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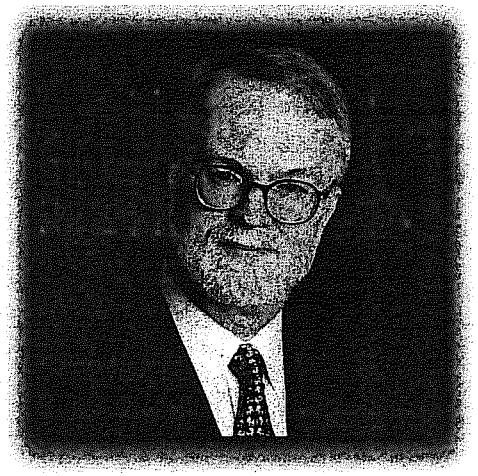
Interview with Dr. Timothy George



R R J — Tell us about your childhood, including the social, intellectual, and spiritual influences of your early formative years.

T G — I was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on January 9, 1950, in what we would today call a "dysfunctional family." My father was an alcoholic and my mother, who is still living, had polio. My father died, in the local city jail, when I was only twelve years old, having been arrested for public drunkenness.

In my early years I was brought up by two great aunts, Aunt Mary and Aunt Hattie. Neither of these women could read or write. A lot of the formation I received in my early life came from them, as well as from a godly grandmother who loved me a great deal and took me to church. My aunts took me to what I would call a country church in the city. You understand what I have in mind here since you are a Southerner, too. We had a very emotional style of worship. We would shout "amen" and so forth. It was a wonderful, loving community. We were very poor, yet I remember in the winter when it got very cold these folks would send coal to our home

so we would have fuel to heat our house. They really demonstrated the fruit of the Spirit in their love to us. I have very good memories of church from my earliest days.

One of the pastors was a man named Ollie Linkous. He had a voice that was deeper than God's, or so it seemed to me as a little boy. I would sit on the front row. Whenever he would say anything really good, which was a lot of the time, I would say "amen."

R R J — How old were you?

T G — I was four or five, I think. Brother Ollie said I was his "little preacher boy." I just came to assume that was the case so I started preaching at a very, very early age. I preached to birds, Coke bottles, you name it. I even did a bird's funeral once. A friend and I buried this bird in a matchbox in the backyard. We put a carnation on it. Then we sang, "I'll Fly Away," which was one of the anthems from that wonderful little church. Those are very good memories. There is no doubt that the Lord used it all in a significant way.

But there came a time when I knew I had to make a personal commitment to Christ. As a very young boy I had twice read the Bible through completely by the time I was ten years old, but I had never made a personal commitment to Christ until one Sunday night when I was eleven years old. The pastor preached a sermon on Psalm 116. I remember it very vividly. We had the tradition of an invitation in this church. People were invited to come forward at the end of the service. I felt convicted but I didn't go forward that evening. Later that evening, when all the lights were out and everybody had gone to sleep, I knelt beside my bed and prayed some simple prayer like: "O Lord, forgive my sins and come into my life." I believe that was when I was born again, August 6, 1961. From then until now my life has been different. Shortly after that night I sensed that I was called to preach. In my tradition you not only had to be saved at a point in time but you had to be called to preach at a point in time if you were to enter the ministry.

I do not want in any way to diminish the sense of divine guidance. But "calling" has a very special connotation. We are all called as Christians for sure, which is our effectual calling. But calling to the Christian ministry of the gospel is more of a commissioning to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to do it just like that vision said, "Over the mountains, in the valleys," wherever that opportunity allows itself.

R R J — How did that come about?

T G — My mother had brought home from a women's prayer group a magazine called *Royal Service*. This was a Southern Baptist (SBC) congregation and this was a mission magazine published by the SBC. There was a wonderful exposition in this issue on Romans where Paul was quoting the Old Testament passage from Isaiah, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach . . . " While reading that devotion, based upon Paul's quotation from Isaiah, I was in fact called to preach the gospel. Whenever I think about my calling in life, that is what I believe I was called by God to do, preach the gospel. I have done a number of different things in ministry over the years since. I have been a youth evangelist, a pastor, a professor, and now I am an administrator. I don't feel particularly "called" to do any of those things. I feel "called" to be a preacher of the gospel. Those are jobs I had, or now have, that allowed me to exercise my calling. But my calling is first to be a preacher of the gospel.

R R J — Why then are you doing all of these other things if you were called to preach the gospel? Someone might argue, "Why don't you just preach the gospel?"

T G — I think that is what I am doing, "preaching the gospel." I am doing it now as the dean of Beeson Divinity School. Once upon a time I did it as the pastor of Fellowship Baptist Church. I've done it as a seminary professor as well. These are different roles, different occupations, different jobs, different opportunities, all brought into my life providentially. I do not want in any way to diminish the sense of divine guidance. But "calling" has a very *special connotation*. We are all called as Christians for sure, which is our effectual calling. But calling to the Christian ministry of the gospel is more of a commissioning to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to do it just like that vision said, "Over the mountains, in the valleys," wherever that opportunity allows itself.

R R J — Your sense of calling reflects the Reformation sense of *vocatio* that all Christians are called to serve, but you also believe there is a *particular call* to preach the gospel. So you really think there is a *particular call* to this life?

T G — Yes, I feel very strongly there is. At our school, as is true with most evangelical seminaries, when a person applies to become a student we ask them to write an essay describing their conversion to Christ and their calling. I do not have any kind of Betty Crocker cake mix formula way in which God always calls people. I think God is God and he works in wonderful and mysterious ways. But I do believe there is a calling that comes to us from outside of ourselves. It is not just a matter of getting in touch with our true feelings or taking one of these tests and saying, "This would suit you best." I think it's a commission!

I wrote a commentary on Galatians a few years ago and I looked very closely at Galatians 1 where Paul describes both his conversion and his calling. While there is a way in which these are distinct experiences, they are so closely interrelated

in Paul's life. And they are interrelated in my life, too, because I was called and commissioned, at more or less the same time. This all came during a three-month period. I look back on that as a foundational experience for everything else that I've done.

