

Letter to the Membership of First Baptist

Introduction

It has been a blessing to have been used of God in service to First Baptist Church Maryville (FBCM), and it is by His grace alone that we have served. Earlier this year Sarah and I met with Connie Sager. This meeting was to make her aware that we would be withdrawing from our roles within the Children's Ministry, as well as participation in official church activities and services, at the conclusion of Centrikid camp on July 5, 2013. Having served for over 12 years within the Children's department, it was a heart breaking decision. For well over a year we have tried to press forward in service with our current ministry callings, so please know that this was NOT a knee jerk reaction. This decision came after much contemplative prayer and discussion. That being said, I think it should be known that this decision to step aside was only because we felt there was no other recourse at the time.

I apologize in advance for the length of this letter, but see it as necessary to explain the reasons that precipitated that decision, as well as shed light on what we believe to be troubling times at First Baptist Maryville. (FBCM) We humbly ask that you would prayerfully and intentionally read the contents therein. We say that knowing that our case is no more deserving of consideration than any other member's. This is a decision we feel has been forced upon us due to the direction of leadership at FBCM and we want all within our congregation to know that we believe the situation to be critical.

We decided that we could no longer serve this congregation under the leadership of our current senior pastor.¹ Let me make it clear that we are not moving our membership to another church. We have not visited another congregation and still have some hope that we can return to fellowship and our ministerial callings. There is nothing that pains us more in this situation than knowing that our opposition to the senior pastor is very much in danger of causing unrest and division within the congregation. We fully understand the implications of such action, but we feel we can no longer continue to stand idly by. We also accept that our future at FBCM is in jeopardy regardless of the outcome. Speaking out on these things has come at tremendous cost to our emotional, spiritual and even physical well-being. Our concerns going forward are for the church family of FBCM. We have prayerfully considered and weighed the costs of speaking out, and are certain that the consequences of silence far outweigh the alternative. It is time that the congregation becomes painfully aware of the peril it faces going forward.

¹ My initial thoughts were that some will view that departure as a direct result of Connie Sager's decision to resign from her role as Children's Pastor. Although it may have served to accelerate our announcement and time table, this is simply not the case. Sarah and I approached Connie about our concerns and decision to leave long before she notified us of her own intentions to leave FBCM, and I am certain she would confirm this to be the case.

Section I

There are many questions surrounding the current events at FBCM, and how we got to this point. Many in our church family will be unfamiliar with the issues presented in this document. There is nothing more important to me than insuring that what is written here is an accurate and truthful representation. During this time I have made and received hundreds of phone calls and emails regarding this situation. It has been my goal to speak to those involved and provide as much first-hand information as possible.

You may be wondering why so many are unaware of the many problems afflicting our church at this time. The simple answer is **lack of transparency**. Over the past two months I have been made aware of more than a dozen members who have presented concerns to the elder board through meeting and letter; and many more who confronted the senior pastor directly. For those who have attempted to adhere to the governance of this church, including myself, there has been a complete and total failure of leadership.

Where do we stand today? The elder board is split. Two of those elders are likely to resign after voting against affirming the senior pastor. In the past few months we've had one staffer fired and three others resign from their positions.² Two ROC coordinators have left the church.³ Whether it is tension among the staff, abuse of the pulpit, firings and resignations, or families leaving the congregation, all of these issues have one common denominator; the senior pastor and the inaction of our church leadership. And yet the congregation was presented information that white washed over the ugly truth of these situations. And let me assure you, the list of issues does not end there.

These problems are not new, as there were signs of trouble from the day the senior pastor took office. The board should have long ago been able to identify a pattern of behavior and responded with aggressive monitoring and a course of action. Instead, they took a default position to deflect blame, trivialize concerns and to even disparage those who brought issues forward. Now the board wants to speak before the congregation.⁴ I suspect that what will be presented is nothing more than damage control and an attempt to cover up their incompetence in this situation. I suspect that the remaining board will try to convince you that they have a plan, and that those who are standing in opposition are the real problem. Had the elder board taken the proper action the current situation could have been avoided.

² Resigned: Emily Byrd, Connie Sager, and Dawn Herring. Fired: Chuck O'Conner.

³ I have statements from Carol Lucas and the Springsdorfs confirming this to be the case. Both went through the proper channels of church governance and were offered no official resolution.

⁴ This is not to say that each individual board member failed in all their duties. Only to say that collectively the board was dysfunctional and ineffective.

Section II

So how did we get to this point?

For many, the resignation of our children's pastor was the first evidence that something was wrong in our church. Let me make it clear that the reason for Connie's resignation was directly related to issues of honesty and character relating to the senior pastor.⁵ Sarah and I share a very close walk with Connie as friends and ministry partners. I am amazed at the grace and the restraint she has demonstrated in this trial. I was blessed to serve on the search team that selected her for ministry at FBCM. It doesn't seem that long ago that we were processing resumes, trying to identify the "qualified" candidates. What Judy Rice said has always stuck with me. "I'm interested in knowing whom God has called to be the children's pastor of this church." That became our prayer, and I remain confident that this prayer was answered. Since that time, we have served closely with Connie in every facet of children's ministry. To say that we have served together would be a gross understatement. Over that time we have conducted close to 80 sidewalk SONday⁶ programs at the Blount County Boys and Girls Club, and ministered the gospel to hundreds of children in this community. There is simply no way to quantify the value of Connie to our congregation and community. Over the past year⁷ I have witnessed Connie slowly being robbed of her ministerial calling. And there is little question in my mind that the church has been equally robbed of a servant. I know that Connie would never use her resignation as a focus of division in the church. However, this has already become a reality for those of us who know how incredibly valuable she was to our congregation.

Connie is a remarkable soul. Serving with her in ministry I see the fruits of the spirit manifest. As friends, Sarah and I have seen the emotional wear and tear that has led up to this very sad time. Due to Sarah's experience in the criminal justice system, she began to notice signs that pointed towards emotional trauma. (More on this later) She has confided in us, and all I can say is that the whole mess is shameful. Despite her resignation, she has been EXTREMELY gracious in wanting to conform to the policies and procedures the church has in place. It is my fear that her graciousness and desire for peace has already been used to misrepresent the events that precipitated her resignation.

