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'Southern Baptist In Exile'
 Writes Of Spiritual Journey

By Greg Warner

HATTIESBURG, Miss. (BP)--Once a pulpit-pounding preacher boy and now a disillusioned skeptic, Clayton Sullivan is a victim of somebody else's war.

Some will say he fell victim to "liberalism," others that his "fundamentalist" upbringing failed him, but Sullivan says "I brought my troubles on myself. I had never taken the liberal-conservative conflict within Protestantism seriously."

Sullivan has not been involved in the current theological conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention, but his name surfaced in the controversy when a speaker in a Florida rally cited a book he wrote on his experiences as an example of liberalism in a Southern Baptist seminary.

In "Called To Preach, Condemned To Survive," published by Mercer University Press in 1985, Sullivan wrote of his experiences. He disagreed with the Florida speaker, noting the book "can be used by either side of the controversy. It depends on what part you want to quote."

Now a professor of religion and philosophy at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, Sullivan watches the latest SBC controversy from a safe distance and with the perspective of one who has felt its sting.

His battle began more than 30 years ago when, as a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., he traded the "simplistic and sentimental" religion of his Mississippi roots for the "intellectually honest" faith of contemporary theology. That decision branded him a "liberal," cost him a job and, in part, pushed him out of the ministry.

Sullivan grew up in rural southern Mississippi in the Depression with a dream of "being somebody." That dream changed when the high school student experienced "a call to be a Southern Baptist preacher." He headed for Baptist-sponsored Mississippi College, where instead of studying he spent most of his time preaching youth revivals using sermons "borrowed" from his pulpit idol, W.A. Criswell.

His faith was sincere yet superficial, and he sensed something was missing. "But seminary was around the corner and I resolved to go to seminary and to study my heart out in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the Christian religion," he recalls.

As he pulled out of the driveway in 1952 headed for Louisville and Southern seminary, his father warned, "Son, whatever happens, don't let 'em change you." He did change, however.

"At Southern seminary we were introduced to new ideas and new ways of thinking," he says. Chief among the "new ideas" was the historical-critical method, in which the Scriptures were "critically examined against their historical and ideological backgrounds." This approach allows for no "pious fudging," Sullivan notes, but is committed to intellectual honesty "wherever it leads." It led Sullivan to reject many of the ideas of his youth on the way to restructuring his faith.

"So much of the religion I'd been exposed to prior to seminary had been, I now sensed, sentimental mush like cotton candy at the Mississippi State Fair---all sweetness and air but no substance and structure." His study at Southern helped him discover "I could be a Christian without committing intellectual suicide."

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There was a price to be paid for this enlightenment, however. "I had gone from certainty rooted in ignorance to bafflement.... I was more certain of what I didn't believe than I was of what I did believe. Southern seminary had destroyed my biblical fundamentalism but it had not given me anything viable to take its place."

Feeling more study could solve this dilemma, Sullivan stayed at Southern to pursue a doctor of philosophy degree. Five more years of study only worsened the problem, however, leaving him "a ministerial Humpty Dumpty, all head and no heart."

Moreover, Southern had not prepared him to be a pastor, Sullivan says. Professors, few of whom had spent much time serving churches, belittled the pastorate. "That was unfortunate because they had no appreciation of the role the church plays in the lives of common people."

To add to his problems, four of the five professors assigned to supervise Sullivan's doctoral dissertation left the seminary in a power struggle with then-President Duke McCall. Only Wayne Ward, still a faculty member, was left.

The new doctoral committee, "dominated" by Ray Summers, who recently had joined the seminary, found Sullivan's dissertation "too liberal," Sullivan recalls. Faced with being denied his degree after five years' work, Sullivan "groveled." At the expense of his intellectual integrity, he rewrote his paper.

The greatest hurt, Sullivan says, however, was the final pronouncement by Summers, "I don't think you have the moral right to be a Southern Baptist preacher." This verdict, "like a perpetual pendulum of pain," Sullivan says has haunted him every day since.

"I didn't think of myself as a 'liberal.'... But whatever I was I'd become because of Southern seminary and all I'd learned there. Now Southern seminary, in the person of Dr. Summers, was rejecting me for becoming what it had made me."

Devastated by that rejection, he was adrift in self-doubt and bitterness. William Jewell College, which had promised him a teaching position, withdrew the offer, Sullivan says, on the advice of Summers.

Sullivan left Louisville and for weeks drove aimlessly across the South, finally getting a job as a dishwasher in Washington. Desperate to pick up the pieces of his life, Sullivan called McCall and asked for help. McCall helped Sullivan become pastor of Tylertown Baptist Church, a small town congregation in southwestern Mississippi.