R R J — We do share several things in common. We are both Tennesseans. We were both born of God and called to the ministry in Southern Baptist contexts. My calling was very distinct as well. I was a little older than you were when God called me to preach. My call was also distinctive and formative in a powerful way. Some would say, "What could you have known at twelve years of age?" I had this sense that "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel." It is this same idea that I am hearing you speak about.

We have addressed your early childhood experiences; now talk about your teen years.

T G — In the church in which I grew up, education was not highly valued. I do not know if we had anyone who had been to college except for perhaps one or two school teachers. No one in my family had ever been to college. Brother Ollie, my pastor, had been a factory worker and the Lord called him. It was not that they opposed education, it just wasn't part of our shared experience. It was definitely not a prerequisite for being a preacher. But I was called to preach and Brother Ollie said I was a preacher boy so I just started preaching. I did youth revivals when I was twelve or thirteen. I was on a circuit preaching in Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina. Probably the apex of my youth evangelism career was in 1967 when I was seventeen years old. I was invited to preach in a little tiny church in Lynchburg, Virginia, named Thomas Road Baptist Church, where Dr. Jerry Falwell was the young pastor. In the summertime they had the Treasure Island Youth Camp. They would bring in hundreds of young people and they would get a full-time evangelist to speak every week of the summer. This evangelist would speak every night and then go on Sunday evening to Thomas Road Baptist. Well, I was the

youth evangelist in between two well-known men at the time, Bob Harrington and Lester Rollof. This was 1967. That's the kind of ministry I was afforded and God used it. I was in and out of the independent Baptist movement. Dr. Lee Roberson at Highland Park Baptist Church had an influence on me as well. They had a summer camping program, called Camp Joy, and I was a counselor for Cabin Number One, for the nine-year-old boys.

During these teen years I was learning the gospel, preaching the Word and doing Christian work. Looking back on that now you would have to call those people Fundamentalists. We only knew ourselves as "Bible believing" Christians back then. I am very grateful for the fact that this is where I have my roots as a Christian and as a preacher. They taught me some very precious things that I still hold dear. They taught me that the Bible was the Word of God. They taught me that Jesus loved me and died on the cross to save me from my sins. They taught me that the power of the Holy Spirit was real in my life. They taught me that we were to love one another. Those are things I still believe with all my heart. Even though I may see some things a little differently from some of my friends from that period of my life, that is where I came to know Christ and that is where I came to hear the gospel. There is no doubt in my mind that having that kind of solid biblical foundation served me very well in some later turns in my spiritual pilgrimage.

R R J — You went to college at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Tell us about that experience. You came to see, at some point, that you had this inquisitive mind and with it a very definite intellectual orientation to things. How did this come about?

T G — The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) was in my hometown. I majored in history. UTC was a good school. I could have done better had I not been out preaching far and wide but I did alright and came through with good grades. I minored in philosophy and religion. That was

a period of American history, in the late 1960s, when the death of God movement was still in the air. Vietnam was also having its impact upon everything in our society. Doubt and skepticism were in the air. Many of my professors, especially in the religion and philosophy departments, were graduates of the University of Chicago. They took it upon themselves to disabuse us fundamentalists, particularly evangelists like me, of crusty, hidebound, redneck fundamentalism by introducing us to the wider and deeper world of theology and philosophy. So I took courses on phenomenology and read Edmund Husserl. I also read Rudolf Bultmann and Freidrich Schleiermacher for the first time. That was my baptism into the world of the historical critical understanding of Scripture and the Enlightenment paradigm of theology. Let me say, parenthetically, that I prayed devoutly for the salvation of my professors. I am not sure they prayed for me personally but they were surely working on me. We even developed a mutual relationship of respect for each other. I am grateful to this day, though at the time it was very hard for me, that insofar as I went through a crisis of faith it was at UTC.

I am actually grateful for those teachers because what they gave me was a gift. They taught me to think critically, not only about my own fundamentalist background but also critically about the stuff they were teaching, too. I am not sure they intended it to come out that way. Once you teach a person to think critically you give them a principle that can lead them in ways that you may not expect.

R R J — Do you think those professors who were liberal were liberals in the truest sense of the word? I mean that even though they tried to dissuade you from your fundamentalism they would, nonetheless, be happy to see you develop critical faculties? Today it seems liberalism has taken on a sharp tone of intolerance and social correctness. Do you find this to be true?

T G — I do think that is true up to a point. These professors were bemused that one could think critically and still be, in

their mind at least, a fundamentalist. It's been several years now but these same people invited me back for a distinguished lectureship on religion. We've kept up a bit. I remember that the primary textbook of those days was *The Making of the Modern Mind*. It was a very famous book which essentially was a compendium of Enlightenment dogma. We had not yet developed, at that level, the ideas of postmodernism and deconstruction.

I want to say that a person who was extremely important to me at this point was Francis Schaeffer. I met him at Covenant College in Chattanooga and I read his stuff with great interest. He was a man who believed the Bible and Jesus and yet he could talk about art and music and all this other stuff I was learning about at the time. He was a model, to me, of a thinking Christian. He was also very important in helping me think about what a Christian worldview would look like. I have since, in reflecting on Schaeffer, seen limitations in him. But like so many people you and I both know and respect—Os Guinness, David Wells, and others—evangelical theologians and leaders who were influenced by Schaeffer, I would include myself happily in that number. He was a very important figure in helping me to keep faith with the tradition I had learned while also moving and expanding my mind in other directions.

R R J — Did you get to know Schaeffer personally?

T G — I did meet him and heard him speak but I would not claim an intimate relationship with him as a friend. Later I wanted to go to L'Abri when I was at Harvard. I really wanted to leave and spend a year there if possible. His real influence on me was mostly through his writings and his example based on what he was doing at L'Abri.

R R J — Were you active in the Baptist Student Union, the student ministry of the SBC, and were you also still actively ministering in a local church? Did you preach during these college years?

