

Humphreys/Patterson—1987:
A Southern Baptist Debate on the Atonement

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At the height of the Southern Baptist Convention's Inerrancy Controversy (1979-2000), SBC theologians Paige Patterson and Fisher Humphreys consented to a debate over the nature of the atonement at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 1987.¹ Often overlooked by those who examine the doctrinal skirmishes within evangelicalism in late twentieth century, the Humphreys/Patterson debate reveals some of the depth of what was in play in SBC theological life. While somewhat an intramural contest among Southern Baptists, the arguments volleyed were well known to the watching evangelical world.² Indeed, the essence

¹ Special gratitude is extended to the assistance provided by the libraries at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, including the Paige Patterson archives.

² See R. Albert Mohler, Jr. "The Wrath of God Was Satisfied: Substitutionary Atonement and the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention," August 12, 2013 available from <http://www.albertmohler.com/2013/08/12/the-wrath-of-god-was-satisfied-substitutionary-atonement-and-the-conservative-resurgence-in-the-southern-baptist-convention/>. James Ray Nalls categorized Southern Baptist thought on the atonement into three categories: (1) the period of essential unanimity, 1845-1916, (2) the period of emerging divergency, 1917-1958, and (3) the period of extensive multiformity, 1959-1985. Writing in 1985, Nalls concluded that the "atonement has never been the basis of controversy within the life of the convention," 195, which appears not to have anticipated the level of undercurrent controversy in some sections that appeared in the events leading up to the Humphreys/Patterson debate in 1987. See Nalls, "The Concept of the Atonement in Southern Baptist Thought," (Unpublished ThD dissertation, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Memphis, Tennessee, 1985).

of the discussion remains and therefore a worthwhile exercise exists in the examination of this dispute.³ On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Humphreys/Patterson debate, this article seeks to provide the historical setting of the events that led to the debate, the content of the debaters' arguments on the atonement, and an analysis of the significance of the debate both for the SBC in 1987 and for evangelicals inside and outside the SBC in the present day.⁴

A Debate a Decade in the Making

The lives of Fisher Humphreys (1939-) and Paige Patterson (1942-) first intersected on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in the late 1960s. Humphreys, already a New Orleans graduate, had returned after post-graduate studies in England to pursue the ThD degree in 1967. Patterson, also a ThD student, had been enrolled at New Orleans for masters and doctoral studies since 1965.⁵ Humphreys joined

³ See Richard Mouw, "Why Christus Victor is not Enough," in *Christianity Today* 56:5 (May 2012): 28 available online

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/may/getting-to-the-cruce-of-calvary.html>. Murray Campbell, "Penal Substitution is the Heart of the Gospel," *The Gospel Coalition*, April 5, 2017 available online

<https://australia.thegospelcoalition.org/article/penal-substitution-is-the-heart-of-the-gospel>. Campbell is responding to Chuck Queen, "It's time to end the hands-off attitude to substitutionary atonement," *Baptist News Global*, March 24, 2017 available online <https://baptistnews.com/article/its-time-to-end-the-hands-off-attitude-to-substitutionary-atonement/#.WRJDPMa1uUn>.

See also Bob Allen, "Atonement tweet sparks blood fuel on social media," *Baptist News Global*, March 1, 2017 available from

<https://baptistnews.com/article/atonement-tweet-sparks-blood-feud-on-social-media/#.WRJGD8a1uUk> and the 2017 Resolution of the Southern Baptist Convention, "On the Necessity of Penal Substitutionary Atonement," available from <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/2278/on-the-necessity-of-penal-substitutionary-atonement>

⁴ For another recent brief review of the debate see Mark A. Rathel's helpful article, "The Cross and the School of Providence and Prayer: Atonement Controversies at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary," in *JBTM* 14//2 (Fall 2017): 30-31.

⁵ The two theologians shared a common friend in Richard D. Land, for whom they would both serve as groomsmen in Land's wedding.

the New Orleans faculty in 1970, the same year Patterson accepted the call to serve as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas. In 1975, Patterson would move to Dallas, Texas, to serve as the president of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies (later Criswell College) for the next seventeen years. Humphreys would remain at New Orleans until 1990.

In 1978, the Southern Baptist Convention's Broadman Press published Humphreys book-length treatment of the atonement, *The Death of Christ*. Humphreys explained his thesis as, "I believe that God in Christ accepted suffering as his way of forgiving the men whose sins caused him to suffer. He went to all that trouble and experienced all that pain in order to call men to himself for forgiveness. The experiences of Christ are the measure of God's costly forgiveness of sinners."⁶ Humphreys called this "cruciform forgiveness" and the concept would serve as his model for explaining the meaning of the atonement.⁷

By 1979, Humphreys' work had been read by Patterson, and the views expressed therein caused Patterson significant concern to the point that a mutual friend, Richard D. Land, encouraged Patterson to call

⁶ Fisher Humphreys, *The Death of Christ* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 116. One reviewer saw this thesis as problematic. John J. Hughes, review of *The Death of Christ* by Fisher Humphreys in *JETS* 23:3 (Sept 1980): 263-264, classified Humphreys as having "a moral-influence view of the atonement."