Though finally "a Southern Baptist preacher," Sullivan's struggles were not over. Moving to Tylertown in 1961, he "experienced reality shock. My seminary training, for which I am still appreciative, had not prepared me for life's rawness and pain."

Sullivan continued to face difficulty in coping with the injustice of human suffering, and he felt no support from fellow ministers. This resulted in what he calls his "coherence problem"--the difficulty of reconciling his Christian beliefs with the harsh realities of life. "Having burned out on the inside, I cringed at the thought of spending the next 40 years with windy words and a sense of futility."

So he got out. Offered the chance to teach at the University of Southern Mississippi, he left the pastorate. His struggles were not quite over. At USM Sullivan found a dictatorial administration with a particular and exaggerated dislike for Christians. Ironically, he was fired from the faculty for being what he never felt he had become--a preacher.

Again Sullivan "groveled," begging the administration for his job back. And again he was rescued, eventually gaining tenure and a measure of the security that always had eluded him.

Now he looks back on 20 years as a "Southern Baptist in exile," calling his book "a cry out of the depths of my soul," motivated by his love for and debt to Southern Baptists. "My hope is this book will personalize the liberal-conservative controversy and make a positive contribution," he said.

Sullivan recognizes danger in the tactics of those on both sides of the SBC fight. He emphasizes it was neither liberal nor conservative theology that made him a victim 30 years ago, but the hypocrisy of "professional Christians" on both sides.

It was not the "liberals'" TEACHING at Southern seminary that made him doubt Christianity, Sullivan says, but their hatred of fellow believers. It was not the "fundamentalists'" BELIEFS that forced him to "grovel," he said, but their "urge to purge."

"No poison is so potent as the venom of the virtuous."

Thinking about the current situation in the SBC, Sullivan also worries that whoever wins the fight in the convention will be left with a "Pyrrhic victory---victory at too great a price. The ultimate victor will be the old devil himself."

What is his advice to Southern Baptists caught in the current controversy? "You don't try to solve it. You learn to live with it. I think the two sides can coexist, but it will take a whole lot of Christian love."

Although no longer a Baptist, Sullivan often preaches--usually in Methodist churches. That's only a compromise, however, since he believes God's call was very specific.

"All I ever wanted to be was a Southern Baptist preacher and that's all I want to be today. If you find me an open minded church in Florida, I'll be there in five minutes."

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(Adapted from an article published March 6, 1986, by the Florida Baptist Witness, newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention. The full version is available by computer from the Witness. A photo of Sullivan has been mailed to the state Baptist newspapers by the Witness.)

Summers, Ward, McCall Remember
Clayton Sullivan Differently

By Greg Warner

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--Ray Summers does not remember the conversation with Clayton Sullivan that Sullivan says changed his life dramatically.

Summers "dominated" Sullivan's doctoral committee at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., 25 years ago. Sullivan's seminary experiences are recorded in his recent autobiography, published by Mercer University Press.

Summers does recall, however, that Sullivan's expressed beliefs about Christ that were, "to my mind, completely wrong and out of line with what Southern Baptists believe." He does not remember, however, telling his student he had "no moral right to be a Southern Baptist preacher."

"I probably did tell him that with those views he probably would have trouble. He knew they were not in line with what Southern Baptists believed," Summers says.

Summers taught 21 years at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, before going to Southern. After five years there, he returned to Texas, where he taught 16 years at Baylor University before retiring.

"I had many students whose views were far more liberal than my own," he says, "but that did not give us any trouble in working through their dissertations."

His difficulty with Sullivan, Summers says, stemmed from a later confrontation in the professor's office after Sullivan was turned down for a teaching job by William Jewell College. Summers recalls he denied writing a letter to the Missouri Baptist college "blackballing" Sullivan. When Summers started to call the school to prove his innocence, Summers says, Sullivan hit the telephone switchhook to interrupt the call.

"I told him to leave the office," Summers says, "and I haven't seen him since."

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Wayne Ward was the only member of Sullivan's dissertation committee who remained after the 1958 power struggle at Southern seminary. When Ray Summers joined the faculty and the committee, "he felt he had to turn things around" theologically, Ward says.

Ward, who has remained Sullivan's friend over the years, remembers well the conflict between Sullivan and Summers over "liberal views" in the student's dissertation. "Clayton was absolutely devastated by his encounter with the new chairman of his committee," recalls Ward, who still teaches Christian theology at Southern. "Summers would not sign a dissertation he did not agree with," Ward says. "I didn't agree with that. I would have signed it.

"Clayton was going in a direction he was being led by his (original) committee. His point of view was that the kingdom of God was essentially a future event. Many Southern Baptists would not like that, but he made a powerful case for that view and it should have been approved."