Over the past year, both of our families worked hard to compartmentalize these problems to insure that they would not impact the children and families we are blessed to serve. The church leadership was officially made aware of her problems in November, 2012, although they were aware of tensions among the staff long before. Since that time there have been no official

⁵ Connie did not resign to pursue other opportunities, spend more time with family, or due to any family health emergency.

⁶ This is part of a larger parachurch ministry. It is called SONday School, because every day is His day.

⁷ We became aware of these concerns well over a year ago.

policies or procedures to monitor the office environment or follow-up with concerns.⁸ Before Connie submitted her resignation she sought counsel from a select few, and although she did not provide written copies, she read each of us the letter of resignation. In my opinion, the letter was a mild representation of what I witnessed Connie go through this past year. Connie also wrote a short note announcing her resignation, which was to be shared in the church's monthly publication. She informed me that what she had written was rejected and she was asked to do a re-write. When she declined, she was informed that the letter would not be published. This lack of transparency is concerning.

The following Tuesday I met with the executive pastor. We had a pleasant discussion and I shared with him my experiences with Connie over the past four years. I told him that I was aware of the content of Connie's letter and that what was being put in the Link would white wash over the situation, and that this was wrong. I was told by more than one person, that this is simply not how it works; that there are procedures and policies to insure that everyone is protected. Really? What policies and procedures were there to protect Connie? And what policies are there to protect the remaining staff, which I am certain work under the same duress. The congregation has been presented an explanation that implies an amicable arrangement, which is simply not the case. Her letter to the elder board revealed very serious issues with the leadership, integrity and character of the senior pastor. I am confident the remaining staff remains silent only out of concern for the repercussions to the church family as well as their current and future employment in ministry.⁹ I submitted a list of questions to the board of elders to ask our present and previous staff.

Staff members (past and present) need to be allowed to speak before the BOE without fear of reprisal, and with knowledge that the BOE will first hear and prayerfully consider their points, and will not interject excuses, trivialize or defend another position. (This should be on the record) The BOE should ask, among other things:

- Do you feel the senior pastor (SP) is a threat to the spiritual health of FBCM?
- Did the SP contribute to a toxic culture among the staff, which created division, unrest and tension?
- Has working under the SP robbed them of joy in fulfilling their ministerial callings?
- Do they believe that the SP is fit to lead this staff or congregation going forward?
- Has working under the SP for the past 18 months had any negative effects on their emotional, spiritual and physical well-being?
- Does the staff feel that the BOE has done their due diligence in holding the SP accountable?
- Does the staff feel like the BOE has gone to proper measures to monitor the staff situation and address their concerns?

⁸ Several questions were included in my letter to the elder board that have yet to be answered. I have interviewed Connie, Dawn, Gary, Greg to confirm this information.

⁹ Since this time Connie has signed an affidavit verifying the events in this document. Dawn Herring has also signed my letter to the elder board. Dawn has since resigned her position as well.

These questions were presented one week before the elder vote. During that week, no staff member was contacted by the elder board to investigate these issues. My belief is the remaining staff¹⁰ feels isolated, and unable to openly express similar concerns for fear of backlash. I can see why. From my perspective, there seems to be more concern for protecting the institution than the people. And this protection includes deflecting blame, trivializing concerns, failing to take action, and keeping the congregation in the dark. I am confident that one day we will look back to see how those chosen for leadership responded to this crisis, and I am certain it will not be well remembered. In the meantime what I have seen is more maneuvering to try and make this appear as something it is not.

Section III

A Not So Brief History

The issues surrounding Connie's resignation may have sparked this firestorm, but I assure you this is only one chapter in this story. Issues regarding the leadership of the church have been presented from every demographic of the congregation. There are many who would prefer to sweep this under the rug and attempt to move forward like nothing has happened. Connie may be gone, but the problems that precipitated her resignation have yet to be addressed in any official manner. In fact, the rabbit hole is deeper than most can imagine. Next, I would like to share a little of my story, which will provide some background and even look beyond the periphery of the local congregation.

To say that we were excited would be an understatement. When we received the one call announcing our new senior pastor I literally jumped in the air. My initial relationship with the senior pastor was friendly. We often had lively discussions on a variety of matters ranging from eschatology¹¹ to styles of worship music. For me, I rather enjoyed having a pastor who was interested in discussing the deeper theological issues. It seemed that this was an area of common ground we both shared and could build a relationship upon. There is little question that at this time the pastor had my full support. Not long after his arrival, I asked him to share with me what he felt was his greatest need of prayer as the new pastor of our congregation. He stated that it was on doctrinal matters and **implementing** those into the church. This struck me as a bit odd, as I was very familiar with the qualities the church had identified in selecting its next Pastor, and this item was not on the menu. Our church and the vast majority of Southern Baptist congregations have always resisted implementing exclusive doctrinal systems. Those matters have traditionally been relegated to secondary in nature, and Baptist congregations have welcomed those who hold a diversity of views within orthodoxy.

Now keep in mind that I was very much a proponent of FBCM selecting a pastor who was more intentional about stewarding Biblical fitness for the congregation, and I even expressed this to the senior pastor. However, his fixation on this issue began to give me concerns. Over the next

¹⁰ For the purposes of this document I am only considering staff prior to the hiring of Stan Breedon.

¹¹ That's fancy talk for the 'end times.'

several months, through conversation and teaching¹², I discovered that he held a much different definition of doctrine than how he was presented to the church during the search process.

