

**1979 - The Literalists**  
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Louisville, Kentucky  
1978

“That you, Marco?”

Frank DeMarco nestled the phone between his ear and shoulder and popped open a can of soda.

“Yeah.” Slurping the residue from around the opening, he settled back into the couch and let the cushions envelop him.

“You hear about Troy?”

“What about him?” He took a big swallow.

“He’s dead.”

Marco gasped, gagging on fizz that burned through his nostrils and splattered onto his shirt and pants. As he coughed and tried to clear his throat, he doubled over and the cord pulled the handset from his neck. Wheezing, he set the can on the coffee table and reached back for the phone.”

“...all right? Marco?...Marco?”

“Yeah...” He hacked and coughed trying to speak. “Yeah...I’m OK. Just swallowed wrong...What did you say?”

“He’s dead, Marco. Troy died in a car accident going home from class this afternoon.”

“What happened?”

“Not sure. That’s all I heard. Thought you’d want to know.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m praying for his parents, but...”

“They’ll need it.” He didn’t want to talk. “Thanks for calling.” Without waiting for a response, Marco hung up the phone, took it off the receiver, and set it on the table. His hand slowly rose...paused...then fell without feeling into his lap. *Dead...Troy*

*dead?...No, that couldn't be!*

They were to graduate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the summer. Nineteen seventy eight had started out such a good year. He pictured the time just a month ago when his friends shared a meal...at this table...right here...and talked about God's call on their lives and His special plan for each of them.

Marco laughed. Troy would witness anywhere. They went to the park once. Three bikers parked near them to use the water tap. These guys weren't just yuppies on motorcycles. Long matted hair splayed out from under headbands. Unkempt beards hung down their chests over sweat-stained T-shirts with pictures of...demons? A large bullet hung from a leather thong around one man's neck. On his arm, another displayed a tattoo of a skull with sword stuck through its gaping mouth. Marco didn't realize he was staring until the biker locked threatening eyes with him. At which point, Marco quickly turned to Troy. The delicate bubblegum scent of nearby hyssop gave way to the kind of rancid odor Marco only smelled in locker rooms full of unwashed gym clothes.

"Hey, you guys want a soda?" Marco remembered cringing when Troy said that.

Frowning, one of them drew his forehead into a knot. "You speaking to me?" he asked turning his hands into fists.

The voice grated on Marco. Why couldn't Troy just be quiet?

"Hey, you a coach?" asked Troy.

The three bikers stared at him.

"Isn't that a whistle around your neck?" he continued.

*No, Troy, no! Just be quiet...please!* Marco trembled, glancing up to see what they would do.

Blinking as if not believing what he heard, the man's aura slumped. He fingered the necklace. "It's...a...**BULLET!**"

Troy shrugged. "We have cokes here if you want some." In the end, the bikers sat down at the table, drank soda, and listened to Troy explain the Gospel to them.

That was only two years ago. With a swat of his arm, Marco knocked the phone and its receiver off the coffee table. How could God allow this to happen, especially to Troy? If anyone had the gift of evangelism it was Troy. He stood, picked up a cushion from the couch and slung it blindly across the room into the base of his fish tank. Water splashed up the glass as angel fish darted for cover. His breath caught and he wiped his eyes. How could God do this?

He reached for the door handle, but once again refused to pull it. Resting his arms on the steering wheel, Marco laid his head on them and looked out the side window at Troy's home...well, Troy's parent's home. Troy was dead; his home was with Jesus... whatever that meant. He remembered a time when he knew what he believed. Now...? He shook his head. Seminary wasn't supposed to be like this. Religious convictions were to be discovered and confirmed.

Some convictions! Here he was, sitting in a car, afraid to talk to the parents of his best friend. Marco sighed. *Are you there, God?* He listened. No answer.

What could he say to them? Their son had just died in a car accident. Someone studying to become a pastor should be able to deal with this. Two years ago...maybe even last year...he would have walked right in, sure of what to say. Jesus died and rose

from the dead giving a promise of eternal life with Him. He provides victory over death. And, in conquering this enemy, He assures us that we have a comforter so we can withstand anything that comes our way.

But the truth really wasn't so clear, after all. Teachings from his classes, tools to aid him, came to mind. If he gave any credibility to the historical method of Biblical interpretation, much of the Bible was probably just stories. When he complained to his advisor that some professors said the miracles may not have happened exactly as written in the Gospels, Dr. Coleman had told him to grow up...that he needed to get past such childhood crutches. A physical resurrection? That's impossible. A spiritual resurrection... maybe. And the virgin birth? A beautiful idea, but no one really believes it these days.

The Bible is a good book as long as you filter what it says...you know, read it in light of the superstitions of the day it was written. But take it literally...? Marco shook his head. No doubt God inspired the words--the same way Dante was moved in creating the Divine Comedy...or Milton was stirred to write Paradise Lost. And the Fifth Symphony, Beethoven was inspired when he composed it. Yeah, he grew up a lot that day. And he didn't like it much.