T G — Yes, I did. I was an evangelist and continued to preach in various churches during the first two years of my college time. During the last two years of college I became a pastor. That was also a big turning point in my life. Three things happened to me in the space of one month. First, I was ordained to the gospel ministry. Second, I was called to pastor my first church. And third, I got married. I was twenty years old. All of this happened in the space of about thirty days.

R R J — That's pretty amazing. I came close to that record. I was ordained in August of 1970, married in December of 1970, and began to pastor my first church the next May, 1971, right when I finished college. I was slower than you Timothy. It took me about nine months to get all three together in my life.

T G — We both survived it would seem. I was called to pastor the Fellowship Baptist Church in Chickamauga, Georgia—a wonderful church. It is still there and I have gone back now and then to visit. Chickamauga is a mill town. It is also actually a famous place because of a major Civil War battle fought there. Our church was located on the edge of the battlefield. My wife, Denise, and I moved into the parsonage, which was actually our first house. It was a church that ran about 200-250 people, which for a college student was a pretty good-sized congregation. I was as green as a watermelon gourd in the summertime, but I can tell you now it was a wonderful experience.

I'll never forget my first funeral. The deceased was a man named Steve Lance. He and I were the same age. He had been shot and killed in Vietnam trying to help a buddy back into a helicopter when a sniper shot him. They sent his body back to Georgia and his mom called and asked me to preach his funeral. Well, I had never preached a funeral. What do you say at a time like that? There I was, a young pastor, preaching a funeral for a man the same age as I was. I'll never forget standing there in that cemetery, with that flag-draped coffin and the bugle playing taps. And there before me was his young widow

and his little sister, Bridget. I was wondering, "Why him, why not me?" We had the draft lottery in those days and I had been given a number in the lottery that allowed me to go to school. I had a beautiful wife and a wonderful church and a car to drive and life was great. But there was Steve, and I had to say some words on behalf of God over his dead body. What do you say? That was a moment in my life that was riveting. I suppose when I think about what I believe about God's sovereignty, the work of God's providence, this was an event around which so much of that truth coalesced for me in a very personal way.

R R J — After you graduated from UTC and had served as pastor of this church in Georgia you moved to Massachusetts and entered Harvard Divinity School (1972). Tell us how the decision came about to go to Harvard.

T G — Well, I had some of these professors at UTC who said to me, "You need to look outside the Southern Baptist Convention to go to seminary." I had never thought about that really. If I were going to a Southern Baptist seminary I would probably have gone to either New Orleans or Southwestern (Texas). In those days these two were considered the most conservative of our six convention schools. The pastors I knew and trusted recommended these two. They said, "Southwestern is very evangelistic and will not destroy your faith." Well, Harvard was like going to the moon or to Mars in my circles. I began to explore this and wrote to the Home Mission Board of the Convention (now called the North American Mission Board). I was accepted at Harvard so I asked the mission board, "Is there anything I can do for Southern Baptists in New England? I have been a pastor for two years and done a good bit of evangelism, etc." The word came back that there was a church right in Boston that needed a pastor and that they would love to have me consider being their pastor. It was the First Baptist Church of Chelsea, Massachusetts. Now remember, I was the pastor of a little mill town church in Georgia. There was a First Baptist Church in Chicamauga but

A wonderful thing happened in that church. We began a Friday night Bible study and young people began to come. We studied the Gospel of John, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. Within that first year twenty-five of them had become Christians and I had baptized them into the fellowship of that little church.

that was where the all the rich people went. Fellowship Baptist was where the poor people went. Now I had the opportunity to be the pastor of the First Baptist Church in a Boston suburb. Wow, that was the big time, or so I thought. Well, off we went to Harvard. I became the pastor of this church. On my first Sunday there six people attended the service. Two of those were my wife and me! [Laughter] It was an old American Baptist Church that had died and had sold its property to the Southern Baptist Convention mission board on the condition that they would provide somebody to do services for them, to be kind of a chaplain on Sunday morning until they all died off. I was that chaplain and that was my job.

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R R J — Did you pastor there all the time that you were at Harvard?

T G — No, I was at Harvard for seven years. I served the church in Chelsea for three or four of those years and then I was an associate pastor near Harvard in Cambridge.

R R J — If you were at Harvard for seven years then you did your M. Div. degree at Harvard and stayed to complete your doctoral work there as well. Tell me about your post-seminary doctoral work at Harvard.

T G — One of the reasons I wanted to go to Harvard, even before this time, was because I was interested in history and the Protestant Reformation period. As an undergraduate I did my senior thesis on "Calvin's Theology and the Weber Thesis." That was my entrée into Calvin and Calvin studies.

R R J — Did you get this interest from a history class or from a history teacher?

T G — I did. I had a wonderful teacher who I think might still be teaching at UTC. His name was Bill Wright. He belongs to the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church and is a great lecturer who made the Reformation come alive. I also began to read the Reformers for the first time, for both spiritual and theological reasons. I went to Harvard because I wanted to work with the famous George Huntston Williams. I knew his work on the Radical Reformation. He was a truly great historian. I was able to do that kind of work at the M. Div. level and at the doctoral level both, working in Reformation theology and Reformation studies with Williams as my primary professor.

R R J — George Williams was, as we would both agree, the author of the finest work written on the radical Reformers, the Anabaptists. Tell us about this man personally. He was obviously influential in the development of both your life and thought.

T G — George Williams was a true renaissance man. Even though people think of him in terms of his scholarship on the

Radical Reformation, which is of course his *magnum opus*, including over a thousand pages of material. As a matter of fact, George Williams knew virtually everything about church history. If anybody ever knew everything, it was George Williams—early church, medieval, mission history. When he was sixty-five years old he taught himself the Polish language to the point that he could lecture in Polish and critically edit documents in Polish.

The word that comes to mind, at least for a young student like me, was intimidating. I was privileged to get to know him in a close personal way, gaining a sense of his heart and soul. What George Williams taught me was the *catholicity* of the church. I was a Southern Baptist and reared a fundamentalist. He always wanted to deepen my appreciation for that background. He never said, "You need to leave that behind you and become broad minded." Along with that he taught me that there were other Christians who had loved Christ even before I was born, even before "my grandma was born." He taught me this by exemplifying this in himself. He taught me to read and appreciate people who were very different from me, with whom I had, and still have, strong disagreements.

