

American Reform Judaism and the Southern Baptist Convention: Responses to Social Trends

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This article addresses current trends in Reform Judaism by examining the role played by the new platform adopted in 1999 by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The approval of a new statement of faith by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), known as the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, demonstrates a parallel response to the demands of modern society and institutional survival. Yet, in choosing similar responses, the Reform movement and the SBC are seeking to achieve different purposes. Although Reform has tried to reflect the diversity found in American society, the SBC has chosen to stand apart from it, often taking on an adversarial position, while also attempting to transform it. These differing uses suggest that the role of confessions in religious organizations should be re-evaluated.

Introduction

The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) adopted a new platform in May 1999, at its 110th annual convention held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The passing of these principles has attracted a great deal of interest, not only in the American Reform movement, which claims about 1.5 million members, but also in the broader American Jewish community and beyond. The day after

the conference, *The New York Times* reported on the passing of the platform in an article that appeared on page one of the first section of that newspaper, a place of honor extremely rare for a religious conference.¹ This article will seek to describe the current trends in the Reform movement today, and the place of that platform within those trends, while at the same time juxtaposing these with trends within the Southern Baptist Convention. These two entities have chosen to respond to the same social and cultural developments in ways that at times are strikingly similar. Yet their responses have taken them in different directions.

The American Reform movement claims to be the largest liberal denomination in the United States and is organized into the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). Local Reform synagogues are part of the national structure that includes the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the CCAR, and UAHC. The UAHC is a constituent of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), and in fact is the largest constituent organization of the WUPJ.²

The CCAR adopted their new *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, popularly known as the “1999 Pittsburgh Platform,” in May 1999.³ Despite the popular perception that a “platform” had been passed, this was not semantically accurate. There was a conscious decision made to call the document a statement of principles rather than a platform because a statement of principles would indicate where the movement stood today, whereas a platform would indicate where the movement was going in the future. This was something that many of the rabbinic leaders wanted to avoid. However, for the purposes of this article and for the sake of brevity, the authors will use the word “platform” interchangeably with “statement of principles.”

Contained in *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* were principles that had caused much consternation in the months prior to its passing, and the controversy was of interest not only in the American Reform movement, but also in the entire American Jewish community. The media, questioning the meaning of the final vote, put forth various interpretations of this document. From one point of view, it was seen as a victory for the resurgence of

¹*New York Times*. May 27, 1999, p. 1.

²“The World Union for Progressive Judaism: An Introduction to Our Organization, Our Work, Our Needs,” Official Publication of the WUPJ, undated.

³The text of this platform can be found at <http://ccarnet.org/documentsandpositions/platforms/>.

traditionalism, but the neo-traditionalists saw it as less than they had expected and more of a compromise with those who had maintained ties to Classical Reform Judaism. The debate brought home the fact that congregants within Reform Judaism are as diverse as its numbers. Regional factors certainly play a role, but the personal religious backgrounds of the congregants are probably a more important factor. The scope of Reform Judaism is a wide continuum, and while most Reform Jews practice their Judaism with a certain amount of ritual, many are virtually non-practicing Jews. At the other end of the spectrum are Reform Jews whose religious practice can be considered very traditional.

Historical Background

The Reform movement is one of the three major movements in American Judaism. Although Germany specifically, and Central Europe in general, was the birthplace of the Reform movement, it was in the United States that Reform Judaism became most widespread. Many Jewish immigrants wanted a form of Judaism that would allow them to adapt to the structure and ethos of American society while still maintaining a loyalty and affiliation with the religion of their forefathers. This form of Judaism, which allowed for change—particularly pragmatic-based innovations—met with a great deal of success. Reforms were generally introduced piecemeal in response to changes in the local social and economic conditions. By the closing decades of the 19th century, a form of Reform Judaism developed in America which stressed the Jewish belief in ethical monotheism and the mission of Israel. Classical Reform Judaism placed a heavy emphasis on belief and minimized many aspects of traditional ritual. The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 was the definitive statement of Classical Reform belief. This platform became the quasi-authoritative position paper of the theology and ritual practice of American Reform Judaism from its conception until 1937, when a new and radically different platform was adopted.

As early as the 1920s, certain factions within the Reform movement began to re-embrace selected aspects of the Jewish tradition. After the rise of the Nazi party in Germany in 1933, many American Reform Jews began to slowly readopt a conscious ethnic identity that an earlier generation had attempted to stifle and deny. In 1937 the CCAR adopted a new platform at Columbus, Ohio, which distanced itself from some, but not all, of the religious conceptions expressed in the Pittsburgh Platform. The Reform movement began to take concrete steps to accept the reality of the Zionist movement, and there were numerous signs that many of the once-rejected traditionalist symbols were beginning to make a comeback. This trend continued to gain momentum in the subsequent decades and is reflected in the 1976 San Francisco state-

ment. But since 1976 the Reform movement has developed in new and somewhat unexpected directions. Rabbi Richard N. Levy, then President of the CCAR, used these dramatic changes, which included the Patrilineal Descent Resolution of 1983, the development of an outreach program to intermarried families and others, the establishment of a significant number of congregations with special outreach to gays and lesbians, and other innovations, to justify the need for a new statement of religious principles.

On May 26, 1999, the CCAR met at the historic Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh. This was the same congregation that had hosted the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform that had symbolized the hallmark rejection of Jewish tradition. The rabbis voted to adopt the new Platform by a vote of 324–68, with 9 abstentions. This was the culmination of more than a year of intense and sometimes acrimonious debate that began when Rabbi Levy proposed an initial draft of a platform advocating that Reform Jews consider trying out and perhaps adopting many ritual practices that had formerly been regarded as simply not practiced in a Reform context. The suggestion that Reform Jews might consider eating kosher food, taking ritual baths in a mikveh, and even wearing tefillin (phylacteries) was shocking to some, and others considered such proposals as an attack on their entire approach to religious life. While many people applauded the tone and the substance of the proposed platform, many others were distressed and saddened by what they felt was an abrogation of the historical positions of the Reform movement. Levy's proposals struck a raw nerve and precipitated a major debate over the direction that the Reform movement should take.

The Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist Faith and Message

The struggles centering around the efforts of the CCAR to generate a new platform both parallel and diverge from the production of a new statement of belief by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). At the same time that the CCAR was developing a new platform, so was the SBC. On June 14, 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, adopted a revision of its statement of faith, known as the Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M).⁴ This was not the first time Southern Baptists had expressed or revised their confession. Although the SBC has

⁴The text of this statement can be found at: <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>. See also "SBC president names study committee to review 'Baptist Faith and Message,'" *Associated Baptist Press* (August 26, 1999).

been in existence since 1845, it did not adopt the BF&M until 1925; the convention subsequently revised it in 1963 and 1998. The 1998 revision was somewhat minor and served as a prelude to the 2000 statement. Even though the SBC did not adopt a confession of faith until 1925, other confessions had been generally adhered to, with the most important being the Philadelphia Confession of 1742 and the New Hampshire Confession of 1833.⁵

The adoption of the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform and the 2000 BF&M reveals two religious organizations struggling with the demands of modern society and institutional survival. The CCAR and the SBC are responding to similar stimuli. In part, both have chosen to deal with these factors in the same manner, but with drastically different implications. Whereas the Reform movement has attempted to reflect society, the SBC has sought to set itself apart from society. One of the main ways it has of doing this is in the reformulation of the BF&M.

Born out of a perceived need to respond to societal changes, the preamble to the 2000 BF&M clearly reflects this desire when it says:

New challenges to faith appear in every age. A pervasive anti-supernaturalism in the culture was answered by Southern Baptists in 1925, when the Baptist Faith and Message was first adopted by this Convention. In 1963, Southern Baptists responded to assaults upon the authority and truthfulness of the Bible by adopting revisions to the Baptist Faith and Message. The Convention added an article on "The Family" in 1998, thus answering cultural confusion with the clear teachings of Scripture. Now, faced with a culture hostile to the very notion of truth, this generation of Baptists must claim anew the eternal truths of the Christian faith.