Marco forced himself to grip the handle. His fingers fought to free themselves, but he would not let them.

*Maybe Troy's parents want to be alone.*

No! This is the right thing to do.

Pulling on the latch, Marco pushed the door open and spun sideways, stretching his legs onto the street before he could close the door.

There. He took a deep breath and started across the street.

*Maybe they won't even be home.*

Yeah. I can hope.

Except for a light in the living room window, the two-story house was dark. No lights outside. Maybe...

With his insides rolling up and down, he came close to the door and shivered ever so slightly. Was that weeping? He paused on the stoop and listened. A laugh? An instructor once told him that the farthest edge of grief can sometimes manifest itself in all kinds of odd ways.

He knocked softly...once...twice.

The sounds stopped. Troy's dad opened the door, eyes red, the remains of a wistful smile fading from his face. "Hello, Marco."

"Hi...I heard about Troy..."

"God's ways are not always what we would want are they?... Please, come in? Judith and I are looking at family pictures of Troy."

"Can't stay long." He knew--and they knew--that was just a good excuse to leave early.

Harry led him to the couch where Judith dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "Hi, Marco..." Her voice caught. "It's good of you to come."

"Just wanted to tell you how sad this makes me and to find out if there's anything I can do for you."

They looked at each other, and Harry shook his head.

Judith slid over. "Have a seat. You might enjoy these pictures."

Harry pointed to a photo of a young boy, Troy, standing beside a park bench. His little black cocker, he called him Sparky, sat obediently at his feet.

“Remember this?” Harry smiled at his wife.

Troy’s mom touched it and turned toward Marco. “Troy always saw the world in his own unique way--but you already know that. Just before this picture was taken, he asked me if they really made homeless people pay to sleep on the bench.”

A loosening laugh rolled up Marco’s chest. Across the back support were the words, *Rent Me*.

“And the spaniels...” A tear rolled down Judith’s cheek. As she wiped her nose with tissue, she nodded to Harry.

With a wounded smile, his breath caught. “... We went to southern California once... Toured the missions. In a courtyard, Troy glanced up at Judith with a most amazed look and asked, ‘Did spaniels really make these buildings?’”

That was definitely Troy. He laughed and cried over stories and pages of pictures with these parents of his best friend. He relived the life of their son.

“You were an important part of his time at seminary,” said Harry.

Judith leaned back. “He was excited about becoming a pastor.”

Harry put his arm around his wife. “He saw things more clearly than most of us. For the last year, he believed the next Southern Baptist Convention in Houston would be a pivotal point in time. He was excited about going.”

Troy’s mother tapped a picture of him and a number of youth. “Our church made him one of the messengers... younger than any we’ve sent in the past.”

Marco remembered Troy talking about it, but these political things never excited Marco much. “Why did he want to go?”

Harry looked sideways. “Surely he talked with you about the direction of the denomination.”

Troy’s talk of the loss of the foundations of the faith never really interested him. Marco was busy soaking up the teachings of his instructors. He shifted position and stared at the pictures.

“Harry, surely, he’s seen it in his classes, even if Troy never mentioned it.” Judith turned to him. “What do you think of the professors here at Southern? Do you find them as liberal as Troy did?”

Marco began to sweat and wasn’t sure exactly why. “Well.” His voice was weak. “I... I don’t think it does any good to label people as liberal and conservative. It gets in the way of a higher critical approach to the scriptures.”

Judith got this look on her face, the kind Marco’s mom used to give him when she was disappointed in some answer he gave. “I see.” She glanced at her husband.

“I know it’s getting late and you’ve got to go,” said Harry, “but to Troy this was important. It defined these past eighteen months of his life. And you are... his best friend.”

True. He nodded and sat back. They would have their last say.

Harry had as much a look of satisfaction on his face as agony would allow. “What did Troy tell you about how his concern developed?”

Of course he knew the answer to the question. This HAD defined his best friend. “First, I think he said a liberal trend in northern universities worried him. Then, second, he saw these same beliefs creeping into Southern Baptist thought.”

“Well, yes,” said Judith. “But the root problem is the same in the north and south; it’s the tendency to seek other authorities than scripture. When we take away that standard, we don’t have much left. The real issue is this: what is scripture?”

“Don’t you think there is too much emphasis on which translation is the right one?” replied Marco, “Scripture is the word of God. I think everyone agrees it’s a good guideline for living.”

Harry moved to the edge of the couch. “The issue is not the Bible’s translation or its ability to change lives. This is the question we need to ask, *what is scripture?*”

Marco felt their eyes on him but stared at the floor.

