively bridge the gap between science and religion.

Literature Review

Many scholars from a range of academic areas are involved in examining and communicating the relationships between world religions and the environment. The activity is fairly extensive, and while I have presented a few literary works here, it is not an exhaustive list, nor is it intended to be.

“Conservation Biology and Western Religious Teachings” was published in 2000 in the journal, *Conservation Biology*. The article references Zen Buddhist teachings and its emphasis on the interrelatedness of humans and nature. It indicates that within this religion there is an inherent awareness of and responsibility to one’s surroundings. It goes further to point out that Jewish teachings also include and emphasize these same characteristics and responsibilities; and that Judaism promotes the sacredness of the world around us.

The final conclusion is that western religious traditions are significant in

providing wisdom that could prove valuable in initiating concrete actions to effect environmental change.³

In *Bioscience*, an interesting article written by Richard Norgaard, presents an historical relationship between science and religion. Among some of the notable scientists, historians, philosophers and theologians found here include Condorcet, Comte, Tielhard de Chardin, Eiseley, Lynn White Jr. and Thomas Berry.

Norgaard provides thoughtful insight into some of the controversies found within the fields of science and religion throughout history to the present. This interpretation suggests that while taking different approaches and often opposing arguments, there are mutual interests within these two areas, and that these mutual interests can provide a critical base for bringing about transition and a more constructive relationship between religion and science.⁴

A couple of other interesting works include an article published in *American Forests*, "Building Faith in the Environment", and another article found in *Environmental Practice*, "When Preaching to the Choir isn't Preaching to the Choir: Churches, Trees and Environmental Perspectives." The article in *American Forests* is related to environmental justice and discusses a number of faith-based organizations working with communities to address and improve issues of environmental health.⁵ The article in *Environmental Practice* addresses the lack of effective communication between scientists and non-scientists regarding scientific information. The article outlines this author's investigation of

direct communication with various churches about the importance of trees and forests in natural systems.⁶

In reference to religious publications addressing environmental issues – they are growing. *Earth Ethics* is a journal published by the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, which has also been instrumental in advancing this field. The journal addresses many aspects of world religions, spirituality and the environment from a theological perspective, with a wide array of interesting and diverse articles – including topics such as sustainability, animals, outreach and education.⁷

One of the most visible organizations is the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN), which has its own website and publications, such as *Creation Care Magazine*. The organization works in many environmental areas to apply Biblical principles to the care of all God's creation.⁸ The EEN was instrumental in working with the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in the organization of the recent initiative on climate change that was distributed to Congress. An article in the journal, *Nature*, cites evangelicals as a "powerful social force" and states "to have them involved will impact the public's thinking." It goes one step further to suggest that since President George Bush is also an Evangelical Christian, perhaps Evangelical involvement could influence him in governmental decision-making regarding climate change.⁹ *Science Magazine* also reported the story and commented that this successful coalition could help in developing a more common ground for other issues.¹⁰

An article in the Tennessee Baptist Press reported that there is a lack of consensus among Southern Baptists regarding the scientific evidence of human-induced climate change, and that several prominent Southern Baptists, to include Southern Baptist ethicist, Richard Land, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson, did not endorse the statement and have urged the NAE not to take an official position on global warming. Some prominent Southern Baptists who did sign the statement include pastor and author, Rick Warren of California, Timothy Dean of Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, and president of Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, David Dockery.¹¹

A few other publications worthy of including here include one new journal and two books. *Ecotheology* is a journal published in London and presents diverse articles connecting ecology and religion from a number of different perspectives. In his book *Fragments of the Spirit*, Mark Wallace introduces an *ecological pneumatology* and suggests a change in the way the Spirit is understood in relation to the environment and the Green Face of God. Robert Booth Fowler presents in his book, *The Greening of Protestant Thought*, Protestant environmentalism and its relationships to science and political and social thought.

As stated earlier, these are a few of the publications that I found in my research, but they are by no means the only ones. There is a great deal of activity and a very profound effort by many distinguished individuals to merge environmental ethics with both spirituality and religious ethics.

World Religions

A brief overview of dominant world religions is offered here in the context of ecological spirituality.

Buddhism includes an ecological vision and principle of interdependence that integrates all aspects of the ecosphere. There is a rejection of hierarchical dominance of humans over humans, and humans over nature. Buddhist environmentalists demonstrate a concern for the total living environment, and extend loving-kindness and compassion beyond people and animals to include plants and the earth itself.¹²

Hinduism and Jainism are two of the oldest religious traditions in India. Both of these religions value the power of the natural world through time honored traditions and observations. Hinduism advocates simple living through nonviolence and truth, and emphasizes a need to act for the good of the world. Jainism stresses the interrelatedness of life forms through a biocosmology, emphasizes nonviolence and truth and includes a commitment to minimize harm to all living things. Both are interpreted with an eco-friendly perspective.¹³

Confucianism takes an holistic approach as well, and sees the universe as unified, interconnected and interpenetrating. It emphasizes a sophisticated awareness and a profound reciprocity between humans and the natural world. Confucian societies appreciate nature as intrinsically valuable and rely on history as a way of maintaining continuity and collective memory.¹⁴

Islam teachings include a theology of profound responsibility to the stewardship of the earth. The Qu'ran presents a global trusteeship and considers other living species to be "peoples or communities." Creation is thought to be diverse and complex, and to be signs of God's power, wisdom, beneficence and majesty.¹⁵

Indigenous traditions are diverse and vary in their approaches to ecology, but there are some common threads to be found within these groups. Ritual practices and cosmologies are inherent in Indigenous peoples and their traditions.

Subsistence practices are prevalent within these societies, and traditions teach self-awareness, an understanding of spiritual forces and kinship with place.

Indigenous peoples understand interrelationships and interact with cognitive insight, affective understanding and ethical reflection in an holistic way. Found within Indigenous traditions, is an intimate knowledge of bioregions, a love of the land and a deep and abiding respect and reverence for the natural world.¹⁶

Christianity is comprised of multiple and complex emphases and traditions, and takes competing forms of ecological ethics and responsibilities. One of the most dominant theories found within Christian philosophy is the Dominion Theory.

There are various interpretations of this theory, however, they all address the interpretation by humans of their God given right to dominion over the earth and the separation of God from earth. The Dominion Theory creates a hierarchy model with God in Heaven being the highest order, human beings are second in the hierarchy and earth is relegated to the lowest order. Earth is viewed as needing human control and oversight. This line of Christian thought is indicted as

the catalyst for environmental crisis, since it denies the intrinsic relationship of all three orders, and does not acknowledge the Spirit's presence on earth. Moreover, the role of Christians in the conquest of nature in the name of science, largely for economic reasons, is blamed for environmental degradation. Modern technologies and their effects are subsequent accessories to this abuse through exacerbation of environmental injustices, unsustainable development and population-consumption explosion. Some Christian thought has now taken a more ecumenical approach and applied Scripture and tradition in more ecologically alert terms. Many denominations are in search of an "Ecological Reformation" in Christian theology, which provides Biblical and doctrinal interpretations designed to integrate ecological awareness and insight, social responsibility and the re-conception of Christian ethics.¹⁷

World religions clearly have a profound influence in shaping and defining human morals, ethics and spirituality in every avenue of life. In light of the importance of all religious beliefs and traditions, it is especially important to recognize that all religions play a very significant role in the course of environmentalism and in establishing a universal earth ethic. The following sections of this writing will focus more directly on Southern Baptists, so it is appropriate to say here that in all my research, especially including that with Evangelicals and Protestants, there was very little evidence of positive participation or contributions by this group in the field of Religion and Ecology.

Southern Baptist Origins and History

In spite of its colorful and controversial past, the South is a place blessed with a proud and genteel people, abundant natural resources and a distinctive religious culture. Southern culture, while progressive in many ways, is in other ways viewed as less developed due to a society still very strongly entrenched in morals, values and traditions. Most Southerners are profoundly influenced by religious attitudes and experiences; so in many ways, the entire society is itself defined by faith in God and family. In that respect, Southern Baptists are one of the most influential denominations in the South, especially in Mississippi, and Southern Baptist churches are powerful in more ways than not. In order to more fully understand the ideas and attitudes that have shaped Mississippi Southern Baptists, it is important to present a short history of the origin and evolution of the Southern Baptist denomination. This chapter seeks to present what I found to be the most generally accepted brief history of the Southern Baptist denomination; however, it is not all-inclusive, since there were other influences in addition to the ones represented here. Furthermore, this chapter is not meant to be an historical analysis, rather it is designed to provide the reader with some fundamental concepts that will contribute to a contextual understanding of both the Southern Baptist denomination, its people and its cultural heritage.

Baptist Beginnings

In the early years of Baptist beginnings in Europe, there were several groups with varying beliefs and ideologies, some stricter than others, but all struggled and all were persecuted for their beliefs. All the Baptist groups had common threads that bound them together – the strongest of which was their unheard of (at the time) insistence of the freedom and responsibility of the individual before God. They wanted to do away with traditional institutionalized religion and papal authority, which infuriated the official Church. By 1644 there were 50 Baptist churches – some of which were General Baptists, while the others were identified as Particular Baptists because they believed that redemption was limited to a chosen few. Both of these Baptist groups strengthened the Baptist movement in England. Near the end of the seventeenth century the Act of Toleration was passed and life for Baptists in England became a bit more bearable. There is, of course, more than one theory about the origins of Southern Baptists; however, there is agreement that Baptist ideology originated and evolved from both Calvinism and Arminianism.¹⁸

The teachings of John Calvin, a French-born lawyer, theologian and reformer, came to be important during the Sixteenth Century. Calvinistic doctrine was harsh and severe, and was focused on the sin and condemnation of man. The basic tenants were that 1) God is completely sovereign, 2) the fall of man (Adam and Eve) had forever destroyed the special relationship with God, so man was forever condemned and damned, and 3) even though man was undeserving, God took pity

on man and sent his Son to offer redemption and salvation to some individuals - but not all. Calvinists believed that only a few individuals, known as the Elect, would be offered salvation and that the fate of these few was predetermined by God and was irreversible. Calvinists rejected papal authority, but retained the Catholic sacraments of Communion and Baptism.