Although our conversations revealed obvious differences in our positions, they seemed relatively minor at the time, and these interactions were never argumentative. Our concerns began to grow exponentially over the next year. Whether it was the awkward letter that was read during the quarterly meeting,¹³ comments during a sermon, or things said to me regarding the previous staff; these were just a few of the many issues that were giving me pause. Later, I emailed the pastor an article and a question regarding one of his sermons. The response was polite, but dismissive. My follow up email sought to expand upon the matter further, but he explained (in a later phone conversation) that he saw no point in responding because he had, ‘been through all that stuff in seminary, and was beyond debating these issues.’ Considering my role as a teacher in this congregation, and in fact one who teaches his oldest child, you would think the response would have been a little more diplomatic. He seemed more than eager to have these discussions when he believed our positions more closely aligned and I was viewed as an asset. He accused me of being argumentative in our past discussions, which came as a shock to me. Our past discussions did reveal disagreements on certain theological issues, but up to that day they were ALWAYS respectful.

The initial reason for this conversation was to express my concern over the selection of a Mark Driscoll study on doctrine. (More on Driscoll in Section V) The pastor was very familiar with the controversy surrounding Driscoll. I informed him that I had prepared an email to send to the men regarding my objection to this selection, as I suspected that most of the men were not aware of this controversy. However, out of a sense of Christian duty,¹⁴ I wanted to first share these concerns with him directly. His immediate response was that this email was intended to undermine his authority. I explained that even though this study didn’t breach any “controversial” matters per se, promoting Driscoll’s material as a teaching resource could be taken as an endorsement of his views. I asked him to consider whether Driscoll was a name he wanted associated with his leadership. In light of all the controversy during his nomination (regarding women pastors, etc.), I felt my admonition would at least be carefully weighed.

I can imagine many ways a senior pastor could have directed the dialogue from this point, but the conversation took a dramatic turn for the worse. Instead, he began to defend the selection, and stated that this wasn’t an ‘official’ church function. I reminded him that this study meets on campus, is comprised of church members and is led by the senior pastor of the church. He also implied that he was not responsible for the selection of the material. Having been part of the

¹² Specifically in the Men’s morning study led by the senior pastor.

¹³ It has already been brought to the attention of the elder board that the senior pastor implemented a practice (regarding women elders) that was not consistent with the written position he shared with the church. His preference became the policy. (Although not ‘officially.’)

¹⁴ Matthew 18

study previously, I simply find that hard to believe. His defense became even more outlandish and he threatened that if I sent the email he would reply with his own. “Even Adrian Rogers has been criticized,” he responded. Anyone who is familiar with these two knows the absurdity of this comparison. Driscoll, who has been referred to as emotionally abusive (among other things), was now being compared to one of the most beloved figures in Southern Baptist history?!? His reaction was nothing short of dismissive, and he seemed only concerned with how this email would affect him, not whether the men were aware of the issues surrounding the author.

The email was not targeted at the senior pastor, nor the material content, but at the source of the material with concern for protecting the reputation of the church and its senior pastor. This is the original email, which never names the senior pastor in any way.

I think it is a worthy calling to see our lay people equipped to study God’s word for themselves. However, I am very concerned to see a study by Mark Driscoll being employed to teach the men in our congregation issues of doctrine. With all of the options available, I find it hard to imagine that there isn’t a source of scholarship better representative of the cross section of our membership.

Mr. Driscoll is at the point of much contention within the Christian culture today. Although, I take exception with Driscoll on several issues, the concerns about Driscoll are not limited to those who disagree with him doctrinally. [Link](#)¹⁵ In fact, I would argue that there are many within our congregation, including myself, who would be personally offended to have some of his sermon and book material read from our pulpit. Please note, having read several excerpts, I am aware that this book does not bring up those issues, and may be spot on for the most part. However, due to the polarizing nature of much of Driscoll’s work and comments, this can still be seen as an endorsement of his overall ministry. And I for one would be very concerned if that were the case.

Accusations from many sources use words like dogmatic, insulting, arrogant, divisive, sexist, and even vulgar. Consider, there is an entire website devoted to people who have been personally wounded by this man. [Link](#)¹⁶ He is squarely at the forefront of the neo-Calvin resurgence, which often seems divisive and intolerant of believers who don’t agree, specifically on certain doctrinal issues. I do think that doctrinal studies have a place in the church and can be a valuable resource. However, much of this material is filled with the author’s own extra-biblical commentary; therefore I am deeply concerned about any of our membership sitting under his tutelage.

Although I sent the email to the pastor, I elected not to send it to the other men since he implied it would be a problem. In hindsight, I regret that decision and have no reason to believe that he gave my email a second thought, or that he ever mentioned anything to the other men. Several other things were discussed during this conversation that only amplified my concerns. Surprisingly, the discussion ended on a better tone, and I was pleasantly surprised to hear him express an interest in getting together for lunch to discuss our issues. This phone call was on 2/28/13. Other than a casual greeting, that was my last conversation with the senior pastor. It is

¹⁵ <http://www.driscollcontroversy.com/?p=1>

¹⁶ <http://www.ismarkdriscollabully.com/evidence-that-demands-a-verdict-members-stories/>

interesting that the theme (Man Up!) for the Spring men's retreat was sourced from a direct quote of a Mark Driscoll sermon.¹⁷

Early in the senior pastor's tenure, I was part of the Tuesday morning men's study that he lead.¹⁸ Although promoted as a Bible study, this was actually an introduction to systematic theology with a strong emphasis on promoting the reformed view. During these meetings (lectures according to one elder) there were many things said by the senior pastor that sent up red flags, particularly in regards to what he felt one should believe to be part of this congregation. When asked, he plainly stated, 'to be a part of this congregation one needs to be a Calvinist, or at worst a modified Calvinist.' Of course there is absolutely nothing in the church by-laws or history that speaks to any such requirement. Nor, was there ever any motivation by the search team, or church body to choose a pastor who would implement such restrictions regarding membership or doctrine.¹⁹

I want to **STOP** here for a moment and make sure that the reader understands **this is NOT a letter debating the merits of Calvinism**. I have studied these issues exhaustively and can speak with a great deal of competency on the subject. My personal Christian walk is one that has been impacted by various theological streams within the body of Christ. The fact is that FBCM has traditionally been comprised of members who hold a diversity of opinions on these secondary issues. So, I think it is safe to say that the history of this congregation is one that neither promotes nor excludes one system over another.

