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This Man Was No Moderate: The Legacy of Cecil Sherman

We are not likely ever to see the like of Cecil Sherman again. No one will be able to understand the history of the Southern Baptist Convention in the twentieth century without reference to him. No one who had a meaningful encounter with him will ever forget him. Cecil Sherman may have led the moderate movement in the SBC, but this much is clear — Cecil Sherman was no moderate.

Friday, April 23, 2010

Some men leave an indelible mark on their times. Cecil Sherman was one of those men. Sherman died April 17 at age 82, just two days after suffering a massive heart attack in Richmond, Virginia. He lived long enough to be almost unknown among a generation of younger Southern Baptists. But, for those of us who knew him, Cecil Sherman is impossible to forget.

My first glimpse of Cecil Sherman came during the years he served as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Asheville, North Carolina. He came to preach in chapel at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary when I was a new student. He stood tall in the pulpit and announced that he was “born, bred, and buttered a Baptist.” He spoke with a steady authority that dared anyone to argue with him.

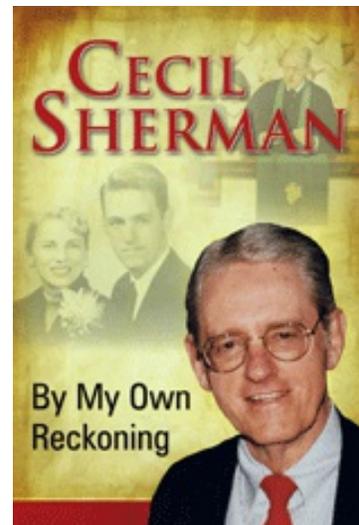
I had arrived at Southern Seminary as a fellow “born, bred, and buttered” Baptist. We were of different generations, of course. Cecil Sherman graduated from Southwestern Seminary with his Doctor of Philosophy when I was less than a year old, but our early biographies were remarkably similar — if for no other reason than we were both representative of generations of Southern Baptist children and youth. Cecil Sherman grew up in the Polytechnic Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. A generation later I had many of the same experiences at Southside Baptist Church in Lakeland, Florida. We knew and loved a Southern Baptist culture that was truly a cradle to grave experience. We were both shaped forever by that experience. Cecil Sherman had his first impression of a call to ministry as a boy at Royal Ambassador camp. The same was true for me, though in a different time and a different state. That mattered little in that epoch of the Southern Baptist Convention. Time moved slowly.

Over the course of his ministry, Dr. Sherman served churches in Texas, Georgia, and North Carolina as pastor. He had the look and language of a scholarly and serious pastor. He had graduated from Baylor University before attending Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. He then earned a Master of Theology degree at Princeton Theological Seminary before returning to Southwestern for his doctorate.

By the time our lives intersected, Cecil Sherman was a well-known figure in Southern Baptist life. He was known as a progressive thinker and a forceful leader. During his years as pastor in Asheville he fought a brave fight for racial equality. He was passionate in his preaching and he took no prisoners in argument.

When Cecil Sherman was scheduled for chapel at Southern Seminary, I was told by faculty and friends that it would be a service not to miss. I didn't miss the service, and I can still remember it clearly. Cecil Sherman was not a man to be easily forgotten.

By this time, the Southern Baptist Convention was embroiled in the definitive controversy of Baptist life in the twentieth century. Opposing forces fought for control over the institutions of the denomination and the future course of



the convention. Conservatives had elected Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee as president of the convention, and the stage was set for a battle royal over theology, doctrine, and the accountability of the denomination's seminaries and institutions. The central issue was the inerrancy of Scripture. Conservatives affirmed it; Cecil Sherman did not.

Over the course of the controversy, Cecil Sherman would emerge as a formidable leader on the convention's left—who called themselves moderates. He would serve on the Peace Committee that attempted to bring a negotiated conclusion to the controversy, but he resigned in protest after the presidents of the denomination's six seminaries signed the "Glorieta Statement" affirming that the Bible is without error "in any area of reality." In his autobiography, *By My Own Reckoning*, Sherman wrote: "I was undone by friends who knew what they had written was not so, but for the sake of buying time and space from Fundamentalists had caved in and told a lie about the Bible."

Dr. Sherman has not been coy about his own beliefs. As far back as 1975 he had preached a sermon in Asheville in which he affirmed the theory of evolution. In that sermon he told his congregation, "If you want the answer to religious questions, the Bible is still your best source, if you take your mind with you when you go. If you want answers to scientific questions, go see the right scientist."

In 1981, Dr. Sherman debated Dr. Paige Patterson, then president of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas and recognized as the leading theologian among conservative Southern Baptists. That debate would turn out to be a crucial moment in the SBC controversy, for Cecil Sherman was as candid about his beliefs in that debate as he was with his own congregation. "I will not declare that I hold to an inerrant Bible," he stated clearly. He claimed a "dynamical" view of the Bible's inspiration and then pointed to what he saw as contradictions in the biblical text. Then he dropped a bombshell:

"I actually do think parts of the Bible are more valuable than others, more inspired than others. In fact, I think that some parts of the Bible have been put aside by the Christian revelation."

He then pointed to specific texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament and suggested that the passages made reference to different Gods. "One is a tribal god, vindictive and cruel. The punishment that is to be inflicted upon even the innocent is low and mean by any standard. On the other hand, the picture of God in the sayings of Jesus is lofty, beautiful, exalted." He proceeded to argue that the Old Testament's view of God is often distorted and grotesque.