In the Seventeenth Century, Jacobus Arminius, a Divinity Professor in Holland, opposed the Calvinist theology of unconditional predestination. Arminius believed that God had given man the choice to accept or reject him, therefore, having the freedom to accept or reject eternal life. Because of his opposition to Calvinist doctrine, Arminius was viewed as a liberal and was rejected by the Calvinists of Holland. A bitter controversy erupted and Arminianism was labeled a "deviant doctrine." Arminianism was kept alive in an underground movement, eventually flourishing and becoming a great influence in the ideologies of many modern religious groups.

In the Seventeenth Century, various reformers called for strict accountability, purification of the church and a return to the New Testament example of Christianity. During this time, John Smyth, an Anglican Priest who opposed the Church of England and was known as a Separatist, left England and settled in Holland. Smyth is described as an egalitarian, since he argued that church leaders should be accountable to their congregations.¹⁹ Smyth introduced Arminianism to his followers and established the two-fold leadership in the church that is known today as Pastor and Deacon. Smyth was known for his adamant support of adult

baptism and re-baptized himself and his followers. It is important to note, however, that Smyth's mode of baptism was pouring – submersion did not come into practice until later. Because of his strong belief in adult baptism and each individual's right to choose salvation, Smyth and his group came to be known as "Baptists." Smyth saw atonement as "general" and not limited and is credited as the chief founder of the first General Baptist Church in Holland.²⁰

Baptists in America

During this time, many Baptists, as well as many other denominations, began to migrate to America. Roger Williams is one the most famous early American Baptists. He was expelled from Massachusetts because of his belief in the separation of church and state, and as a result of his expulsion, he founded the Rhode Island Colony (1636). In 1639, Williams founded the First Baptist Church in Providence, which was also the first Baptist Church in America.²¹ For the rest of this century, Baptists continued to migrate to America, and to grow and spread throughout the new territories. Baptists were most secure in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, since their religious liberty was guaranteed and they were free from persecution. However, in other areas of America, Baptists continued to be persecuted and mistreated because they refused to baptize infants. Throughout the colonial period, Baptists were not allowed to vote or hold office, and their children "were considered unfit for marriage to the orthodox".²² During the eighteenth century, many Baptists had begun migrating south to what would eventually become the Confederate States.

As Baptists began moving south, churches were first established in Charleston, South Carolina and the surrounding area. Some of these Baptists came to be known as Separatists because of their extremely emotional services and refusal to adhere to state laws. They held strong to their beliefs about baptism and individual rights and established very strong relationships within communities. Separatist Baptists created a comfortable and stable environment for the many settlers and frontiersmen who were seeking freedom and a better way of life. The congregations were most often made up of uneducated people who were considered lower class, as opposed to the northern Baptists- referred to as Regular Baptists - who were more educated and urban. As they continued to be persecuted, Separatist Baptists were very outspoken concerning religious freedoms and were instrumental in the fight for religious equality and acceptance. Considered radical, they were socially ostracized and labeled dissenters; however, because they continued to rebel against the norm, they paved the way for many of the freedoms we enjoy today. During this time, Baptists were even more inspired to evangelize and recruit members, and their congregations began to grow and organize. So it was at this time in history, known as the Great Awakening in America (1730 – 1770) that Baptists won religious liberties and equality, came to be accepted into society and created their own place in American history.

Now firmly established in America, Baptists focused on organizing and expanding through revivals and mission evangelism. With a very strong desire to spread Christianity, Baptists were the unequivocal leaders in building foreign mission programs. One of the first foreign missionaries was William Carey, an

English Baptist who sailed to India to spread the gospel. Mission groups, or societies, began to form in order to support the mission movement. The first was the Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes, which was organized by Mary Webb, and worked to raise funds for the support of those missionaries in foreign lands.²³

As the emphasis on foreign missions grew ever bigger, new and larger organizations began to develop to support this growing cause. The mission societies were brought together through their devotion to this single cause, but there was no central structure or organization. However, through the campaign of enthusiastic and dedicated Baptists, a convention was called in Philadelphia for the purpose of organizing a national Baptist missionary society. In 1814, the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions was established – known more commonly as the Triennial Convention, since they met every three years. In 1817, the convention decided to expand its work and began to cultivate domestic mission programs, and in 1832, the American Baptist Home Mission Society was established.

As the home mission movement grew, revivals began breaking out all over the South. They were called camp meetings and were an impromptu response to widespread needs of somewhat isolated individuals, families and communities. Soon, these camp meetings developed into well-planned and publicized events. In addition to serving as religious functions, these gatherings also served as social functions, and were extremely important in providing opportunities for courting

and marriage. They were organized and scheduled near harvest time, since this was the time that most farmers had completed their work for the year and could bring their families to the designated camp. Now called protracted meetings, these functions allowed geographically scattered people to come together in one place – a campground of sorts - with each family providing its own shelter. The services were highly emotional, bringing comfort and assurance in a wild land, and most importantly, bringing the message of individual salvation. Following the American Revolution, many denominations, especially Baptists, began forming national organizations and creating a unified, comprehensive religious structure.

As the number of Baptist churches continued to grow, the Baptist presence gained strength in Southern evangelical society and moved into the mainstream of American religion. Along with growth in membership came a change in the ranks of Baptist members – what had started out as the denomination that included social outcasts or “lower-class dissenters” soon moved to include the socially “higher-class” or “socially elite.” Southern Baptist Churches were founded on the principles of individual freedom and church autonomy. Baptists were different in the sense that there was no official church hierarchy. The emphasis on individual salvation, piety and public professions of faith signified acceptance into Southern evangelical society, and so allowed the Church to firmly develop a religious culture with marked power in controlling individual and community behavior. According to historian Donald Matthews, “evangelical symbols, style of self-control and rules of social decorum became dominant in the social

system.”²⁴ Baptists in the South began to establish academies and colleges aimed at spreading doctrinal beliefs focused on fellowship, evangelism and discipleship. They were convinced that their way of life was the best, and they began to claim their ideology as the model for all Christians to follow. Here we find the establishment of The First Baptist Church in most every Southern city or town where it was, and still is, sure to include the largest membership, the most significant architecture and the greatest amount of monetary contributions, or tithes.

The Southern Baptist Denomination

Up until this point in 1844, all Baptists, both North and South, were still nationally associated through the American Baptist Home Mission Society – there was no official Southern Baptist denomination, but that was about to change. The issue of slavery surfaced within the Baptist religion and Baptists in the North and South began to take opposing sides. Each side was fully convinced of its divine cause – Northerners opposed slavery and Southerners believed that the functions of each race were preordained and that slavery was an example of God’s separation of races. Southern beliefs about slavery were grounded in scripture found in the Bible in Chapter Nine of the book of Genesis and in the New Testament. Their Biblical expositions of Negro inferiority were based on Noah’s curse of slavery upon Canaan, son of Ham, who was presumed to be the ancestor of the black race; and were also based on the patriarchal and Mosaic acceptance of slavery found in the New Testament commands of Peter and Paul regarding

slave-master relationships.²⁵ The issue of slavery continued to dominate Baptist life, and eventually became the catalyst for the Southern Baptist denomination we know today.²⁶

Around 1835, Southern churches began to make claims in respect to lack of mission work - spreading the gospel through Bible distribution, charitable work and social ministries - in their areas by the American Baptist Home Mission Society. Arguments erupted and continued for several years with no solution. Finally, there was public admission by the Mission Board that no slaveholders would be appointed as missionaries, at home or by the Foreign Mission Board. So came the split between the Baptists of the North and South when the Home Mission Society declared that mission work would be carried out separately between northern and southern divisions. In May 1845, Southerners gathered in Augusta, Georgia, to organize their own mission boards; and the end result was the birth of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) supported by the Southern states known as the Confederacy.²⁷

Throughout the period of the Civil War, Southern Baptists worked to build a religious identity separate from the Northern Baptists and to establish religious institutions more suited to Southern culture. This was a time of great turmoil in America and the Southern Baptist churches fought for preservation and sustainability. The churches were united in their fight against outsiders, but often, they were unable to financially support their ministry and mission programs. However, one of the most important events during this period was the

establishment of the first Southern Baptist seminary, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which was formed in 1859 in Greenville, South Carolina. While the South struggled in many ways, one thing was for sure – “Southerners were thoroughly evangelical and Baptists were thoroughly Southern; culture and religion were inextricably linked.”²⁸

During the time of Reconstruction, Southern Baptists' hard work and continued dedication paid off. They experienced phenomenal growth in establishing new churches, mission programs, schools and hospitals; and even though they strongly believed in separation of church and state, many Southern Baptists became involved in social causes. Despite their dislike of ecumenism, Southern Baptists joined forces with other religious organizations to support Prohibition. Another major development within the Southern Baptist Convention was the establishment of the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU), an organization devoted to praying for missionaries, and more importantly, supporting their missionaries financially. Ironically, the idea of skillful and formidable women seemed to intimidate the gentlemen, since shortly before the WMU was institutionalized, the Southern Baptist Convention formalized its attendance rule of “brethren only” - meaning that only men could attend and participate in the annual Southern Baptist Convention.²⁹ In spite of the obstacles, the South had seen uneducated, scattered Baptists reorganize and transform themselves into one of the nation's most powerful religious empires.

It is clear that Baptists beginnings have a solid link to the Reformation, and that today's Southern Baptists originated from past dissenters who strongly believed in religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Southern Baptists are forever linked to what was, at that time, a radical movement that supported adult baptism by immersion, religious liberties, evangelism and mission work.

Southern Baptists started out as a much ridiculed and persecuted religious group, but have now grown into one of the most dominant and most powerful religious organizations in this country. One of the most characteristic facts about Southern Baptists is their stability of belief in the orthodoxy of doctrine. It is surprising to many people that a denomination without a creed, with no central authority or other human device for preserving unity, and with each local organization a law unto itself, could be held together for any length of time. However, there is a plausible explanation – Southern Baptist loyalty to their fundamental principle, the Word of God.³⁰

A Brief Overview of The Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptist Convention was established in Augusta, Georgia, in 1845, and was created primarily as a mission board to support Baptist missionaries. The term “Southern Baptist Convention” refers to both the denomination and its annual meeting. Because Baptist churches believe strongly in the autonomy of the local church, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is a cooperative organization that allows churches to pool resources, rather than a body with any administrative control over local churches. Southern Baptists argue that self-government within the local church preserves the spirit of democracy, encourages the participation of laypersons in the church and permits a broad range of theological expression.