These issues have historically been viewed as non-essential when defining our statements of belief. In fact, this would be the case in the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptist congregations as well as the Southern Baptist Conference itself. An article from SBC Today states, "*For the most part, Southern Baptists have been glad to relegate disagreements over Calvinism to secondary status along with other important but 'non-essential' theological matters.*"²⁰ Just as reformed theology has its place in both the history and shaping of the Southern Baptist church, so do other streams of theology. Generally, one could sit in a pew with someone on one side who leans more towards Calvinism. On the other side may be one of Arminian persuasion. In front might be a dispensationalist, and behind is someone who is

¹⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkaeAkJOw8>

¹⁸ This has since been moved to Wednesday morning.

¹⁹ I would like to warn the reader against several potential conclusions at this juncture. Some may see view the charges as being nothing more than disputes among conservatives and liberals. Others may dismiss these concerns as mere disagreements in theology. That would be a grave mistake. As one who is a conservative, I want to make sure that we understand what is **really** at the root of this situation. I fear that earlier concerns brought before the elder board may have not been given proper consideration due to the lack of knowledge on these matters.

²⁰ The full statement can be read at <http://sbctoday.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/A-Statement-of-Traditional-Southern-Baptist-Soteriology-SBC-Today.pdf>

ambivalent to the differences therein. That balance is very much in danger due to something called, "**New Calvinism.**"

*"The precipitating issue for this statement is the rise of a movement called "New Calvinism" among Southern Baptists. This movement is committed to advancing in the churches an **exclusively Calvinistic** understanding of salvation, characterized by an aggressive insistence on the "Doctrines of Grace" ("TULIP"), and to the goal of making Calvinism the central Southern Baptist position on God's plan of salvation."*²¹

You may be asking, "So how does this relate to FBCM and the leadership of our senior pastor?" I believe that much of the unrest, whether it is the issue of maturity, honesty, leadership, the exodus of members, or personal conflict, is in many ways rooted in this matter of New Calvinism. It is important to note that this is not a localized problem. Similar events are transpiring in Southern Baptist congregations all over the country. Therefore I think it is essential at this point to unpack much of what is under the surface of this controversy.²²

Consider that a group of Southern Baptist pastors were so concerned about the dangers of New Calvinism that they gathered together in solidarity to present a statement warning against the dangers of this movement. Is this the result of overzealous pastors seeking to exclude those who lean towards the reformed position? No, instead this is as a counter response to a subversive movement impacting Southern Baptist churches and seminaries with a desire to shift them exclusively towards Calvinism. And please note that this shift occurs at the expense and exclusion of those who do not fall in line with some form of reformed theology.²³ To this point, there has been mixed reaction within the Southern Baptist conference (SBC) as this statement does have divisive implications. I am fearful that the SBC, in its desire to keep the peace, will be too long in rightly identifying this threat. And by the time it does, many traditional SBC congregations will have already been besieged.

The Dangers of New Calvinism to the Local Congregation

I want the Elders and church body to understand what is happening on the landscape of the Christian culture and how the dangers of New Calvinism impact unsuspecting congregations. This next article²⁴ illustrates this threat, and references a situation that is eerily similar to that at FBCM. Roger Olson says,

*"A seminary student told me about his home church. His parents are members there and he grew up in it. It's a Baptist church that **has never had any official position on Calvinism or Arminianism.** Its background is Pietist (as opposed to, say,*

²¹ Same as footnote 17

²² I promise this is not some wacko conspiracy theory, and no I am not wearing a tinfoil hat.

²³ For the most part the terms 'reformed theology' and 'Calvinism' are interchangeable.

²⁴ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2012/02/a-report-on-some-recent-conversations-about-calvinism/>

fundamentalist). In other words, it has traditionally had a policy of not fighting over secondary doctrines such as predestination.”

*“The church recently called a new pastor. He is relatively young, not long out of seminary but with some previous pastoral experience. During the search and interview process he did not reveal to the committee or then to the church’s leaders that he is a five point Calvinist. Hardly anyone in the church has been a five point Calvinist and he knew very well that it would be controversial. After he was called and accepted the call, he began pushing Calvinism in a very heavy handed way. He gives books by **Wayne Grudem and Mark Driscoll** to adult teachers to use in preparing their lessons. He unilaterally removed books from the church library he considered unbiblical or unorthodox from a Calvinist perspective. (This is an evangelical church and probably didn’t have many, if any, really liberal books in its library.) He began to insist on being present at all church committee meetings. A committee is not supposed to meet if he cannot be there. He is preaching and teaching Calvinism as if it were the one and only truly evangelical theology. He admits to being inspired by John Piper. The students’ parents are not very knowledgeable about theology but **sense** that the pastor’s behavior and teaching are a problem. The congregation is gradually being disturbed by this situation.”*

It is hard to ignore the similarities. Our senior pastor is currently leading a study on doctrine by Mark Driscoll and is very much a fan of Grudem’s systematic theology, and I suspect has plans to teach this in the church as well. Although I am not completely familiar with his committee involvement, his controlling and ‘heavy handed’ persona is very evident. It was brought to my attention that the Elder Board has never officially met without him being present, even during preparation for his performance review.²⁵ This ‘authoritarian’ approach is very much an evidence of New Calvinism. (More on this later) There is little question that he is FULLY in charge, and seems all but unbridled in pushing through his agendas regardless of the consequences. Listen closely to what Olson says next.

*“What bothers me is illustrated by those two true situations. First, that many Calvinists are **sneaking** into pastoral positions in churches where they know Calvinism is not confessionally traditional and where they have good reason to believe it would be controversial if preached and taught as THE evangelical theology. By “sneaking in” I mean they don’t ever mention it even if asked if they have any beliefs that might be a problem for the church. They become pastor and **only then**, when they feel firmly ensconced, begin to preach and teach Calvinism as the one and only biblical view..... And I think some Calvinist pastors are behaving in a **cultish** fashion by being sneaky and non-*

²⁵On March 1, 2012 Carol Lucas request that the elders meet with her to discuss issues about the senior pastor without him being present. The request is denied.

transparent about their Calvinism until they feel safe and then they begin to impose it on their unsuspecting congregants in a heavy-handed manner.”