“Can we really call it the Word of God?” continued Harry. “Is it trustworthy? Is it without error? If so, then we know...” His voice caught. “...Troy is with Jesus now.”

Marco squirmed as one clammy hand gripped the other between his knees. “But isn’t the real issue sin?” He looked up. “That’s what separates man from God. The heart of man is where the problem lies not in our view of the Bible.”

His hosts both lowered their heads. Then Harry spoke. “Two events shaped our son. Oh other things happened, but these were pivotal. In junior high school, he read an analysis of beliefs of Dr. Clark Pinnock. While at our New Orleans seminary in the late 60’s, Pinnock taught that the Bible is generally reliable but not inerrant and that it is not the Word of God. He went so far as to say it contains false prophecies.

“Troy confronted us with these teachings by a Southern Baptist professor. We told him what we believed and encouraged him to study the scriptures. He reaffirmed his faith. But then he asked why the denomination allowed such ideas to be taught in a seminary. Later, while visiting his sister at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, he overheard a discussion on the banks of the Brazos River--I like to think it was Paul Pressler. Troy didn’t know who they were, but the men appeared to be conservatives in our denomination concerned about the same thing that bothered him. And they had a plan, and it sounded good to Troy.”

“I think Marco needs to be going.”

Maybe Judith was more sensitive, being a woman. He didn’t want to argue. He wanted to leave.

Harry stood. “I’m sorry. I was probably coming on too strong.”

“We really are glad you came. You were an important part of Troy’s life.”

“Let me just say this,” continued Harry. “Of our six seminaries, Southern is the oldest and the one Troy thought has the biggest problems. If the denomination is headed down a road that leads to impotency, then our seminaries are leading the way. If we want to remain a positive influence in the world, we must take another path. He felt a split was...”

“Harry,” Judith said softly

*Thank you, God, for the wife.*

Nodding, Harry walked to the shelf and pulled down a small book. “Here. This is Boyce’s Systematic Theology. He founded Southern over a hundred years ago. I just ask that you read chapter 28 on the Atonement of Christ. It really affected Troy. He picked it up this year at the seminary. The whole book is full of gems waiting to be mined.”

These men were all over campus handing it out. But he never accepted one, too extreme. But this was coming from Troy’s parents. Marco reached out and took it.”

“Please find time to read it,” said Judith.

“What do you mean you like what they said!” Dr. Coleman puckered his forehead around the bridge of his nose.

“It rang true.”

“You can’t mean that. Surely you realize that fundamentalists are trying to subvert the freedom of education. Ultimately, they want to control the denomination. It's politics, not theology. The literal interpretation of the Bible isn’t really the issue. Oh, yes, that’s a part of it, but only a minor piece. In fact, it’s power they’re after.”

“Troy’s parents didn’t seem like that to me.”

“The rank and file may appear sincere. But they’re just naive Christians with their heads in the sand. It’s the leaders of the movement, the ones calling the shots, that set the real direction. You can spot it at the conventions. You’ll see it in Houston. They keep trying to put their people in power. Last year it was Anita Bryant. Can you believe it! They found a fundamentalist woman to run for vice president. They hoped a female would receive the sympathy vote. Fortunately, the messengers saw through that ploy and she didn’t get elected.”

“I just don’t see it from down here.”

“Look. There’s a man, ummm, I think his name is Pressler... Paul Pressler. He’s been raising a stink for years now. I heard he talked with Paige Patterson and some other fundies, pushing their literal beliefs on everyone...”

“But...”

“Don’t be a *butt* kind of guy. They’re the fringe now. Watch out that you’re not hoodwinked by propaganda. We’re in an age of enlightenment where truth is finally free from the chains of tradition and closed minds. It's taken years for John Clifford's inclusive view of our faith to blossom. The exclusiveness of creedal belief is finally ebbing. For too long, creeds perpetuated authoritarian dogma and excluded so many who need to know the healing power of Jesus.”

“Didn’t you teach us in class that we’re not a creedal people?”

“We’re not, at least historically. In Augusta, Baptists had no creed except the Bible. But today the fundamentalists would have everyone pledge support of The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Or, if they gain control of the convention, they would no doubt raise its resolutions and motions to the level of dogma. These people have more in common with an independent fundamentalist like Jerry Falwell than the moderate conservatives of our convention. We have never been a denomination that emphasized the opinions of man. But fundamentalists want to change that.”

Marco was sure his advisor was right. To overemphasize doctrines developed by man tends to squelch piety, fervor, and courage. Anyone can come to Jesus. We shouldn't put stumbling blocks like creeds in their way. This is the kind of truth he learned from professors like Dr. Coleman. These were men who studied the scriptures, after all. That said something. Marco smiled and nodded.

Dr. Coleman's face relaxed as he settled back into his chair. “So, what did you say in response to their argument for literalism?”