The SBC was originally formed as a result of conflicting Baptist beliefs between Northern and Southern Baptists concerning the issue of slavery. In addition, there were other controversies concerning the disproportionate numbers of missionaries appointed to the southern United States and preferences of different structural and denominational organization between the north and south. It is important to note, however, that Southern Baptists apologized in June 1995 for their pro-slavery, pro-racist and pro-segregationist past.³¹ Today, the SBC is the largest Baptist group and the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. The SBC has grown in membership to over 16 million with more than 42,000 churches, 1,200

local associations and 41 state conventions and fellowships in the United States. It has congregations in every state and territory in America, though its greatest numbers are in the southern United States. There are more Southern Baptist congregations in America than any other religious group, including the Roman Catholic Church.³² The SBC has become the most significant influential and organizational structure within the Southern Baptist denomination; and even with the stated limitations, this one organization has become an effectively run institutional empire that has reached into and impacted all areas of Southern Baptist life.

The SBC can be further defined and divided into groups based on Biblical interpretations – Fundamentalists, Moderates, Progressives – with Fundamentalists being the most conservative and Progressives being the most liberal. Fundamentalists assume the Bible is the literal word of God, while liberal theorists place the Bible in an interpretative framework. Liberal interpreters do not assume that Bible is literal or that it is all inclusive; instead, they consider the impact of changing times and believe the Bible must be placed in a historical context. Either way, the Bible is still taken very seriously. Regionally, the Southern Baptist denomination is divided into four regions. The South Atlantic Region, Virginia and the Carolinas, is the most liberal. The Deep South, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, is a combination of the three groups, but leaning more in the conservative direction, as well as Kentucky and Tennessee. The Southwest includes Arkansas, northern Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas, and is considered to

be the most conservative. While all the regions will vary in extremes, this is a general range. These divisions are important in explaining the ongoing controversies and power struggles within the SBC. Presently, the fundamentalists are in control of the SBC (the institution), and since they claim to interpret the Bible literally, some of these interpretations and subsequent actions conflict with the more moderate and progressive interpretations, thus creating contention and conflict within the entire Southern Baptist denomination.³³

The Southern Baptist Convention – The Organization

There are four levels of SBC organization: the local church, the local association, the state convention and the national convention. The SBC maintains a central administrative organization based in Nashville, Tennessee, but the central office in Nashville has no authority over its affiliated state conventions, local associations, individual churches or members.

The highest level of organization within the SBC is the national Convention that is made up of individual churches, associations and state conventions. The national convention meets annually two days a year in early June. A President who is elected for a one-year term, but cannot be elected for more than two consecutive terms, leads the Convention. Southern Baptist Churches select “messengers” who attend the annual meeting on their behalf. The Convention determines the number of messengers per church – with larger, more supportive churches having more messengers. Messengers must be members of the church

that appoints them and must meet the qualifications as outlined in Article III of the SBC Constitution (further defined later in this chapter). The SBC Constitution provides detailed rules and principles in the organization of the Convention, but for general purposes, the President appoints the members of committees, who in turn nominate other committee members and all are eventually voted on by messengers. While the process is complicated, the President can exert considerable influence on the direction of the SBC.

Individual congregations and associations may choose to affiliate into state conventions. With the exception of Texas and Virginia, which have two conventions, each state has only one convention. For each state convention, the primary goal is evangelism and church planting, or assisting churches in starting “mission churches.” A mission church is identified as a church that is located in a new real estate development area or a church that is designed to reach a certain ethnic group. State Conventions may also support educational institutions and retirement and children’s homes. State conventions cannot direct individual church affairs, but can set requirements for affiliation and disfellowship of churches at its discretion. State conventions determine the number of messengers allowed per church and usually meet annually (larger churches have more messengers).

Individual congregations may then choose to affiliate into associations and are generally organized within certain defined geographic areas within a state. The

general rule is that only one association exists in a specific geographical area, does not cross state lines and does not accept churches from outside that area. The primary goals of associations are evangelism and church planting. An association cannot direct the affairs of associated churches, but it can set requirements and can disfellowship any church with which it disagrees, usually in areas of contentious practice. Meetings are held annually with the association determining the number of members each church may send (general messenger rules apply).

The lowest level is the individual congregation, although, since the SBC supports Congregationalist church governance, it may be considered the highest level.

Each congregation is independent and autonomous, except for certain mission churches. Individual congregations are free to associate with or disassociate from the SBC at any time, to determine the level of support which it provides to SBC affiliated programs and other groups and to conduct its own internal affairs without direction from a higher level entity. Mission churches have smaller congregations and are operated by larger, parent churches. The goal is for the mission church to become independent and autonomous. One or more parent churches may sponsor the mission church and may have additional assistance from a local association.

Southern Baptist Doctrine

The following sections will focus on providing brief explanations of particularly important areas (to this thesis) within the Southern Baptist Convention. While there are many interests, for the sake of simplicity and relevancy, only the specific tenets of doctrine will be addressed. Many areas are delineated by the SBC, but in an attempt at containment and through my own design, I will address only those areas that are important in contributing to a deeper understanding of Southern Baptist life and the environment.

The Baptist Faith and Message³⁴

Southern Baptists have never adopted a universal creed, but they have established a statement of faith, the Baptist Faith and Message, which was written to define and defend their beliefs. While the Baptist Faith and Message gives expression to Southern Baptist faith and clarifies Southern Baptist beliefs, it has not been elevated to a place of equal or superior authority to the Scriptures. The first Baptist Faith and Message statement was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1925, and has been revised twice since then, once in 1963 and again in 2000. The Southern Baptist Convention identifies the purpose of the statement as setting forth the teachings in which they believe and declares the Baptist Faith and Message as “instruments of doctrinal accountability.” “Thus this generation of Southern Baptists is in historic succession of intent and purpose as it endeavors to state for its time and theological climate those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us.”

Southern Baptists believe that the Holy Bible is God's revelation of divine instruction to man, and that it was written, without error, by men who were divinely guided by God. Scripture is believed to be the ultimate standard by which Christians should be judged in conduct and the ultimate standard by which all creeds and religious decisions should be measured. There is a firm belief that God is the author of the Bible and that the Bible is completely true in every aspect, including its testimony to Christ and salvation.

God is believed to be perfect, all-powerful and all knowing – the Creator and Ruler of the universe – omnipotent and infinite in His perfect knowledge and wisdom. The Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is affirmed as the eternal triune. God the Father is Supreme and is seen as the Father to all earthly men. Christ is the Son of God, the Savior who died and rose from the dead, and who will one day return to judge the earth. The Holy Spirit is the divine spirit of God who indwells those who have been saved by belief in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer and Savior of the world. Believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit to understand the truth and are guided in worship, evangelism and service.

Man is considered to be the special creation of God, made in His image, and every person, regardless of race, is worthy of dignity, respect and Christian love. Man is also seen as sinful in nature, but with the free choice of salvation through Jesus Christ, who died so that we might be saved. There is no salvation except

through repentance and faith - personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Salvation is available to man only through the Sovereign goodness and grace of God.

The Church is the Body of Christ, excluding no one and including all redeemed, baptized believers of every tribe and nation. Every Church operates under the Lordship of Christ, and is an autonomous, democratic congregation operating under faith and fellowship in the gospel. Scriptural officers are defined as pastors and deacons, and while women are allowed to serve in the Church, the office of pastor is limited to men. Pastors are not required to attend seminary in order to be ordained. Any church may ordain any person that it believes to be called to the ministry by God. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are acts of obedience symbolizing belief and faith in Christ as the Savior. Public profession of faith followed by baptism is required for membership in a Southern Baptist Church.

Sunday, the first day of the week, is believed to be the Lord's Day and should include Christian worship and spiritual devotion. Church services are held on Sunday mornings and evenings, and usually on Wednesday evenings as well. The Kingdom of God includes sovereignty over man and the entire universe; and at the appropriate time, God will judge and bring an end to earth. The righteous will dwell in Heaven forever and the unrighteous will be forever punished in Hell.

Every Christian has a responsibility to mission work and to spread the gospel to all nations. Christians should constantly seek to win the lost to Christ through

words, actions and lifestyle. Education is considered to be part of Christian heritage and should be supported by churches. Christian education places an emphasis on proper balance and emphasizes that academic responsibility is guided by the Scriptures and the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ. Stewardship is defined in terms of using time, talents and possessions for the advancement of spreading the Redeemer's cause on earth. Unity and cooperation are encouraged in order to more effectively build the Kingdom of God.

Southern Baptists advocate establishing a Christian social order. They believe that Christians should act in spiritual love to provide for the needy, the helpless, the sick and the abused. In contrast, they are strongly opposed to abortion, greed, racism and all forms of sexual immorality – to include homosexuality, adultery and pornography. Peace is preferred, rather than war.

Southern Baptists follow the doctrine of separation of church and state, with an emphasis on religious liberty. While they believe in civil obedience, they very strongly believe that “a free church in a free state is the Christian ideal, and this implies the right of free and unhindered access to God on the part of all men, and the right to form and propagate opinions in the sphere of religion without interference by the civil power”.

Families are recognized as the foundation of society and include relationships of marriage, blood and adoption. Marriage is interpreted to be a covenant between

one man and one woman to provide companionship, to channel sexual expression and to provide a means of procreation. Husbands are the leaders in the family and should love, protect and provide for their wives. Wives are instructed to submit themselves to their husbands, to respect them and to be their helpers. Children are considered to be a blessing from the Lord and should always honor and obey their parents. Parents are instructed to teach children moral and spiritual values and to lead by example.

Messengers³⁵

Article III of the SBC Constitution defines messengers as “members of missionary Baptist churches cooperating with the Convention as follows:

1. One (1) messenger from each church which: (1) Is in friendly cooperation with the Convention and sympathetic with its purposes and work. Among churches not in cooperation with the Convention are churches which act to affirm, approve, or endorse homosexual behavior. And, (2) Has been a bona fide contributor to the Convention's work during the fiscal year preceding.
2. One (1) additional messenger from each such church for every two hundred and fifty (250) members; or for each \$250.00 paid to the work of the Convention during the fiscal year preceding the annual meeting.
3. The messengers shall be appointed and certified by the churches to the Convention, but no church may appoint more than ten (10).
4. Each messenger shall be a member of the church by which he is appointed.”

Upon arriving at the convention meetings, messengers must show proper identification in order to be allowed entry.

In this chapter, I selected those areas that I believe best explain the SBC, both as an organization and as a people. The end result is that the SBC provides doctrinal explanations and guidelines, but it also seeks to maintain some sense of democracy within its membership. Even with the conflicts and power struggles found within the SBC, this denomination has risen through the ranks to become one of the most powerful and influential Protestant religions in America.