Here is another interesting thing about George Williams —he was a Unitarian. But he was *really* a Trinitarian. That is to say, he was a Unitarian who really believed in the Holy Trinity. He was a Unitarian, primarily for cultural reasons. He was a third generation Unitarian minister, back to the days of Thoreau and Emerson. This was in his genes, I suppose, but he had thought through the doctrine of the Trinity and had come to embrace it. So he had an orthodox view of Jesus Christ and of the Trinity while remaining culturally and denominationally a Unitarian and a Congregationalist. He was also an observer of Vatican II and a very close personal friend of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who was of course to become Pope John Paul II. I actually have a letter from the Pope when he was still Archbishop of Krakow commending us for doing a *Festschrift* for George Huntston Williams. So when we published that letter we said of him, "formerly, Karol Wojtyla, *nunc* (now), His Holiness John Paul II." So George

Williams introduced me to this whole world of the entire Christian family. He taught me to think sympathetically and not to dismiss anyone disrespectfully, even those with whom, in the end, we had to say, "We simply cannot accept this." This was a wonderful gift he gave to me and to all of his students.

R R J — Anyone else in particular, during those same years, who influenced you greatly and Harvard still stands out these many years later?

T G — I will mention two or three others. First, there was Krister Stendahl, the dean of Harvard Divinity School. He was Swedish, a Lutheran (Church of Sweden), and a great New Testament scholar. I took Greek and New Testament with him. The thing I learned from Krister most was the way he combined, in his role as the dean, a deep pastoral concern for that community with academics. Every week he would have the Lord's Supper, a Eucharistic celebration, where he was dressed in all his Lutheran vestments. There were only three or four of us who ever came. One day I asked him, "Krister, why do you do this?" He said, "This is a part of my role as the dean of Harvard Divinity School, that I offer worship to God for this community." That made a deep impression on me that he had a sense of vocation in his role that deeply impacted the way he carried out his responsibilities. He was not simply an administrator, but a churchman, and as a result he had a responsibility for leading in worship. In my own role, later, as the dean of a divinity school, that was a model for me that I have often thought about.

I will mention two other professors at Harvard who influenced me greatly. Both I was able to study with while they were there for short term appointments. First, a man named Heiko Oberman, a great Reformation historian. I was his teaching fellow and thus I got to know him quite well. Later he came to Beeson and gave lectures for us just before he died. He taught at Tübingen and then later at the University of Arizona in Tucson. He died about four years ago. Another visiting teacher who impacted me greatly was David Steinmetz,

who is a professor at Duke University now. David is one of the best classroom teachers I ever had. He could make church history and theology come alive in a very powerful way. Both Oberman and Steinmetz had a great influence on the way I think about church history and the way I try to teach church history and theology.

One more person I would like to mention is Arthur McGill. I don't know if that name rings a bell with you since you are well read but Art McGill is not too well-known. He died prematurely at age fifty-two and never wrote much. When I took systematic theology at Harvard, it was team taught by Arthur McGill and Gordon Kauffman, whom you probably have heard of. Kauffman is a very liberal, post-Kantian, rationalist theologian. Well, McGill was very much influenced by phenomenology and by Karl Barth. The two of them were rather like oil and water but it was wonderful because I got to see right in the classroom what real theological engagement was like. They would respond to one another very directly and it was a tremendous experience. McGill wrote a book called, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method*, which was one of the most important books in my own theological formation. I still remember him as passionately engaged in the issues of life and death. I would have to say that Arthur McGill was a very important figure in forming me personally.

R R J — So you finished your doctorate at Harvard in 1979. Where did you go after Harvard?

T G — Well there were three Baptist seminaries that offered me teaching positions, or at least had serious conversations with me about coming to teach. One of them was at Rüschlikon in Switzerland, where I would later spend a sabbatical year, a very important year I might add. This was a European Baptist seminary. The other school was Southeastern Baptist Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, where Dr. Randall Lolley, the president, invited me to visit. The third was, of course, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. I have a dear friend, Bill Leonard, who was on the faculty in

Louisville. He had graduated a few years before me at Boston University. (Bill is now the dean of the Wake Forest Divinity School.) Bill lobbied for me to come to Southern, which was my entrance into that particular community. So I joined the faculty at Southern in 1978 while I was still finishing my degree at Harvard.

R R J — At that time Glenn Hinson was at Southern if I remember correctly. Hinson had a very keen interest in Baptist roots and spiritual formation, which at the time was not the big subject that it has become recently, at least in evangelical circles. Was this emphasis as uncommon, at the time, as I tend to think?

T G — Yes, that is true. Glenn Hinson was my colleague and though I have come to profoundly disagree with him about a lot of things I do have great appreciation for him for several reasons. You mentioned one of them. He had a real interest in spirituality and was in fact a pioneer among Baptists to think about the disciplines of spiritual life and the history of spiritual devotion. He edited a number of the classics of spiritual devotion. The other thing that I appreciate about Glenn Hinson, that I've in some ways come to appreciate even more in recent years, is that he also had a real interest in the wider unity of the body of Christ. He was very involved in ecumenical discussions. He carried it in a certain way that I would have reservations about theologically but I appreciated his heart and his interest in both of these fields—spirituality and ecumenism.

R R J — That raises a related question. You have been a real friend to me in encouraging me in these same areas that you mentioned with regard to Glenn Hinson. My first knowledge of you was as a Reformation historian and theologian, especially your work, *The Theology of the Reformers*. I think we first met in the Beeson chapel one summer when I was attending a conference. You have since influenced me in the whole area of spirituality and ecumenism, but always as an Evangelical with

very orthodox convictions. You talked about the influences at Harvard. Talk about a bit more about how you have tried to do this over the years. You have remained a Southern Baptist. I don't think anyone would question your conservative convictions yet you have retained this love for the whole church. If someone asked me to describe you I would say, "Timothy George is the exact opposite of a sectarian. He has strong convictions but he is always willing to engage other Christians with real respect." Talk to us about this. You taught at Southern Seminary in the 1970s, and the early 1980s, when you were one of the most conservative members of the faculty. I can't help but think that going to Harvard must have helped you at this point. You went to Louisville to engage the whole spectrum there and you had a love for the whole church when you went.

