

Editor's Note: This story was originally conceived and written for the *Unionite* special edition commemorating David S. Dockery's 15th anniversary as president of Union University. It was held for this issue because it is relevant to a discussion of biblical scholarship.

A Mind for Truth A Heart for God

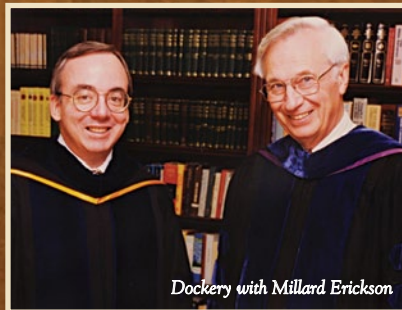
A Baptist Theologian's Contributions to the Church, Academy, and Society

By Jerry N. Tidwell and Douglas E. Baker

When David Dockery stepped to the podium on January 31, 2009 at the annual meeting of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities in Washington, DC to present the Mark Hatfield Leadership Award, he gave a cogent and concise explanation of the exact purpose of the award within the entire organization of CCCU. The granting of this prestigious award has become one of the highlights of the annual CCCU conference. Past recipients included evangelical luminaries like Arthur Holmes, Carl F.H. Henry, Chuck Colson, Billy Graham, Rick Warren and others. Dockery twice before had been invited to participate in the presentations of this award, first with Carl Henry and then Rick Warren. In 2009 he was invited to make the presentation to the brilliant theologian, J. I. Packer. "J. I. Packer has shown us the way forward by connecting the dots between solid Christian thinking and appropriate application," Dockery stated. Dockery swept through Packer's literary contributions giving a summary of each and its appropriate application for leaders in Christian higher education. He stated that Packer had "pointed us beyond mere rhetorical and pragmatic responses, calling us afresh to think Christianly about and in all aspects of life."

For those who heard these words from Dockery, it became obvious that Packer had been a shaping influence in his own understanding and vision for a university. Early in his own theological study and

formation, Dockery had pressed against difficult questions about the Bible's inspiration, authority, and proper application to the modern era. He emerged as one unafraid to engage in serious academic study and remained committed to a plausible structure of theological thought grounded on what distinguished Baptist theologian James Leo Garrett stated was Dockery's "specialization in biblical hermeneutics."



Dockery with Millard Erickson

In his acclaimed 1995 volume of *Christian Scripture*, Dockery outlined doctrinal pillars that both systematically and practically articulated a doctrine of Holy Scripture that affirmed the truthfulness of Scripture and provided an interpretive method by which every Christian could have confidence that the Bible was to be regarded as the very words of God – the vox Dei. His book on the subject, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in Light of the Early Church* (1992), had revealed that interpreting the Bible was not merely a matter of subjective speculation based on shifting opinions of textual elasticity. Rather, reading the Bible was best accomplished in a context of understanding the narrative of Scripture itself to be inspired and authoritative as the Word of God in communion with the Church and the best of the Christian tradition. The Bible itself provided guidance for its own interpretation with the textual and contextual keys revealed therein.

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An Evangelical Baptist/ A Baptist Evangelical

David Dockery came of age in a community where the Bible was considered to be an authoritative guide for life. The Alabama native was born into a Southern Baptist culture that inculcated the Christian faith through a programmatic emphasis supported by a denomination organized around efficiency. During his years in graduate school, there developed an intellectual curiosity that propelled him toward a deeper understanding of a distinct evangelical identity. Dockery wanted to know how Baptists (and particularly Southern Baptists) fit into the broader Christian tradition and the wider world of evangelical life.

Time spent as pastor of a church in New York and further study beyond his preparation at Southwestern Seminary at institutions such as Grace Theological Seminary, Texas Christian University, and the University of Texas provided for him an informed perspective of the development within what has often been called "the pattern of Christian truth." In his studies, Dockery's Baptist and evangelical convictions were reinforced, but not uncritically. His reading deepened his appreciation for the creeds and councils of the Early Church.

Dockery was able to construct carefully worded statements that encapsulated the history of a doctrinal precision all the while incorporating a distinctive Baptist theological perspective that was wholly orthodox, biblical, and evangelical. Early in his training as a Baptist theologian he sought to publicly learn from and identify with key evangelical leaders such as Carl F.H. Henry and Millard Erickson. Always ardent supporters of propositional revelation as the foundation for engagement with the world, both Henry and Erickson helped shape and sharpen Dockery's mind for the strategic work of both biblical theology and cultural engagement.

Over time, Dockery's theological study gave way to a multi-dimensional understanding of biblical applications that refused to restrict the influence of the Bible as merely a guide for pietistic practice. Tracing his thought through his successive

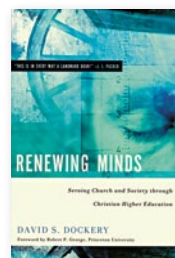
writings, it is not difficult to see that Dockery developed a worldview that sought to show how Christian theology had relevance for all academic discussions. Captured by the contributions of the Christian intellectual tradition for both the Church and society, he was able to strengthen his thoughts of integration to such a degree that by the time he was elected president of one of the SBC's oldest universities in 1995, a vision for serious intellectual engagement with various academic components and expressions was paramount in his vision for the university. With Dockery at the helm, Union University would experience continuity with its historic legacy, but a rediscovered path would be laid that would propel the institution into an evangelical and Baptist milieu quite unlike anything seen at the school before or since.

