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Abstract: In the wake of the 2016 election, Oxford Dictionaries announced that its selection for the word of the year was “post-truth,” defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” We find ourselves residing in a society in which facts and truth matter less and less. President-elect Donald Trump’s campaign stood firmly on a foundation of appeals to emotion and personal belief. He consistently rejected facts presented to him by the media as having no basis in reality, arguing that they instead resulted from media bias against him. One of Trump’s most prominent surrogates, Newt Gingrich, when pressed on crime statistics during a CNN interview, dismissed them as unrepresentative of the feeling of Americans. He argued that “the average American . . . does not think crime is down,” and rejected statistics, saying that he would “go with what people feel” over the arguments of “theoreticians.” Feelings of fear, unfounded or otherwise, hold more currency than verifiable data.

While this may seem to be a shocking and dismaying development to some, I would like to argue that this phenomenon is not new, but is merely an intensification of a gradual transition from emphasis on truth to emphasis on narrative. Humans have long held a loose relationship to truth, instead relying on narratives as a method for generating meaning and certitude. Our own emotional response takes primacy over the facts before us, and we seek a narrative which affirms those emotional responses. In this paper, I will seek to demonstrate this through an examination of the role of narrative in the schism in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In every stage of the SBC’s breakup, and particularly now in the retelling of this history, we find competing narratives portraying drastically different images of who was in possession of the moral high ground. As conservatives paint themselves as brave warriors coming to the rescue of a wayward institution corrupted by secularism, and moderates portray their movement as seeking to preserve an organization which welcomed and encouraged a diversity of views in the face of a radical rightward shift, it becomes possible for the outsider, or perhaps even the insider, to lose perspective on what is fact or fiction. As truth and fact are increasingly meaningless, we cling to narratives which mediate feelings of identity and community. We seek justification for our position, and narrative provides the means of overcoming facts to legitimate our movement and our identity in the face of opposition. Truth persists, not as verified fact, but as a feeling of unity constructed through narrative.
Introduction: Post-truth, our “new” reality

In the wake of the 2016 election, Oxford Dictionaries announced that its selection for the word of the year was “post-truth,” defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

At the time I submitted the abstract for this project, this was the most recent evidence of America’s assault on truth; we had yet to be exposed to “alternative facts.” Needless to say, we find ourselves residing in a society in which facts and truth matter less and less. President Donald Trump’s campaign stood firmly on a foundation of appeals to emotion and personal belief. He consistently rejected facts presented to him by the media as having no basis in reality, arguing that they instead resulted from bias against him. This trend has not ended with Trump’s installation into office. The president maintains an on-again, off-again relationship with fact and truth, consistently painting facts with which he disagrees as “fake news.” As of June 1, PolitiFact’s running scorecard on President Trump finds that, of the statements they have checked, only 5% are fully true. Nearly 70% have been disproven, ranging from the categories of Mostly False (20%) to Pants on Fire (16%).

This rejection of narrowly defined notions of truth can be seen in other figures beyond the President, however. As I mentioned, there was, of course, Kellyanne Conway’s assertion of the existence of “alternative facts.” Press Secretary Sean Spicer consistently is forced to dispute facts and figures in the interest of preserving the administration’s perception of something resembling coherent messaging. However, perhaps one of the best examples of the modern American approach to truth can be found in a statement from one of Trump’s most prominent surrogates, Newt Gingrich, in a CNN interview conducted during the Republican National
Convention. When pressed on statistics pointing to a nationwide decline in crime, Gingrich dismissed them as unrepresentative of the feeling of Americans. He argued that “the average American . . . does not think crime is down,” and rejected the statistics outright, saying that he would “go with what people feel” over the arguments of “theoreticians.” Even beyond his simple rejection of what the CNN anchor presented as fact, in his labeling of researchers as “theoreticians,” Gingrich has further stripped away the authority of trained researchers utilizing sound methodology to provide us with trustworthy information. In Gingrich’s language is the notion that the supposed “facts” to which these researchers point are little more than disproven theory. And this perception of research is not limited to Gingrich. Numbers and studies are no longer as authoritative as they once were. At the end of the day, the norm is a privileging of emotion over statistics. In 21st century America, feelings of fear, unfounded or otherwise, hold more currency than verifiable data.