In a letter accompanying the report of the committee charged with revising the confession, committee chairman, Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, elaborated on the societal aspects to which the SBC was responding. According to him,

Our generation faces the reality of a postmodern culture, complete with rampant relativism and the denial of absolute truth. A pervasive secularism has infected our society and its corrosive effects are evident throughout the life of our nation. Moral decay and assaults upon cherished truths dominate the arena in which we must now minister, and to which we must now proclaim the Gospel.⁶

⁵H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987).

⁶Adrian Rogers, "Message from the Chairman of the Committee on the Baptist Faith and Message." [Http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmchairman.asp](http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmchairman.asp) (date visited January 3, 2003).

Rogers, who was the first president elected by the fundamentalist faction that took over the SBC in 1979, went on to identify nine areas in which changes had been made. They included the making “more explicit” of the “total truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Bible,” further clarifying the nature of God and the substitutionary nature of the atonement of Jesus, reaffirming gender distinctions, as well as the blessedness of racial and ethnic diversity, rejecting inclusivism and pluralism with regard to salvation, reaffirming Baptist congregationalism, rejecting women as pastors, and commenting upon certain sexual behaviors.

As a document reflecting a response to societal values and actions, the 2000 BF&M represents the Southern Baptist effort to keep what is perceived as contaminating influences from the secular world out of the convention. It also reflects an approach commonly used during the twentieth century by Southern Baptists to deal with societal changes and influences. Baptist historian Leon McBeth has pointed out that a rising creedalism has resulted from the many controversies surrounding the formulations of the BF&M.⁷ The BF&M, therefore, has been employed by some as a barrier against agents deemed to be harmful, while others have found guidance in how to respond to these developments.

Reform Judaism’s Return to Tradition

The reporting of the final platform touched on the reality that the Reform movement is simultaneously moving in two different directions. This fact was pointed out by Professor Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.⁸ He argues that since the 1960s the positions taken by the Reform movement have been shaped by two very different, almost contradictory, impulses. On one hand, the Reform movement has reintroduced many traditional rituals and practices that had been rejected by the Classical Reform synthesis. At the same time, the Reform movement adapted to changing social realities by sanctioning a dramatic change in the traditional definition of who and what is a Jew—the Patrilineal Descent Resolution of 1983, which accepted the children of Jewish fathers and Gentile mothers as Jewish if they were raised as Jews, even without a conversion. They went even further when they decided to ordain first women and then gays and lesbians as rabbis and cantors. These highly innovative responses to changing social

⁷McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, p. 686.

⁸Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1997), p. 95.

trends reveal how acutely sensitive the leadership of the movement is to the needs of the typical congregant. And they show a tremendous willingness to actively promote change in order to meet the needs of Jewish congregants who are part of a rapidly changing society. These two partially contradictory trends were already present when the debate began over the proposed platform. In September 1998, E. J. Kessler, a reporter for *The Forward*, wrote that the draft of "Ten Principles for Reform Judaism" was promoting "rituals and observances . . . that many associate with Orthodoxy."⁹ He noted that the proposed platform had been written for the most part by younger male rabbis who have become more observant of the mitzvot, who were finding holiness in these traditional aspects, and wished to move forward from the rational and modern ways of their German-Jewish ancestors to embrace a new spirituality in the traditionalism that has remained almost constant in those Jews of Eastern European heritage.

Rabbi Alexander Schindler, former President of the UAHC, responded to the platform's first draft by stating that the language used in it was not inclusive enough. Schindler accepted the trend toward traditionalism as authentic and legitimate, and pointed out that the language "continues trends manifest' in Reform Judaism for over the last century, and is therefore simply a continuation of pre-existing trends."¹⁰ Schindler, however, believed that the Reform movement's commitment to inclusivity was not being adequately emphasized.

But speaking to the author after its approval, he emphatically argued that the platform was of virtually no theological or even sociological significance. "It's nothing. It's nothing from nothing. It's not good, not bad, it's not really an advance over the Centennial issue [statement] . . . it is much to do about nothing. It really is. I mean it doesn't go beyond anything that [Eugene] Borowitz said in the Centennial statement, not one iota. So I don't know what all the hullabaloo was all about."¹¹ But not all observers agree with Schindler. Many believe that the movement's embracing of contradictory trends cannot continue forever, and that the platform may serve to galvanize opposition to either neo-traditionalism or to the politically correct liberal social agenda. But it is certain that the religious trends affecting the Reform movement cannot

⁹E. J. Kessler, "Reform Gets Set to Turn Toward Jewish Tradition, Draft Principles Suggest," *The Forward* (September 18, 1998): 1.

¹⁰Kessler, "Reform Gets Set," p. 2.

¹¹Alexander Schindler, Telephone interview with the author, October 1999.

be seen in isolation from broader sociological patterns influencing the entire American Jewish community and indeed all Americans.

The Different Understandings of the Platform and Its Potential Impact

In trying to evaluate the platform's meaning and impact, it is critical to put the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform in the context of the sociology of the Reform movement. It is important to stress the fact that the entire American Jewish community is in the process of coming to terms with and developing responses to the dramatically changed situation that American Jews find themselves in at the turn of the millennium. This is partially due to changes unique to Jews and Judaism, but it also reflects the overall changes in American society as a whole. Many if not most of the same phenomena can be observed in other American ethnic and religious communities. Nevertheless, American Jews must come to terms with the assimilatory process and develop concrete strategies for dealing with life in an open society.

The leaders of the Reform movement are certainly aware that when seen from a particular perspective, the American Jewish community is in crisis. They are also aware that the Reform movement has had a great deal of difficulty meeting the challenges it faces. Many Reform rabbis are frustrated precisely because they want to serve vibrant congregations who are dedicated to the study and practice of Judaism. Instead, many of them are officiating at a constant stream of life-cycle events, and visiting large numbers of people in the hospital, many of whom they do not know. The non-Orthodox congregation has become a service station for those needing particular services at any given time. Some rabbis cope with the situation better than others, but many are aware something is wrong with the average non-Orthodox congregation.

One rabbi who realizes that something is wrong is Rabbi Richard Levy. Many fellow rabbis are surprised by this characterization because they see him as a positive-thinking and proactive person, one who is naturally optimistic. And he is. But as early as 1969, Levy wrote an essay entitled "The Plight of the Reform Synagogue," for *Judaism*,¹² which stressed his deep concern for the future of the Reform synagogue. Levy wrote that the American Reform synagogue "has generally defaulted on all three" of its traditional functions:

¹²Richard N. Levy, "The Reform Synagogue: Plight and Possibility," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Understanding American Judaism: Toward the Description of a Modern Religion*, Vol. 2, (New York: Ktav and Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, 1975), p. 64. The essay originally appeared in *Judaism*, Vol. 18 (1969), pp. 159–176.

as a beth Tefillah (a house of prayer), a beth Midrash (a house of study), and a beth Knesset (a house of meeting). Levy stated that while there are congregations that have been successful in providing these functions, there are many more where prayer is irregular and insignificant for the majority of their members, serious study of Jewish ideas and books is nil, and meetings with others within the congregation are rare events. Levy then described what he saw as the specifics of these failures and made suggestions for building a more vibrant Reform congregational experience. The trends that Levy saw in 1969 are now far easier to spot. One sees repeated references to continuity, survival, assimilation, and intermarriage in Jewish newspapers. Once in a while, an Orthodox leader may explicitly condemn the Reform movement for causing this situation, or more likely, for not doing enough to counteract it. And it is not only Orthodox rabbis who feel that the Reform movement may not be doing enough to counteract the currently escalating trends toward assimilation.

So when the CCAR voted to adopt the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform, one could interpret the 324–68 vote as an endorsement of Levy's position. This, however, is not the only way to interpret the adoption of this new platform. One could see it as simply a move toward greater tradition. Those observers who have emphasized this approach have been careful to explain that as the Reform movement moves toward tradition, it is not the same thing as moving towards Orthodoxy. The Reform movement is not considering the adoption of any halachic standards. Even the proponents of progressive halachah, such as Rabbi Walter Jacob of Rodef Shalom and other disciples of the methodology of the late Rabbi Solomon Freehof,¹³ are not interested in instituting a binding system of Jewish law.