Dr. Coleman kept a glass on his desk, right in front of Marco, filled with marbles. Marco remembered his using it as an object lesson in a class. The glass was any person.

The marbles represented sin. He filled the glass with water representing God's character. Removing sin makes more room for God's love to shine through us.

"I said that sin is the real issue."

"Good...good..."

"But they argued the Bible is God's word and completely true."

"Well..." Dr. Coleman drew it out with an underlying chuckle. "...We can grant that the Bible is God's word. But it is expressed in the language of man. There is both a divine and a human dimension to it. Once we acknowledge that people did the writing, boundaries must be placed around it. For example..." Dr. Coleman stretched across the table, leaning on his arms. "...what is the primary purpose of the first chapters of Genesis?"

That was simple. "It's to provide religious teaching, not to be a history lesson. Based on the teachings of Clifford and Hall, because men wrote the Bible, it is susceptible to human error."

"Exactly. Likewise, we must offer the gospel in ways appropriate to our time, intelligible and attractive to our contemporaries." He paused. "Troy's parents must be fundamental literalists, right?"

*Just like Troy.* Marco nodded.

"There is a cute aspect to the naiveté of literalists. But we do them a disservice to encourage such narrow mindedness. The world is a big place. We can't close our doors to it. The minds of literalists are closed to the truth that stands knocking. It's been on their threshold for hundreds of years, and they ignore it. Be wary of them. You'll find such people in most any congregation you pastor. Fundamentalism, by its nature, evokes an intransigent intolerance of others. And this is extremely dangerous. It is much too easy to slip over the line that separates spiritual superiority from physical violence.... Did they bring up prophecy?"

"Well, in a way."

His advisor shook his head with sad eyes. "I never understood how some folks believe people can see the future. Only God does that. Sure we can respect the symbolic language of...*prophetic*...scripture, but that doesn't mean we interpret it literally. We should not expect to discover, in these books, details about the end of the world or concerning how many will be saved. They even say Israel's troubles are a result of God's punishment when we all know they are due to its location."

"I know...I know." Like a battery being charged, Marco was energized by his advisor's words. "People today are searching for what's worthwhile, what has real value, what can be trusted, and what's really true."

"And that's not found in the syntax of sentences or in the written word--but in a relationship with God." His jowls quivered. "This is the crucial truth that's shrouded by their war over words. Walk with these great teachers from the past who prepared the way." Dr. Coleman leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "Be vigilant--always on the lookout for efforts to return to the exclusiveness of Calvinistic spirituality."

"Mm-hmm. Troy's parents said something about a plan by conservatives."

"Wouldn't surprise me at all. There will always be those who try to lead us away from the truth. Longing for old dogma, they don't want to keep up with the times. But, for them to accomplish any real change, it would have to be through the national

convention. That's where the power is. We need more messengers that have a good understanding of scripture and how it fits in a contemporary world." He bent forward with an enthusiasm that made Marco jump. "Have you considered going as a messenger from your church?"

Marco replayed the question. He attended a small country fellowship, helping out where needed. They gave him opportunities to preach and free rein when it came to outreach. Most of the folks were over fifty; and, if the convention were in Louisville, a few might be willing to go as messengers--in Texas?...no way. He could go. But...

"It would be a good experience for you."

"I appreciate the offer, but I really need to focus on my studies. The convention is in June and summer is my last quarter here."

Dr. Coleman leaned across his desk. "Look, Marco, this is an opportunity to network, to meet influential people. You'll fit in fine. Besides, we need educated participants. And you've received one of the best educations available."

Going to the Houston Convention was not high on his list. If Troy were right, there would be a lot of contention. Who needs that? Marco just wanted to get on with God's business. "I don't think I can afford the trip."

"Can we sacrifice a little? Even Jesus said the poor will always be with us. That's why we have the Annuity Board. With their help, you will do fine financially in the long run. So look at this as an investment in future ministry."

Marco stared at the glass of marbles. He had a little savings, but that was to deal with emergencies. The church gave him twenty five dollars when he preached, and love offerings were taken for him every so often. But this money covered food. And he wasn't extravagant with his meals.

Absently turning a pencil end for end in his hands, his advisor stared at Marco over the top of glasses that rested low on his nose. "I'll tell you what...I've never done this before...But you've been one of my best students. You've matured here at Southern. You arrived a spiritual child and are leaving an adult. I'll arrange scholastic credit for you. And your church should be able to help financially, especially after I call them."

"But..."

"No buts about it." A smile stretched across Dr. Coleman's face. "You'll get credit, meet the right people, and it should cost you very little." He stood and walked around the table. "I'll even help out financially."

Marco rose to his feet ready to shake hands.

His advisor put his arm around his shoulder and ushered him to the door. "This will be an experience you won't forget."