⁷ One can see the roots of Humphreys' views in his doctoral dissertation on the theology of Leonard Hodgson. Humphreys states, "Hodgson did not propose that his view of atonement was the only one, or the best. He tried to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various proposals that have been made. He held that no one view alone is adequate, nor are all views together, if in fact anyone could manage to put them all together," in *God in the Theology of Leonard Hodgson* (Unpublished ThD dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1972), 107. Further, in an article on Hodgson he explains, "Hodgson also held a very strong understanding of the atonement, which he always treated as God's response to evil ... Christ voluntarily accepted the pain which is the just punishment for sin, as his way of winning the right to forgive sinners without becoming indulgent or compromising with evil," in "Leonard Hodgson," *The Theological Educator* 40 (Fall 1989): 22-23. For a helpful overview and analysis of Humphrey's "cruciform forgiveness" view, see Matthew C. Rose, "The Social Implications of Certain Theories of the Atonement: An Assessment of Fisher Humphrey's 'Cruciform Forgiveness'," (Unpublished PhD Seminar Paper, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2014).

Humphreys to discuss the book before Patterson took any action.⁸ The conversation, though cordial, did not alleviate any of Patterson's theological concerns. With the election of conservative pastor Adrian Rogers as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Patterson and others were raising the question as to whether or not faculty and other denominational workers believed the same thing about the truthfulness of the Bible as did the majority of Southern Baptists. In the April 23, 1980 edition of the *Baptist Standard*, the denomination's state newspaper in Texas, Editor Presnall Wood called for Patterson to provide a list of names of those whom he suspected of denying the trustworthiness of the Bible.⁹ In response, Patterson submitted an essay entitled, "A Reply of Concern," which included a list of seven names of theologians and citations showing their views from their published works.¹⁰ Fisher Humphreys and *The Death of Christ* were fourth on the list. In addition, Humphreys was interviewed for the story and stated, "Paige Patterson is deceiving Southern Baptists. He has not told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."¹¹

In 1982, Humphreys published an article in the journal of Southern Seminary, "Salvation: A Southern Baptist Perspective," where he repeated some of the same themes regarding the atonement as found in *The Death of Christ*. In part, he stated that with regard to the atonement, he did "not know that God had to do things precisely this way," thereby

⁸ The accounts of these conversations and events are retold by Humphreys and Patterson in their debate and in other news accounts cited. For the purposes of this article, the debate was transcribed by the author from "A Discussion of the Atonement," video recording, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, October 19, 1987.

⁹ Presnall Wood, "Concerns About 'Concerned' Organization," *Baptist Standard*, April 23, 1980, 6.

¹⁰ Paige Patterson, "A Reply of Concern," unpublished essay, Paige Patterson Archives. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

¹¹ Toby Druin, "Patterson, Seven Accused Exchange Charges," *Baptist Standard*, May 14, 1980, 9. Also in this issue is the story, "Criswell Says Patterson to Leave Politics," which recounted the reaction of W. A. Criswell, the pastor of the First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas to Patterson's activities in the denomination in recent years.

questioning the necessity of the cross.¹² Also that year, Patterson published a commentary on 1 Peter, *A Pilgrim Priesthood*. When discussing 1 Peter 1:19, Patterson used Humphreys' *The Death of Christ* as an example of a modern theologian who questions the necessity and substitutionary nature of the atonement.¹³

In 1983, Humphreys taught a summer course on the atonement at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and published *A Dictionary of Theological Terms*.¹⁴ Under the entry "atonement," Humphreys states, in part,

While some Christians do not like theories of the atonement, many Christians find them helpful to try and understand how Jesus' work provided salvation. They point out that the Bible contains a number of explanations of Christ's work The work which Christ did is a unique, divine work; there is no exact human analogy for it and, therefore, no complete explanation of it. Perhaps this is why the Bible contains a number of different ways of speaking of it. The church must continue to draw upon all the biblical expressions in order to clarify what it means when it proclaims that 'Christ died for

¹² Fisher Humphreys, "Salvation: A Southern Baptist Perspective," in *Review and Expositor* 79:2 (Spring 1982): 284. He goes on to restate his "cruciform forgiveness" model as a theory that "may not be" true, but "seems to me to qualify as a distinctive theory of atonement and to be able to explain to people who have participated in costly forgiveness the same thing that an older model like sacrifice explained to people who participated in the Jewish cults" 287.

¹³ Paige Patterson, *A Pilgrim Priesthood: An Exposition of the Epistle of First Peter* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 58, asks, "How can one champion such a position in light of Peter's clear statement that we are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ is a mystery. Still less can the view that the atonement was not 'necessary' or 'substitutionary' in the light of Romans 3:25-26 which declares that Christ's blood was a propitiatory sacrifice which declared God's righteousness by making it possible for God to justify believers and still be absolutely just in so doing."