While much of the debate over the new platform centered on the so-called move toward tradition that the Reform movement is in the process of embracing, much of the subtext of the debate was an argument over how to interpret the recent sociological studies on American Jewry. The premise of Reform Judaism had been that it was possible to Americanize and yet be able to pass on a clearly identifiable, if perhaps attenuated, form of Jewish identity to children, grandchildren, and beyond. But since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), this assumption has been called into question. Even worse, it is not at all clear how many Reform Jews still care. A number of

¹³Walter Jacob, "Authentic Report of the Proceedings of the Rabbinical Conference Held at Pittsburgh, Nov. 16, 17, 18, 1885," in Walter Jacob, ed., *The Pittsburgh Platform in Retrospect: The Changing World of Reform Judaism* (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Congregation, 1985), p. 105.

recent journalistic reports¹⁴ suggested that the obsession with Jewish continuity and survival is something that worries lay and professional leaders exclusively, while most Reform Jews and most American Jews are concerned with just living their lives. As the intermarriage rate has dramatically increased, the consensus in the Jewish community has dramatically shifted from rejection to grudging acquiescence and more recently to full acceptance. The Reform movement has attempted to react to the change in social context by proactively advocating and implementing new approaches to issues facing Jews and Judaism today.

The Impact of the SBC's Response to Society

The 2000 BF&M has served as a tool to rid SBC agencies of people and ideas deemed undesirable and harmful. A brief explanation of the SBC as an organization will help demonstrate the revision's impact. The SBC is composed of churches that individually choose to associate or partner with the convention. As such, the SBC does not have official power to dictate policy to any of its member churches. The SBC owns a number of agencies created to carry out its goals, including six seminaries. Individual churches also cooperate on a local level, forming what are called associations, and on a state level, forming state conventions. Each entity is autonomous. The SBC does not officially own or control state conventions, associations, or churches. Individual churches choose whether or not to associate with an association, state convention, or the SBC. So, for example, a local church could choose only to associate with the SBC, or to cooperate with an association and a state

¹⁴See: B. S. Bauer, "Is it time to chart a new course for Reform Judaism? Reactions" (letter to the editor), *Reform Judaism* (Spring 1999): 4; R. N. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. M. Sullivan, A. Swidler, and S. M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); G. Bullard, "Reform Judaism Adopts New Platform," *The Detroit News* (May 26, 1999); H. A. Fribourg, "Is it time to chart a new course for Reform Judaism? Reactions" (letter to the editor), *Reform Judaism*, New York: UAHC (Spring 1999): 8; S. Fuchs, "A Reaction to a Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism Adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis," *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, June 4, 1999, reprinted in the congregation Beth Israel Newsletter (August 1999): 1, 4; B. A. Kosmin, S. Goldstein, J. Waksberg, N. Lerer, A. Keysar, and J. Scheckner, *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991); J. B. Stiffman, "The Vitality of Reform Judaism," *Shaare Emeth Temple Bulletin* (June 11, 1999): 2; and S. J. Willis, "Reformed Reform? Jewish leaders say Platform misunderstood," *Las Vegas Sun*, (June 14, 1999).

convention and not the SBC. In other words, the SBC, state conventions, and associations are made up of local churches, but not all local churches choose or must associate with all three entities. Nor are churches, associations, or state conventions compelled to accept the BF&M as a statement of faith. While most do, the BF&M is not, at least in theory, a binding statement on Southern Baptists; it is not a creed. Southern Baptists, therefore, may choose to affirm or deny all or part of the BF&M. The preamble to the 1963 BF&M asserted that “[s]uch statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority.” Functioning as a guidepost for theological belief, it has been understood to be an interpretation of scripture, rather than an exact reflection of scripture. As such, it is fallible. Theological diversity and even disagreement with it has been acceptable practice.

The 2000 BF&M, however, has been used as a tool to compel complicity in belief and support of the fundamentalist faction currently in control of the SBC. While SBC leaders assert that the BF&M is not binding, diversity of opinion is essentially not allowed; disagreement is unacceptable. Examples of this use of the BF&M are numerous. In January 2002, the International Mission Board (IMB) of the SBC requested that all missionaries affirm the 2000 BF&M. Current IMB president, Jerry Rankin, insisted that his request was no different than what had been required of missionaries for several decades. Rankin explained, “The reason I have asked them to reaffirm their beliefs in regard to the 2000 ‘Baptist Faith and Message’ is to remove suspicions that their beliefs and practices could be inconsistent with our common confession of faith and move us forward in reaching a lost world.” Former IMB president, Keith Parks, as well as other former missionaries, disagreed with Rankin’s assessment of earlier practices. According to Parks, “This current demand is different from what was expected of missionaries in the past.”¹⁵ While the two sides disagree over the use of the BF&M, it is clear that it is currently being used to compel uniformity of belief and loyalty to the denomination. According to one report, over thirty international missionaries had resigned by the end of 2002, citing their refusal to sign the BF&M. Others had been terminated for either teachings deemed contrary to the BF&M or refusing to affirm the BF&M.¹⁶ Rankin wrote current missionaries, “Allowance is provided for

¹⁵“Past, present leaders disagree about impact of new IMB request,” *Associated Baptist Press* (March 11, 2002).

¹⁶“Former missionaries speak out on request to affirm faith statement” *Associated Baptist Press* (November 15, 2002).

stating areas of disagreement. However, there cannot be flexibility in being unwilling to be doctrinally accountable and assure Southern Baptists that we will work in accord with our confession of faith and not contrary to it. To do so would erode the credibility and support of the IMB and bring into question your colleagues around the world.” He went on to say, “You are now serving in the 21st century, and it is important to recognize and support the organization and positions of the denomination with whom you serve, even if there are some areas of personal disagreement.”¹⁷ Rankin reflected the opinion of much of the SBC leadership that the denomination requires total loyalty.

Personnel serving with the convention’s North American Mission Board also have been required to affirm the statement. Leaders reason that while churches are autonomous and can choose to affirm or reject the BF&M, employees of convention agencies cannot.¹⁸ Employees of all six SBC seminaries also must affirm the BF&M. Numerous employees have either been terminated or left the seminaries over this issue. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas has inaugurated a ceremony where new faculty members publicly affirm their agreement with the BF&M. New faculty members sign a book that details the seminary’s past adherence to SBC statements of faith. By signing, the faculty “symbolically signed the Baptist Faith and Message 2000.” Craig Blaising, the seminary’s executive vice president and provost, remarked, “Having a confession is like having a testimony. For a Baptist—a Southern Baptist—to be a believer is to be able to make a public testimony of your faith. That means you are able to state what the faith is. That’s the public nature of the confession for Baptists.”¹⁹ In essence, the BF&M has been equated with the Christian faith. Tremendous pressure is placed upon those with qualms about affirming the document. Southwestern Seminary trustees affirmed the BF&M as “a faithful and foundational interpretation of God’s word,” and that Jesus taught that scripture was “inerrant.” Seminary President Kenneth Hemphill said, “It [i.e., the seminary affirmation] is a fresh and direct statement of who we are. . . . Our educational mission comes out of the Great Commission (i.e., Matthew 28:19–20), and we affirm the Baptist Faith and

¹⁷“Missionaries terminated for failure to affirm ‘Baptist Faith and Message,’” *Associated Baptist Press* (October 18, 2002).

¹⁸“NAMB employees leave over new faith statement,” *Associated Baptist Press* (August 7, 2001).

¹⁹“New Faculty Publicly Endorse BF&M,” *Southwestern News*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Winter 2003): 30.

Message.”²⁰ The coupling of the BF&M with the Great Commission, a text evangelicals often point to as motivation for missionary endeavors, signals the status the BF&M has attained within SBC circles. It in essence has become synonymous with scripture. To not affirm it implies that one does not affirm scripture.