I think this information demonstrates that there is something much more serious at the root of this problem. But how did this problem develop within Southern Baptist congregations?

Section IV

“It remains doubtful whether Southern Baptists at large know how radical things have become at their treasured, flagship seminary. Also one suspects if they did, they would understand better the root cause of why so many churches are facing problems with Calvinism.”

This issue of New Calvinism in Southern Baptist congregations has escalated since Albert Mohler took over at Southern Theological Seminary, of which our pastor is a graduate. Southern has been labeled as “Ground Zero” when it comes to promoting reformed theology as “THE” system of belief, and Mohler is the champion of pushing out young, restless and reformed pastors looking to make their mark in the world. (This [article](#)²⁶ speaks briefly of that history.) Granted, there was no question that change was needed prior to Mohler taking office. In fact, I have a dear friend and spiritual mentor who was a student at Southern during that difficult time. Despite the fact that nine out of 10 Southern Baptists embraced biblical inerrancy, many seminaries were teaching an alternate and unacceptable view of biblical authority. This was a genuine reason for concern and change at Southern. Yet, this house cleaning (96 out of 100 professors) resulted in a seminary that now teaches an alternate and unacceptable view of “Reformed” theology, which the vast majority of Southern Baptists still reject today. Mohler was able to accomplish this under the banner of ‘conservative reform.’ Mohler is recognized as a leading conservative columnist and many will find agreement with him on a variety of social issues affecting today’s Christian culture. Still, some believe that Mohler was able to shift Southern to a ‘strongly’ Calvinist institution under the guise of conservative reform, and did so with little resistance. Peter Lumpkin says, “According to Mohler, no convictional, thinking evangelical who wants to embrace the apostolic faith will come to any other conclusion than *“The Reformed.”*²⁷ *There exists no other option.*” The impact of Mohler’s regime is being felt among Southern Baptist congregations today, and I would contend it has hit home at FBCM.

Mohler has been calculated with his responses towards this statement. He said, “*The document was written and released by a group of Southern Baptists who clearly intend to make a theological argument.*”²⁸ That is very much a strategic reply by Mohler, intended to trivialize

²⁶ http://peterlumpkins.typepad.com/peter_lumpkins/2011/04/southern-baptist-theological-seminary-ground-zero-for-young-restless-reformed-by-peter-lumpkins.html

²⁷ http://peterlumpkins.typepad.com/peter_lumpkins/2011/11/al-mohler-says-new-calvinism-remains-the-only-viable-theological-option-by-peter-lumpkins.html

²⁸ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2012/06/06/southern-baptists-and-salvation-its-time-to-talk/>

these concerns to nothing more than the matter of theological differences. As already shown, this is not the case. In fact this is exactly the type of tactic one would expect to be employed by the senior pastor in response to this letter. The basic idea is to dismiss the severity of these concerns with a, “nothing to see here,” flippancy, and to reduce this down to arguing over, “isms.” I can assure you this is another in a long line of tactics employed to divert attention.

Some of the harshest criticisms of “New Calvinism” (e.g. Presbyterian) come from those who hold to a more traditional reformed view. One reformed website says, “We contend that it (New Calvinism) propagates false teaching in the Church of Jesus Christ, misleading thousands upon thousands of young people who are particularly vulnerable to its attractive menu.”²⁹ Traditional, reformed congregations have also experienced turmoil with the rise of this aggressive movement. In fact a senior pastor and several members from a Knoxville congregation were recently excommunicated due to an unsuspected insurgence of New Calvinism into their congregation.

Why the Attraction?

Austin Fischer said, “*Calvinism, once accepted, provides an inner logic with virtually no loose ends that offers its adherents a strong sense of certainty.*”³⁰ The Christian culture has experienced a decay of sorts over the past decades with the rise of groups such as ‘the emergent church’ and the ‘word of faith’ movement. In this wake there has certainly been a decline in doctrinal substance among many evangelical churches. To say that this has impacted our own congregation in previous years would not be a stretch. Lack of doctrinal substance and lethargy are legitimate concerns in the Christian culture today. Books such as *Crazy Love*, *Not a Fan*, and *Radical* are all best sellers that rightly identify this problem, but whether these New Calvinism (or any ism) is the answer is another question entirely.

Whether it is promoting a very high view of doctrine, or magnifying God’s sovereign rule, New Calvinism holds an attraction to those who are frustrated with this lethargy. Doctrinal depth, as well as a gung-ho approach is attracting a new generation like moths to a flame. “Gospel centered,” “Christ-centric,” and “missional,” are just a few of the buzzwords used to set the bait. Now, you may ask, “What could be wrong with any of those things?” Nothing. The hidden danger is that believers take these phrases at face value, never questioning whether the substance of the agenda is accurately reflected by the banner it wears. New Calvinism cloaks itself in what would otherwise be considered solid biblical teaching. After all, how does one ‘question’ being missional? And therein lay the dangers. These buzz words position the agenda behind New Calvinism as being above reproach. So, if someone questions the program, they can easily be discredited as not being ‘mission minded,’ or not about the ‘work of the Kingdom.’ The subtleties of this method and the calculated use of scripture are why so many fail to recognize the danger, or even unknowingly become supporters of this movement. In turn, resistance to this

²⁹ <http://www.newcalvinist.com/>

³⁰ Austin Fischer is teaching pastor at Vista Community Church in the Temple, Texas

leadership can then be utilized to validate the agenda; since after all, the enemy comes to steal kill and destroy.³¹

You may be asking, “So why is this important to our congregation?” Prior to Mohler’s tenure, reformed theologians were more than content to rely on their own seminaries from which they would dispatch graduates to serve already reformed congregations. Traditionally there are very few Southern Baptist churches searching for pastors to operate under that theological persuasion. The results are graduates seeking employment among congregations that do not share their exclusively Calvinistic view.