Southern Baptist Social Issues

The Southern Baptist Convention provides more information on its stance regarding certain social issues in the form of Position Statements and Resolutions. Both are grounded in Scripture, but to include Scriptural references here was beyond the scope of this writing. The ten Position Statements include the following: Priesthood, Soul Competency, Creeds and Confessions, Women in Ministry, Church and State, Missions, Autonomy, Cooperation, Sexuality and Sanctity of Life. Position Statements address specific issues and are endorsed by the Convention and its entities. Resolutions are numerous and are used to communicate expressions of concern. They are passed during the annual Convention, but do not carry any specific action. These sources will be used as primary, along with other selected Southern Baptist literature, to offer some brief insight into Southern Baptist life. With the exception of the environment, I've selected only those social issues that are in the forefront of Southern Baptist thought and ideology.

The Role of Women

Women are regarded as of equal value to men, but are viewed as helpmates to man. It is important to note, however, that husbands are instructed to love their wives as Christ so loved the Church, which sheds a different light on the position of women within the family structure. Many resolutions provide support for

women as homemakers, but there are others that urge fair treatment of women in the workplace; however, the SBC does not support the Equal Rights Amendment. They are allowed to participate in ministry through staff and educational positions and through outreach programs, but the role of women is secondary to that of men, since the SBC specifically states that, according to Scripture, the role of pastoral leadership is assigned to men. While there are some Southern Baptist Churches that allow women to serve as pastors, they are in the minority. Most often women serve as Sunday School teachers, staff and in missions work. A resolution (SBC 1998) was passed to oppose women in combat on the grounds that it undermines the authority of men in leadership roles and that it lends support to the feminist agenda.³⁶ The integration of social work with theological education was instrumental in redefining women's roles as a form of missionary activity. In 1885, the SBC Constitution excluded women from becoming messengers when it changed the wording to "Brethren only." In 1913, R. H. Coleman of Texas, gave formal notice that at the next session of the Convention in 1914, an amendment to the Constitution would be proposed with the purpose of reinstating women as messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention.³⁷ There was such fierce opposition to this proposal that it was postponed until 1917. The amendment to allow women to serve as messengers was finally passed in 1918; however, Baptist women's struggles for equality still continue today. Southern Baptist women, despite many progressive and innovative exploits still find themselves severely limited by a denominational culture that does not recognize

their ability for and calling to types of ministry that lie outside rigidly defined definitions of a woman's place of service in the church.³⁸

Homosexuality

Homosexuality is not considered an acceptable way of life and is viewed as a sin. However, Southern Baptists believe that homosexuality is a forgivable sin. A Resolution was passed in 2003 to oppose same-sex marriages and to reaffirm the belief that legal and Biblical marriage should only occur between one man and one woman.³⁹ Parents are urged to monitor and control outside influences of homosexuality on children, and to insist upon the discontinuation of any such materials by schools, the media and any other sources.⁴⁰ The SBC has been very involved in lobbying against companies that they believe condone and promote homosexuality, such as the Disney Company, and urges its members to boycott these businesses.⁴¹ Southern Baptists are called on to stand against homosexuality in all ways, but they are also instructed to demonstrate love for those practicing homosexuality by sharing with them the forgiving and transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. According to Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, "Homosexual acts are expressly and unconditionally forbidden by God through His Word, and such acts are an abomination to the Lord by His own declaration."⁴²

Abortion

Southern Baptists believe that human life begins at the moment of conception and are very committed to the sanctity of life. The SBC passionately opposes abortion and has taken a very public stand against this particular issue. They are very outspoken concerning their views and are very active in publicly denouncing all types of abortion – unless it is necessary to prevent the imminent death of the mother. In addition to the position statement and many resolutions, the SBC publishes many articles in regard to issues related to abortion, as well as using other forms of media. In the 2004 – 2006 editions of the Journal of the Southern Baptist Convention, SBC Life, there were eleven articles addressing the issue of abortion.⁴³

Missions

The SBC is very involved in and dedicated to mission work, both domestic and abroad. The SBC operates several very large mission programs, such as the Cooperative Program, and approaches mission work with a priority of evangelism. Strong social ministries include medical care, emergency famine relief, water projects and agricultural assistance. Through the International Mission Board, Southern Baptists support approximately 5,300 missionaries who work with more than 1,194 different people and groups around the world. New churches numbering over 1,781 have been planted through the efforts of more than 5,126 North American Missionaries, whose efforts are coordinated through the North American Mission Board and individual state conventions. LifeWay

Christian Resources and the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) actively promote Cooperative Program Missions, however, they do not receive funds from the Cooperative Program. The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission is dedicated to addressing social, moral, and ethical concerns, with particular attention to their impact on American families and their faith.⁴⁴

Evolution

The SBC supports the theory of Creation Science and is largely opposed to secular theories of evolution, specifically Darwinian theory. Some members dispute the Darwinian theory based on the following seven principles: (1) The Darwinian theory does not chemically explain the origins of life. (2) The fossil record does not support this theory. (3) Living cells (Life) are too complex to have originated through accumulated changes. (4) Encoded genetics within DNA are evidence of intelligent design. (5) The numerous systems essential for life are not explained by Darwinianism. (6) The complex, open system of earth is not inherent within nature. (7) The Bible says that God made the heavens, the earth and all the animals, and established that they would reproduce.⁴⁵ While evolution is not formally included in a Position Statement, it is addressed through Resolutions and public outreach.⁴⁶ Southern Baptists have been opposed to theories of evolution being taught in public schools and have responded by encouraging and supporting the inclusion of Creation Science in public school curricula. Many articles, as well as other forms of media, are devoted to disputing theories of evolution in favor of Creationism.

The Environment

There was very little information available concerning the SBC and the environment. Available information included two Resolutions (1983,1990), but no formal Position Statement. Also available were two Resolutions related to energy and natural resources – dated 1977 and 1999. The Resolutions encouraged an environmental ethic and called members to be faithful stewards in caring for that which was entrusted to them; however, the worship of creation was specifically addressed and was forbidden. I found this to be the most prevalent thread in SBC environmental literature, as well as statements that refute equality among all creatures, stating that “welfare of people comes first...there is a clear distinction between the human race and all other living creatures.”⁴⁷ An excerpt from the most recent Resolution (1990) reads as follows:

“WHEREAS, We are forbidden to worship the creation (Matthew 4:10; Romans 1:25), but are charged by our Creator with caring for creation (Genesis 1:28, 2:15), and are called to be faithful stewards of that which is entrusted to us (Luke 16:1-13).

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That we, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 12-14, 1990, recognize publicly our responsibility to God to be better stewards of all of the created order; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the messengers in the session for

this Southern Baptist Convention covenant with one another to seek ways personally and corporately to care for the earth and all those who dwell therein; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That individuals, churches, and other Baptist groups be encouraged to make an environmentally responsible ethic a part of our lifestyle and evangelistic witness."⁴⁸

More often than not, I found stewardship to be defined in terms of managing finances, family and spiritual gifts, rather than interpreted in terms of environmental stewardship or stewardship of all God's creations.

Conclusions to Part I

My intent in this concluding chapter is to put the previous chapters into context in respect to how each relates to the relationship between religion and ecology, and to make pertinent connections between Southern Baptist culture and environmentalism.

In exploring the relationships between world religions and ecology, it's important to recognize that in a historical sense, religion and science have always been connected, and often it has been a controversial relationship. With the growing concern about environmental degradation and resource depletion, there has been an avid interest in reaching some compromise, or common ground, from which to develop sustainable solutions. Research shows that there is a very strong desire by many scholars to have Religion and Ecology recognized as a legitimate and very important field of study; and they have worked tirelessly toward this common goal. The Forum on Religion and Ecology is a great example of leadership in the field and is making substantial contributions in fostering discussion and creating collaborative learning experiences. Religions are very powerful in developing and shaping human thought and behavior, and since humans are responsible for the environmental crisis and for finding some resolution, it makes absolute sense to create working relationships with religious communities and to give their contributions as much consideration and credibility

as those offered by the scientific community (biological, physical, natural, medical). The evidence clearly shows that many fine efforts are now in progress in respect to cross-cultural relationship building between both sectors in the quest for a more sustainable future. Furthermore, there is absolutely no doubt, at least in my mind, that world religions have played an instrumental role throughout history in establishing an earth ethic, and that they will continue to do so in the future.

Now, to put this into perspective in regard to Southern Baptists, the three most important factors to include are history, doctrine and faith in God. Southern Baptist history, while contentious, establishes the fact that this denomination is founded on its differences from other denominations. The pioneers in Southern Baptist history were largely independent thinkers, very driven people, who had the courage to publicly disagree with the norm. They did not waver in their faith, even though they suffered both personally and professionally. This is important to say that since they deviated from the norm, their recruits and memberships deviated from the norm. The type of culture that was established began with isolated communities that were largely agrarian. The people were poor and uneducated in the beginning, since their very survival was dependent upon working the land and using resources to their advantage. Southern economies were established through heavy agriculture and resource extraction, and even today, their economies remain dependent upon both. Religious functions were also social functions and were a way of bringing many people together in one

place. The South was, to some degree, separated from mainstream society and so developed an independent society suited to the area and the needs of the people. Religious beliefs and traditions flourished as they provided a sense of security through faith in God. Southern Baptists established a culture around their religious beliefs, and as a result, religion is embedded in Southern culture- the two are inseparable. Viewed from this perspective, Southern Baptists created an almost closed society that refused to be influenced and dominated by outside ideas of progress. They have been a people who refused to conform to the ideas of others and this is clearly borne out by their history. This is exemplified through a still strong belief in separation of church and state and in a firm stance against women in pastoral roles, as well as in a reluctance to develop cooperative relationships with other religious denominations. Considering this further leads me to believe that Southern Baptists are still resisting what some call progress, but what they interpret as violations of their most basic and foundational principles – freedom of religion and the Word of God.

Southern Baptist doctrine is very clear in articulating that God is the ultimate authority and that the Scriptures are His Words. Scriptural references are used to justify all Southern Baptist thought and ideology. They firmly believe that Salvation through belief in Christ is the only way to Heaven, and that all Christians have a responsibility to share this message – the gospel. Southern Baptists are not ecumenical Christians; instead, they tend to view religions other than Christianity as paganistic or as cults. They are tightly bound to their

doctrinal beliefs and interpret religions that teach self-awareness and spirituality of the earth as forms of nature worship and, therefore, a form of idolatry.