This understanding is particularly evident in an article written by Jerry Rankin in the February 25, 2002 edition of the *Baptist Standard*, the state paper of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Notice the coupling of scriptural authority and the BF&M. According to Rankin,

Some have charged that the Southern Baptist Convention has changed to the point that the highest priority is not missions but doctrinal conformity. We have not changed our priority. . . . Reaching a lost world is what missions is all about. This is what Southern Baptists want their missionaries to be doing—witnessing to the lost, starting new churches, spreading the gospel to the Last Frontier of the Great Commission. That isn’t done by those who water down the authority of God’s Word, believe whatever they choose and are batted about by every wind of doctrine. The almost 5,200 Southern Baptist missionaries who have been approved for appointment by the International Mission Board and dispersed to the uttermost ends of the earth are solid in their faith, thoroughly Southern Baptist and doctrinally sound.²¹

Rankin juxtaposes being “thoroughly Southern Baptist” (i.e., affirming the BF&M) with holding sound Christian faith and doctrine. The implication is that those who do not affirm the BF&M not only are not affirming the Bible, but also are incapable of fulfilling the Great Commission. Within the SBC, a tremendous stigma is attached to anyone characterized in such terms.²²

As a tool compelling belief, the BF&M, therefore, becomes an effective instrument for SBC leadership to purge its organizations. Leaders are willing to take extreme measures to achieve this end. Jerry Rankin used what he admitted to be an extreme analogy when he compared his requiring missionaries to affirm the BF&M to measures the United States might have taken had it known about plans for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Rankin was

²⁰“Southwestern Trustees Affirm Declaration of Faith,” *Southwestern News*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Winter 2003): 26–28.

²¹Jerry Rankin, “No Creed is Being Imposed on Southern Baptist Missionaries,” *Baptist Standard* (February 25, 2002).

²²See Bill Fudge, “Letter to Southern Baptist Missionaries,” [Http://www.blacksburgbaptist.org/SpecialEvents/IMBMay02.html](http://www.blacksburgbaptist.org/SpecialEvents/IMBMay02.html) (date visited January 6, 2003); see also “‘Overwhelming Majority’ Will Sign BF&M Affirmation” *Baptist Standard* (June 3, 2002).

quoted as saying, "The airlines and general public would have been outraged at the delays and inconvenience of heightened security measures. The civil-liberties advocates would have probably called for impeachment of President Bush for profiling and detaining people of Middle Eastern descent, and other similar reactions." He surmised, "Because of our willingness to affirm doctrinal accountability to the Southern Baptist Convention, the consequences that could have been disastrous for the credibility and support of the IMB have been diverted."²³ Rankin's analogy demonstrates the belief SBC leaders have in the righteousness of their cause. When the BF&M was used as a guidepost, it could not become an instrument to secure doctrinal purity, but now that it is viewed as an instrument of doctrinal accountability, the BF&M becomes a sword to keep out what SBC leaders believe to be unbiblical ideas and to cull out any who might harbor such understandings (SBC leaders, however, will insist that the BF&M has always been used to insure doctrinal accountability). Any who resist often are dealt with harshly because of the threat they pose to what the SBC leadership considers the spiritual and theological integrity of the convention. Those offering resistance or expressing disagreement immediately become suspect and subject to intimidation. Rankin himself tacitly admitted that attacks often are made on those who are perceived to be in disagreement with the BF&M. Rankin was quoted as saying in a letter to missionaries dated January 31, 2002 that, "Signing this affirmation protects you from charges of heresy behind your back while you are overseas and cannot defend yourself."²⁴ The Bible and the interpretation of it as reflected in the BF&M essentially have become synonymous in SBC life and practice.

The use of the BF&M to raise barriers to evil societal influences, as well as remove those who have been deemed to be unduly influenced by such things is not restricted to the national level. Many state conventions acting under the influence of the SBC leadership have also affirmed the BF&M or are in the process of doing so. The Missouri Baptist Convention (MBC) became the first state convention to require formal loyalty to the SBC.²⁵ Churches qualifying for membership now must be "any Missouri Southern Baptist church in sympathy with the objectives of the MBC and desiring to cooperate with the [Missouri Baptist] convention." The requirement that churches must be affli-

²³"Requesting missionaries to affirm faith statement averted disaster, Rankin says," *Associated Baptist Press* (August 12, 2002).

²⁴"To Sign or Not to Sign," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (April 22, 2002): 20.

²⁵"Partisan Rancor in Missouri reaches new heights in 2001," *Associated Baptist Press*, (November 29, 2001).

ated with the SBC in order to affiliate with the MBC is unprecedented. The MBC essentially has become an agency of the SBC, in practice giving up its autonomy. With this kind of relationship, the requirement of MBC employees to affirm the BF&M cannot be far behind. A repeat of what has happened on the national scene will likely occur on the state level. The BF&M probably will be used to rid state agencies and universities of those who express dissenting views. These individuals will be and have been subjected to extreme pressure, intimidation, and organized campaigns to remove them; their careers, as well as their personal lives, have been adversely affected. Those in positions of leadership, such as university administrators, will be forced to choose between succumbing to and thereby supporting such tactics, or offering resistance on behalf of the individual under attack. In many cases these leaders follow a policy designed to avoid conflict with the fundamentalist powers of the SBC. They may either overtly declare their loyalty to the SBC or espouse neutrality between the fundamentalist-controlled organizations and the more moderate factions within the SBC. This latter tactic, however, usually means that fundamentalists are allowed to pursue their agendas within that organization, even if it means sacrificing individuals who come under attack.

The effort to set itself apart from society also is filtering down beyond the state and associational level. A recent SBC president, Jack Graham, pastor of Dallas' Prestonwood Baptist Church, stated that one of the goals of his presidency was affirming the biblical model of the family. On June 9, 1998, the SBC added to the 1963 BF&M an article dealing with the family. The committee charged with drawing up the revision noted that "the family is under attack as never before." It defined marriage as the uniting of one man and one woman and affirmed that husband and wife are of equal worth in God's eyes. While the husband is to love his wife, he has the divinely ordained responsibility to provide for, protect, and lead his family. The wife is "to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband." She has the divine responsibility to respect her husband and "to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation." Graham's emphasis on the family is an extension of the new article to the BF&M. Noting that today's family is in trouble, Graham is encouraging churches to develop Christian schools. To him, "it is important that we begin teaching our children early, and whenever possible provide a Southern Baptist style."²⁶ The answer to the problems

²⁶"Graham at the Helm of the SBC and Prestonwood," *Southwestern News*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Winter 2003): 18–19; Jack Graham, "The Kingdom—Mission and Vision." *SBC Life* (November 2002).

confronting the family, in Graham's opinion, is Southern Baptist education, which, no doubt, will be taught in accordance with the BF&M. Thus, a highly organized system is being put in place by the SBC leadership. It potentially will teach people at every level of their educational journey in accordance with the BF&M.

In Southern Baptist life, the BF&M is an exceedingly influential document. It represents one of the primary answers articulated by the SBC to the challenges posed by modern society. In a sense, it represents a retreat from society by acting as a defensive barrier to keep out social and theological evils, as well as a sword to cut out those evils wherever they arise in SBC life. Rather than creating a mutual interaction with society, the BF&M draws boundaries around the SBC. Thus, while the SBC is concerned with many of the same issues as the CCAR, the convention has chosen a different approach. Whereas Reform Judaism has sought to be inclusive and pluralistic, Southern Baptists have become exclusive and particularistic. The CCAR has plotted a course to become more like contemporary society; the SBC has sought to become less like it. The CCAR embraces this society; the SBC withdraws from it. While the CCAR expresses concern that the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform is too vague and does not establish a clear identity for the group, the SBC has crafted a document that makes clear distinctions and creates a strong identity.