¹⁴ Fisher Humphreys, "Classroom lecture, 1983, June 21-July 7, Doctrine of the Atonement," audio recording, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

our sins' (1 Cor. 15:3).¹⁵

In 1986, Southern Baptist historical theologian, Tom J. Nettles, published *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*. In one section on the atonement, Nettles interacts at length with Humphreys' *The Death of Christ*, stating,

Fisher Humphreys plays the part of Abelard against Anselm by rejecting the idea of moral necessity in the atonement and opting for a contemporized setting of moral influence. In preparing the foundation for his rebuilding of a classically inadequate understanding of Christ's death, Humphreys sweeps away the ideas of necessity.¹⁶

In the summer of 1987, Humphreys and Patterson attended the Southern Baptist Convention's "Conference on Biblical Inerrancy" in North Carolina as well as the Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in St. Louis. While in St. Louis, Humphreys approached Patterson to discuss their longstanding differences and to propose the idea for a public discussion on the atonement. Patterson agreed and they scheduled the event for October in the setting of their first meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana.

¹⁵ Fisher Humphreys and Philip Wise, *A Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983), 9-10.

¹⁶ Tom J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 313-315. Nettles explains why Humphreys' view that the biblical writers never tried to explain how sacrifice can provide forgiveness is not correct: "Paul thus explains the why and how in terms of the eternal moral nature of God (Rom. 3) as expressed in his law (Gal. 3), and he leaves the reader no liberty to conclude that these are merely time-bound cultural models with which modern man may dispense. Justice and mercy kiss each other on the cross, as the Father himself sets forth the Son as an acceptable and adequate sacrifice. God can now forgive without denying his justice (Exod. 34:6-7; Job 10:14)."

Debating *The Death of Christ*

Almost three-hundred students, faculty, and interested observers appeared on October 19, 1987, to attend “A Discussion on the Atonement” held in the chapel on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and Continuing Education, Paul Robertson, welcomed those in attendance at 1 p.m. and proceeded to introduce the two debaters. Robertson explained that each participant would have 20 minutes to give an opening statement followed by a shared dialogue of 45 minutes. After a short break, the participants would return to respond to questions from the audience until 4 p.m. Each was provided a simple folding table on the chapel stage, and both Humphreys and Patterson remained seated for the entire debate. Humphreys made the first presentation.

“The Jury Is Still Out”: Opening Statements

Humphreys used his first 20 minutes to recount for the audience the sequence of events from the conceiving of the idea for *The Death of Christ* in 1976 to the present debate. He recounts in brief his phone conversation with Patterson in 1979 and then the “Reply of Concern” article in 1980. While affirming that the quotations cited in the article from *The Death of Christ* were accurate, Humphreys stated his thesis for the debate: “These three quotations give people a distorted view of what I believe—have always believed—about the cross of Jesus and therefore they do not represent me fairly and therefore this kind of criticism shouldn’t have been made.”¹⁷ Before proceeding to explain the meaning of the quotations, Humphreys gave brief affirmations of what he did believe about the cross—that it was a historical fact, that it was and is a gospel act of salvation, and that there are several theological “models” given in the Bible to help one understand how the cross provided salvation for all people.¹⁸

¹⁷ “A Discussion on the Atonement,” video transcription, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4. Humphreys explained, “I believe myself that the Bible is filled with models of the atonement—that there are many different pictures of the meaning of the cross that help us to understand how it was God’s great act for providing us with salvation. I furthermore believe, something I have said repeatedly in the book, that all the biblical teachings about the cross are true—

Humphreys' recounted the first quote cited by Patterson from *The Death of Christ*, "I do not know of anyone today who naturally assumes, as the writer of Hebrews did, that sins can be washed away only by the blood of sacrifices."¹⁹ Humphreys explained,

What I am talking about here is [sic] people who are not Christians, naturally assuming a connection between blood and the washing away of sins I believe that blood washes away sins, because I believe the Bible and because the Bible teaches it and because it is very important to us and so forth. But I don't think that people naturally believe that I think that [was] taken out of context.²⁰

In the second cited quotation, Humphreys wrote, "I believe it is unwise to seek for a 'necessity' for the cross. It is quite possible to affirm and clarify the importance of the cross without speaking of it as necessary."²¹ Humphreys proceeded to show that this quote occurred during his discussion of Anselm's view that the atonement was logically necessary. Humphreys believes that one need not go that far in his affirmations but rather should simply "read the Bible, believe what it says, and affirm the truth of what it says One need not, in order to affirm the importance of the cross, say this is the only way God could have done it."²²

The third quotation contained an entire paragraph related to Humphreys' discussion of John Calvin's view of the atonement. Humphreys said,

Men today do not ordinarily hold this view of God as simply willing right or wrong, and so they cannot believe that vicarious punishment is either meaningful or moral. No illustration can be given, so far as I can tell, which makes vicarious punishment morally credible to men today. The stories of one soldier punished for another, a child punished for his brother, a man punished for his friend, may be morally praiseworthy from the point of view of the substitute, but they never are acceptable from the point of view of

every one of them is true."

¹⁹ Humphreys, *The Death of Christ*, 38.

²⁰ "A Discussion on the Atonement," 5.

²¹ Humphreys, *The Death of Christ*, 55.