Is Truth Dead?

Earlier this year, the cover of Time magazine bore the simple question: Is Truth Dead? The design hearkened back to a similar cover from 1966 which had asked then: Is God Dead? The impetus behind this cover questioning the state of truth was an interview appearing in that issue in which Donald Trump had repeatedly uttered falsehood after falsehood. The writers were left to ask, is the idea of truth really dead after all? It would seem fair to suggest as much. This is our new normal: a post-truth, post-fact, post-reason America. Or, so it may seem. In this project, I contend that this decline in the influence of truth is not actually a new phenomenon.

My argument that this assault on truth is not new is not itself new either. In fact, in response to this sudden American fixation on “post-truth,” articles began springing up from all corners declaring that politics has always been post-truth. President Trump may be a more
frequent offender than most, but he is certainly not the first. The difference in the case of President Trump is that he is so blatant in his disregard for truth. It could be argued that President Trump is merely a performance artist playing a particular role, and he has found that the truth is merely a tool in his arsenal which may be bent to his will for increased leverage. It is precisely that element of truth that I intend to focus on in this project.

There is actually evidence to suggest that fact plays perhaps the least important role in altering someone’s political perspectives. A Stanford study found that, even when someone’s beliefs had been “totally refuted, people fail to make appropriate revisions in those beliefs.” Another study of political misperception and unsubstantiated belief found that, not only does the presentation of corrected information fail to have any impact on the erroneous belief, but the researchers found multiple instances of a “backfire effect” where commitment to the misperception actually intensified. Presentation of fact from some source deemed to be authoritative may be completely ineffective in altering perception. On the contrary, it would seem that a convincing narrative appealing to a pre-possessed set of beliefs and emotions will hold more sway than any fact-laden argument which poses a threat to those sincerely held beliefs. The manner in which the argument is presented and the emotions to which it appeals are as important as the underlying facts. I would argue that, not only is a departure from truth not a new phenomenon in America, it is not new in Baptist life, either. One prime example of this use of narrative can be found in the schism of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Scholars have analyzed the schism from a variety of angles, focusing on theological, political, gender, and racial elements in particular. If we move beyond this level of critique, and examine the schism purely at the level of narrative, purely at the arguments presented with an eye toward their intent to provoke a specific reaction through appeals to particular emotions, we
find something different. I seek to propose a new way of approaching this conflict and the consequences which followed. I feel that the schism, in particular, provides an illustration of narrative’s ability to construct and mediate truth.

**Competing Narratives of the SBC Schism: The Conservative Case**

In turning to the narratives rising out of the Southern Baptist schism, we find two clearly defined strains: the Conservative and Moderate. Obviously, each of these strains requires greater nuance than I am able to supply in such a brief time. I will be attempting to focus on the broadly prevailing narratives which came to define the two largest factions of the fragmentation.

The conservative narrative of the schism can be boiled down to an effort to return the SBC to a lost state of theological purity. The general conception was that some integral element of Southern Baptist-ness had been lost and needed to be reclaimed. The theological issue at the center of this was biblical inerrancy. One voice which came to represent the inerrantist cause was that of Harold Lindsell, whose books *Battle for the Bible*, and later *The Bible in the Balance*, would provide fuel for the conservative cause. Lindsell offered a particular critique of the SBC as having drifted from their roots in regard to biblicism. He presents a specific view of soul freedom as “the right of all people to believe as they choose,” but adds the important caveat that “this does not mean that Baptists can believe what is not baptistic and still be Baptists.”

Lindsell’s understanding of Southern Baptist history led him to believe that there was a general theological consensus regarding what was and was not “baptistic,” in his parlance. Soul freedom was simply exercised within the “baptistic” confines, it was not meant to go beyond them. He offers a particular indictment of the Southern Baptist seminary system, pointing to figures such as Frank Stagg and Dale Moody as examples of faculty members with faulty views of Scripture. Lindsell perceived a “substantial dissatisfaction with existing theological seminaries on the part
of **loyal** Baptists.” His usage of the qualifier “loyal” here reinforces the fact that Lindsell is particularly intent on what he sees as a need to remain committed to principle and return to what he sees as the original Southern Baptist doctrinal position on Scripture, rather than giving in to modernization and liberalism. Theological progression is a betrayal of Southern Baptist orthodoxy.