Yet both groups continue to struggle with some of the same issues. The revision of the BF&M and its stringent enforcement have not solved the SBC's problems. Graham, in his September 2002 message to the SBC Executive Committee, said regarding what he called the expanding Kingdom witness, "We're not getting the job done! Our baptisms are decreasing. Many of our churches are struggling to reach people for Christ and baptize them."²⁷ While the SBC is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, it is not growing significantly in terms of membership, particularly in the area of new members. Cultivating a combative and hostile attitude toward non-Southern Baptist society, SBC leaders have created problems in relating to that same society. An editorial in *Christianity Today* pointed to the problems caused by SBC leaders using "triumphalist language." This kind of rhetoric not only appears arrogant, but it tends to alienate those who do not agree, both within and without the SBC. While SBC leaders often talk about loving people, this is hardly a characteristic that comes to the minds of many. The path charted by SBC leaders has been unable to bring peace and unity to the SBC, much less American society. While generally applauding the conservative resurgence in

²⁷Jack Graham, "The Kingdom."

the SBC, the *Christianity Today* editorial wondered if the SBC had gone too far by eliminating discussion on some topics and alienating opponents. It emphasized the need for unity in drawing up confessions of faith.²⁸ While some have been galvanized to action in the SBC, many have been deeply hurt in a variety of ways—emotionally, spiritually, financially, publicly, privately, and careerwise—just to name a few. While members of the SBC and the greater American public may have a clear understanding regarding what the SBC stands for—or, rather against—this is something that many would rather do without. Yet, this seems to be a position that many of the SBC leaders revel in because they believe they are doing the work of God as outlined in scripture. In their minds, to do anything else would be unfaithful to God. Yet by taking this almost exclusively adversarial role, SBC leaders have been unable to articulate a positive vision of society that meaningfully solves social problems. Whereas the CCAR has emphasized doing over doctrine, the SBC has done the opposite. Even though the SBC has social programs, these have been overshadowed by the emphasis on doctrinal purity. Ironically, the SBC's emphasis on doctrines has been largely muted by its leaders' inability to demonstrate how those doctrines effectively answer society's needs. The doctrines, as expressed in the BF&M, have served more to build an institution rather than advance the principles on which that institution was founded. The SBC experience may point out that developing a statement of faith or a clear identity may be easier than effectively addressing society's problems. While this may be important to an organization's leaders and most ardent supporters, it can seem irrelevant to the larger public, particularly to those who live on the fringes or outside of the organization. Organizations responding to societal trends in a manner similar to the SBC certainly may achieve a strong institutional identity with clearly defined boundaries. Yet, they also run the risk of devolving into a political culture with all its attending squabbles and, therefore, becoming irrelevant to the broader society.

The Limited Influence of the Reform Rabbinate

Confronted with powerful social forces, it is highly unlikely that the future direction of the Reform movement will be determined primarily by one or another of the rabbis. Long gone are the days when an Isaac Mayer Wise could build an entire movement by having a charismatic personality and being willing to travel up and down the Mississippi River, dedicating synagogues and

²⁸“Do Good Fences Make Good Baptists?” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 44, No. 9 (August 7, 2000): 36.

selling his newspaper. Indeed, it could be argued that even Wise succeeded to the extent that he did because he went with the flow rather than fight against it. Those rabbis who go with the flow of the times may have an easier time of it, and those who resist may have greater difficulties. There have been reports for many years that many Reform congregations will not consider rabbis who will not perform intermarriages. Now, recent reports indicate that some congregations will disqualify a rabbi from consideration if he or she will not allow unconverted Gentile spouses to perform specific ritual acts in the Friday night service, such as lighting the candles and saying the accompanying blessing.²⁹

Yet the rabbis as individuals and the Reform rabbinate as a collective are certainly committed to maximizing their impact and influence on the Reform laity. Similarly, the Reform lay leadership is attempting to formulate its own response to the challenge that the boundaries issue presents to them, and to that end, they passed a controversial resolution at the UAHC biennial in Atlanta in December 1995. This resolution, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the UAHC, stated that interfaith couples who were sending their children to other religious schools should not be allowed to enroll their children in a Jewish religious school in a Reform congregation. The resolution specifically encouraged synagogues to establish a clearly articulated policy that would offer enrollment to children in Reform religious schools, as well as Reform Jewish day schools, only to those children who were not receiving formal religious education in any other religion. This policy was a bold effort by the UAHC to set limitations on the openness that the Reform movement had exhibited toward interfaith families in the past. Yet the Reform movement had pioneered the entire concept of outreach, and indeed continues its strong commitment to outreach by utilizing a number of different strategies, which include alternative family education programs such as Stepping Stones and A Taste of Judaism.

²⁹David K. Adams and Cornelis A. Van Minnen, eds., *Religious and Secular Reform in America: Ideas, Beliefs, and Social Change* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); E. Kessler, "Jewish Grandparents Edged by Christians in Transmitting Religion to Interfaith Tots," *The Forward* (July 23 1999): 1–2; C. S. Liebman, "Ritual, Ceremony and the Reconstruction of Judaism in the United States," in Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman, eds., *Jews in America: A Contemporary Reader* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999), p. 311.

Periodic Uplift Rather than Daily Routine

Bernard Susser and Charles Liebman of Bar Ilan University write that if one views what is happening in the non-Orthodox American Judaic world through the prism of the concepts of personalism and volunteerism, then there is a great deal of elasticity possible in how one defines Jewish identity.³⁰ Indeed, it becomes difficult to define Jewish identity at all because personalism and volunteerism are estranged from objective formalized boundaries. For a person who believes that episodic experiences can create a meaningful spirituality, there is very little motivation to look to law or any traditional definitions as a source of authority. The influence of personalism and volunteerism does a great deal to detach American Reform Jews from the Jewish collective of which they still view themselves to be a part. But as their values become more connected to their personalist perspectives, they see their lives as more focused on their own personal directions. They feel less obligation to fit their own lifestyles into a predetermined mold.

If the current trends continue, congregants of Reform congregations will demand more programming that can help them feel Jewish on specific and exceptional occasions, rather than demand that their congregations provide them with the regular structure that would create the framework for weekly or even daily ritual practices. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Reform congregations rarely have daily *minyanim*, and many do not have Saturday morning services when there is no bar or bat mitzvah. Yet the UAHC Department of Adult Jewish Growth has created an impressive series of weekend retreats called *kallot*, held yearly in Waltham, Massachusetts, Santa Cruz, California, and Beloit, Wisconsin. For about three days, hundreds of Reform Jews celebrate their Jewishness and experiment with new forms of Jewish spirituality. While this is certainly a sign of tremendous vitality, such yearly retreats are not going to overcome the increasing alienation from regular Jewish ritual practice that needs to be seen within a communal perspective and lived out in the context of a covenant community. Rather, it is another expression of personalism and volunteerism that emphasizes individual meaning and the individual's search for spiritual fulfillment. If such an ethos continues to dominate Reform Jewish life, it seems clear that whatever boundaries exist at present will slowly disintegrate. More and more Reform Jews will see them as stilted and artificial. More and more Reform Jews will commit themselves to a religious identity that places one's individual search for existential meaning

³⁰Bernard Susser and Charles S. Liebman, *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

above the needs of the Jewish community, as well as the dictates of the traditional Judaic understanding of God, Torah, and Israel. So, while traditionalists may applaud the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform, they should not get too excited. The Reform movement may simultaneously embrace tradition and jettison all semblances of Jewish traditional understandings of religious identity at the same time. Much of the mixed response that the platform has received is due to the fact that while many rabbis and intellectuals view the document in theological terms, most of the laity have focused almost exclusively on the references to ritual observances that were omitted from the final draft.

Rabbinic Reaction in Contrast to Congregants

Speaking to approximately 130 Reform Rabbis on August 17, 1999, Rabbi Eric Yoffie addressed a question that had been submitted in advance by Rabbi Herb Brockman of Congregation Mishkan Israel of Hamden, Connecticut. Brockman had asked if there was a noticeable “disconnect” between the leadership of the movement on one hand and many of the people in the congregations on the other. Brockman suggested that most congregants see the principles as a representation of the values and behavior of the leaders of the movement, while the congregants themselves see the principles as having little prescriptive value for the way they live their lives. Yoffie responded to this question by explaining how he believed the dynamic worked. He noted that in order to understand the strong reaction from so many of the congregants, it is necessary to go back to the third draft, which primarily focused on theological issues. This was the draft that got the most attention because it was published in *Reform Judaism*.³¹

Yoffie remarked that in his role as the President of the UAHC he had traveled to many congregations throughout the country and heard and observed how people felt about the third draft of the platform. A recurring theme that came out of these observations was centered on the questions of abandoning rationalism and subordinating modernity to tradition. While the rabbis reacted in one way to the third draft, the laity generally focused on the draft’s references to Jewish practices, such as using the mikveh, wearing tefillin, observing kashrut, and learning and reading the Hebrew language.