Marco sat alone, at the same table where Troy had witnessed to the bikers. Like light shining off crinkled cellophane, the sun's rays spattered through trees on the far side of the park, working its way into night. He was going to the convention. Dr. Coleman must have called the church because; when Marco got to his apartment that morning, a message from the chairman of the deacons said the church would help out as much as they could. The last time they sent a messenger was nine years earlier.

He took a deep breath and sighed. Troy wanted to go. Seeing the convention as a battleground, his friend had been excited about it. Was this really a crossroads for

Southern Baptists? Surely not. Conservative views still prevailed in the convention, probably too much so--Troy's parents were proof of that. Would there really be a fight in Houston? God wants unity in Christ's body. But, like Dr. Coleman said, he would meet leaders from the Foreign Mission Board, the Home Mission Board, Woman's Missionary Union, the Baptist Sunday School Board, and Christian Life Commission--all important SBC entities. This would only help his future ministry. Nah, there wouldn't be any division.

But Troy's parents were convinced. Maybe they wanted it to be so, for their son's sake. What if fundamentalists confronted the modernists... Marco drummed his fingers on the table, and his stomach drew tight.

He was going to the annual meeting in Houston. His church made him their messenger; they were paying. Dr. Coleman was paying. He drummed a little bit harder. He would get credit for attending.

But shouldn't you have convictions to attend?

Marco's fingers stopped drumming and made a tight fist. *I have convictions.*

Aren't beliefs based upon the application of His Word?

*God wants more than just rote acceptance of his Word. He wants us to live the life, to meet people's needs, to work in the field and relieve suffering. That was what Jesus did.*

The Bible says salvation is not by works.

*But good deeds were created for us to walk in them.*

Marco stood. "I need something to eat," he said to no one in particular.

Turning up his stereo, Marco let the music from To Be An Instrument wash over him. But it didn't drown out the thoughts.

Sometime in the 1920's, J. Frank Norris of Fort Worth alleged that Southern Baptists had accepted "modernistic" teachings on Scripture, evolution, and the church. Then in 1961, Ralph H. Elliott published The Message of Genesis. This was what Troy's parents said affected their son. In 1969, the Sunday School Board released volume 1 of The Broadman Bible Commentary written by English Baptist G. Henton Davies. Concerning Genesis 22, Davies questioned whether God really commanded Abraham to kill his son Isaac. No doubt about it, the older generation was more conservative than Marco's. He grew up in a traditional church. Seminary was his first taste of a more intellectual approach to scripture.

Two sides were lining up. He would be in the middle of it in Houston. "Ohh." Marco grabbed his stomach and leaned forward. It hurt. The strains of his favorite song on the album started echoing through the room. "It's Just Not Enough To Love Jesus." He knew that. But trying to live it was not always easy.

"I was up most of the night praying."

Dr. Coleman frowned. "What's there about the convention that troubles you?"

"I think it's the prospect of arguments. I don't want to pick a side. Jesus doesn't want division in his body."

“Well, of course not. But people don’t always do what Jesus would have them do.”

“And I think that upsets me the most.”

“God calls us to walk through these valleys, Marco. We’re to be lights. And a light is only valuable when used...”

He knew this was how his advisor would react. What did he expect, that the man would suddenly agree he should not to attend the annual meeting?

“...Important decisions are made at the national convention. Given a chance, fundamentalists would dictate what’s taught in the seminaries. If they have their way, we will become a centralized, controlling denomination. Culturally, that would chauvinize us, make us less...well, less Baptist. Who knows, this meeting might be the one where your intellectual voice keeps us headed in the right direction. Don’t shy away from battles, Marco. Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple. He took a stand. Follow in his footsteps. And, just a century ago, Clifford faced persecution from Spurgeon. Where would we be today if he just thrown up his hands, too upset to argue his beliefs?”

Nodding, Marco sighed agreement.

“We need level heads like yours at the convention. Conservative fundamentalists are great at their pontificating shibboleths and simplistic slogans. Crowds are easily swayed with a bumper sticker theology. You must be there to represent reason.”

When Marco left Dr. Coleman’s office, all the worries were gone, again replaced by an enthusiastic anticipation. His advisor was right. Jesus didn’t avoid confrontation. It filled the Lord’s ministry. If arguments did erupt in Houston, he would be ready.

Scratching his head, Marco sat back in the chair. The words from Boyce’s Abstract of Systematic Theology surely sounded right. But they just didn’t jive with what he’d been taught--as if looking at his fish tank and finding a twenty four inch, two and a half pound carp sucking air from the water's surface rather than seeing his five lovely angel fish waiting serenely for him to talk to them through the glass. By this time in seminary he should know what he believed. He hoped these doubts and concerns would go away once he got a church. That’s what the professors said. Yet here he was, reading the abstract Troy’s parents had given him. The carp was beating the water into a froth.