Since our senior pastor was not called for these purposes, he could not accomplish this through overt methods; at least not at first. He would have to be less than transparent about many of his doctrinal positions. There would need to be a dramatic shift both in the staff and leadership. He has made it clear to the staff that they should all agree on virtually all theological positions. During his tenure, several staff members have challenged him to be transparent with the entire congregation about such things. His response was that he was, “slowly unrolling the scroll.” In the last year I have heard from many (including those in leadership), who were either confused, even misled as to where he stood on these issues. The problem is not so much what he believes, but the fact that he has not been transparent about his positions during the search process or his tenure as senior pastor. I am convinced that had the senior pastor been transparent about his positions on many of these issues, he would not have made it through the search process, much less have been affirmed by the congregation. In hindsight, I think his agenda was to re-write the entire DNA of this church regardless of the cost.

Whether the reformed doctrines have merit or not, there is little question that those in New Calvinism hold a very high view of this ‘system’ of belief. One of my greatest fears is how some adherents are prone to elevate their interpretive system to the authority of scripture itself. There is little doubt in my mind that this system is viewed by the senior pastor as the exclusive lens through which the scripture must be rightly understood. The staff has been told that only by conforming to his positions will the church be able to achieve excellence. One of our key statements says, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” This sounds like a very reasonable foundation for governance, but I suspect that what constitutes ‘essential’ in the mind of the senior pastor would be much different when compared with the majority of the congregation at the time of his hiring.

Section V

The Battered Sheep

At the time of Christ, no one was more learned than the Pharisees. Their knowledge of doctrine was without compare. Yet, their knowledge of the words failed to help them ‘know’ the living

³¹ John 10:10

Word, or discern the truth of his teaching. Jesus accused these men of abusing their authority and misleading those who sat under their leadership. I am leery of any pastor whose ambition is to implement an exclusive doctrinal system. Dogmatic adherence to one view combined with intolerance toward competing views is bound to lead to much more serious concerns among the staff and congregation.

New Calvinism has a very disturbing side, which is revealed in its overly authoritarian tendencies. Ron Enroth, author of ‘Churches that Abuse’ explains, *“The first danger sign of a possibly unsound church, can be seen through a high-handed exhibition of its leadership's **authority**, which often appears unnervingly legitimate. Spiritual abuse can take place in the context of doctrinally sound, Bible preaching, fundamental, conservative Christianity.”*³² For this reason unsuspecting congregants could be supporting an agenda they don’t even fully understand, while assuming the motives are for the greater good of the church.

The demand of allegiance and unquestioned loyalty to the church leadership is part and parcel to this movement. Left unchecked these pastors will impose hyper-authoritarian governance to move their agendas forward. (LINK)³³ The apostle Paul warns, *“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”* (Romans 12:3) Hyper-authoritarianism results in pastors seeing themselves as being ‘the anointed’ and others as only appointed. Based on statements to the staff and the senior pastor’s sermon content there seems to be good evidence that this is his view. This distorted sense of authority will make it difficult for a pastor to receive admonition, correction and encouragement from those seeking to offer counsel.

A prime example of this is Mark Driscoll, pastor at Mars Hill church in Seattle. Driscoll’s bravado has been a catalyst in the growth of New Calvinism. Many of the values promoted by this group are appealing to those frustrated with apathy in the church. No one would suspect that challenging men to ‘man up’ and be Godly leaders would have any negative connotations. After all, there is certainly biblical merit to men fulfilling their roles as leaders, husbands and fathers. (No argument there) On the surface this all may seem very genuine, but at its core there is a sinister and dark side that has left many emotionally and spiritually battered. In fact, there are a Growing number of support groups established to serve those that have been emotionally wounded under this type of leadership.³⁴

The subtleties of spiritual abuse are hard to identify and for the majority of the congregation they often go largely unnoticed. Spiritual bullying is employed by authoritarian pastors to gain control of every aspect of church governance. Whether it is missions, programming, curriculum or leadership, the senior pastor will ultimately have his way and “rule” the church much like a

³² Ron Enroth; *Churches That Abuse* (Zondervan) <http://www.spiritwatch.org/idrelab.htm>

³³ <http://spiritualsoundingboard.com/2013/03/02/4633/>

³⁴ <http://www.abuseresourcenetwork.com/category/spiritual-abuse/>

totalitarian regime.³⁵ Those who already have a favorable impression of the pastor will be enlisted in his ‘inner circle’ to help enact his agendas. They will see a much different side of the pastor than those who offer any resistance or challenge. Should one make it obvious that they are not a ‘yes man’ they will be quickly discarded and their input rejected. Those on the ‘inner circle’ begin to enjoy the benefits of being on ‘the team’ and even unknowingly begin to assist the pastor in moving these agendas forward; all the time unaware that others are in danger. These are primarily members who will quickly defer to the wishes of the senior pastor even when their conscience might say otherwise. He is the leader, after all. They typically have a very high opinion of senior pastors as being ‘the man of God’ and believe the church should unquestioningly yield to his direction. They are likely to see any challenge to the senior pastor as going against the prophet, resisting God’s will, or even as an act of the enemy. Others see any challenge to church leadership as a threat to the institution itself. It isn’t uncommon for the pastor and his supporters to reference those who challenge him as evidence that he is in fact doing God’s will.

For those on staff who fail to blindly submit to his direction the abuse is much more evident. Bullying can be utilized to create division among the staff and dysfunction in the workplace. Any staff member who doesn’t blindly submit will be targeted for removal. The toxic environment robs the staffers of their joy in serving, and impacts their ability to effectively fulfill their duties. Many wonder why anyone would work under these conditions. Barnabas Ministry says, “*Abuse can flourish on a staff, because people would have to quit their job to get away from it. Leaving isn't an easy option, especially to those with children or those who have limited career options.*”³⁶ Speaking out will not only cost them now, but can also damage future opportunities for employment. Remember, they have chosen ministry as their vocation and their options are limited. Therefore, they will have to conform or be forced to put their careers on the line. This tension can often lead to conflict among the staff itself, which then creates a toxic work environment. The pressure to either get on board or get out of the way leads to polarity in the office setting. A staffer who speaks out is likely to be viewed as a trouble maker by those who are less likely to stand their ground. This subtle tension affords the senior pastor a great deal of leverage in getting his way with little resistance.