T G — It does sound rather strange when I hear you put it that way. At the time it didn't seem all that strange to me. I thought I was simply being true to the Reformation. I understood what Calvin and the great Reformers were attempting to do, and as best I understood them I was trying to live that same vision out in my own context. I do remember that when I went to Southern there was no doubt that they did not hire me for my deep conservative convictions but rather because I had a Harvard doctorate and I knew something about the Reformation. I'll never forget my first interview with the faculty and the president, Dr. Duke McCall, a great soldier of the cross and for many years president of Southern. They talked to me and talked to me about what I believed about this and that. I confessed to them, and I never denied, that I was an inerrantist, a Calvinist, and a premillennialist. In spite of these three strikes against me they still wanted to hire me. I guess that says something about them. Maybe they thought they would wear me down after awhile [Laughter]. I went there as a confessional Christian, and as we think about it I was a very conservative Christian, deeply committed to the Christian faith and to the Baptist heritage. I had come to understand Baptist and Reformation not as antonyms, but as

synonyms. For me these were certainly friendly and coexisting terms. Southern was a very good place for me in many ways. I was there for ten years. I have many good memories. Both our children were born while we were there. I had wonderful students there. The SBC controversy storms were rumbling at the time (Dr. Adrian Rogers was elected president of the SBC in 1979) so we were off and running with a controversy at Southern during my years on faculty. Eventually I was caught in some of that crossfire by virtue of the fact that I was *who* I was and I was *where* I was. But in spite of that I would say those years were a very constructive time with a lot of good formation.

It was during that time at Southern that I took a year away (my first sabbatical year) and went to teach at Rüschlikon. It was my first experience of travel in Eastern Europe, which was before the Berlin Wall came down. That was a transformative experience for me—personally, spiritually, and in some ways, theologically. This was not true so much in that I learned new things as much as it was in that I learned to see things in a new context. I learned what living out the Christian faith in this different context really meant, and I came back a more transformed and, I hope, godlier person from having been exposed to Christians and churches like these in Eastern Europe which were not like any I had seen in a North American context.

R R J — Some of these Christians and churches would not have been as conservative as your own context yet they were godly, orthodox and faithful people living in an oppressive and difficult situation.

TG—What I remember about them most was the way they prayed. They would have a prayer meeting and come forty-five minutes or an hour early and just pray with such fervency that it put our little thirty-second, "Lord help us, we want to worship you" prayers to shame. I'll never forget a youth meeting I spoke at in Kiskorosh, Hungary. They wanted me to speak to the young people so I prepared a little fifteen-minute

devotional like I would do here in the States. I was going to give this talk before we went out and had a pizza party. No, they wanted a two-hour lecture on the Bible. They wanted to know about theology and about God. Here were young people, most of whose parents were not Christians, but deeply committed to Christ and the church while living in a Communist society. This had a profound impact upon my discipleship, a very convicting one, showing me how shallow my own faith was.

R R J — You referred to your wife, Denise, whom you married in college, and then your two children who were born while you were teaching in Louisville. Tell us more about your wife, who is a prolific writer in her own right. And tell us about your children.

T G — I have a fantastic, wonderful and beautiful wife that God has graced me with as my companion. She is a writer, has produced sixteen books, and is working on books right now. She is a speaker as well. She has been a wonderful helper to me in all the various ministries we have been involved in over these years. We were married very young—I was twenty and she was nineteen. That is younger than anybody should get married, or at least that is the way it seems to me now. We have been married for thirty-four years. Christian, our son, completed college a few months ago while my daughter Alyce is spending her senior year at a German university. Christian has surrendered to the ministry and has recently married a beautiful young woman named Rebecca. God has indeed blessed me with a wonderful family for which I am very, very grateful.

R R J — After you taught at Southern for ten years, did you then go to Beeson? Tell us about that transition and what followed those years in Louisville? Tell us how Beeson came into existence and how you came to be the first dean?

T G — When I went to Southern I had no greater ambition than to teach, to be a professor. One of the benefits of teaching

at Southern, if you have tenure, is that you get to be buried in Cave Hill Cemetery, which is where some of the great founders of Southern, like James P. Boyce and John A. Broadus, are buried. It was a favorite spot of mine. I would often go over there to pray and meditate. I wanted to be buried there when I died at the end of my long career of teaching at Southern. That was my real ambition. I never wanted to be an administrator or a dean. In fact, I have said some very bad things about deans, for which I hope the Lord will now forgive me since I now know they were spoken in great ignorance. But one day I received a call, quite out of the blue, from the president of Samford University, Dr. Thomas E. Corts. I had heard of Samford University, of course, but knew very little about their situation. He said that an individual donor, a Mr. Ralph Waldo Beeson, had made a generous gift to the university for the purpose of establishing a divinity school. He asked if I would come down and talk to him about this possibility of beginning this new school. Several things he said were of interest to me. First, "We do not want to be just another Baptist seminary. We are not against such schools but Mr. Beeson was a Presbyterian, his father was a Methodist, and he married a Baptist. He thought that we had something to learn from one another." Mr. Beeson wanted the school to be evangelical, committed to the orthodox Christian faith, and conservative in theology. He was very clear about that. He also wanted this school to be interdenominational so he set up the school in a way that there would be professors from different denominations on the faculty as well as students from different backgrounds in the student body. Given my background, as we've talked about it, this was very intriguing to me. There was not anything quite like this at the time. And at that point there were no seminaries or divinity schools related to Baptist universities anywhere in the Southern Baptist world. Others have caught on to this idea over the past fifteen years but Beeson was the first. So I went down in1988, having spent a lot of time praying about this decision. There were two passages of Scripture that were very important to me that I read over and over again and through which I received a sense of guidance that

was palpable. One was Psalm 119, all 176 verses of it, about the Word of God, the law of God, and the precepts of God. The other, and this has always been for me a paradigm passage, was Hebrews 11. Particularly important are those verses that talk about Abraham and Sarah going out to a place where they had never known before. It says Abraham obeyed and went out not knowing where he was going. Well, in a way that had been my experience going to Harvard. I had no idea where I was going really. In a way, that had also been my experience in coming to Louisville as well. Certainly it was my experience in going to Birmingham to help begin Beeson in 1988.