He turned to the history book opened on the table next to Boyce's Abstract. This conservative/liberal debate wasn’t new. It quoted a man of impressive credentials. As a professor at Harvard, Crawford Toy quickly built up the Semitic Department. He offered instruction in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Ethiopic, the Talmud, general Semitic grammar, the history of Israel, the religion of Israel, Old Testament introduction, quotations from the Old Testament, criticism of the Pentateuch, criticism of Chronicles, and the Spanish and Baghdad Caliphates. Using Darwinian evolution for evidence, Professor Toy said that as science reveals new truths, scripture must be reconstructed along rationalist guidelines. This might require disregarding divine inspiration of the text. To him, a literal interpretation was a detriment to truth.

Marco nodded. That sounded a lot like his professors at seminary.

The box on the side of the page said **Spurgeon wanted orthodoxy, even if it meant restriction of some freedom of thought. Clifford wanted liberty, even if it**

**meant the presence of unorthodox teaching.**

Marco groaned. What did he want?

Six was a good age. No cares, no worries, parents to watch out for you...and an ummpad. He hadn't thought of his security blanket for years. So smooth on his cheek. And the smell--his smell--the world had been a good place when he held his ummpad. But grownups don't want their kids to be secure. Every time his mother washed it, for some reason it shrank in size...down to a 2 inch square. Finally, his blanket disappeared. Life was never quite the same after that. He smiled. He would never do that to his children.

There, next to the window, in the bookshelf--the camphor box his parents gave him. He hadn't thought of it for months. Feeling each groove in the intricately carved wood, he took it down and placed it on the table next to the book. The lid opened as easily as it used to. He gently inserted his fingers under the tattered and frayed burlap.

Somewhere in his family's past, a man named William weaved a silk fabric and wrapped it in this coarse cloth. William used it to show the difference Jesus made in a life. Then he was burned at the stake. This ancestor had been so sure of what he believed.

Marco's earliest recollections involved hazy memories of the box. Even as a child it fascinated him. His parents let him touch it if he begged. It comforted him through relationship problems in high school.

When did he outgrow it? He hadn't looked at it since...since *growing up*. That wasn't right. Marco unrolled the bundle, something he seldom did. Each movement strained the fibers and shreds marred the edges. The subtle smell tickled his nose--the smell of his ancestors. With the bickering he sensed around him, was the denomination like this silk? When he touched it, shivers ran up his back. How many before him found security in it rather than doubts?

With the silk and the burlap beside him, he returned to the Systematic Theology, Chapter 28, The Atonement of Christ. A restless twitch moved him forward in his chair. The first viewpoint that Boyce discussed was that of many of his instructors.

This proceeds on the principle that God is pure benevolence, that vindictive justice is incompatible with his character, and that upon mere repentance, God can and will forgive the sinner. The work of Christ, therefore, is regarded as one in which he simply reveals or makes known pardon to man. Nothing that he has done secures it, because he had nothing to do to this end. It was already prepared in the benevolence of God's nature, and is simply now made known. The advocates of this theory explain away all that the Scriptures say on the subject of Christ's death for us, by maintaining that his life and death were mere examples to us of the manner in which we should live and submit to God. In their view, therefore, Christ is merely a great teacher and a bright example.

This position was picked apart as were others. Then Boyce used more than half of the chapter to argue the case for his conviction from scripture.

The Calvinistic theory of the atonement is, that in the sufferings and death of Christ, he incurred the penalty of the sins of those whose substitute he was, so

that he made a real satisfaction to the justice of God for the law which they had broken. On this account, God now pardons all their sins, and being fully reconciled to them, his electing love flows out freely towards them.

He knew what he'd believed as a child. He knew what he'd been taught in seminary. Which was right? Like an explosion in the night a thought struck him, knocked him back in his chair. None of the beliefs questioned the omnipotence of God. If He is all powerful and if He wants us to have a book describing Him, His character, and His relationship to man, then He can do it. He can work through man to create just that book. Our frailty couldn't prevent such a God from bringing that about.

Does God want us to have such a book?

*God created us; He loves us; He has a plan for us. Yes, He wants us to have this revelation.*

Is the Bible this revelation?

Marco's mind raced back in time. Truth rings from its pages. It is the only compilation of writings that speak of such a relationship...in this way. *Yes, this is God's work.*

Is it the completely true and perfect revelation or is it not? Well, if this is God's plan, and this is his book, then, *Yes, it is completely true and without error!*

On the table in front of Marco was that Book.

He stood, raised his hands toward heaven, and yelled, "Yes!" Then he did a crunch, pulling his arms down to his side and his right knee up to his chest, followed by a victory dance around the table. He knew it now. Jesus IS the God of his childhood.

Now...he was an adult.