Southern Baptists believe that these kinds of religions are not in accordance with Biblical Scriptures, and that any followers of such religions are lost and in need of Salvation. Every aspect of this denomination is focused on Salvation and eschatology – being prepared for the Rapture and what's to follow.

With such a strong focus on and commitment to human relationships and Salvation, they have very little interest in anything else unless they feel that it violates or threatens their beliefs. Their public stance on social issues supports this, in that the issues they are most public about are homosexuality, abortion and evolution – and all are considered to be abominations to the Lord. They provide scriptural references to justify their position that these issues are absolutely wrong and no amount of education or progress will change their minds. Moreover, these issues create a very real conflict and disagreement with modern science. While many societies, and certainly the scientific community, see the knowledge associated with these issues as progress, Southern Baptists see them as human manipulation in areas that only God has the power to decide. They disagree with scientific theories that justify homosexuality as a genetic disorder and point out Scriptures they interpret to say that homosexuality is a sin. Evolution is a very touchy subject with Southern Baptists. The Scriptures in Genesis very clearly state that God created the world and everything in it, so they object to and disagree with scientific theories that state otherwise. Since children are viewed as

gifts from God, abortion is a cardinal sin and is absolutely not accepted as an advance in medical technology. Southern Baptists disagree with and distrust science and scientists, and with the communication barrier between the two, finding common ground will not be an easy task. Southern Baptists build their arguments upon interpretations of Scripture, and with this in mind, it is clear that Southern Baptist beliefs conflict with and oppose those of modern science.

Based on this discussion, Southern Baptists do not support the environmental movement for three primary reasons. First, Southern Baptists interpret Scripture to justify exploitation of natural resources for the good of mankind. To quote Dr. Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission, "We have been given a divine mandate to 'till the earth and to keep it'(Genesis 2:15). To 'keep' the earth is to guard it and to protect its resources and to preserve them. 'Till' means to develop the earth's resources and to cause it to give forth its bounty *for the benefit of humankind.*"⁴⁹ This is significant in clarifying that Southern Baptists do not view nature or the earth as having any intrinsic value – rather that everything was created for the convenience of man. There is no spiritual connection with nature, as is seen in other religions. The second reason takes several avenues in the form of economics, science and politics. Since Southern economies are dependent upon natural resource extraction and agriculture, environmental restrictions are interpreted, to some degree, as a threat to their economic existence. They do not trust the science behind the environmental movement, as was stated in regard to the initiative on climate

change. The environmental movement is viewed as a political issue, perhaps even a power struggle of sorts, in which they could become the victims, since they believe conservative Christians are under attack by the secular world. The belief in separation of church and state could allow them to remain politically inactive (at least publicly) and to perhaps view some policies as placing restrictions upon them. Probably the strongest argument for Southern Baptist non-involvement in environmental issues is that they are so focused on human salvation, they are somewhat oblivious to anything they don't believe is important in furthering this cause. Ecology and environmental responsibility is not something Southern Baptists see as important to Salvation, especially since they believe that Christ will ultimately restore the earth and everything in it.

To close this section on a positive note, I would like to say that this is not intended as a characterization of all Southern Baptists, for I do believe there are some who are genuinely concerned about the environment and are actively involved in the environmental movement, but perhaps not the majority. The SBC Resolutions are an indication that at least some are thinking about the importance of our responsibility in better caring for the environment. Southern Baptists have made many positive contributions to society through their missions programs and should be credited for doing so. One must admire their democratic ways, tenacity and commitment to their theological beliefs, even if you disagree with them. While this section, Part I, is based on extensive literature review, the next section, Part II, will focus specifically on the actual study and results.

PART II

Method of Study

The purpose of this study is to determine how well Southern Baptists in Mississippi perceive and understand certain problems in the context of environmental degradation. My primary goal is to explore the depth of understanding in order to make an informed assessment of the knowledge of Mississippi Southern Baptists about environmental problems - what I've referred to in the introduction of this thesis as "environmental literacy." In addition, I wanted to explore the area of Religion and Ecology in a theological context by gauging Southern Baptist interpretations of and responses to selected literature relevant to this topic, specifically the Dominion Theory and Stewardship/Sojourner theories. It was also important to examine how this group felt Biblical Scripture is relevant in the context of environmental responsibility and how all of the topics are applicable to Southern Baptist culture in the region of Mississippi. This study is an attempt to understand the beliefs of this population from their point of view.

After some thought, an ethnographic research method called micro-ethnography was determined to best meet the needs of this study. The method uses both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives. An ethnographic methodology is an holistic approach and seeks to identify and interpret common cultural understandings. Variables or biases could include overestimating individual

interpretations and underestimating cultural influences and knowledge. The study takes a descriptive, as well as an analytical approach in trying to reveal certain cultural understandings in relation to environmental degradation, subsequent problems and theological perspectives. The methods employed purposive sampling and involved selecting individuals based on their cultural knowledge in a particular area, as well as research of literature for context. The protocol involved using key informants who were recommended by knowledgeable community members and then interviewed several times through email correspondence and telephone conferences. The key informants in this case are identified as leaders in the Mississippi Southern Baptist community or as leaders in the field of Religion and Ecology.

Ethnographic interviews are more in-depth than survey research and allow the researcher to avoid preconceived frameworks and to derive meaning from the community informants themselves, whereas survey instruments often reflect the conceptual categories preconceived by the researcher prior to actual encounters or discussions with respondents. The study was not intended to be a thorough investigation of all Southern Baptists and is limited to the geographic region of South Mississippi.⁵⁰

A list of topics was developed (see Appendix A) that covered a range of environmental problems. Some of the problems are found on a global scale, as well as in Mississippi, and others are found specifically within the state of

Mississippi or the surrounding area. Theological topics for reading and discussion are related to Ecotheological literature and Biblical Scripture that analyze and define Christian environmental ethics in a relatively new way. The list of topics was designed to foster open-ended discussions with the participants and to allow them to formulate and express their thoughts in their own way. It was not designed in a question/answer format in order to avoid any bias, limitations or restrictions that could occur from such a format.

The research goal is to provide new information specific to the population under study. With this in mind, the key informant sample was selected based on the individual ability to provide responses appropriate to the target population, Mississippi Southern Baptists. From an emic perspective, pastors are the most knowledgeable and most visible, recognized leaders within the Southern Baptist denomination. Through their ministries they have the most contact with members of numerous congregations and communities throughout Mississippi, as well as the surrounding area. In addition to pastors, academic scholars employed by Southern Baptist colleges are extremely knowledgeable, with high exposure and can also speak for the target population.

The emic sample included four pastors from local churches – one urban, two suburban and one rural. Participants included Greg Medenwald of Magnolia Baptist Church, Larry Romack of Shiloh Baptist Church, Dr. Dean Register of Temple Baptist Church and Bill Wright of the First Baptist Church of Purvis.

One academic scholar, Dr. Dorman Laird, from William Carey College was also included in the sample. From an etic perspective, two academic scholars were selected for the sample - one each from Presbyterian and Methodist denominations that included Dr. Mark Wallace of Swarthmore College and Dr. Jay McDaniel of Hendrix College. Both are considered experts in the field of Religion and Ecology and both are associated with the Forum on Religion and Ecology. All participants in the sample have backgrounds in religious studies and all are ordained ministers. Sample size could be considered small, but it is unlikely that a larger sample would produce different results due to the uniformity of opinion on religious issues within the Southern Baptist community. Attempts were made to include scholars from other academic backgrounds, such as sociology, science and ethics; however, they all declined to comment based on their lack of understanding and involvement with Mississippi Southern Baptist theology and culture. In some instances, there were no responses to my inquiries and these are interpreted to mean that they cared less and were not interested in this study.

The information reported here comes from interviews with the key informants through telephone conferences. Initial contact and preliminary discussions were the result of a series of email correspondence and telephone discussions. Informants were provided with a list of the topics to be discussed and related reading material approximately two weeks in advance of the final telephone interviews. During the final interviews, notes were taken, and the interviews were

recorded with the permission of the informants. Emic informants were asked to provide some background information and then the conversations followed the outline of the topics presented for discussion. Etic informant discussions were not as lengthy, were less focused on environmental problems and more focused on their interpretations of the level of understanding of the average Mississippi Southern Baptist regarding environmental problems, as well as their interpretations of causal factors.

My purpose was to initiate the discussion and then to actively listen to the informants. In some instances, follow-up questions were asked to insure clarification and accurate interpretation. After the interviews, the data from my notes and the tape-recorded interviews were compiled, interpreted and evaluated. Interpretations, evaluations and conclusions were based on individual ability to demonstrate some depth of understanding through knowledgeable and informative discussion and in their ability to represent the broader Southern Baptist community.

Interpretation of the Data

In this chapter, the interviews with key informants will be interpreted and discussed. The format will be to include commonalities, similarities and differences reported in the discussions. Emic interviews are combined and condensed according to each topic. While some informants were more forthcoming, others provided vague responses, so as a result, some categories contain more discussion than others. Etic interviews are discussed separately from emic perspectives, since they followed a different line of discussion.

Emic Perspectives

At the beginning of each interview, informants were asked to respond to the following terms: environmentalist, spiritual ecologist, ecotheologian and ecological pneumatologist. Responses were to be stated as positive, negative, neutral or unfamiliar with term. The purpose of this exercise was to make a quick assessment of general attitudes towards the subject matter. For the term environmentalist, there were two positive responses, two neutral and one negative. Further explanations of neutral and negative responses indicated that *environmentalist* is a term associated, to some degree, with liberal politics. Spiritual ecologist garnered three negative expressions and two neutral/unfamiliar. There were expressions of negativity based on the interpretation that *spiritual ecologist* could negatively impact Biblical

implications. Responses to *ecoth theologian* were also mixed, with two positive and three negative. Some concerns expressed here indicated a negative association of this term with environmentalist and an emphasis of the importance of Biblical theologians. Most of the informants (3) were unfamiliar with *ecological pneumatologist*, but there was one negative response and one identified as mixed. There were no elaborations on this particular term.

For the following discussions of environmental topics, informants were asked to express how the average Southern Baptist would identify and view the topic based on importance as an environmental problem and the relationship to human health. The topics were categorized into broad subject areas with more specific subtopics outlined for points of discussion (see Appendix A).