So while Yoffie agreed that in some sense a wide gap exists between the Reform rabbinate and laity, it is not necessarily over the “return to tradition” issue. Rather, it is over the rabbinic focus on the theory of Reform Judaism and

³¹Eric H. Yoffie, “The Knowledge Gap and How to Bridge It,” in *Reform Judaism* (New York: UAHC, Spring 1998), pp. 18–21.

the lay concern with practical manifestations of Reform Judaism. He argued that it was not the advocacy over tradition that the congregants were concerned about, but what he terms the “re-ritualization of Reform Judaism.” He said that the issue is not a matter of tradition; the movement has already embraced patrilineality, gays and lesbians, and creative approaches to worship that cannot be defined as a traditional approach. Yoffie reminded teleconference participants that for more than a decade, Reform Judaism has been going through a process of re-ritualization, and while the majority of the Reform movement has adapted to the changes, up to 33% of congregants remain uncomfortable with the process. It can be argued that the conflict brewing among congregants was accelerated when the new platform proposal came to light. Yoffie noted that he had observed a generational difference in ritual observance at a recent UAHC event, in which twenty older officers were to be installed before 4,500 congregants. These officers tended to be older because to be installed as a UAHC officer, one must have served at least twenty years. Not one of twenty officers wore a kippah, but over half of the congregants were wearing kippot and a smaller group was wearing tallits. While the smaller percentage of congregants have been unhappy for the past ten years, they have been accepting and tolerant of the differences. So why did one-third of Reform Jews who were uncomfortable with the process of re-ritualization go along with it for ten years or longer and then suddenly react so aggressively? Yoffie believes that there are at least three reasons. The first is that the ritual practices are being introduced by Reform Jews and Rabbis who grew up as Reform Jews and have been aware of the need for more ritual. Second, the Rabbis have not traditionally imposed ritual or tradition on their congregations in the past. Third, many Classical-Reform-oriented congregants went along with the changes because they understood that it was a widespread social change which was being willingly accepted and even embraced by the younger generation.

Yoffie suggests, as an aside, the fact that the photo of Rabbi Levy, which many Classical Reformers perceived as representing an extremely traditional image, was one factor contributing to the adverse reaction. He further argues that many people saw the passing of the platform as setting a standard for the movement because they viewed it as “a credal affirmation, as an oath of allegiance, as a litmus test.”³² But surely that is a reasonable inference for a Classical Reform Jew to make.

Yoffie’s central message is that the Reform movement continues to move into quite different directions simultaneously. There is the “return to tradi-

³²Eric H. Yoffie, Teleconference Speech (August 17, 1999).

tion” and there is at the same time the stretching of boundaries so that the movement is as inclusive as possible. And what is the message? The movement is changing, and re-ritualization of Reform Judaism is a dynamic that accurately reflects the belief structure of many of the congregants on a wide scale. It meets the needs of longtime congregants as well as the new generation of Reform Jews. American Reform Judaism remains inclusive and pluralistic and embraces all in a healthy diversity.

Nevertheless, many Rabbis remain troubled by what they see as an attempt to “spin” the platform to avoid facing the mistakes that the leadership may have made. CCAR President Charles Kroloff states that the platform will be valuable for the congregants, noting that 98% of congregants he met with before the principles were voted on believed it would be a good idea to clarify the meaning and practice of Reform Judaism, and that it would be helpful to congregants to clarify *their* understanding of Reform Judaism. Speaking at the August 17 teleconference, Kroloff praised the platform as an “extraordinary document” providing a tremendous source for study and for personal growth.³³ Kroloff hoped it would bring dialogue to the congregations and stressed that *nothing in the platform is obligatory*.³⁴ This may be true, but a platform is a statement of what a movement believes and to what it aspires.

The Need for Theological Clarity

The Reform movement in recent decades has presented a series of bold new policies that have been welcomed by some as groundbreaking and criticized by others as breaking with thousands of years of Jewish tradition and destroying any possibility for Jewish unity. What has not been stressed enough is that most or all of these new policies were not ideologically driven innovations, but rather practical responses to the crisis of Jewish continuity that has been growing since the 1960s. Thus, these innovations were rear-guard actions that attempted to control the amount of damage that might be done to the integrity of the Jewish community. And as practical strategies, they have probably been partially effective. But by the late 1990s, it was becoming increasingly apparent to more and more Reform rabbis that rear-guard actions were not sufficient. Further, it was becoming clear that there was not much room for many more such innovations. Having accepted mixed married couples and gays and lesbians and in some congregations even accepting practicing Christians, it

³³Charles Kroloff, E-mail communication to the author (October 31, 1999).

³⁴Kroloff, Teleconference call (August 17, 1999).

would seem that inclusivity had reached its maximum reach and it would be necessary to find a new direction to keep the numbers up. But more than sustaining numbers, many rabbis felt that the Reform movement was in danger of becoming just a community of numbers. Having 700 family units or 900 family units or 1,300 family units may sound impressive. But when many of these congregations draw fifty or fewer people on Friday night and may not have a Saturday morning service in the absence of a bar mitzvah, then it would seem that the level of intensity is so low that those truly interested in an intense spiritual community would need to look elsewhere. The push toward tradition that generated so much publicity may help to attract and retain many young Jews who are looking for something more serious. As Rabbi Leon Morris, the Director of The New York Kollel of HUC-JIR writes:

Some will argue that a Reform document which mentions kashrut, tallit, tefillin and mikveh would alienate the masses of American Jewry with whom we rabbis are apparently out of touch. But what about all the serious Jews who leave our movement because they were never able to find the kind of religious community Reform claimed to be but never lived up to? . . . For those who do not become rabbis and cantors, there isn't enough the movement offers them. To be sure, there are notable exceptions. But in many instances, Jews who desire a framework for an impassioned engaging liberal Judaism feel frustrated and go elsewhere. What will we offer those who can't accept traditional claims of Revelation but desire to make Judaism the center of their lives? Can we engage the minds of those who insist upon making their own religious decisions but want a religious path of depth and meaning to follow? A Reform Judaism of the 21st century needs such people as our laity.³⁵

Rabbis such as Morris feel that perhaps concurrently with the drive for inclusiveness, there is a need for a drive towards greater intensity. This was one of the reasons that so many, perhaps subconsciously, supported a new platform that would be perceived as a dramatic move toward tradition. But for this platform to serve as a source of vitality for the Reform movement, it must be able to present a belief that American Jews can and will embrace. While there is little interest in developing an explicit ideology favoring radical assimilation, neither does the American Jewish community have a clear conception of why it should not allow the natural process of assimilation to proceed. Bernard Susser and Charles Liebman are correct when they say, "Among those who fill synagogues on the High Holy Days, a very significant percentage are there not to pray to a God about whose existence they harbor significant doubts,

³⁵Leon Morris, "Not Your Grandfather's Reform Judaism" (unpublished paper).

but rather in order to identify ethnically, historically, and culturally in the only way they know.”³⁶

This is one of the main reasons why American Judaism is having so much trouble. Judaism was the accepted medium in the 1950s Eisenhower years for the expression of Jewish ethnicity. As Jewish ethnicity has faded over the last number of decades, it has become increasingly unclear to the children and grandchildren and now great-grandchildren why they should feel that Judaism is so important. Unfortunately, a platform such as the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform does not begin to come close to presenting a coherent theology that can be taught and then embraced by growing numbers of increasingly secular Reform Jews. While it may well be that the sociological processes pushing Jews in certain directions are strong, and perhaps irresistible, a theologically clearer and stronger platform could provide the basis for a process of clarification that could fuel a true renaissance of Jewish religiosity in the Reform movement.