As he gently raised the burlap and the silk, his eyes welled up. He tried to wipe them with his shoulder, but one tear slipped off his nose and fell onto the corner of the silk. The splattered stain looked just like another old one next to it. Ancient marks spotted the fabric. Marco always wondered what tarnished it. Now he knew.

The years at seminary were so like this silk and burlap. How many of his friends had given up the silk teachings for the burlap? How many would go to churches carrying burlap with them? But the Southern Baptist Convention was not tattered. It was strong enough to allow internal debate. It grew and changed.

Resting in security's protective embrace, he carefully returned the cloth and its wrap to the box and placed it on the shelf.

Marco hesitated outside Dr. Coleman's office but not because he lacked conviction. This was his advisor, the man who helped map out his education. A warm feeling of respect mixed with the chilly expectation of disappointing the man. He bent his head downward and turned to go.

"Marco." Dr. Coleman peeked out the door, a smile filling his face. "I thought I heard someone out here. Come on in."

Marco smiled weakly and shuffled in.

The smile on his advisors face morphed into seriousness. "Why the sad look?"

Marco's stomach trembled. "I've prayed concerning the Convention, and it really wouldn't be right for me to go without talking more about it with you."

“I thought we went through this a couple days ago. Of course you should go. You’re needed there.”

Marco nodded. “I know. And I do want to go.”

“Well then, what’s the problem? You’ve got funding. Credit will be given to you. It’s all set.”

Marco wanted to come right out and say it, but this fear lapped against him like waves pushing a child to the ground. “And I appreciate the funding you helped arrange and the credit you’ll give me.”

Dr. Coleman smiled and settled comfortably into his chair, peering over the top of his spectacles.

Marco tensed. “But it would be wrong of me to go without telling you what happened last night.”

His advisor gave him that fatherly look, “I’m all ears.”

“I read Boyce’s Systematic Theology. Well, at least part of it. Troy’s parents gave it to me. Said it was a book to be mined.”

Dr. Coleman chuckled. “The only mining they want is that a wife mind her husband.”

Marco shifted his position. What could he say to that?

His chuckle died away. “Go on...go on...What did you think of it?”

“Well, uh...I picked out some good jewels.” He smiled. “I think it is very... insightful. Especially the chapter on the atonement of Christ. There can be no other way to God. Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

Dr. Coleman leaned forward, eyes on Marco. “You must realize, Marco, that John 14:6 is a most unreliable source.”

“If God is omnipotent, he won’t let man get in the way of the revelation of truth. I think Boyce is exactly right, and the Bible is completely true.” Marco moved to the edge of his seat, words bubbling up from inside. “This light hit me. God wants us to know him, not just in a scholarly way, but personally. His Word is His revelation; it’s a trustworthy guidebook...”

Staring at Marco, Dr. Coleman’s jaw gradually lowered.

“...I never considered what’s meant by the substitutionary atonement of Christ, not really. It’s like the magnolia tree outside your window, wonderfully beautiful but overlooked in its familiarity. Jesus had to die and rise again...really rise. I believe He was dead, buried, and resurrected. He walked out of that tomb.” The glass of marbles on the desk caught his eye. “It’s like your glass here.” He turned it slowly. “The marbles can represent sin and the water the character of God. But how does the water get into the glass in the first place? Someone needs to do that. Jesus did that in us by dying on the cross in our place. He...”

Dr. Coleman wagged his head. “I truly thought you were beyond all this, Marco. You’re probably reacting to the death of your best friend. Go home and think about what you’re saying. Remember what you’ve learned.”

“Sir, Troy’s death isn’t the reason...or his parents. God’s Spirit convicted me of the sin of my unbelief. He...”

“Oh, so your professors here have a sin of unbelief?”

“No...No.” Marco shook his hands back and forth. “That’s not what I meant at all. It’s me. I...”

“I think you need to go home and consider--strongly consider--this...decision.”

“Sir, I have. I prayed most of the night.”

His advisor had no smile on his face when he stood. “Well, I am glad you came to me with this. Perhaps you are right about not being ready to go to the annual meeting.” Before Marco could say any more, Dr. Coleman ushered him out and closed his door.

The disappointment welling up in his chest surprised him. Sometime since yesterday, Marco developed a longing to attend the national convention. His advisor’s parting words played over and over. He had known this was a possible outcome but didn’t consider the impact until Dr. Coleman spoke the words. He WAS the right person to go to the convention. He knew that now.

The walk home was a long one; Marco took the out-of-the-way path around the park. It gave him time to pray and think...and it passed Troy’s parent’s house. He stood on the sidewalk wondering why he should be surprised at finding his way there. Since the funeral, Troy’s parents kept in touch with their son’s friends--calling, sending cards. They were ministering more than being ministered to.

He walked right up and knocked.

Judith answered the door. “Hi, Marco.”

“Just out walking and found myself here.”