The Environment

Coastal Development – There was unanimous agreement that Mississippi Southern Baptists (MSBs) understood water quality as an important environmental problem; however, there was a very direct emphasis on drinking water and few associations were made to other areas of water quality as a result of development. Informants attributed a higher level of understanding in relation to drinking water standards as the result of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the efforts of community water systems to inform customers through direct mailing of contaminant notices and advisories.

Other comments included the fact that sportsmen are much more aware of and concerned with water quality since it directly impacts their interests, and that while point sources may be vaguely understood, non-point sources are not understood in regard to water quality problems. Coastal wetlands and habitats were determined to be valued and recognized as environmentally important by special interest groups, such as fishermen, hunters, and state environmental departments, but not by the average MSB. Discussions indicated that most people are more concerned with economics and oppose any development restrictions that might be imposed in the conservation of wetlands. No other associations were made to the importance of wetlands in any areas other than those of special interest groups.

The hypoxic zone in the northern Gulf of Mexico refers to an area along the Louisiana-Texas coast in which water near the bottom of the Gulf contains less than 2 parts per million of dissolved oxygen. Hypoxia can cause fish to leave the area and can cause stress or death to bottom dwelling organisms that can't move out of the hypoxic zone. Hypoxia is caused primarily by excess nitrogen delivered from the Mississippi River in combination with seasonal stratification of Gulf waters.⁵¹ Very few MSBs are aware of and have any understanding of the problem of Gulf Hypoxia, and would include only those who are economically impacted, such as fishermen. Otherwise, it is not considered important and the broader impacts and consequences are not recognized.

Agriculture - In the case of the cotton industry, there was little association of cotton with the harmful effects to the environment and human health, since the economic importance far outweighs any other concerns. Genetically modified organisms are not well understood, although some unease was expressed. Some informants felt that the effects of pesticides were of concern in regard to human health and drinking water safety, but there is no understanding of the far-reaching effects of pesticides in respect to the interconnectedness of all systems, including the Mississippi River system. Overall, there was an expression of faith in the controls placed on pesticide use and there is no hesitancy to use them as long as they are available.

Higher stages on the Mississippi River at the mouth of the Yazoo River can cause flooding in areas in the Mississippi Delta. The Flood Control Act of 1941 authorized the Yazoo Backwater Project to protect the Delta area of Mississippi from these increased stages. This project included a combination of levees, drainage structures and pumps.⁵² There was no familiarity with the Yazoo Backwater Project, so awareness and understanding are determined to be completely lacking.

Air Quality and Emissions – Some concern was expressed in the area of automobile emissions, but there is no clear association between environmental problems and auto emissions. More concern was expressed in the rising costs of

gasoline and the high cost of automobiles, rather than the detrimental impacts of emissions.

The impacts of industrial emissions, such as Georgia Pacific and coal-powered plants, are overridden by economic factors and by the belief that the government regulations are sufficiently friendly to the environment. No connections are made between industrial emissions and human health.

Global warming and climate change are topics of discussion, especially in view of the media coverage and speculation about recent hurricane activity. The reactions are mixed, but generally skeptical. Reasons for skepticism were identified as general distrust of science, since the scientists are arguing among themselves and cannot come to any consensus or agreement about causal factors. Distrust of science was further related to theories of evolution and subsequent debates. Other indications were a definite lack of understanding of the relationships between emissions and environmental problems, which may in part be due to lack of information and education.

Conservation/Preservation - Concern was expressed in this area more so than others. There is a general awareness about endangered species and the necessity to preserve habitats, wilderness areas and biodiversity, but is mostly expressed in terms of special interest groups such as hunters, fishermen and other sportsmen. The general consensus was that the average MSB is aware of and supports

conservation and preservation as long as it is reasonable in terms of human needs and economic factors. Other expressions indicated more favorable support for animal species as opposed to plants.

Objections were raised in respect to environmentalists using these particular issues related to endangered species as avenues for furthering their own political agendas or “political grandstanding,” which is interpreted as left wing politics and is not supported by MSBs. Additionally, concerns were expressed in relation to the importance placed on protecting animal species as opposed to protecting human life in reference to abortion.

A strong sense of heritage and local activism has allowed the Pascagoula River to remain the only free-flowing waterway of its size in the lower 48.⁵³ There was no awareness of and no involvement in the preservation of the Pascagoula River system, which was attributed to a lack of knowledge; however, this project would be supported if it were better understood.

Sustainability – Recycling was a topic that is understood in a general context. It is viewed as important to a certain extent, but only if economically feasible.

While some progress has been made regarding this issue, more emphasis and information is needed.

Alternative energy is a topic that was well received and there is some knowledge and understanding – however, it was limited to biofuels. The interest is mainly due to the rising costs of gasoline and there is some speculation concerning the limitations of oil. Interest was expressed in biofuels as an alternative fuel, but also as important to the economy in providing new industry and more jobs. Some reservations were expressed as to why there is not more government action in developing alternative fuel technologies.

Policy – MSBs are not informed about and have very little knowledge about the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), commonly known as Superfund. The only awareness is in areas that have Superfund sites and where specific populations have been directly impacted. Most do not understand what a Superfund site is and how it impacts the environment and human health.

Presently, there is an awareness of the Clean Water Act (CWA), but no real depth in understanding. Awareness is again largely due to recent impacts of Hurricane Katrina.

There is high awareness of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but limited understanding of the details. Much more media coverage has been given to or noticed by MSBs concerning the ESA, and they have been personally exposed to efforts to save species. Some view this favorably, particularly outdoorsmen and

sportsmen, while others view the ESA as having a negative impact on the economy and believe there should be a better balance between the two.

The responses to the involvement of religious organizations in policy making were varied. There was general agreement that MSBs are politically active in certain areas, but not in environmental policy. Separation of church and state was not viewed as a limiting factor.

MSBs feel that other issues are of far greater concern, specifically those related to human salvation and spreading the gospel. Biblical interpretation of and emphasis on environmental issues are viewed as lacking in regard to the issues the SBC chooses to support, but there were hopeful expressions that more emphasis and action would be placed on protecting the environment. Some concern was expressed in that political activity related to environmental problems is viewed as liberal and not appropriate for religious organizations to be involved in, rather that it should be an individual interest or activity. The general consensus was that there is an information problem and a definite lack of understanding due to the priority and focus of MSBs on human relationships.

Throughout these discussions, there were general references to the importance of Christian stewardship, the value of God's creations and to the fact that God is Sovereign, Omnipotent and in control. Only one informant was able to identify the watershed in which he lives, and there was a general lack of knowledge about

the importance of healthy watersheds. No direct associations were made between human health and the environmental problems discussed here. There is overwhelming evidence to say that while there is a vague understanding, at best, of some environmental problems, there is a clear lack of understanding in both depth and breadth of the problems. Moreover, there is a fundamental lack of understanding in relating the impacts of environmental problems to human health.

Theology

Dominion Theory – This theory addresses the interpretation by humans of their God given right to dominion over the earth and creates a monarchical order of God, humans, and earth. This line of Christian thought is indicted as the catalyst for environmental crisis, since it denies the intrinsic relationship of all three orders, and does not acknowledge the Spirit's presence on earth.

Most of the informants disagreed with this theory and its characterization of Christians and MSBs, but one did agree that it described MSBs and the dominion orientation of the denomination. The theory was interpreted as placing too much blame on Christians for environmental degradation and not enough on humans as a whole. The general feeling was that the monarchical description given did not accurately characterize MSBs. They expressed a need for balance rather than control.

Sojourner/Steward – This was based on an excerpt from the book “Fragments of the Spirit” in which the author advocates a reinterpretation of the Holy Spirit as the “Green Face of God” and believes that if humans behaved as sojourners rather than stewards of the earth, perhaps more attention would be paid to our behavior towards the environment.

While there was consensus that this passage emphasized the integrity of life and the presence of the Spirit, there was also consensus that it was too close to nature worship such as that found in other world religions. It was interpreted as making creation equal to or above the Creator and as a type of Pantheism. The feeling was that *steward* is an adequate term to describe environmental responsibility, and that the only difference between the two terms, *steward v. sojourner*, is semantics.

Southern Baptist Convention Resolutions on the Environment – Resolutions are numerous, are used to communicate expressions of concern and are grounded in Scripture.

There was clear determination that the average MSB is unaware of the SB Resolutions. Some felt that they were “window dressings” with no real depth and that they did not adequately address the issues, since environmental problems are not in the forefront of MSB thought. Favorable reactions were expressed and agreement that this area needs to be revisited, with the exception of one informant

who felt that the focus of the SBC should remain on human salvation and not on the environment.

Biblical Scripture – There was agreement that Scripture can be interpreted with ecological and environmental implications, but that was not the original intent of the authors – their purpose was to glorify God’s majesty. There was also agreement that Scripture is much more complex than such interpretations could capture, but they can and do carry some significance in emphasizing environmental ethics and stewardship.

Informants were asked to identify their churches as fundamentalist, moderate, progressive or other. Most expressed a dislike for the term *fundamentalist* and self-identified MSBs as Conservative Christians or Conservative Evangelicals with one exception, who self-identified as moderate/progressive. All felt that environmental problems were being addressed through current literature within individual churches and through sermons. There was recognition that more emphasis should be placed on educating and informing MSBs in respect to environmental problems, human responsibility and the impacts on human health. Reservations were expressed concerning the current left-wing political associations with environmentalism. One other interesting view was that MSBs may be somewhat reluctant to align themselves with the environmental movement based on their distrust of science, but more importantly, that MSBs have an

independent spirit and might resent and resist being told what to do by policy makers in Washington, D.C.

Etic Perspectives

Both experts in Religion and Ecology agreed that MSBs had very little to no understanding of environmental problems, with the exception of special interest groups. Both attributed the lack of understanding to Southern Baptist doctrine and its emphasis on human salvation and to a disconnect between faith and care of the Earth. Additionally, their evangelical nature prohibits them from expanding their interests into other areas such as environmental degradation.

One expert believed that MSBs' resistance to change and lack of long-range vision were contributing factors, as well as their lack of trust in governmental policy. The other expert believed that consumerism and the prosperity principle (property ownership, bigger is better) were contributing factors, as well as the emphasis on overall economic prosperity. MSBs were interpreted to be dominion oriented in that they interpret stewardship in terms of control rather than care.