Others in church leadership can be unknowingly enlisted to help advance this agenda where the ultimate goal is to either re-program the current staff or replace them with those more agreeable to the senior pastor’s agenda. Spiritual and emotional abuse is a very real threat to the church and can often go completely unnoticed by the congregation until it is too late. Barnabas Ministry explains,

³⁵ For example, Driscoll was able to pass new By-Laws that resulted in irrevocable tenure.

³⁶ <http://www.barnabasministry.com/recovery-uncovering.html>

“First, not everybody will see abuse. Many people will not see a problem at all, all they will see is the positive things and they will not be able to understand why there is a problem.” They will not believe anything could be wrong. Second, abuse is frequently restricted to or most acute with staff and lay leadership groups. Often, newer members will not see the problems.”³⁷

There is a growing list of resources dedicated to exposing and dealing with this disturbing phenomenon.³⁸ Spiritual abuse is hard to admit, even when the evidence is overwhelming. The idea of a pastor engaging in this type of behavior is simply beyond reason for many in the church, especially for those whose interactions are favorable and without incident. But this positive experience is not evidence that abuse is not happening outside of their view. Even when clear many will not want to admit that they supported this pastor, or might have even been unknowingly complicit in advancing his agenda. Out of embarrassment it will be difficult for members to accept these allegations. This often results in denial and further division within the congregation.

The Pulpit

Spiritual abuse will also manifest itself in other areas. Pastors like Mark Driscoll have often used the pulpit to attack dissenting voices or to promote themselves as the ‘prophet’ who must be followed without question. Let’s be clear that the pulpit should never be used to disparage others, or to try and sway public opinion regarding disputes involving church leadership. Under this authoritarian rule, the pastor will use the pulpit to attack his opposition, create confusion, or rally support through overly emotional appeals. I have been told by more than one member that they approached the senior pastor with their own concerns only to hear their case being torn apart from the pulpit in a later sermon. This excerpt from one of our senior pastor’s sermons speaks volumes:

“And I also want to say this, because some people say ‘well you just want to run people off...you just trying to get rid of people’ it’s going to be one of two things, and you listen very carefully. I say this with love. Can’t you see I’m smiling? See, look at that. I say this with love. You’re either going to run away or you’re going to run to Jesus. And my goal is that you run to Jesus. No, you can run away, I mean you can walk out those doors, you can find a church that’s dead. You can find a church that’s lifeless, you can find a church that doesn’t believe in the Bible, you can find a church that’s more concerned with what’s going on in the culture or more concerned with whatever it may be than Jesus...You can run off...You can run off...”³⁹

³⁷ <http://www.barnabasministry.com/recovery-uncovering.html>

³⁸ <http://www.abuseresourcenetwork.com/category/spiritual-abuse/>

³⁹ (Sermon: February 17, 2013)

This statement is wrong on a number of levels. One congregant expressed concern to me because he felt that the senior pastor was impugning the character of other congregations in this area. Although that certainly seems to be the case, I do not feel that this is the primary motive for this statement. Instead, this is a classic example of the bully pulpit. Concerns had been brought to his attention regarding many families leaving the congregation. In fact, I had expressed these concerns myself. Shamefully, he employed his position of authority to disparage those who had left the church or might leave in the future. At the same time he is setting the table against any future dissenting voice. The implication is that these people have no legitimate reasons for leaving, but are running from Jesus and to some superficial Christianity. This rhetoric, in addition to being a false dichotomy, is shallow, laced with arrogance, and is an outright **abuse** of power. The fact that a senior pastor would make such a statement from the pulpit is troubling, and this alone should be ample evidence that he is not fit to lead this congregation. This has been brought to the attention of church leadership on more than one occasion. In fact, I recently warned several church leaders that the senior pastor would likely abuse this authority again, and he has not disappointed.

*“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, **with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:1-6).”*

I have no doubt that the senior pastor is totally convinced in his mind that he is right and is in fact called by God to be an agent of reform at our church. Therefore, those who resist his agenda or challenge his authority are seen as a threat to this unity and are expendable in his eyes. Should they leave, they are viewed as running from the truth. It is my opinion that surrounding himself with yes men and agreeable laity are the means by which unity is accomplished and kept. This would also include purging the church of any dissenting voices. The list of those (members and staff) who have either left the church because of our senior pastor, or have relating issues seems to be growing exponentially. And again, the majority of the congregation is in the dark as to why this is the case.

There is no doubt in my mind that genuine restoration will never occur unless the truth prevails. **Unity at the expense of truth is not unity.** Peace at the expense of truth is not peace. Love at the expense of truth is not love. And restoration at the expense of truth is not restorative. In this case unity is pushed ad nauseum to try and deflect or undermine any dissenting voice. Truth, on the other hand is treated as a dirty word.

Paul list several qualities that will preserve unity among the body of Christ. This is not achieved by inflexible adherence to a doctrinal system. It is not accomplished by misusing the pulpit to attack those who disagree or even refuse to sit under your teaching. It is not accomplished by

isolating and alienating those who question, challenge, or simply resist your agendas. It is not accomplished by plunging ahead with grandiose ambitions against the admonition of those around you. It is not achieved by creating a dictatorial atmosphere that serves to belittle and wound those who labor with you on staff. There is much more that I could say on the matter, but for now I will let this suffice. The congregation has been kept in the dark about a myriad of issues that have been brought forth on these matters. This church is in peril, and I fear for its future if a dramatic course correction does not occur.