One level of Lindsell’s critique of SBTS was to note that the school expected its faculty members to sign its *Abstract of Principles*, a document delineating certain beliefs the faculty members were expected to hold. It was commonly known that many of the professors signing did not necessarily believe all of what was in the document, and Lindsell viewed this as further evidence of the institution’s leftward drift. He saw the views of the founders, such as Basil Manly, Jr., as the agreed-upon orthodoxy in Southern Baptist life, and for faculty members at SBTS to be deviating from that doctrine was dishonest. Paul Pressler shared this criticism of theological dishonesty on the part of faculty members and others in SBC life. He felt that the *Baptist Faith and Message* and the *Abstract of Principles* were useful, what the SBC needed was “more integrity” from those who were signing the documents. What Pressler saw was denominational employees “deceiving untutored Southern Baptists by ‘playing’ word games in affirming an interpretation of the *Baptist Faith and Message* which most members of the denomination do not accept.” This line of thought was brought further by Jerry A. Johnson’s “The Cover-up at Southern Seminary,” which sought to make the world aware of this theological dishonesty on the part of SBTS faculty members. In particular, he cited Roy L. Honeycutt’s critical approaches to the Book of Exodus, which suggested that the story of Moses at the burning bush might not have happened, and Molly Marshall’s universalist leanings. He also
made mention of Frank Tupper and his infamous use of profanity in the classroom. Jerry Sutton, in his own book reflecting on the schism, assessed the debate in this way:

Repeatedly, moderates and those sympathetic to them argued for freedom and liberty of interpretation. Yet one man’s liberty is another man’s heresy. And much of what has been taught among Southern Baptists has clearly been heretical in nature. Coupled with this *theological inadequacy*, however, was also an institutional bureaucracy that protected the aberrant theology.xv

In these statements, and particularly in the labeling of these teachings as “theological inadequacy,” we see the prevailing belief that the institutions which were training the next generation of SBC clergy were improperly preparing them for ministry. As Ramsey Pollard put it, the SBC needed to be “on guard against false teachers within our own ranks.”xvi

What we see taking shape is a narrative of a denominational body which has drifted from its roots and is in need of correction. While the arguments focused on the inerrancy of Scripture, this was simply one aspect of a larger, societal issue. The battle over inerrancy was one front in an ongoing war to stem the tides of modernism and liberalism. To lose this battle was to begin the descent down a slippery slope, a crossing of the “theological Rubicon,” in Pressler’s words, after which you will have “opened the floodgates for the individual to determine categories which are truth.”xvii Adrian Rogers cast this as a simple dualistic struggle in which you were either a believer or a heretic.xviii This was a narrative of fear that losing this battle would lead to the loss of every battle to come, because once you allow for individual agency in terms of the interpretation of Scripture, “then you move into areas like the resurrection of Christ, the deity of Christ, soteriology, the whole works – all stems from your view of scripture.”xix Pressler argued that, for the conservatives, “the truth of inerrant Scripture is not to be disputed, or to be
reconciled with passing theories of science and philosophy.” Rather than the moderate approach to theology, which Pressler viewed as bending with the wind, the conservatives were committed to staying the course and remaining dedicated to doctrines they viewed as foundational.

One particularly noteworthy retelling of the story of the Conservative resurgence is a short documentary created by SBTS entitled “Recovering a Vision: The Presidency of R. Albert Mohler Jr.” As the title would suggest, the video portrays the prominent conservative figures of the resurgence, chiefly Mohler in his role at the seminary, as salvific heroes reclaiming something that had been lost at SBTS. These were champions of traditional Baptist values, heralding a return to the theological doctrines which had made SBTS and the SBC great in the first place. In the video, the schism is painted in retrospect as a benign course correction, although still regarded as a brave and bold stand against liberal encroachment. And yet, it nevertheless stands in stark contrast to what was viewed as a war by those in its midst, and what was described by Pressler as “going for the [Convention’s] jugular.” This is the view of conservative Southern Baptists looking back upon the schism: a justified course correction to effect a return to the SBC’s foundational values in the interest of “saving” the Convention.