The expectation was that Ecotheology would not be well received, would be related to heathenistic/paganist religions and that environmentalism is interpreted as a left-wing political movement. Suggestions included an appeal to special interest groups such as conservationists and sportsmen, providing more education and introducing new ways of understanding Christianity and Biblical principles.

Final Discussion

The purpose in this final analysis is to provide a comprehensive discussion of Parts I and II, to draw final conclusions and to provide some recommendations in the form of suggestions or next steps.

Through the literature review and analysis, it is apparent that the Field of Religion and Ecology has made great strides and contributions to many academic areas of study and research. Some common ground has been established between a number of academic fields, most importantly those of Science and Religion. There have always been tensions and controversies between the two, but the search for a more sustainable future has created some solidarity and a common goal. Scientific communities are beginning to more fully understand and appreciate the value of religious beliefs, morals and ethics; and to realize their profound impact in shaping and influencing human behavior. The role of religious scholars and religious communities in caring for and protecting the environment is being recognized as a legitimate and very important role. The literature suggests that the relationship between Science and Religion is growing in a more positive direction and that it will continue to do so in the future. Religious scholars and leaders are becoming more involved in the environmental movement and are diligently working to reinterpret Christian environmental ethics and to educate the broader religious community. While many Protestant

denominations are especially active in creating a greater earth ethic and a more sustainable future, Southern Baptists are noticeably absent.

In Part I, the literature review established that Southern Baptists are a doctrinally driven denomination. The denomination began with independent thinkers who differed from the norm, but because of their perseverance and dedication, Southern Baptists have become the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. The denomination is very independent and democratic and does not like censorship or restrictions to be placed upon them. The culture is built around religious values and morals and outside influences and changes are resisted, to include those of government policy and views of the secular world. Southern Baptist's very conservative nature leads to skepticism of public views and policy, particularly those they interpret as liberal views and liberal politics. There is a tendency to associate environmentalism with liberal politics and economic suppression.

Since Southern Baptist theological beliefs are founded in Biblical Scripture and interpretation, Southern Baptists can be less receptive to or completely opposed to outside ideas and opinions with which they see no Biblical associations or implications. The social issues that they are most outspoken about give clear insight into the theological beliefs and social issues they feel most strongly about. These also provide some explanations for the lack of involvement in addressing environmental problems. The research shows the Southern Baptist denomination

to be most interested in those issues that deal most directly with humans and their relationship to God.

A distrust of science has developed as a result of what they perceive to be violations of their most basic beliefs and principles as is found in their opposition to abortion, evolution and homosexuality. Churches affiliated with the SBC and their elected Messengers who do not support the SBC position on these issues are not allowed to participate in the Convention meetings. Southern Baptists have refused to back down regarding their position on women in the pulpit, even though many other religions have embraced this idea. Southern Baptist culture is guided by faith and trust in God, and the history clearly shows that regardless of public opinion, Southern Baptists are committed and loyal to their doctrinal beliefs. Through their commitment to their theological beliefs, they have built a very powerful empire that profoundly influences every aspect of their religious memberships and Southern society. Regardless of public opinion, Southern Baptists take very seriously the divine responsibility to spread the gospel and prepare mankind for the end time, so much so, that this overshadows many other responsibilities, including stewardship and care of the environment.

Southern Baptist dedication to the work of salvation is evident through outreach ministries and expansive missionary programs. The programs operate on the basis of helping the needy and less fortunate, but the primary goal is to expose and win these populations to Christ. Even though they are not recognized as such

by Southern Baptists, these programs are contributions to the environmental movement from an environmental justice perspective.

The results of Part I conclusively determine that Southern Baptists are bound by their absolute faith and belief in the Bible as the Word of God and its application to every aspect of human life. The denomination is found to be lacking in awareness of and knowledge about environmental problems and is considered to exhibit dominion-oriented characteristics.

The discussions with informants revealed more specific details about MSBs and their knowledge about the environment. There is some knowledge and understanding about water quality, but it is limited to drinking water pollutants and standards. Knowledge in this area was determined to be higher than usual due to the recent impacts of Hurricane Katrina and the efforts of local water departments and media to inform community members of current problems with drinking water. Point source contaminants are vaguely understood, but non-point source pollution is not understood and is not associated with water quality. There was no association of fresh water quality or water quality in the Gulf of Mexico in relation to development, industrialization, wetland functions, marine life or other significant factors. There was no indication of knowledge or interest in the problem with Gulf Hypoxia and its impacts on marine life and fisheries. No significant connections were made between these environmental problems and the direct impact on human health and the economy.

Agriculture is viewed as essential to economic prosperity, which takes precedence over any environmental precautions. Cotton is considered very important economically and is not considered to be environmentally harmful. No significant associations were made between the cotton industry and agriculture and the harmful effects of fertilizers and pesticides to humans, water quality and the Mississippi River System. Some skepticism was expressed about genetically modified organisms, but no in-depth knowledge was detected. No knowledge about the Yazoo Backwater Project was reported and no associations were made between this project and environmental damage to the Mississippi River, its riparian zones and wetlands.

Some awareness of emissions was evident, but emissions are considered to be environmentally friendly through government regulations and standards. Much more interest is found in the price of oil and automobiles, as opposed to automobile emissions. Climate change is identified as a topic of discussion since Hurricane Katrina, but is viewed with much skepticism. Not much faith is expressed in science, since the scientists themselves are in constant disagreement and contradict each other. Very little attention is paid to air quality problems in relation to emissions. No associations were made between emissions and the impacts on human health, especially in industrial areas.

Conservation and preservation are of interest and are supported by most of the population, specifically special interest groups such as hunters and fishermen. Special interest groups are much more knowledgeable about conservation practices which include protecting animal species and land preservation. These groups consider wetlands important primarily for recreational and sport activities, rather than for water quality functions. Preservation of plant species is not a significant factor of interest. MSBs are not aware of the uniqueness of the Pascagoula River and are not actively involved in its preservation. Parks and wilderness areas are considered important as long as there are no adverse economic impacts.

Sustainability is not understood in the broader context. Recycling was reported to be important so long as it was economically feasible, but was not linked with growing urbanization, population and land use problems. Awareness and interest was evident in alternative energies; however, discussions were limited to biofuels. Biofuels were also seen as a way to provide jobs and to improve the economy. No knowledge or awareness of other alternative energies was discussed and shows a lack of knowledge and understanding in this category.

Only the population directly impacted by Superfund sites are vaguely aware of CERCLA, but with no real depth of understanding. The Clean Water Act has been more visible in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and a general awareness is detected. There is high awareness of the Endangered Species Act, but there is

resistance if enforcement has any unwanted economic impacts. Religious organizations involved in environmental activity are viewed as more liberal and less conservative. MSBs expressed reservations about the role of Southern Baptists in environmental policy activities.

MSBs exhibit dominion orientations, although not exactly as described in the Dominion Theory. The divisions between God, humans and earth are less distinct, but human needs are considered more important than others. MSBs believe that the earth and all it holds is for the benefit of mankind. Nature is seen as God's creation, with no inherent value of its own and not to be worshipped. Other world religions are associated with nature worship and are seen as making creation more important than the Creator. No ecumenical views are evident.

Stewardship is interpreted in terms of caring for the earth for the greater good of mankind rather than for its own intrinsic value. Biblical Scripture is understood as complex and is not viewed as originally written with any environmental intent; however, there is a willingness to apply Scripture to environmental ethics and responsibility. Resistance to ecotheological literature and reinterpretation of Scripture is evident. SB Resolutions on the environment have no significant impact in guiding the larger SB community, especially since resolutions carry very little weight and most are unaware of their existence. MSBs believe that environmental ethics and responsibility are being addressed through current

literature used within local churches, but the overall lack of knowledge indicates otherwise.

The results of the study reveal some awareness of specific environmental problems in a limited context, but with no real depth in knowledge or understanding. A vague awareness is exhibited in areas associated with water quality, climate change, conservation and species preservation. A higher degree of awareness and interest is found in special interest groups, but not in the general population; and is found to be more related to concern for recreational and sporting activities rather than understanding the broader impacts of environmental degradation. Additionally, more interest and knowledge are shown by those who have been most directly impacted by a specific environmental problem than those who have not.

More concern is expressed for economic prosperity than for the care of the environment. MSBs associate environmentalism with liberal politics and liberal grandstanding, and since they are conservatives, they oppose those views interpreted as liberal. Environmental laws and policies are interpreted as economically limiting and are, to some degree, viewed as another means of controlling economic growth and prosperity in the South. MSBs are democratic and have an independent spirit; therefore, they resist outside influences and controls. Opposing views between scientists and MSBs have created a contentious relationship. MSBs' general distrust in science has carried over into

the environmental arena. Lack of knowledge of the interrelatedness and interdependence of ecosystems is a contributing factor.

There are some correlations to be found between the land ethic of MSBs and those of Aldo Leopold, but they are minor. Leopold describes the relationship between man and the land as an interwoven community, and creates a powerful motivation for living by a land ethic that preserves diversity, wilderness and the entire spectrum of life whether or not we see any immediate economic value in it.⁵⁴ MSBs demonstrate, to some degree, a love of the land and advocate conservation, but not in the same sense of reverence and respect as that of Leopold.

In a theological context, the results show that MSBs have a dominion orientation; but not in the monarchical sense of control as described in the Dominion Theory used for this study. There was no evidence that the earth was viewed as needing human control and oversight, rather MSBs expressed a need for balance between caring for the earth and providing for human needs. Stewardship is encouraged to some extent, but human and economic needs are considered to be more important. The Dominion Theory is found to be less significant in explaining MSBs lack of understanding and knowledge about environmental problems.

MSBs believe their mission in life is to provide opportunities for salvation and place much more emphasis on human relationships and human salvation. The

primary purpose of MSBs is to prepare for the return of Christ, at which time all things will be gloriously renewed. They have an unshakeable faith in God and believe that He is omnipotent, omnipresent and in control of all things, including those problems associated with the environment. Theological beliefs associated with eschatology indicate that environmental degradation is a sign of the decline of mankind. Environmental degradation is expected and is a significant indicator to MSBs that the return of Christ to the earth is approaching. MSBs' preoccupation with all things eschatological overrides all other issues, and they truly believe that God will provide, even in the event of an environmental crisis.