Patterson was courteous but clear in his responses. Cecil Sherman's view of the Bible was stunningly out of step with Southern Baptists. More importantly, it was horribly deficient by any standard of biblical orthodoxy.

Years later, Dr. Sherman would tell *Christianity Today* that he would not want to see any professor removed from a teaching position in one of the seminaries simply because he denied the Virgin Birth. While affirming the Virgin Birth himself, he offered one of the most remarkable statements of recent Baptist history: "A teacher who might also be led by Scripture not to believe in the virgin birth should not be fired." Led by the Scripture *not* to believe in the Virgin Birth? By then, Sherman was serving as Coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a group of moderate Baptists who separated from the Southern Baptist Convention.

Throughout his years as a leader among more liberal Baptists, Cecil Sherman never hid behind a claim of moderation. He was a man of deep principle who seemed incapable of trimming his sails for the sake of politics or public relations. There was no lack of irony in the fact that such an immoderate man was destined to lead a group of people who insisted on being called "moderates." He attempted to lead moderate opposition to the conservative resurgence in the SBC, even calling together a group of moderate pastors later known as the "Gatlinburg Gang" and orchestrating a sophisticated political strategy and machinery. His political efforts met with no electoral success. Writing years later he said, "I have a pretty good grasp of the obvious. We lost."

He assumed leadership of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1992 and spent years seeking to build the movement. I was serving as editor of the *Christian Index* when Keith Parks, formerly president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, was named as leader of the CBF mission agency. I attended the press conference held on the Atlanta campus of Mercer University. At the conclusion of the public event, Dr. Sherman called me aside. He unleashed a verbal critique that will never be forgotten, punctuated with his finger repeatedly thrust into my chest. He referred to my experience as a student at Southern Seminary in what he saw as its moderate heyday and lambasted me for reverting to what he saw as an

intellectually discredited view of biblical inerrancy. That is not the kind of encounter one forgets. But, in its own way, it provided me with an experience that would be invaluable in years ahead.

Looking back, I learned a great deal from Cecil Sherman. His honesty revealed the basic theological issues at stake. His rejection of biblical inerrancy caused me to think more deeply about the inspiration and authority of the Bible. His candid and shocking words helped me to understand what was at stake. When I heard recordings of his debate with Paige Patterson over biblical inerrancy, I realized that I agreed with Dr. Patterson, not Cecil Sherman. Had Dr. Sherman equivocated or played verbal games, I might not have seen the issues so clearly.

Cecil Sherman is also a reminder of the shaping influence of a denominational culture. By his own admission, the Southern Baptist Convention he knew as a boy and young man was adept at sweeping doctrinal problems under the denominational rug. Speaking of the adoption of the denomination's first confession of faith, *The Baptist Faith & Message*, in 1925, he asserted that "no one paid attention to it." He was largely right. The denominational culture that produced the generation of Cecil Sherman was a culture of program, not doctrine.

Similarly, his generation of seminarians was caught up in the Southern Baptist drive to attain the intellectual and cultural respect of the larger Protestant world. But the entry price to that esteem was the forfeiting of much Baptist conviction. When Cecil Sherman spoke of what it means to be a Baptist, he leaned immediately into libertarian themes of radical individualism, couched as Baptist freedoms. His generation knew of no credible evangelical theological and biblical scholarship. So far as he and so many other moderates were concerned, anything to the right of liberal Protestantism was obscurantist Fundamentalism.

The cost of the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention was unspeakably high, but undeniably necessary. The theological differences between the moderates and conservatives in the SBC were fundamental and irreconcilable. Conservative leaders saw this clearly, and argued it openly. Most moderates denied the reality. Not so with Cecil Sherman. As Paige Patterson would later reflect, "Cecil Sherman is an honest man who tells you up front what he thinks about everything without indulging in political spin games." That is a remarkable tribute from a man who led the movement Cecil Sherman so energetically opposed.

Dr. Cecil Sherman was a man of many parts and a serious man of ideas. We must respect his bravery and courage in confronting the reality of racism. No one who knows his life story can respond with anything less than total admiration for the love and devotion with which he cared for his beloved wife Dot when Alzheimer's disease struck. When Cecil Sherman gave his word, he kept it. When he pledged his faithful love in sickness and in health, he meant it.

Cecil Sherman's death brings to a close a remarkable chapter in Southern Baptist history — and one with lessons too important to forget. I will never forget seeing him stand in that chapel service, nor feeling the jab of his finger in my chest many years later. In his own way, he played a very important part in clarifying for me the most basic issues at stake in the SBC conflict. We ended up at opposite ends of the SBC spectrum. The fact that our boyhoods and youth experiences in the SBC were so similar serves to underline the vast change brought about by the conservative recovery of the denomination. A Baptist who feels no grief in that fact has no heart. This grief serves to underline the cost of theological recovery and doctrinal accountability. We must be ever willing to pay that cost, but we must never forget the cost that is paid.

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Cecil Sherman, *By My Own Reckoning*, Smyth & Helwys, 2008.

Carla Wynn Davis, "[Founding CBF Coordinator Cecil Sherman Passes Away After Massive Heart Attack](#)," *Cooperative Baptist Fellowship News*, Saturday, April 17, 2010.

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