Competing Narratives of the SBC Schism: The Moderate Case

The moderate narrative, naturally, presents a very different story of the same events. The moderate side tells the story of individuals committed to preserving the SBC as it was. These were people equally committed to what they saw as an integral part of their identity as Southern Baptists, which they perceived as having been stolen. The difference lies in when this forceful theft of identity took place.
Where the conservatives saw a focus on inerrancy and enforcement of confessional documents as a return to historic Southern Baptist principles, the moderate camp saw it as an imposition of creedalism and a reduced view of the doctrine of soul freedom. Particularly of note is Walter Shurden’s reflections in *Not a Silent People*, in which he argues that “the new fundamentalism has de-baptistified the SBC.” I found it interesting to place this in direct conversation with Harold Lindsell’s own arguments about soul freedom operating within the confines of what he construed to be “baptistic.” Both are arguing for some ideal notion of what it means to be Baptist, both see the other as having abandoned it, and neither is likely to have been swayed then or now. Further, in contrast to Sutton’s claim of theological inadequacy on the part of the moderates, Shurden argued that inerrancy lent itself to “bumper sticker theology.” Moderates presented themselves as combatting this over-simplified view of theology which demanded uniform adherence to “a host of narrow beliefs.”

In what was simply an extension of the inerrancy issue to the conservatives, the moderates sought to make a primary issue out of the role of women in the church. The conservatives provided little room for debate on this, arguing that the Bible said what the Bible said and there was no room to argue for women in ministerial roles. One woman called to mission work recalls the way in which the shift to inerrancy only intensified and broadened the ban on women in any “man’s space,” including, now, missions. Some saw this as further restriction of soul freedom and the right to interpret scripture and answer God’s call as one would. Others felt the need to push back against what they saw as “pure subjugation of women.” Particularly surprising to some women was the sheer number of church members they knew who were undisturbed by the changes taking place. It did not matter to these people
what specifically was happening or how, what was important was that the SBC “keep the church pure.”

Further, the moderate wing made it a priority to hold fast to the SBC’s revivalistic methodology. The work of missions was arguably the very reason for the existence of Baptist associations such as the Triennial Convention, and later the SBC, in the first place. Local churches retaining their autonomy while coming together to support common mission efforts abroad had always been an integral aspect of Southern Baptist life. The SBC, however, consistently “showed that it would sacrifice its own missions in order to hobble women.” As stated above, women who discerned a call to ministry in the mission field found fewer avenues open to them than before. The moderates viewed the efforts of the conservative movement as extending beyond merely correcting erroneous doctrine and now impacting what they viewed as the central purpose of the SBC. The moderates sought compromise and a putting aside of theological differences for the sake of preserving the mission efforts of the Convention. Where the conservative wing was demanding a single acceptable response, the moderate wing attempted to continue preserving the tenuous state of compromise that had existed in the SBC from the beginning.

Some in the moderate wing portrayed their efforts as a genuinely theological response to a politically-motivated movement on the part of the conservatives. In the wake of Patterson’s “A Reply of Concern,” which named names of men whose theological teachings deviated from what he considered Southern Baptist orthodoxy, moderates viewed the conservative effort as bearing the hallmarks of a McCarthy-era witch-hunt intent on gaining power through the removal of anyone standing in their way. Further, the efforts to bus messengers en masse to Convention meetings and direct voting efforts from skyboxes further reinforced this discomfort with the
Many would never accept that the conservatives actually cared about theology, rather, “they charged repeatedly that conservative theology was being used as a cover for the rawest and crudest grab for power.”

In the end, the moderate wing was forced out of the SBC big tent. Where the narrative for the conservatives began with a feeling of lost identity, that was where the narrative reached its peak for the moderates. There was no single uniform withdrawal from the SBC for the moderates, but each group of Southern Baptists leaving to form a new association found themselves leaving an identity of Southern Baptistness which had come to define them. The narrative became one of exile, forced upon them by the conservatives and their need for power.