As it stands, the platform begins with a section on God, stating: “We affirm the reality and unity of God, even as we may differ in our understanding of the divine presence in our lives.” Such a vague statement will not provide the theological basis on which the Reform movement can build a sense of religious obligation with a Reform Jew. Without a sense of religious obligation, it will be impossible for people to justify making a strong commitment to ritual observance as a system. Making this theological argument for a commitment to religious acts is essential for breaking what sociologist Rodney Stark describes as the free rider problem, in which many members of a religious organization ride free for the benefits that the organization offers without actively working to produce “religious goods.”³⁷ As a result, the Reform synagogue may find that an even greater percentage of congregants begin to ride free, rather than play an active role in the religious, cultural and social lives of the congregation.

The SBC’s Effort to Extend Its Boundaries

Like Reform Judaism, the SBC seeks to be inclusive, although in dramatically different ways. While the SBC defines itself in opposition to society by building barriers and requiring more stringent theological commitment on the part of its members, it also seeks to extend its boundaries and bring under its

³⁶Susser and Liebman, *Choosing Survival*, p. 97.

³⁷Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

sway society as a whole. The SBC does not want to embrace societal diversity, but instead wants to transform society by capturing it and its institutions. So, the SBC wants to embrace society, but only after society conforms to SBC standards. This is not merely a campaign characterized by the proclamation of a message and an invitation to society's members to accept the SBC's vision of society. Rather, it is an aggressive effort to impose its vision upon society. SBC leaders often use the rhetoric of battle, characterizing their struggle as a crisis, and believing themselves and their vision to be the object of an assault. This, in turn, creates both defensive and aggressive responses. War is waged against those who do not conform; attempts are made to influence legislative actions in accordance with the SBC vision. Rather than working to maintain the traditional wall of separation between church and state, the current SBC leadership has directed efforts aimed at reconstructing the wall in a manner that would allow the SBC to implement more aggressively its societal visions while keeping out differing visions. In doing so, it partners with groups of like mind such as the American Center for Law and Justice and the Christian Legal Society's Religious Freedom Advocates. Prayer in public schools is a major emphasis of the SBC leadership, but other issues also are advanced. At the 2002 annual meeting of the SBC, convention messengers passed a resolution calling on the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee to act upon President Bush's judicial nominations, while commending the President for timely nominations of well-qualified candidates. The SBC also has attempted to influence U.S. policy on the war against terrorism. Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, wrote President Bush on October 3, 2002, "We believe that your policies concerning the ongoing international terrorist campaign against America are both right and just. Specifically, we believe that your stated policies concerning Saddam Hussein and his headlong pursuit and development of biochemical and nuclear weapons of mass destruction are prudent and fall well within the time-honored criteria of just war theory as developed by Christian theologians in the late fourth and early fifth centuries A.D."³⁸ Land is not unique among religious leaders in speaking for or against the Iraqi war. Numerous religious leaders have debated its morality or immorality. Land's opinions, however, take on added significance in light of the SBC's resolution on terrorism. The resolution asserted that the "only ultimate answer to all forms of terrorism" is the conversion of all people to "salvation through belief in the Lord Jesus Christ." This sentiment in itself is

³⁸Richard Land, "Land's Letter to Bush," October 3, 2002. http://www.erlcmmedia.com/pr_2002/LandslettertoBush.html (date visited January 6, 2003).

not unusual among evangelicals, but given the direction that SBC leaders have taken since 1979, these statements conjure up visions of the linking of state power with a particular sect's goals for society. These assertions, at best, appear imprudent and, at worst, suggest an attempt to spread the SBC vision of society by influencing governmental policy. While not unparalleled in the history of Christianity, this effort has become increasingly aggressive in gaining political power. Indeed, the SBC has launched a website (www.iVoteValues.com) to give guidance on political candidates' views based on the SBC's perception of biblical truth, and has introduced a voter registration campaign designed to influence the 2004 presidential election.

The SBC continues to court legislators and issues invitations to them to speak at SBC functions. President Bush addressed the 2004 SBC annual meeting. Richard Land shared the platform with Alabama Governor Fob James at a Legislative Prayer Luncheon sponsored by the Alabama State Board of Missions on February 4, 1997. At that time, controversy swirled around Roy S. Moore, Circuit Court Judge of Alabama's Etowah County and a Southern Baptist layman. Judge Moore refused to remove from his courtroom a plaque of the Ten Commandments. Calling for a government that would neither sponsor nor censor religion, Land encouraged "religious people" to take their faith into the public arena. He explained, "Those of moral and religious convictions, whatever their faith, have a right to full citizenship in public policy and the public arena." While disavowing government sponsorship of religion, he also did not want government to suppress the right of citizens "to bring their religious convictions and values into the public marketplace." Asserting that the United States faced a moral collapse more dangerous "than ever we faced from the Japanese navy, the German air force or the Soviet missile command," Land contended, "The myth is that we can't legislate morality." In concluding that God gave people government in order to punish those who commit evil and reward those who do right, Land essentially expressed the SBC intention to legislate their vision of society, a vision expressed in part by the BF&M. This means that the SBC and like-minded groups will continue their efforts to overtake society and its institutions. After Land spoke, Governor James indicated that he was willing to call out the National Guard in order to allow Judge Moore to keep his Ten Commandments plaque in place.³⁹ While Governor James did not represent the SBC, he demonstrates the influence of the SBC in matters of church and state. Furthermore, neither does Judge

³⁹"Judge's Ten Commandments Plaque Remains Focus of Legal Battle," *Baptist Press* (February 11, 1997).

Moore officially represent the SBC, but he does represent actions taken by SBC members largely in line with the convention's vision for society. Moore ultimately was elected as Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, running as the "Ten Commandments Judge." After his election in 2000, Moore moved a two and one-half ton monument of the Ten Commandments into the rotunda of the state judicial building; he was subsequently sued and ordered to remove the monument. When he refused to comply with the judge's order, he was removed from his position as Chief Justice. Moore's explanations for his actions echo the rhetoric of SBC leaders. He contends that posting the Ten Commandments represents a return to the moral foundation of law and to God.⁴⁰ These comments are reminiscent of Richard Land's remarks at the Alabama State Board of Missions Legislative Prayer Luncheon. Furthermore, Judge Moore was doing what Land had encouraged—taking his faith into the public arena. At the luncheon, Land argued, "Every single moral wrong and injustice in our society has been corrected because people of religious conviction and religious faith have brought their religious convictions into the public arena and insisted there be a change." *Baptist Press* reported that "James also pleaded with Alabama Baptists attending the luncheon to get involved and help impose their morality on the state, especially in areas of education, gambling and child abuse and neglect."⁴¹ The SBC leadership fully intends to press its vision of society, in large part reflected in the BF&M, through any means possible.

Such sentiments and efforts are not illogical when one considers the basic belief system of SBC leaders. The BF&M Study Committee issued a statement on May 26, 2000 regarding questions raised about their proposed revisions. In explaining the section dealing with scripture, the committee made the following statement:

Events in recent years have demonstrated that we needed to clarify that the Bible is not merely the record of God's revelation, but is itself God's revealed Word in written form. With Christians throughout the ages, most Southern Baptists believe in verbal inspiration. The Bible itself teaches that every word of Scripture

⁴⁰Roy S. Moore, "Speech by Justice Moore at Monument's Unveiling Ceremony." Appendix C, *Glassroth v. Moore*; *Maddox and Howard v. Moore*. [Http://www.almd.uscourts.gov/Opinions/appendix%20c.html](http://www.almd.uscourts.gov/Opinions/appendix%20c.html) (date visited January 6, 2003); "Ten Commandments Judge Praised and Panned," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 45, No. 15 (December 3, 2001): 22, 24; "Ten Commandments Judge Wins Chief Justice Seat in Alabama," *Baptist Press* (November 8, 2000); "Ala. Justice Defends Religious Display," *Washington Post* (October 18, 2002).