²² "A Discussion on the Atonement," 5.

the punisher. It always seems morally outrageous that any judge would require a substitute. However noble the substitute's act might be, the judge's act seems despicable.²³

Humphreys explained that here, too, he believed his quotation had been taken out of context by Patterson. Humphreys stated that "in human judgments, we do not in fact allow one person to substitute for another."²⁴ By human judgments, Humphreys seemingly meant that in human systems the concept of a substitute taking the punishment for another is not acceptable. The only place where something like this occurs is in the paying of a fine for someone else, but not at all in terms of someone dying in the place of another.

At this point in his opening remarks, Humphreys explained the final thing prompting him to seek to arrange the debate. In the months leading up to the debate Patterson and Humphreys were interviewed by Lacy Thompson for a news story in the *Louisiana Baptist Message*. Humphreys emphasized that he hoped the public discussion "would have a peacemaking effect." Patterson stated that he hoped the discussion would provide "clarification that would enable people to see (Humphreys) as a solid evangelical." Further, Patterson said that the "jury is still out on precisely what (Humphreys) means in the book."²⁵ At the conclusion of his opening statement, Humphreys indicated that he had reflected on Patterson's statement to the *Message* only to conclude that "The jury is not out for everybody."²⁶ By this, Humphreys seemingly meant that in two cases there were individuals who had come to the conclusion that Humphreys' views of the cross were acceptable and orthodox. First, Humphreys cited his interaction with Wade Akins, a well-known Southern Baptist missionary and personal friend of Patterson, after Akins had contacted him to express his concern after reading the quotations of Humphreys' work in Patterson's commentary on 1 Peter. Humphreys related that after corresponding with Akins and explaining his views, Akins changed his opinion of Humphreys and *The*

²³ Humphreys, *The Death of Christ*, 61.

²⁴ "A Discussion on the Atonement," 6.

²⁵ C. Lacy Thompson, "Patterson, Humphreys plan theological discussion," *Baptist Message*, July 23, 1987, 1,7.

²⁶ "A Discussion on the Atonement," 7.

Death of Christ and communicated his support. Humphreys then said, "The jury is not out for Wade Akins."

Second, Humphreys cited the support of Adrian Rogers. Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee and the principal leader of the conservative movement in the Convention along with Patterson and Paul Pressler, was elected in June to serve his third term as the President of the Southern Baptist Convention. Humphreys recounted how in 1985 Rogers preached a sermon entitled, "Snakes in the Garden" on June 11 where he quoted the passages Patterson had referenced from *The Death of Christ*. Not citing Humphreys by name, Rogers reviewed for his congregation how one Southern Baptist theologian believed that "It is quite possible to affirm and clarify the importance of the cross without speaking of it as a necessity."²⁷ In April, 1985, Humphreys received a call from Rogers whereby Rogers sought to establish whether he did in fact have the right understanding of Humphreys' views. After discussing the matter, Humphreys indicated that he was able to clarify his views to the degree that Rogers concluded he had misrepresented the theologian. Rogers stated that he would have preferred Humphreys address penal substitution more specifically, and Humphreys agreed saying, "I surely could have, I didn't talk about it, I talked about three other things in the Bible. I just selected three."²⁸ Thus, Humphreys concluded, "Dr. Patterson says the jury is still out. It's not out for Adrian Rogers."²⁹

Patterson responded with a presentation of his opening remarks that centered upon his remaining concerns with Humphreys' views as

²⁷ Adrian Rogers, "Snakes in the Garden," March 10, 1985. Transcript available from <http://www.sermonsearch.com/content.aspx?id=14672>.

²⁸ "A Discussion on the Atonement," 9. When preparing for the debate Humphreys indicated he sought and received Rogers' permission to relay the facts of their conversation.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Humphreys summarized his views at the end of his opening remarks stating, "I believe everything that the Bible says about the cross. I think that I have interpreted the cross correctly. I am not infallible as an interpreter, but I believe I have interpreted the biblical teachings about the cross accurately, and I know that I believe what the Bible says about the cross. I am here this afternoon to attempt to clarify the views which have been criticized by Dr. Patterson in the past, and thereby try to make a small contribution toward peace in this little corner of the Southern Baptist Convention that I inhabit."

articulated in *The Death of Christ*. With regard to Humphreys' use of Akins and Rogers, Patterson replied,

And regardless of where Dr. Rogers and Mr. Akins stand on the matter I do not feel that they constitute a final court of appeal although I have the utmost respect for the both of them. I nevertheless feel that the word of God is the final court of appeal.³⁰

Patterson presented three concerns. First, he explained how he found Humphreys' preference for using a non-biblical model to convey the meaning of the atonement. In *The Death of Christ*, Patterson explained that Humphreys used the term "cruciform forgiveness" as non-biblical model and quoted from Humphreys' volume.³¹ Here Patterson underscored that the use of such non-biblical models as "cruciform forgiveness," even if they correspond with the teaching of the Bible, "unnecessarily raises questions about the adequacy of biblical revelation" and relies too heavily on "philosophical theorizing."³²

Second, Patterson conveyed concern with Humphreys' belief that the atonement cannot be described as necessary. Here Patterson referred to Humphreys' previously addressed statement in *The Death of Christ*, namely, "I believe it is unwise to seek for a 'necessity' for the cross."³³ Patterson argued for the necessity of the cross to fulfill Scripture and cited Matthew 26:54; Acts 13:29; and 1 Corinthians 15:3. Also, he argued that the cross was necessary if God were to take sin seriously and cited Romans 3:25-26 and 5:8-9.