R R J — So you went to Beeson in 1988 and the school opened in the fall of 1988, or did you get there a year or so before it formally opened?

T G — We went on June 1, 1988. Mr. Beeson was the kind of man who when he wanted something to happen it happened, so we did begin classes in the fall of 1988. We had no faculty, no buildings, no books, only a promise, "a wing and a prayer." We had a Pastors School that summer to get started. That fall we admitted our first class, thirty-two students. We had two faculty members besides me. We began year-by-year building the curriculum and the faculty and deciding how we should move from there. It has been a wonderful experience. God has blessed the school in a great way. We have had a good beginning but we still have a long way to go. We have not quite reached all our goals but it has been a wonderful early history.

R R J — Over the sixteen years that you've been at Beeson there are a number of interesting things that could provide good discussion at this point, but one of the unique things about Beeson is the size of the student body. It has a very intentional number of students for a very definite reason. There are other things about Beeson that are different from typical American evangelical seminaries and the way they tend to function, yet your focus is on training people for

ministry, not on training scholars per se, though that has surely happened in the course of things. Simply put, you are seeking to equip people for ministry in the church aren't you?

T G — This again was part of Mr. Beeson's vision. He put this in a very succinct phrase. "Down at Beeson I want you to train pastors who can preach!" (He was a layman, of course.) He apparently knew some pastors that he felt couldn't preach very well so he wanted us to correct that situation. But he wanted not just preachers who happened to be pastors, but pastors who could preach. That says a lot about pastoral and spiritual formation, so we put a lot of focus on that as well. He wanted us to keep the school relatively small in size so we could know one another and relate to one another, outside of class and inside of class, and thus be a real community. This model is an *intentional community of pastoral and spiritual formation*. This had been at the heart of what we have tried to do for sixteen years.

R R J — What then is the size of the student body?

T G — Including all of our students, both D. Min. and part-time students (we do not have many part-time students since we encourage full-time participation in our school community), we have about 250 students in all.

R R J — Mr. Beeson also did a good bit to help Asbury Seminary as well. What did he accomplish with his gift to Asbury Seminary in Kentucky?

T G — I mentioned Mr. Beeson's father, whose name was John Wesley Beeson. He was a Holiness lay-preacher out of the camp meeting era. He was a good friend of Mr. McPheeters, who was one of the leaders of Asbury College and Seminary early on. So Mr. Beeson had a very deep interest in Asbury. He divided the bulk of his estate, between Asbury Theological Seminary and Beeson Divinity School. Asbury has used this money to form a pastoral training center. We've

used the money to form an entirely new school while Asbury has been around as a seminary since the 1920s. This new infusion of Beeson money has allowed Asbury to develop several new and important ministry training tracks. We have a friendly sister relationship with Asbury, a wonderful school. We've had Maxie Dunham, their president (who retired in the summer of 2004), speak at Beeson. I've spoken at Asbury as well. They are more in the Wesleyan holiness tradition, while we tend to gravitate more to the Baptist, Reformed and Presbyterian world, but we do share a lot in common with Asbury as an evangelical school.

R R J — You mentioned that Beeson, that first fall, had a Pastor's School. Haven't you had such a program every summer since 1988?

T G — Yes, we had our sixteenth summer program in July 2004. It is a big event for us in the sense that we have several hundred pastors come with their families. We seek to make it affordable for them. They come from all over the country, not just from the Southeast. They come from Canada and even further. We have a plenary Bible teacher in the morning and in the evening we have inspirational preachers. There are a lot of practical seminars during the day.

R R J — Tell me about some of the roles that have been part of your wider public ministry and life over the years. One example is where we are sitting as we conduct this interview, at Wheaton College. You serve on the board at Wheaton College. You have had some wonderful opportunities to serve, all of which you see as an outworking of your commitment to the gospel of Christ. Why have you taken on these various responsibilities even beyond your own tradition and denomination?

T G — Well, I have a burden for the evangelical church. In some ways Beeson is a kind of meeting place for the wider evangelical tradition and for Baptists, so this is something that is not inimical to my work at Beeson. I see it rather as an

extension of that work. I have had wonderful opportunities to serve various ministries, such as here at Wheaton College on the board of trustees. Wheaton is a very important evangelical institution and I think it has a wonderful future, just as it has enjoyed a wonderful past. I want to offer whatever encouragement I can to support the good work that is done here. I also serve on the board of Prison Fellowship Ministries, which of course was begun by Chuck Colson when he was coming out of his Watergate experience. It, too, is a marvelous ministry. We are chartered in over one hundred countries throughout the world where through prison ministry the gospel goes forth in powerful ways. There is what is called "the theologian's chair" on that board, which was occupied for many years by the late Dr. Carl F. H. Henry. When he retired Dr. Henry asked me if I would step in and take that role, which was also the encouragement of Chuck Colson. I felt that I should do this.

I also work with *Christianity Today* magazine as an executive editor. There are three of us—James I. Packer and Thomas Oden besides myself—who serve in that capacity (Thus there is an Anglican, a Methodist and a Baptist). I deeply appreciate *Christianity Today* and my having the opportunity to have a

I take seriously what Jesus taught in John 17 where he prayed to his Father that his disciples would be one as he and his Father are one in order that the world might believe. So I engage in what I would call prayer and discussion on behalf of Christian unity because I believe in evangelism, because I believe in the gospel.

voice there. I also work with a movement, which is not an institution as such but a process, called "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." This began out of the burden of Chuck Colson and Father Richard John Neuhaus. We meet from time to time as Roman Catholic and evangelical theologians to talk about theological issues, important issues of faith, to discuss where we agree and where we still clearly disagree. We have produced several statements and several books as well, some of which have been controversial, but that work has also been an important outreach.