“You know you’re always welcome. Harry’s working.”

Marco put on a serious face. “I read the book he gave me.”

“And, what did you think?”

Marco broke into a smile he could no longer contain. “It changed my life.”

With a surprised gasp and a smile, she hugged him. “I’m so glad for you.”

“I think I’m as excited about the convention as Troy was. And I understand its importance.”

“Harry will be so pleased.”

“I’ll stop by some evening when he’s home. I really want to tell you both about how my life is changing.”

“We’ll look forward to it.” She wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

Pushing the door open with conviction, Marco tossed his books onto the table and grabbed a soda from the refrigerator. A blinking red light caught his attention. Pushing a button he listened to a message, from the chairman of the deacons.

“Marco, we had a meeting today with the pastor. Your trip to the convention will cost more than we can afford. And the board thinks it would be wise to question you before we allow you to go as our messenger. See me on Sunday.”

Marco collapsed into the chair by the table. Without their support, travel to the convention would be too costly. And if his church wouldn’t send him, how could he go? Dr. Coleman wasn’t a supporter anymore. He sighed, a sick feeling forming a knot in his gut.

Judith and Harry had told him the plan. Conservatives simply needed to attend

and elect their president. He would appoint like-minded folks to the committee responsible for nominating trustees of SBC boards and institutions. Within 10 years, all key positions could conceivably be filled by conservatives. But for this resurgence to come about, people with convictions like Troy needed to attend, people with convictions like his own.

He placed his hands behind his head and looked up. "Lord, you know I want to save our convention. It needs to be a force for you in a world where people are looking for right in the wrong, and wrong in the right. But I need you to provide the way."

With a deep breath, he stood to his feet and went to the kitchen counter to make some hamburger hash. Fretting about it would accomplish nothing. In the middle of his meal, the phone rang.

"Marco," said Harry, "I was glad you got to read Boyce's book. Judith tells me it changed your views."

Marco told him about the revelation and talking to his advisor.

"We don't know what your current situation is with going to the Houston meeting. But our church still has Troy's vacancy in the messengers. I'm sure there's a way to work out your representing us, if you want to."

*God is good!*

In the depression of the 20's, the dust bowl of the 30's, and the military movements of the 40's, Baptists migrated from the South looking for work. Baptist churches already existed throughout the country, but these northern fellowships were very different from what Southerners were used to. The Southern Baptists formed their own churches, associations, and state conventions and sought affiliation with the SBC.

Northern Baptists opposed Southern encroachments in areas where they already had a presence. To mediate disputes, Northern and Southern Baptists held a number of conferences resulting in the Comity Agreements. Southern Baptists would stay south and Northern Baptists would stay north. But in 1940, fourteen churches in California formed a state convention and, in 1941, appealed for SBC affiliation. The SBC accepted the new state convention in 1942. In 1950, the Northern Convention changed its name to the American Baptist Convention and invited other Baptist groups to affiliate under this inclusive umbrella. At the same time, a SBC committee was studying a change to that same name.

The earliest SBC church in new England was the Screven Memorial Baptist church, formed in New Hampshire in 1960. The last state to form an SBC church was Vermont in 1964.

Excitement would not be contained as Marco reviewed his history. Behind the Mason / Dixon line, the south grew, protected like Israel in the womb in Egypt. During the middle of the twentieth century, the Southern churches grew in relative isolation. The one Southern Baptist entity that had not been isolated was their seminaries. An influx of professors and administrators educated in the liberal northern universities gradually changed these and other institutions. The Bible was relegated to just a good book.

Words came to his mind, spoken by Robert G. Lee, who died a year earlier. "You can count on me until my tongue is silent in the grave and until my hand can no longer

wield a pen to keep my unalterable stand for the Bible as the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God--giving rebuke to and standing in opposition to all enemies of the Bible, even as I have done for 50 years."

Marco jumped up with a loud shout. Lee's voice may have been silenced, but his was given life. Now the fundamentalists can emerge, a force to be reckoned with. We will come out and change the world!

Southern Baptists have been involved in what was alternately known as "The Takeover" and "The Resurgence" since at least 1979. What led to such internal hostilities? To what extent have events of the past 30 or so years been rooted in politics? To what degree have they been founded in theology? Conservative presidents have been elected in every Southern Baptist Annual Meeting since 1979. At the same time, the denomination has become more centralized. Votes of the convention have impact on the seminaries. Furthermore, a litmus test on scripture has been put in place for leaders in the seminaries and other arms of the convention.

What do fundamentalists believe? Between 1910 and 1912, a series of 12 paperbacks entitled "The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth" were published. The Five Points are 1) divinely inspired and inerrant Scriptures, 2) deity of Christ and the virgin birth, 3) the substitutionary atonement, 4) Christ's bodily resurrection, and 5) His personal, premillennial, and imminent second coming.