Third, Patterson clarified his concern with regard to Humphreys' belief in substitutionary atonement. He stated that after speaking with

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ Humphreys, *The Death of Christ*, 179, "That, at least, is my conclusion about the model of cruciform forgiveness. We have taken it from modern life not from the Bible I find this kind of authorization of our model satisfying. Some people may not. They may insist that we prove our model to be true with texts from the Bible, which is impossible. Or, admitting that we cannot avoid using models, they may insist that we employ only models taken directly from the Bible. For reasons I have given repeatedly throughout this book, I find this procedure unsatisfactory."

³² "A Discussion on the Atonement," 10.

³³ Humphreys, *The Death of Christ*, 55.

Humphreys in June and after hearing him again in the debate, he believed that Humphreys did hold to a substitutionary atonement view. However, Patterson stated that *The Death of Christ* is still less than clear in that regard and should be clarified. Further, Patterson said that he still had concerns with regard to the way Humphreys understood penal substitution in relationship to other models of the atonement. Patterson believed that penal substitution is the one theme that makes all the others have real substance.³⁴ In order for other subjective models like moral influence or example and Humphreys' "cruciform forgiveness" model to function effectively, acknowledgement must be made that they are dependent upon penal substitution. Patterson then provided an extensive examination of biblical texts supporting the penal substitution view before he concluded by saying that the jury is still out with regard to whether Humphreys believes that penal substitution is the "major motif for understanding the atonement in the word of God."³⁵

"Agreements and Disagreements": Shared Interaction

After the establishment of the points of contention, the debate proceeded to a time of shared interaction. Humphreys and Patterson engaged in extended and often lively, dialogue over Patterson's three main concerns. With regard to the use of non-biblical models to describe the atonement, Humphreys defended against the charge that he believes non-biblical models are better than biblical models or that he is attempting to substitute new models for old ones. A lengthy exchange followed during which Patterson stressed his view that if one is going to write theology in the contemporary era, he should use biblical models as much as possible to avoid confusion. Humphreys took this to mean that Patterson had no problem with the use of non-biblical models, as long as they were not used with the authority reserved for Scripture. Patterson did not seek to challenge the point further other than to emphasize that "if a man chooses to use non biblical models then he is under an even greater mandate, it seems to me, to make very sure that he does not say things that can be easily interpreted to be critical of the biblical

³⁴ "A Discussion on the Atonement," 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

models.”³⁶ Patterson did not believe that Humphreys accomplished this clarity in *The Death of Christ*. Humphreys stated his disagreement and said,

As near as I can tell, Dr. Patterson believes that it is all right to use these non-biblical models but that you should emphasize the biblical ones and believe in their truth. I believe in their truth and in their authority. I think I’ve interpreted them correctly. It seems to me I have done essentially what I needed to do, but he’s not satisfied.³⁷

Concerning the issue of whether the cross was necessary, Humphreys again followed the course of defending his approach as stated in his book. With regard to Patterson’s statement that the cross was necessary to fulfill the Scriptures and to show that God takes sin seriously, Humphreys conceded his agreement. However, Humphreys’ point of contention occurred in his insistence that God has transcendent freedom and nothing is “necessary” for him—even the cross. In response, Patterson returned to Romans 3:25-26 and the statement, “It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Patterson observed,

It seems to say that there is some sort of moral necessity out there that says sin had to be dealt with in this kind of way That seems to be present in God’s nature somehow [I]t’s not interfering with God’s freedom to say that there is something in his nature if he has already said that’s in his nature.³⁸

Further, Patterson questioned, “I don’t think you’re ready to affirm that God is free to do anything he wants to do. Are you going to affirm that?”

Humphreys replied, “No.”

Patterson, “Well, so, then there are some restrictions on God’s freedom growing out of his own nature aren’t there?”

³⁶ Ibid., 17.

³⁷ Ibid., 18.

³⁸ Ibid., 19.

Humphreys, “Yes.”

Patterson, “Is it not the case that Romans 3 cites one of those?”

Humphreys, “I don’t think so. But what we are down to now is the interpretation of the verses in Romans, and it’s a very complex subject. What I understand you to be saying is that there is some sort of a tension between God being just on the one hand, or holy, righteous, on the one hand and the justifier on the other hand”

Patterson, “I didn’t say it; Paul did.”