R R J — Please address the question that some readers might have about this kind of ministry. What is the value of such efforts as "Evangelicals and Catholics Together?" Why do you do this? What do you hope comes out of this kind of discussion and project?

T G — I take seriously what Jesus taught in John 17 where he prayed to his Father that his disciples would be one as he and his Father are one in order that the world might believe. So I engage in what I would call prayer and discussion on behalf of Christian unity because I believe in evangelism, because I believe in the gospel. I believe that our witness in the world is greatly impacted by how we relate to one another. Francis Schaeffer wrote a book not too long before he died, called *The Mark of the Christian*, based upon his exegesis of John 13:34-35. He made a startling statement: "Jesus gives the world the right to decide whether or not we are true followers of Christ based upon our observable love for one another." I submit that this is a startling statement and I believe it is plainly true. I think it is not only important *that we do this* but it is very important *how* we do this. I am not in favor of a lot of what goes under the banner of mainline ecumenism. A lot of it does involve theological compromise, even an attenuation of the gospel. There is a theory of ecumenism, supported by a number of prominent leaders, which says something like: "Lets put away these theological issues. Let's not talk about this since it has divided us." There used to be a saying:

"Service unites but theology divides." And some people would say, "Let's focus on ecology, let's focus on social issues, and lets not really engage in these messy theological issues. We are never going to solve our theological issues anyway so we just need to get on with being nice people and helping the world be a better place." I am positively opposed to this kind of ecumenism. That is what I call "an ecumenism of accommodation." What I am interested in, what I am positively for, is an "ecumenism of conviction" in which both sides face the issue of truth. There can be no unity *without* truth. There can only be unity *in* truth. That is what I think the ECT process has tried to model. We have not done this perfectly and I am not saying we have never made any mistakes along the way but that is the driving heart of the movement, as it is of a number of other things that I am involved in because of my service in the wider arena of ecumenical discussion.

R R J — Timothy, you have been a friend to me personally. You have encouraged me and this ministry for some years now. You openly appreciate the great tenets of Reformation theology and you have keen interest in awakening(s) of the Spirit as well. Tell us how you feel about reformation and revival, not about this ministry but about these particular concerns for the church. Speak about renewal. There are new winds blowing in the church today. The influence of thinkers like Thomas Oden and J. I. Packer, as you have noted, has been a major part of this renewal of mind and heart. You and I both appreciate these two men and what they have given to the church. Talk about your own concerns about these winds of the Spirit and about these broader directions of renewal.

T G — The Reformers of the sixteenth century, at least as I read them, had a passion to reform the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church on the basis of the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. They did not wish to start a new church. (There were, of course, some radical Reformers who went that way.) But these major Reformers wanted to call the church back to its biblical and evangelical roots. That involved, in some

cases, lopping off some excrescences, accretions that had come into the church, so there was a pruning effect, which is to be seen very strongly in men like Zwingli and Bullinger and Calvin and then the Puritans later on. But there was, with many of them, certainly with Martin Luther, the desire to restore. I think John Owen later put it this way: "We should seek to restore the old glorious primitive face of Christianity." That meant engaging with the catholic tradition of the church, not "throwing the baby out with the bath water," but engaging it and reforming it according to the Word of God. That was what the Reformation was all about in its heart.

R R J — You can see this particular emphasis in men like Richard Baxter.

T G — Yes, Baxter wrote a book called *The Reformed Catholic.* That is the kind of reformation I also believe in. I want to call the Church of Rome, just as I call my own tradition, to a more complete reformation on the basis of the Word of God. I think there are serious problems in Roman Catholic theology that need to be corrected and addressed. I think there are places where we can stand with Roman Catholic theologians over against other kinds of destructive and critical trends in theology today and to be discerning so as to know which is which. It is a very tricky thing, but it is an important thing that we should be engaged in.

Let me also say a word about revival, too. It is not just about theology, if you mean by theology restoring orthodox teaching. That is a part of it for sure, but this must include being open and sensitive to where the Spirit of God is leading and what the Spirit of God is teaching us. So I see real reformation and revival, at least in some basic ways, as coterminous. Real reformation is going to lay the groundwork for a true revival, and without the former the latter is going to be very shallow and not very long lasting. I define evangelicalism today as inheriting four different traditions or moments. These are: (1) the early church and the catholic tradition and the great confessions; (2) the Reformation in the sixteenth

century; (3) the Great Awakenings and the impulses of the Spirit that come out of that (I would include in that Pentecostalism, in spite of some of its excesses); and finally (4) the post-Fundamentalist, post-Modernist, what was once called neo-evangelicalism. By this I refer, in particular, to the movement that was influenced by people like Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham and others—the movement which gave shape to evangelicalism over the past half century and produced many wonderful things like Lausanne. John Stott has been a great leader in this movement as well. I think evangelicalism should be defined by these four sweeping movements in the history of the church. I want to identify with all of them. I do not want to ossify any one of them as something we go back to in a naïve simplistic way. We must always bring our various movements and confessions to accountability to Holy Scripture in a way that makes reformation a continuing effort within the evangelical family.

Your second question was about the renewal movements and the emerging ecumenical consensus we see today. In some ways I see this linking up with some of the older ecumenical impulse that comes out of Edinburgh (1910) and Amsterdam (1948). Even New Delhi (1961) lines up with this in some ways.

There are several forms that this emphasis takes with Evangelicals. I'll just mention several that I have been involved with personally. The ECT process would be such a movement within evangelicalism. But there is also a movement for renewal within several of the mainline denominations. I know you have had an important voice and ministry of encouragement in this effort. I think it is a wonderful to see groups like the "Confessing Movement" within United Methodism and the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA). This is happening within almost every old denomination. God is doing something surprising and wonderful and though you and I are not part of that world, at least in terms of our denominational affiliation, we ought to be cheerleaders for this renewal effort. We ought to be prayer partners with those who are there serving the Lord faithfully.