Suggestions for progress and next steps should be suited to address the specific needs and beliefs of this population. First, more research is recommended in order to reach out to and better understand the broader Southern Baptist community. Ideally, environmental and faith-based organizations should reach out to the Southern Baptist community to develop literature and share information in such a way that is respectful of Southern Baptist principles, beliefs and doctrine. Religious scholars working in the field of Religion and Ecology should reach out to and work with pastors and lay people in individual churches. Individual churches might establish environmental committees made up of members who would be responsible for keeping the church community informed about current environmental problems and solutions. The relationship between the environment and human health should be emphasized as a matter of grave importance, as well as the relationship between environmental degradation and

economic decline. These two factors are critically important in helping this population to better understand that care of the environment is vital in creating a more sustainable future. Moreover, the link between these factors and mission work should be explained and emphasized, for Southern Baptists are intricately involved in and dedicated to missions. The point should be made that educating missionaries about environmental problems would allow them to develop stronger mission programs. With better training and education, the programs would be better able to address specific needs and populations.

Clearly, there is an information problem and a lack of understanding and knowledge about environmental problems and solutions by Mississippi Southern Baptists. Better information and stronger communication would allow Mississippi Southern Baptists to become better informed about caring for and protecting the environment. I believe that Mississippi Southern Baptists have a willing spirit, and if they fully understand the magnitude of environmental problems, the implications for all humans and the positive impact they could have, they would be much more willing to take an active voice and role in working to create a more sustainable earth ethic.

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APPENDIX A

Topics for Discussion

What is your first response to the following:

Environmentalist

Spiritual Ecologist

Ecotheologian

Ecological Pneumatologist

Topics to be discussed - I am interested to know how well you understand the following topics and how you believe they relate to environmental problems.

Additionally, I would like to know if you believe the average Mississippi Southern Baptist understands each issue and is interested in learning more about the environment.

Environmental:

1. Coastal Development-

- a. Water quality (Point and Non-point sources)
- b. Coastal Wetlands and Habitats
- c. Gulf Hypoxia

2. Agriculture –

- a. Cotton
- b. Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)
- c. Pesticides

- d. Water quality
 - e. Yazoo Backwater Pump
 - f. Mississippi River System
3. Air Quality –
- a. Automobile Emissions
 - b. Georgia Pacific emissions
 - c. Energy (coal powered plants)
 - d. Global Warming/Climate Change
4. Conservation/Preservation –
- a. Endangered Species and Habitats
 - b. Biodiversity
 - c. Pascagoula River
 - d. Wilderness Areas
5. Sustainability –
- a. Recycling
 - b. Alternative Energy
6. Environmental Health as it relates to each topic (& watersheds)
7. Environmental Policy –
- a. CERCLA – Superfund Sites
 - b. The Clean Water Act
 - c. Endangered Species Act
 - d. Influence of Religious Organizations concerning Policymaking

Theological:

1. The Dominion Theory (attached)
2. Environmental Sojourner v. Environmental Steward (attached)
3. Environmental position, attitudes and responsibility of Southern Baptists (see attached resolutions)
4. Many references throughout the Bible to nature and animals (significance)
5. Interpretation of reference Scripture in King James Version of the Holy Bible-
Proverbs 3:13-26
Psalm 104, 24:1
James 1: 6-11
Revelation 11:18
6. Do you consider your church to be fundamentalist, moderate, progressive –
if none of these then please explain?
7. What do you think you could do to help Southern Baptists to better understand environmental problems?

Excerpts from "Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence and the Renewal of Creation" By: Mark I. Wallace

MARK I. WALLACE is Associate Professor and Chair of Religion, Swarthmore College. He is the author of *Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation* and *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*. He is also a member of the Constructive Theology Workgroup, active in the environmental justice movement in the Philadelphia area, and recently received an ACLS Contemplative Practice Fellowship to redesign his course offerings along eco-friendly lines.

The Dominion Theory:

The hesitancy to reenvision God as Thoroughly immanent to the world is apparent in what is arguably the most searching reunderstanding of Christian theology from a biocentric perspective, namely, Sallie McFague's ecotheology.

McFague's central thesis is that theology for our time must first and foremost be able to account for the environmental crisis through a restructured understanding of God's relation to the world. She argues that traditional theology has been dominated by a dualistic and monarchical model of God in which God was seen as both in control of, and unrelated to, the world in a manner similar to a medieval king's relationship to his feudal possessions. In tandem with this model there emerged a hierarchical understanding of human beings as God's special image-

bearers who are given the responsibility to exercise lordship and dominion over the earth. In the Great Chain of Being, God, as the disembodied source of all life, places humankind in between the highest order being, heaven, and the lowest order, earth, so that human beings can be God's viceregents over the created order. Since in the monarchical model neither God nor humankind is understood as intrinsically related to the world, it follows that the earth can be used – and sometimes abused – to serve human ends. Traditional Christian thought is indicted by McFague as partly responsible for the environmental crisis insofar as it has sacralized this monarchical model of God and humankind as standing over against the earth – which, in turn, is relegated to the status of a lower order of being that needs human control and oversight.

Sojourner/Steward

The *fact* of biological interdependence should entail the *value* of defending the integrity of species life for its own sake. But this particular fact/value dialectic is lost on those of us who do not sense our fundamental cobelonging with nature. The Bible's creation hymns teach us that we are earth creatures, mud people, molded by the cosmic potter out of the clay of the earth. But many of us in the postmodern West construe ourselves differently as denizens of a shopping mall, temperature-controlled, throw-away world in which we have little need for reidentification with the primitive soil of our ancestral origins. Others, however, hunger for a renaturalized Christianity where the palpable sense of divine presence can be touched and tasted and heard and smelled in the push and pull of

natural being and forces. "This universe itself, but especially the planet Earth, needs to be experienced as the primary mode of divine presence, just as it is the primary educator, primary healer, primary commercial establishment, and primary lawgiver for all that exists within this life community"(61). Without this primal earth connection, however, clarion calls for an ecological spirituality and an earth ethic fall on deaf ears. How can a new vision of the interdependence of all life be restored in a technological age when the umbilical cord between divine, human, and non-human life has been snapped long ago?

I have argued that Muir-like, Job-like ecological pneumatology is the most adequate response to our planetary crisis. If the crisis stems from humans' chronic lack of earth-identity, then the Spirit's erasure of distinctions and creation of solidarity between human and otherkind is the hope of our time. I have sought to show that the Spirit's transgressive and unifying activity is basic to its historic, biblical role as the bond of love within and between the immanent and economic Trinity. The Spirit is the power for our convivial unity between all beings through her erasure of the culturally constructed boundaries that separate human and nonhuman life forms. But what is now needed is the practical application of the Spirit's identity as the *vinculum caritatis* to the crisis situation at hand by refiguring the Spirit as a natural being – as breath, wind, bird, and fire – even if such refiguration runs provocatively close to neo-pagan nature worship. On the question of the environment, Christian theology desperately needs a blood transfusion, and one of the sources for this healing, in addition to rehabilitating

the normative Trinitarian lexicon, is the provocation of indigenous and neo-native folkways and beliefs (62).

To live in harmony with the earth is to live inspired (*in-spirited, in-the-Spirit*). Recently the Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force issued, in an otherwise excellent document, a call for a new model of environmental stewardship, and ideal of "servant lordship," as the hope for a revised Christian ethic of ecological responsibility (63). But I believe that the time has long passed for the recovery of lordship and responsibility language in crafting a sound ecological ethic. Rather, the hope of our time is the promise of biocentrism as an alternative to the servant-lordship model for an adequate land ethic. When the Spirit inspired the formative Pentecostal gathering in the book of Acts to speak in other tongues, an eschatological rupture from the past occurred in which the ancient prophecy was fulfilled that the Spirit would pour out itself onto all flesh. It was said that the fulfillment would be distinguished by excessive and impossible signs of the Spirit's presence: some would have visions, others would prophesy, and blood and fire and smoke would cover the earth (Acts 2:14-21). Today the haunting prospect of mass environmental death bears traces of just such a cataclysm. We too have entered a new era marked by a similar apocalyptic break with the past, where the Spirit is again at work to foment aberrant, unorthodox lifestyles ("these ones are full of new wine," Acts 2:13). We are being asked to abandon old mores in favor of a new biocentric and nonconformist theology and ethic. We are being wooed by the Spirit to desert custodial language of dominion and stewardship in favor of an earth-centered religious discourse: all creatures are best served when

humans abdicate their identities as overlords and defer instead to the wisdom of the Creatrix who renews and empowers the common biotic order. If we allow the Spirit's biophilic insurgency to redefine us as *pilgrims* and *sojourners* rather than *wardens* and *stewards*, our legacy to posterity might well be healing and life-giving, and not destructive of the hopes of future generations.

SBC Resolutions

Resolution On The Care Of Our Environment

June 1983

WHEREAS, We believe that God is Creator of a good world and has placed us here as responsible stewards to keep the earth that it might give sustenance to all living things; and

WHEREAS, We believe that the abuse of the good earth through reckless greed is a sin against our Creator and our brothers and sisters, both present and future; and

WHEREAS, We rejoice in the signs of hope which are emerging in several areas.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That we, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 14-16, 1983, commit our lives to a deeper regard for the earth and to a more sparing use of its limited resources; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, That we call upon the leaders of industry and

commerce to impose upon themselves rigorous and verifiable standards of protection and preservation of land, air, and water.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

SBC Resolutions

Resolution On Environmental Stewardship

June 1990

WHEREAS, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Psalm 24-1:); and

WHEREAS, "God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together He called Seas. And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10); and

WHEREAS, Christians recognize God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the created order; and

WHEREAS, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15); and

WHEREAS, The sinfulness of the human race has led to the destruction of the created order (Romans 8:22) as evidenced by the endangerment of the earth by pollution, human extravagance and wastefulness, soil depletion and erosion, and general misuse of creation; and

WHEREAS, We are forbidden to worship the creation (Matthew 4:10, Romans

1:25), but are charged by our Creator with caring for creation (Genesis 1:28, 2:15), and are called to be faithful stewards of that which is entrusted to us (Luke 16:1-13).

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That we, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 12-14, 1990, recognize publicly our responsibility to God to be better stewards of all of the created order; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the messengers in the session for this Southern Baptist Convention covenant with one another to seek ways personally and corporately to care for the earth and all those who dwell therein; and

BE IF FURTHER RESOLVED, That individuals, churches, and other Baptist groups be encouraged to make an environmentally responsible ethic a part of our lifestyle and evangelistic witness. New Orleans, Louisiana