Humphreys,

The difficulty is how he could be both. And that’s not how I read the passage First of all the word “and” can be translated as you know “even.” And I would understand it to be saying that God is ‘just even the justifier’ And that God’s justice, the justice that’s being referred to and has been for about three or four verses there is that justice in which he forgives sinners. That the problem isn’t has God got the right to forgive sinners. That the problem is that we come to understand that God is just—that is he really does forgive sinners. That may not be the interpretation that you would accept, but I am not sure that that verse would authorize us to set up some sort of inner tension in God which places a constraint on him so that when he has made his decision to create and then redeem the world that he has no freedom about how he is going to do that. I think that it is a free choice that he made.

Patterson,

Well, Dr. Humphreys, I have a couple of problems with that. First of all I think that your point, if I followed you correctly, that what is being said there is that he is just being the justifier of them that trust in him, I don’t particularly follow that at all because I don’t see how the fact that he does forgive is necessarily the fact that makes him just. That makes him merciful, but I don’t see how that contributes to justice first of all. Secondly, if there is any chance that you are reading Romans 3 wrong then it seems that it would be unwise for

you to speak of it being unwise to seek a necessity for the cross. It seems like that as long as that's there it would be the only wise thing to do to suggest that there might in fact be a necessity in the cross So it seems to me that what you've done in raising the question of the wisdom of speaking of the necessity of the cross is in fact a dangerous move.³⁹

After several more interchanges along these lines, Humphreys pressed for a few short summary statements of agreement, to which Patterson clarified specific points of disagreement.

Concerning the issue of penal substitution, Humphreys began by clarifying that he affirmed the concept of substitution in the Bible but that the point of contention surrounds the specific understanding of penal substitution. For example, Humphreys stated that when Matthew 20:28 describes the Son of Man as giving his life as a ransom, it is not a penal substitution as there is no penalty involved. However, Humphreys then said that he believes the account of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 and the description of Jesus Christ as "becoming a curse for us" in Galatians 3 are examples of biblical penal substitution. The issue then, for Humphreys, is whether penal substitution is the primary model of the atonement or just one example. Further, he conveyed that penal substitution has some drawbacks in terms of the dilemmas it can create for people. He explained,

[I]n a human law court one person may not be allowed to bear the penalty of another person. I give the one exception of the paying of fines which I would suggest we develop. I would think that would be a good way to do it. But Jesus didn't pay a fine, he died. And in a human law court when Jones is the mass murderer you don't let Smith die for him. And it seems to me to be important that we recognize that and say that openly. And to realize that for thoughtful people at least, for some people, this creates a problem for them. They're saying, "Would God being doing something that looks like it would be wrong if a human judge did it?" If you want to just say that's the way it is, that's fine with me. That's okay, but you haven't explained that's all. What I'm interested in is whether it

³⁹ Ibid., 19-21.

explains or not. That doesn't explain because that diverts people away.⁴⁰

Finally, Humphreys explained his understanding of how Leviticus 16 and the rest of the Old Testament atonement texts relate to the death of Christ. He stated his belief that the cross was a sacrifice, Jesus is the High Priest and the paschal Lamb. He believes that the cross relates to the Day of Atonement and also inaugurates a New Covenant. He then explained,

Now, the question I would ask is whether every time you have sacrifice you have punishment? ...Were the animals being punished? The answer is no. There is no picture of punishment there. I don't think there is any picture of punishment. I don't think the lambs were being punished as though there was something penal about it. The one that really looks like punishment is in fact the scapegoat and that's the one that is not used of Jesus. No, this is sacrifice understood in various ways as an *hilasterion*, a propitiation, deflecting the wrath of God from us. The sacrifice saves us from the wrath. Very clear in the Passover we're saved from the wrath of God. We are saved from the wrath of God. There is no doubt about that. Jesus delivered us from the divine judgment. But does the picture of the Passover lamb show him doing that by bearing the divine punishment himself?

Humphreys then answered his own question,

Well it doesn't from the Old Testament. So what I would say is Jesus is the sacrifice who takes away our sins. Sometimes this may get very close to penal. In the case of Isaiah 53 I think it becomes penal. Frequently, usually, and maybe always for all I know it is substitutionary.⁴¹

Patterson responded quickly to questions Humphreys raised by beginning with Matthew 20:28. With regard to the Son of Man coming as a ransom, Patterson asked,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27-28.

⁴¹ Ibid., 28-29.

What was he freeing them from if it was not to free them from the penalty as well as the presence of sin. Surely, surely, surely the penalty has been exacted and that is part of what they are being freed from, and so I quite disagree with you. Surely penal substitution is involved in Matthew 20:28.⁴²

To this and a few other points, Humphreys sought to clarify his views by again affirming his belief that penal substitution is one of the biblical models for understanding the atonement. Patterson replied, and what follows is the exchange revealing the key difference between the two debaters. Patterson stated,

Then we are establishing that penal substitution does in fact run very deeply through the warp and woof of atonement doctrine, aren't we?

Humphreys,

Nothing like a way in which you say it is "the" model of the New Testament. That was the way you put it.

Patterson,

Dr. Humphreys, why sacrifice? Why sacrifice? Why does something have to die?

Humphreys,

Well, you're back to the necessity question aren't you? You're saying why does it have to be this way?

Patterson,

I'm asking you why sacrifice? Why chosen? Why did God chose that?

Humphreys,

I think he chose it because he loves us.