Section VI

***“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works,
which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10)***

When called to this church, the senior pastor stated, *“If God has called me to this church, he will equip me to lead.”* There are basic virtues and characteristics that should be developed BEFORE someone takes the role of senior pastor. Certainly, many of us are familiar with the pastor who calls you on your birthday and greets you with a big smile. I also know him as a guy who has a great sense of humor. There is no question that he is charming, ambitious, and even personable. But none of those qualify someone to lead a congregation. I have also witnessed arrogance, insensitivity, stubbornness, and a disregard for admonition and correction. Those are flaws and could be the result of a lack of maturity. Being manipulative, dishonest, and lacking genuine remorse are far more concerning issues that speak to his character, or perhaps even deeper issues. And through all this he seems almost oblivious to the damage that he is causing.

For example, the senior pastor was challenged to do the Christian thing and make things right with Carol Lucas regarding their issues. The senior pastor refused stating that he had done nothing wrong, which demonstrates a lack of humility and a desire for reconciliation. Former elder Drew Crain was confronted by the senior pastor and was told that if he was not attending worship then he should not be teaching a Sunday school class. He was informed that this position was supported by the elder board, which was not the case. In response, Drew wrote a letter to the elder board expressing his concerns, and as a result of this confrontation the Crain’s will be leaving the congregation. A student was working on a project with the permission of the music minister, when the senior pastor angrily approached the student accusing him of tampering with the church’s intellectual property. This student had been serving for years in the audio-visual department. This family has also left the church over this incident. Add their name to a growing list of those disgusted with our church leadership.

The senior pastor has attempted to deflect much of the blame with the excuse that he has been busy working on his ambitious plans for our missions program. Henry Blackaby said, “God is already at work all around you. Find out where He is working and join Him.” Since the senior pastor arrived he has essentially undone the most participated ministry (ROC) that this church has ever known, with two coordinators leaving due to issues of trust. The ROC ministry is now only a shell of what it had become. Since his arrival there has been no new programming for

Wednesday nights, no discipleship training, and Sunday night programming has been cancelled. Further, his ambitious missions program is likely not sustainable under current budget projections. I could write extensively on this issue as it relates to our senior pastor. Suffice to say, that he has disregarded encouragement and admonition from several sources and has proceeded headstrong with his agenda, which I would describe as reckless in light of the current situation.

As soon as our senior pastor arrived Connie and I began inviting him to come and observe the sidewalk SONday school program that meets at the local Boys and Girls Club. For the past seven years, this program has reached hundreds of at-risk children in our community with the Gospel of Christ. He has been invited multiple (15-20) times, yet as of today I have not even received 'regrets' to these invitations. How does he expect a missions program to be effective 4,000 miles away when he can't even make it four blocks to see what God is already doing in his community? And just as important, how does a pastor expect a church to be effective in external missions if the church is not internally healthy?

What's next?

Someone asked me, "If our senior pastor showed any signs of contrition for what has happened, how would that change your stance?" As God's children we are forgiven, so we have no other option but to forgive, and this is true whether the pastor genuinely changes or not. That should be quickly settled and resolved in the believer's mind. However, the issue of his leadership going forward is not forgiveness but **fitness**. It is my opinion that if he felt any genuine contrition, his first act would be to resign from his role of senior pastor. I don't see how he could look back on the past 18 months and continue in his role as senior pastor in good conscience.

I suspect that any act of contrition will be nothing more than a vague apology. "I'm sorry it came to this." "I'm sorry if I disappointed you." "I'm sorry if I made a mistake." "I'm sorry if I moved to fast." But you will never hear him admit to any specific sin or act of wrong doing. Never. Instead these will be presented as misunderstandings and differences in semantics. Another excuse will be to say that he was busy and didn't realize these issues existed. Friends, this is all a calculated and text-book response.

Based on my conversations with the elders they are paralyzed by a spirit of fear and doubt; whether it is recalling past times of division in the church, or simply the embarrassment of having to admit that they have completely failed to lead. There is one elder who will support the pastor regardless of the situation and I believe this has emboldened the pastor's aggressive pursuit of his agenda and has served to amplify these issues. This same elder said that my letter presented no 'specifics' regarding the issues with our senior pastor.

“Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.” John 3:20-21

It is sad to say, but the greatest support for the senior pastor comes from those who are either oblivious to these issues, or who have chosen to willfully ignore the seriousness of the situation.⁴⁰ One of those positions is understandable; the other is an outright sin. Now that some of these issues are out in the open, I can see this going one of two ways. Our pastor can acknowledge his complicity in the toxic culture we now have at FBCM, as well as admitting that his vision of ‘what’s best’ is off target. He will resign and allow us to offer support for his personal needs.⁴¹ Or, he will continue down the wrong path in this mode of damage control, which will be to strategically maneuver and try to coerce support. I also fear that he could once again misuse the pulpit to defend himself, disparage others and deflect any blame.

“We KNOW that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

It seems now that our church is at a place where it has to decide where it stands going forward. I have called for transparency, and was told by some in leadership that it doesn’t work that way. I have chosen to speak out at risk to my own reputation, because I believe these issues have remained in the dark for too long. I am certain people will be upset with me for speaking out, but the bottom line is that it never should have come to this point. Our church needed a pastor to come in and wash the feet of this congregation. I recall when Jesus said, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.”⁴² Contrast that with this quote from Mark Driscoll. “I am all about blessed subtraction. There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus (laughs) and by God’s grace it’ll be a mountain by the time we’re done. You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus.”⁴³ Surveying the casualties, it isn’t hard to see where the senior pastor gets his talking points.

Despite the difficult circumstances, I am convinced that God is at work. This church has survived such situations in the past. In fact, I anticipate much good that will come from this situation if we trust God implicitly at this time.

In His service,

Joel and Sarah Lay
865-567-2149.

⁴⁰ James 4:17 “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is **sin** for them.” NIV

⁴¹ As part of the healing process, the congregation should take ownership, offer financial support or severance, as well as encouraging counseling for his issues.

⁴² Mark 10:43

⁴³ <http://apprising.org/2012/07/03/mark-driscolls-dead-bodies-and-chris-rosebrough-with-another-ones-off-the-bus/>