What Conclusions Do We Draw from This?

I believe the example of Harold Lindsell and Walter Shurden providing their own unique parlance for “baptistic” or “de-baptistified” illustrates the fact that each side sincerely felt that the other had gone horribly wrong to the point of forfeiting their very identity as Baptists, in their respective construals. Each side perceived itself as possessing the ideological high ground, and likewise each clung wholeheartedly to their respective notions of right and wrong, and fought to the bitter end to preserve what they viewed to be the “true” manifestation of Baptist life. And likewise, each individual has a particular judgment of who was in the right that day. But we would be hard-pressed to sway someone from the other side, whichever side that may be.

Facts certainly were not in play, or at the very least played a minor role in this drama. One example which illustrates this particularly well is that of Keith Parks at the Foreign Mission Board. Because the narrative being preached from conservative pulpits had been so effective in causing distrust and suspicion of liberalism in denominational agencies, the Foreign Mission Board had actually seen a decline in financial contributions from churches.
presented actual monetary figures, the kind of numbers that typically can cause a change of heart when nothing else can, and still no change. The data mattered less than the narrative. Adrian Rogers in his sermon before the Pastors’ Conference in 1979 essentially said that commitment to orthodoxy took precedence over the historic missional impulse of the SBC. The important thing for Rogers was a foundation in conservative principles, such as an inerrant reading of Scripture. He argued that only a commitment to inerrancy could yield flourishing missions and church growth. Cooperation for the preservation of missional efforts was not even on his radar. What mattered was the continual drive toward a narrative of church growth through return to principle.

What is problematic in this argument is that the growth has not happened as was promised. The SBC is in decline, much like every Protestant denomination in America. The SBC has seen consistent decline in membership and baptism numbers over the first decade and a half of the 21st century. The claim during the resurgence was that commitment to traditional principles would save the church and lead to its growth, but that was not the case. And yet, we see continued commitment to the course correction in the form of the documentary released at Southern Seminary extolling Al Mohler’s role in restoring a lost vision. I think here we find fairly solid evidence for the thesis of the political science study I mentioned at the beginning: correction of an erroneous idea rarely leads to abandonment of that idea, and often can contrarily lead to an intensification of that belief. And that is exactly what I argue has happened in the case of the SBC in the wake of the schism.

What is particularly fascinating is that both sides speak of the conservative wing as having “won.” Members of the moderate wing, for the most part, were defeated and dispersed into various other groups such as the Alliance of Baptists, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship,
American Baptists, the list goes on. But, for some reason, in spite of the conservative wing claiming victory themselves, we continue to see Southern Baptist churches perpetuating this narrative and fighting the same battles even today. One wonders if, even though the threat of liberals from within has been removed, the threat of liberalism and growing secularization from without has only served to increase the urgency of their efforts.

From the moderate side, it is interesting to note the somewhat simplistic nature of the arguments presented in these narratives. Taking, for example, the matter of women in ministry, an early and prominent flashpoint in the explosion of the controversy, we find that the “truth” presented was almost superficial. Eileen Campbell-Reed’s recent work, *Anatomy of a Schism*, makes note of the fact that women were viewed and employed as an issue, a rallying point, and less so allowed to speak and act as agents of their own liberation. Women, on both sides, but it is perhaps more surprising from the moderates, “were treated as objects of a larger contest between men.” xxxix The comparison is made to a football being tossed among the male players. From this, we might come to the conclusion that not only are narratives used to construct a certain vision of truth, but they must be simplistic in order to do so. Too much attention to detail complicates and muddles the issue, and lessens the impact of a particular line of reasoning. The narrative most likely to achieve success is the narrative around which a group will rally, without necessarily thinking about the broader implications or the nuance necessary to truly embrace the argument they are making, such as in the case of men making the argument for more women in the pulpit while to this day we still find a minority of churches with women ministers.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, what does this history have to teach us as we stand today in Donald Trump’s Post-Truth America, the home of the free and the land of the alternative fact?
There is nothing new under the sun. Our post-truth world is not so novel after all. Just as in days gone by, we still see the crafting of narratives playing directly into fears and capitalizing upon longing for a romanticized bygone era of success, and we cannot let ourselves think that ministers are above this even today. Yes, we see it in our government, but we also continue to see it in our churches. Robert Jones attributes this to the death throes of White Christian America, violently lashing out as they deal with their decline.\textsuperscript{31} In any event, I believe it has been shown here that, regardless of the actual factors at play, the particular narrative employed constructs whatever version of “truth” is necessary for the support of a particular cause. When faced with Keith Parks’ concerns that the conservative resurgence was hurting the Foreign Mission Board’s ability to conduct its work, this did not sway the conservatives. When the conservatives expressed sincere concern about the direction of the Southern Baptist seminary system, this did not sway the moderates. Rightly or wrongly, both groups held to a particular narrative of what they believed to be the “truth” regarding the SBC.