[...]

Patterson,

⁴² Ibid., 29.

But Dr. Humphreys you haven't answered my question. Why did something have to die? Why did he choose sacrifice? Or why did God choose sacrifice? Why does sacrifice show his love? Is there no other way he could have shown love?

Humphreys,

Well I think God showed his love in many other ways. Don't you?

Patterson,

I do, too. But why then sacrifice? Well why? I don't understand You see, I don't understand why you are making a distinction between sacrifice and penal substitution.

[...]

Humphreys,

Well the thing is—the question is whether the animals that were sacrificed were understood by the Hebrew people as bearing the punishment of their sins.

Patterson,

Yes. That's exactly the question.

Humphreys,

The question is not were they understood as delivering the people from their sins. That's clear from the wrath of God. No question about that. They said it over and over again. You will not die if you do these sacrifices and so forth. The question is whether they were understood as being punished. Are you suggesting they were?

Patterson,

Yes, I'm suggesting that exactly. That the penalty for sin is death and that when they put their hands on the head of that goat or that lamb as the case may be and they confessed their sins on the head of that lamb they understood that that lamb, that goat was dying the death that they should die. And that they were going to be free from sin because that guilt had been transferred. Now ultimately that's exactly what John the Baptist does then when he points to Jesus

and says 'behold the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.'

Humphreys,

Now here's what's happening, if—the sacrifice is the dominate picture of the meaning of the cross in the New Testament or in the Bible for that matter. It is the dominate picture. If sacrifice must be read, as Dr. Patterson says, as penal—that the animal is bearing a penalty—then he is correct is saying this is the dominate biblical teaching about the cross. I don't think that's true.⁴³

"A Proposal": Questions and Closing Statements

After a short break, Humphreys and Patterson returned to answer questions from nine members of the audience. After the questions and discussion, Humphreys was asked to present his closing remarks, and he proceeded to do so in the form of a proposal. Intended as a peace-making gesture, Humphreys read through a series of simple affirmations and then invited Patterson to join him in signing the document. Further, he indicated that his secretary was standing at the back to distribute copies to the audience. The proposal included the following statements,

Over the past several years many Southern Baptists have come to believe that we, Fisher Humphreys and Paige Patterson, hold to radically differing understandings of the atonement made by Jesus Christ. As a gesture of clarification and of peace we offer the following affirmations to our fellow Christians.

First, we believe in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ as historical events which really occurred in the first century.

Second, we believe in the Christian gospel, which is the affirmation "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15).

⁴³ Ibid., 30-32.

Third, we believe in the truthfulness and authority of all the biblical teachings about the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. For example, Christ was the sacrifice whose blood washed away human sins and created a new covenant between God and man (Matthew 26), Christ was the servant of the Lord who was wounded for our transgressions, who was bruised for our inequities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53). Christ was the incarnate Son of God who went to the cross "that through death he might destroy him that hath the power of death, that is the devil" (Hebrews 2).

Fourth, we believe that the church should always remember Christ's death and resurrection, and celebrate them, and proclaim them as good news to all the world.

Fifth, finally, we believe in the mystery of the cross. No human understanding of the cross can exhaust the infinite meaning of that unique event in which "God was in Christ reconciling" (2 Corinthians 5).⁴⁴

After reading the proposal, Humphreys asked Patterson if he would sign it. To his stated disappointment, Patterson declined, indicating he could not sign the document without adding the points of significant disagreement revealed throughout the course of the debate. Humphreys expressed his disappointment, and Patterson explained that he felt it was unfair for Humphreys to ask him to sign something he had not seen. Patterson stated that in order to make peace, one does not have to suggest that there is no matter of disagreement. Rather, Patterson believed it was possible for two people to disagree and still have peace.

Lacy Thompson wrote two news stories after the debate, which appeared October 29, 1987, in the *Baptist Message*. Providing a lengthy overview of the central issues, he summarized the event, "Two Southern Baptist theologians discussed their different views of the death of Jesus Christ last week in a public peace-making effort that failed to achieve the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 51.

expectations of at least one of the participants.”⁴⁵ Focusing on Humphreys’ affirmation document, Thompson reported that Humphreys said, “I made a mistake at the end of our discussion. I got carried away. I had prepared an affirmation of the gospel which I felt mistakenly that Dr. Patterson, with all the peace-making he’s done would be glad to sign. I embarrassed him, and I have apologized and he has graciously accepted my apology.”⁴⁶

Discussing the Debate

The Humphreys/Patterson debate on the atonement reveals a great deal not only about the views of the participants but also about the state of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1987. SBC conservatives had things well in hand by that fall after surviving the peak years of controversy during 1984-1986. They elected Adrian Rogers to a third term as president, received the report of the Peace Committee in June, 1987, and were on the verge of seeing major transitions in both Southern and Southeastern Seminaries. Yet the subject matter of this debate revealed still the great need for theological examination in all of the Convention’s agencies.