His inaugural address gave hints of what was to come. The title alone provided insight for the future. *The Great Commandment: A Paradigm for Christian Higher Education* began with a method that is observable in most of Dockery's addresses: a detailed cultural analysis that highlights the theological and sociological ramifications of present actions in light of an historical perspective. Herein he provided glimpses of curriculum changes that would not only educate students for various professions provided by the teaching faculty of the university, but Dockery went a step further by stating that the primary purpose of the university was to prepare students to love God with their minds. How this would be accomplished in the context of educational pedagogies and methodologies involved a new vision for the university to become and remain "a seamless whole" where "an interrelatedness" marked the university as a grace-filled community committed to "thinking Christianly" across the curriculum.

The ensuing years resulted in books, articles, and presentations that harnessed the forces and articulated the means at work to establish and strengthen a Christian perspective on all aspects of learning and living. New dimensions in higher education's role and purpose in the community prompted more thoughtful responses to the secular thought that characterized the mainstream

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Academy. When *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society through Christian Higher Education* (2007) appeared, Dockery's thoughts on the university had reached their zenith. Years of study and practice had honed his ideas into a carefully worded work, described as "visionary and magisterial" by J. I. Packer, which spanned the gamut of what it meant to love God with the mind to the fully orb'd development of a theology for Christian higher education.



could not simply ignore the discussions going on around them. He believed far too many Christians sought to completely avoid challenging viewpoints by creating a hegemonic bubble that shut out all secular influences. More and more he looked to the Early Church for help, and he found great insight in the life and work of Clement of Alexandria (150-215). In

Renewing Minds, he provides critical analysis of Clement's writings and suggests a path forward that united a curriculum that was rigorous in a community that was spiritually supportive.

Here, Dockery's vision for the Christian university finds its goal. Business as usual was not an option for him, and he said as much when he wrote, "We must recognize that we can build new buildings, raise significant gifts, recruit great students, create wonderful programs, and design creative delivery systems; but if it is not undergirded by serious Christian thinking, then our vision will be misguided." His vision was founded on an orthodox understanding of the incarnation of Jesus Christ as "an essential theological affirmation" that held "implications for all things across the curriculum."

The notion of the integration of faith and learning, therefore, became more than a slogan. Dockery was able to construct a roadmap and apply incarnational aspects of Christian truth to the world of the Academy. His distinctive vision for the Christian university provided a big-picture manifesto. As important as theological grounding was and is to Dockery's work in the university, he openly stated that "our goal at Christian universities in every course must be to engage the subject matter, the true and various options associated with it, and issues of our day in the various areas of learning while recognizing that God, the Source of all truth, is central in every discipline."

It was here that Dockery's lifelong study of biblical hermeneutics came full circle. From his years of study, he was able to consistently fuse the study of the Bible with the challenges of the modern era as he closed the gap between the Bible and the classroom. While it was a work in progress with ever-changing challenges, he had

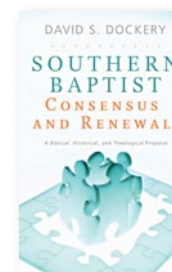
helped to successfully restore the role and purpose of Christian higher education as something more than simply secular education cloaked in piety, chapel services, and student mission trips. Theological truth could successfully guide an institution without stifling serious intellectual inquiry and rigorous research.

Southern Baptist Statesman

The Southern Baptist Convention has sometimes been described as one disagreement away from destruction. Throughout the past three decades, the SBC has been involved in a family discussion of sorts that has not always been civil. The age of the Internet has rendered conversations both immediately accessible and passionately destructive. Early in the last decade issues of control and ministry practice began to emerge in ways that threatened to divide the SBC over theological debates, methodological practices, new ideas of missional engagement, and loyalty to denominational programs.

Dockery envisioned a series of conferences at Union University that sought to address such key issues of Baptist identity in a way that fostered unity in the midst of diversity. In 2004 and 2007 conferences were held that convened leaders from a cross section of Baptist life to address obvious disagreements and work toward consensus. The latest conference (2009) addressed issues surrounding the future of Southern Baptists, evangelicals and denominations.

Dockery's interest in building a new consensus was seen in the release of his book, *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal* (2008). The book brought his lifelong Baptist roots to a new level of engagement with the SBC. He called for a renewed understanding of the Gospel as the convergence point for a new century of Southern Baptist witness. Methodological preferences aside, he believed that agreement on essential Christian doctrines provided Southern Baptists the basis for cooperation as a people who must remain passionately committed to global missions,



Baptist worship, education, and a rediscovery of Baptist history.

The book stands as both a primer for Southern Baptists who need instruction and understanding of their theological history as well as a manifesto for the denomination he obviously loves and to which he remains committed. The Church remains a focus of concern for him even as many universities have drifted from their theological heritage. Under his administration, Union University has experienced a renewal of Baptist distinctives while not allowing itself to become sectarian.

In a speech at California Baptist University in 2009, Dockery celebrated the 400th anniversary of Baptists by declaring that he considered himself a "Christian, an evangelical, a Baptist and a Southern Baptist." That self-understanding has helped shape not only the university he leads, but the denomination he serves. This idea is nothing new as similar confessions were made by some of Dockery's heroes like John A. Broadus and A. T. Robertson. When controversy looms, Dockery has been summoned to help "build bridges" of understanding in and across the SBC, looking for ways to move "beyond the impasse." As a theologian he has used serious scholarship to serve the Church. He has written Convention-wide doctrinal studies on multiple occasions and is the only theologian to write the annual Bible study material used by SBC churches on both Old Testament and New Testament books (Ecclesiastes/2011 and Ephesians/1996).

The contributions of his work as a theologian, author, university president, and minister of the Church reveal a capacity to actively and simultaneously manage issues on multiple levels with different and various constituencies. In 2009, James Leo Garrett, in his four-century study of *Baptist Theology*, identified Dockery as one of the ten shaping theological voices of our current day. Future generations will rightly judge him as one of the most influential Baptist theologians of this century – a true bridge figure between the 20th and 21st centuries who remains committed to ancient truth for a modern age. ☞