In a political and theological context in which there is no commitment to truth, what do we do? I don’t know that I necessarily have an answer. Cognitive scientists would argue that the next step to understanding why we respond this way is to go to the level of the brain, to ascertain the chemistry behind our decision making. Perhaps it could also be as simple as recognizing that there is some legitimate concern at the heart of a sincerely held belief, and understanding what it is and why there is a perceived threat can foster productive dialogue.

I feel the need to clarify that, in this discussion, I am not attempting to say that we should abandon truth as a category or de-center truth as the focus of debate. Rather, I am pointing to what I perceive to be the reality of the situation, whether we accept it or not. We are not witnessing the end of truth, we are being forced to come face to face with the transitory
relationship we have had with truth all along. No matter our perspectives on which “truth” is
“true,” the reality is that there are competing perceptions of truth rooted in tailored narratives
which perceive select facts in a particular way. Edward Farley once wrote about the *Fragility of
Knowledge*, perhaps we would do well to acknowledge the fragility of truth as well. Fact and
truth are malleable – captive to the agenda of those who wield them – and in this we see fragility
indeed.

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5 It is worth noting that in all of this there is an assumption of authority. In the assumption that there can even be such a thing as an “authoritative fact,” one must concede that there is some entity construed to be an authority capable of mediating what is or is not worthy of such a label. There is perhaps need for discussion further probing our right to expect all parties to submit as willingly to these authorities as I do simply because I respect their credentials, and perhaps why I reject other sources of authority.
9 The language here necessitates a lengthy discussion which could stand apart as its own paper. I will suffice it to say that the usage of terms such as “Liberal,” “Moderate,” “Conservative,” “Fundamentalist,” and “Ultra-Fundamentalist,” all carried particular weight and meaning during the schism. A significant portion of the impact was shaped by who was doing the naming. Ironically, I am in a sense succumbing to the narrative forces I am describing in this project in utilizing the labels I use. The labels were not broadly chosen and accepted but constructed and projected by one side upon another in an effort to brand them in a particular way which served a specific agenda. I have chosen “conservative,” referring to the wing of the SBC leaning most fully to the right, and including the fundamentalists in this category for the sake of convenience. Similarly, by “moderate,” I am referring to the left wing of the SBC, including those liberals seen as furthest from traditional SBC values. I do not intend to make any statements in my choice in monikers, I merely do so out of convenience in the interest of clarity.
12 Ibid, 126ff.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 7.
This slippery theological slope was always viewed in direct connection to a similar erosion of values in the political sphere. The similarities between the conservative resurgence in the SBC and the rise of the New Religious Political Right and its efforts to elect Ronald Reagan are not a coincidence. As Oran Smith, Samuel Hill, and others demonstrated so clearly, the Republican Southern Strategy was utilized as effectively in swinging the SBC into lockstep with Republican Party rhetoric as it was in flipping the Solid South politically. Cf. Oran P. Smith, *The Rise of Baptist Republicanism*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997) and Samuel S. Hill and Dennis E. Owen, *The New Religious Political Right in America*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

**xxv** Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis*, 46.


**xxix** Ibid 104.


**xxi** Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 7.


**xxiii** Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 7.

**xxiv** Leonard, *God’s Last & Only Hope*, 141.

**xxv** Shurden and Sheply, *Going for the Jugular*, 15.

**xxvi** Ibid.