I do not know if you are familiar with a movement begun by two Lutheran theologians, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, called "The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity." This effort has been led by The Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. I am a member of that board. We publish a journal called *Pro Ecclesia*. This new statement, "The Princeton Proposal," has been brought about by a wonderful group of scholars. I also see this as an encouraging direction. It doesn't solve all the problems, but it is an effort to reground ecumenism in a solid foundation of confessional and historic Christianity. All of these kinds of things give us real reason to hope.

R R J — We alluded earlier to modernity and postmodernity, the kind of shifting that is going on in the wider culture. We also hear a lot today, and more of our readers are reflective of this, about what has been called "the emerging church." This seems to impact the generation that is about thirty years of age and under. Speak as a Christian leader, as one, like me, that is now part of the "older generation of leaders" who has been given some measure of responsibility toward this new generation. Speak about forming, shaping and educating this new generation. How do you feel about this, a generation in which the percentage of professing Christians is quite a bit lower than it was in our generation? Yet it seems to me that the energy in this generation is very high, the willingness to sacrifice might be higher than in our own, and the interest in Christian community is definitely much higher than among our individualistic peers. How do you see this in terms of the educational process at Beeson Divinity School and in your travels throughout North America? Is this real or is it just wishful thinking?

T G — I do see this shift personally. On the whole I am greatly encouraged by it. I have been at several emerging church conferences recently. Actually I have been surprised at how, if you will pardon this word, "traditional" some of these younger Christians are. I see some picking up on classic

statements of faith from St. Augustine and St. Patrick and the early church fathers. And they are picking up on liturgy as another example. Many of us thought we should throw a great deal of this out the window if we were going to reach younger people. I simply do not accept that premise. I guess if I had a caution about all this it would be that if this younger church is to emerge and transmit to their generation something of lasting value it will require some focus upon structure, discipline and polity. They will need to give attention to these kinds of things. I do not think a merely intuitive Christianity is transferable from generation to generation. I think some of these younger leaders are sensing this and a few of them are moving in that direction. On the whole I am encouraged by this new emphasis. I believe, however, we must always be on guard. It seems to me that Christianity is ever in tension between two irreducible poles—I call them the poles of identity and adaptability. We can go to seed in either direction. If we go to seed with the identity pole then we become little holy huddles and cut ourselves off from the world, becoming sectarian, not reaching people with the gospel. If we go to seed on the adaptability pole we loose the gospel in our effort to win the world. So we will always live in tension between these two. It may be that the emerging church needs to give more attention to the identity pole, just as some of us older folks need to give more attention to the adaptability pole.

R R J — This emerging generation is *contra* our generation and not much interested in what we called "the seeker church." They seem more interested in recovering historic and traditional Christian and classical forms, as you noted. It seems that one of the things to watch here is the need to give them a rich theological tradition that can sustain the missiological vision they have. They need a richer and deeper vision to sustain this kind of faith. They could grab traditions and forms that we threw out and then the danger would be to have the forms *without* the truth itself.

The gospel is what has to be at the center. When Paul said to the Corinthians, "I delivered unto you, that which I also received, that which what was of first importance," he doesn't mean that the other things are of ***no importance*** *but that these things, these gospel centralities, are of* ***first importance*** *—"Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture, he was buried, and he rose again on the third day."*

T G — I think those are wise observations. The gospel is what has to be at the center. When Paul said to the Corinthians, "I delivered unto you, that which I also received, that which what was of *first* importance," he doesn't mean that the other things are of *no importance* but that these things, these gospel centralities, are of *first importance*—"Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture, he was buried, and he rose again on the third day." Whenever we begin to qualify and question that essential message, as I see happening in a lot of theological trends today, and move toward a more pluralistic and syncretistic way of worship, then I want to come back to 1 Corinthians 15, and say, "Whatever we do to adapt the gospel to the culture we need to make sure that it is the gospel we are adapting and proclaiming and not something which is a substitute."

R R J — Through all of your teaching, writing and serving all these years you have "kept your heart" and you have been concerned about piety, devotion and prayer. Tell us how you have maintained this busy life and done this as well? Many of our readers are busy leaders, so your response may help some

of them put this central issue of spiritual formation into perspective. No one who grows in the grace of God follows the same "cookie cutter" approach of someone else, but what has helped you, personally, to become more like Christ?

T G — When I was a young Christian I was told that there were three things you absolutely had to have to grow into Christlikeness. First, you needed to read the Bible everyday. The second was you needed to pray, which involves both speaking and listening. The third was to have fellowship with other Christians because no one can be a Christian alone. I do not have any secret. I have not done this perfectly, in fact sometimes I think I have done this poorly, but I have tried to keep faith with those disciplines—Scripture, prayer and fellowship, which means accountability with other believers, that is with people I trust, with those who have pastored and mentored me. Along with that I would say you need to be open to what God is saying to us through the witness of his church through the ages. I try to read Jaroslav Pelikan often, because he happens to be one of my great heroes of historical theology and is also a wonderful man and scholar. Pelikan used to say, jokingly I believe, that as a rule he never read anything that was published after 1800. Well, I do not want say the same thing exactly, but I do think we must not lose sight of the wellspring of Christian wisdom that comes from the tradition of the church beginning with Scripture, and governed and accountable to Scripture. This rich wellspring has been an important source of growth and deepening for my own walk with God.

R R J — Thank you, Timothy, for your time and for a wonderful interview. I believe our readers will profit immensely from your recollections and personal insights.

In my journey of faith perhaps the most important intellectual insight, which has had a powerful impact upon my entire life, is that the study of spirituality, or spiritual formation, arises out of a distinct recognition that there is a fundamental unity that exists between biblical doctrine, discipline, liturgy, and the Christian life itself. I did not recognize this until spiritual formation became a meaningful part of my own thought about Christian faith and practice.

JOHN H. ARMSTRONG