Once it became clear the dissertation would not be accepted by Summers and others on the committee, Ward says, he helped Sullivan rewrite the paper in an acceptable form.

Ward says Sullivan's charge Southern seminary left him unprepared for ministry was a valid criticism, Ward says, adding, "Like many of our students, he had a lot of growing up to do, but he was not less ready than most."

Ward says he is distressed that critics of the seminary are using Sullivan's book to support charges of "liberalism" at Southern. "To say that's the way things are now is a downright, diabolical lie!" he asserts.

Much progress has been made at the school, including healing of the wounds of the 1958 faculty fight, says Ward, who notes, "By comparison to the '50s, we are a quantum leap ahead in training men and women for ministry."

Duke McCall, former president of Southern seminary, rescued Clayton Sullivan from self-destructive despair in 1961, but McCall does not remember the student.

"He doesn't stand out in my memory, because there were a lot of them," McCall says. Other students were victims of the faculty fight that broke out at Southern in 1958, McCall explains.

Although McCall admits he has yet to make sense of the "Battle of Lexington Road," he says the faculty controversy was not primarily theological. It was both an administrative power struggle and a reflection of the "general malaise" of society that erupted in the 1960s, he says.

McCall, now retired and living in Jupiter, Fla., says he still feels guilty that he and the faculty members involved were not able to reconcile their differences. "It was a devastating thing emotionally to the faculty and students," he remembers.

"I don't really take exception to what Sullivan is saying," McCall notes. "He's not alone in what he experienced." Neither does McCall dispute Sullivan's charge that Southern left the student unprepared for the pastorate.

"Sullivan probably was not equipped for ministry," he says, "but who's responsible for that? Seminary was not expected to teach you how to function in human relationships. It was not viewed as practical. It was academia."

That has changed in recent years, McCall says. Seminaries now are concentrating on more practical instruction and supervised ministry, he observes. McCall says other changes on seminary campuses now threaten students, however.

"The wave is coming from the opposite side now," he says, referring to efforts to make the schools "more conservative. It's not the conservatism I'm uncomfortable with, it's the spirit." He says most of the trustees at Southern "always were conservative, but they weren't mad at anybody."

"The conservatives don't threaten me—I'm glad they're around—but I wish they'd put up their knives," McCall notes. "This controversy is going to create another batch of Clayton Sullivans—another set of casualties."

Seminary Extension Launches
First Course Using Video

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The Southern Baptist Seminary Extension Department turned the corner into the electronic era this spring with the introduction of "Clinical Pastoral Training," its first college-level course to utilize videotape.

While department officials have expressed pleasure with the results, they maintain they are determined the medium will not overshadow the basic purpose of the course.

"In many respects this course is different from any we have ever offered before," acknowledges Raymond M. Rigdon, executive director of the Seminary External Education Division. "It provides a new kind of learning experience, but video is just one of the elements that makes the course effective."

Designed particularly for volunteer hospital chaplains and ministers who need pastoral care training, the course requires 10 sessions of three hours each.

Half of each session centers around a videotape presentation by G. Wade Rowatt, professor of psychology of religion at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. A local learning leader guides each class in a discussion period both before and after viewing the tape. The other half of each session consists of clinical or simulated learning exercises to help students apply the material covered earlier.

Rowatt considers the built-in clinical experiences "one of the exciting features of this program." Through these exercises, "students will have an opportunity to begin where they are and grow toward professional competency as they minister in the sickroom," he says.

Whenever possible, the course is offered in a hospital. "In addition to the hands-on experience this provides the students, we are finding that the course helps the hospital as it better trains the spiritual caregivers who work with it regularly," notes Paul E. Robertson, who is coordinating scheduling of the course for the Seminary Extension Department. Fifteen locations are offering the course this spring, with others already making plans for the fall.

Not every Seminary Extension center will be able to offer this course, says Robertson. Certification will be required of instructors for the course, and the center must lease a set of the videotapes from the Seminary Extension Department.

"We hope many locations will plan to schedule the course," Robertson adds. "There is a tremendous need for the kind of training it provides. Ministers and others who regularly relate to sick or hospitalized persons need to be aware of ways they can contribute to the healing process."

Practical applications of the course caught the interest of the chaplaincy division of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board early in the planning for the course. Robert Duvall of the board's staff has consulted with the Seminary Extension Department throughout the course's development.

Seminary Extension courses on a variety of ministry-related subjects have been available for almost 35 years. Most of them are designed for persons who have been unable to attend a seminary.

The Seminary Extension Department operates as part of the Seminary External Education Division of the six Southern Baptist seminaries. In addition to its network of more than 300 extension centers, the department offers courses through correspondence study.

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