Humphreys’ denial and uncertainty regarding the necessity of the atonement and the specific penal substitutionary nature of the atonement was not new or novel.⁴⁷ Rather, his views reflected the theology of the age rather than the longstanding theology held by the majority of biblical evangelicals dating back to the Reformation and beyond.⁴⁸ From 1987 onward, Patterson and Humphreys would continue

⁴⁵ C. Lacy Thompson, “Humphreys, Patterson discuss views of cross,” and “Peace-making attempt genuine but ill-planned, professor says,” in *Baptist Message*, October 29, 1987, 1,7,9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ For a helpful overview of the history of views regarding this doctrine see Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution* (Baker, 2015), 29-54. See also, Garry J. Williams, “Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms,” *JETS* 50:1 (March 2007): 71-86.

⁴⁸ See Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), Gabriel N. E. Fluhrer, ed., *Atonement* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010), J.I. Packer and

to write in the area of the atonement, and to date neither has changed his view.⁴⁹ Humphreys would leave New Orleans for a position at Beeson Divinity School in Alabama in 1990 and would serve there until his retirement in 2008. Patterson would serve as president of Southeastern Seminary (1992-2003) and Southwestern Seminary (2003-Present).

Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), and John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986).

⁴⁹ For Humphreys, see “The Mystery of the Cross,” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Winter 1987): 47-52, “The Humanity of Christ in Some Modern Theologies,” in *Faith and Mission* (Spring 1988): 3-13, “Christ Died for Our Sins According to the Scriptures,” in *CTR 3:2* (1989): 295-305, *The Way We Were* (New York: McCracken Press, 1994, revised ed., Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), “New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary,” in *Encyclopedia of Religious Controversies in the United States*, ed. George H. Shriver and Bill J. Leonard (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), and with Philip Wise, *Fundamentalism* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2004). Rathel, “The Cross and the School of Providence and Prayer,” 31, concludes that “Since the engagement with Patterson, Humphreys has affirmed penal substitution but denies that penal substitution is the primary motif of the New Testament.” In the second edition of *Thinking about God* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1994), 113-132, in a substantially revised chapter on the Work of Christ, Humphreys does affirm that certain passages do teach penal substitution, but he continues to emphasize that one atonement theme in the Bible should not be elevated above others. (For this, I was helped by Charles Huckaby, who serves in the Roberts Library of Southwestern Seminary, and who also has done capable research on this debate. See Huckaby, “Debating the Atonement: Examining the Humphreys-Patterson Debates of the Inerrancy Controversy,” paper presentation at the Baptist History & Heritage Society, June 2, 2017.) Further, in the third edition of *Thinking about God* (New Orleans, Insight Press, 2016), with which Rathel does not interact, Humphreys offers a further revised chapter on the Work of Christ where much of the second edition language regarding penal substitution and propitiation is removed. Humphreys, 130, concludes, rather, with his consistent theme, “The fact that there are so many biblical ways of thinking about [the Work of Christ] suggests that it is a mystery too great to be understood by any one of them alone.” For Patterson, see “Reflections on the Atonement,” in *CTR 3:2* (1989), 307-320, and reprinted in Bruce A. Little and Mark D. Liederbach, eds., *Defending The Faith, Engaging the Culture: Essays Honoring L. Russ Bush* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), “The Work of Christ,” in *A Theology for the Church*, Daniel L. Akin, ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 596-597; revised edition (2014), 439-480.

Conclusion

While not considered a major turning point in the Inerrancy Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention, a case could be made for attributing greater significance to this overlooked debate on the occasion of its 30th anniversary. First, while there were many debates throughout the controversy years, the majority of them concerned epistemology and the defense of biblical inerrancy. One could argue that the Humphreys/Patterson debate was one of the first public events in a SBC seminary to show how a minimized epistemology affects significant and core aspects of one's theology. Second, this debate revealed that there were indeed divergent theological views at seminaries like New Orleans and not just at Southern, Southeastern, Midwestern—the three schools that were the focus of the Convention's Peace Committee Report (1985-1987).⁵⁰ Finally, this debate underscores the fact that while there were political issues at play during the Inerrancy Controversy, the primary motivation and the occasion for a conservative movement were rooted in real and crucial theological concerns.

With regard to the motivation of peace-making, Humphreys recounted that he was driven to organize this debate as the result of Clark Pinnock's call for reconciliation at the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy. In his response to Pinnock at the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, Patterson articulated what he later modeled at the October debate in New Orleans. He stated,

Dr. Pinnock's plea for peace is one which only the unwary souls who have never been under fire could possibly fail to embrace. However, the passion of our Lord calls attention to the enormous cost involved in the purchase of our peace. Therefore, a peace arranged at the price of truth is unthinkable and is, I suspect, a peace that would prove too fragile in this period of testing.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Charles Martin Jacumin, "A Theological and Historical Analysis of The Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee, 1985-1987," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina, 2008).

⁵¹ Paige Patterson, "Response to Clark Pinnock," in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy 1987* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 86.

Sometimes, the action that will bring about true and lasting peace in the long term requires courage not to compromise under the immediate pressure to accommodate the public pleas for shallow unity and affirmation. The Humphreys/Patterson debate provides the twenty-first century examiner a prescient reminder of this truth.