⁴¹"Judge's Ten Commandments plaque," *Baptist Press*.

was inspired by God, and is therefore completely true and trustworthy [2 Timothy 3:16]. The Bible is inerrant, infallible, and is our sole authority for faith and practice in the Church.⁴²

This understanding results in a hermeneutical system based on the literal interpretation of the Bible according to its plain meaning (at least in the eyes of the interpreter). Once “truths” are gleaned using this process, their implementation expresses devotion to God. This idea is reflected in the comments of recent SBC president Jack Graham after three SBC missionaries were murdered in Yemen on December 30, 2002 at Jibla Baptist Hospital. According to a *New York Times* article, Graham said, “This is not a conflict between religions but a conflict between God and Satan, between good and evil. We want to be sensitive to the political climate. We certainly want to work with governments where our missions have been placed and we don’t want to create a political/religious crisis. But as far as the Southern Baptists are concerned, we will continue to express our love for God.”⁴³ Thus, SBC leaders view their actions as a struggle between God and Satan, not merely a conflict with differing cultures or religions or belief systems. In this light, the stakes are quite high. Christians, according to SBC leadership, participate in this struggle by faithfully enacting divine principles found in scripture. To do anything else would be an act of infidelity to God. While SBC leaders may appear harsh in their rhetoric and actions, they can speak of loving people because they are attempting to institute God’s love (as discerned by them) on earth by eradicating evil and bringing about conformity to God’s law. Since implementing God’s rule is best for people, they believe they are expressing love by bringing this into being.

When the Bible is read in light of its literal and plain meaning, there remains little or no room for diversity or interpretation concerning the expression of God’s society, at least in the minds of SBC leaders. The BF&M guides the SBC in knowing how and what to enact. Anything in opposition to it, therefore, must be changed or eradicated. The BF&M also represents the SBC response to society. It demarcates the boundaries between God’s kingdom and Satan’s kingdom, and, therefore, is a clear description of the vision not only for the SBC, but also for society. SBC leaders have managed to express their vision in basic and clear terms. They have gained popular support in many

⁴²Adrian Rogers, “Committee Response to Initial Feedback.” [Http://www.sbc/net/bfm/bfmfeedback.asp](http://www.sbc/net/bfm/bfmfeedback.asp) (date visited January 3, 2003).

⁴³“With Missionaries Spreading, Muslims’ Anger is Following,” *New York Times* (December 31, 2002).

churches by equating the BF&M with the Bible and asserting that those who express disagreement with it are opposed to God and the Bible. The course of action then is clear. In the war between God and Satan, these individuals must be converted or driven out of the SBC and ultimately society itself. Failure to do so is tantamount to not loving God. The leadership of the SBC then offers to its constituency protection from the evil influences reflected in modern society; many happily accept it.

It is somewhat ironic that in the SBC's effort to distance itself from modern society by demarcating clear boundaries through the BF&M, it in many ways has accomplished just the opposite. Once one moves past the rhetoric of SBC leaders, one finds a convention that is fractured. SBC leaders have created and nurtured a culture of mistrust, suspicion, and ruthless acts, if necessary, to accomplish their goals. The BF&M has been one of the main weapons used in this venture. This "just war" has not brought peace, but strife along with the wounding and, at times, destruction of people's lives and careers. Politics has increasingly characterized SBC life. This does not reflect much difference from the decaying modern society that SBC leaders so often decry. The SBC, in spite of its status as the largest Protestant denomination in America, has failed to offer or demonstrate an alternative community model that effectively addresses many of the problems plaguing society.

Reform Judaism's Efforts to Set Limits and Stretch Boundaries

Setting limits and stretching boundaries seems like a dichotomy of ideas, but that is exactly what the Reform movement is attempting to do. It is trying to establish what kind of religious identity boundaries it should incorporate, without compromising another strong hallmark of Reform Judaism: inclusivity. Inclusivity has become the buzzword in the Reform movement. Almost every Reform congregation stresses its commitment to this concept. The feeling is widespread that for congregations to thrive in the new century, it is essential that they be open to all, including intermarrieds, gays and lesbians, Jews by choice, the unaffiliated, and so forth. Being inclusive implies accepting all while remaining non-judgmental. While it may seem obvious to many readers that any religious tradition must be by definition judgmental, American Jews have so merged American liberal values into their Jewish identity that many would not accept this viewpoint. Sylvia Barack Fishman has argued that a process of "coalescence" has occurred, in which the ethnic identity construction of American Jews has become increasingly fluid. As a consequence, American

Jews are no longer aware of the former dissonance between Judaic values and American liberal expectations.⁴⁴

For intermarried couples and their children, the Reform movement is the foremost choice for worship and other activities because it is the only large non-halachic American Jewish denomination that can accept such families as they are. Under traditional Jewish law, intermarried families would have to become Jewish and follow the dictates of *halacha*. However, there has not been a standardized Reform response to the results of the 1990 NJPS, where it was found that 52% of all American Jews from 1985 to 1990 had married non-Jews who had not converted. Several decades ago the Reform rabbinate and laity had generally accepted the principle of patrilineal descent, which means that children of a Jewish father can be considered Jewish. Under *halacha*, only children born of a Jewish mother can be considered Jewish. So strong was the idea of patrilineal descent in the Reform movement, it adopted in 1983 its resolution known as *The Status of Children of Mixed Marriages*, also known as the patrilineal descent resolution.⁴⁵ This CCAR resolution provided the basis for incorporation of intermarried couples into the Reform Jewish community, since its wording stressed that if one parent were Jewish, the child is “under presumption of Jewish descent.”⁴⁶ Liberal and conservative Reform Jews have found this resolution satisfactory, since it has expanded the boundaries of who can be considered Jewish in an intermarried situation. The added wording requiring the children of intermarried parents to be raised as Jews is a new concept, adopted for the purposes of this resolution, but it firms up the parameters under which such a child can be considered Jewish, even though this requirement is not found in *halacha*. Under *halacha* a Jewish child does not have to be raised as Jewish, but under the Reform resolution, this is an essential component of the child’s status. The resolution brought equality to the status of both the father and mother regardless of who is Jewish. Since it was adopted, the resolution has generally been well received as a necessary and predictable move for effective outreach.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

⁴⁵CCAR, *The Status of Children of Mixed Marriages* (also known as The Patrilineal Resolution), 19th paragraph of resolution (March 15, 1983).

⁴⁶CCAR, *Status of Children*.

⁴⁷Eric H. Yoffie, “The Importance of Outreach in Maintaining Reform’s Autonomy, Diversity, and Pluralism” (2000), in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

A high percentage of younger couples in most Reform synagogues are intermarried now, and many of the non-Jewish spouses have not converted to Judaism. The complete dynamics of having such couples actively or inactively participating in the synagogue have yet to be revealed, but in many congregations these couples are exceptionally active. This has become a positive trend in Reform synagogues across the country, but it has brought questions and concerns with it. Because of these concerns, the Reform movement has tried to guide congregations that might be struggling with issues relating to the integration of substantial numbers of non-Jews into their congregations. In 1990 the UAHC published a guide for Reform synagogues, entitled *Defining the Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue: A Resource for Congregations*,⁴⁸ in its effort to apprise congregations of some of the implications of this new trend. In the early years of this development, most intermarried couples who joined the synagogues were involved in Judaism as a religious practice. In recent years, however, this has changed to some degree, since many non-Jewish spouses have decided not to convert to Judaism, and the congregation is left with questions on how to deal with issues of ritual practice in the synagogue. Although different schools of thought have become apparent during this time, the important principles of inclusivity and autonomy have allowed each congregation to decide its own policy concerning what ritual practices can be performed by unconverted gentiles. Other questions, however, have arisen. Can they be full congregants in their own right, or do they have to be part of the membership unit with their spouse and children? Can they participate in a *Shabbat* service, and if so, how much can they participate? Can they sit on the board of directors? Can they teach in the synagogue?

Reform Judaism Today in the Individualistic American Society

Although there are many challenges the Reform movement must address in the coming years, there is one central question that must be asked: Can liberal Judaism thrive in an individualistic society? Because of the basic nature of the liberal American society, volunteeristic options abound, and most Reform congregations find themselves in a situation where *Shabbat* services are attended by small numbers of its congregants on any given Friday night. Worse, the vast majority of the membership ignores educational programs produced in many Reform synagogues. The small numbers are accepted as the norm in most congregations, and it is seen as concrete evidence that Reform

⁴⁸UAHC, *Defining the Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue: A Resource for Congregations* (New York: UAHC Press, 1990).

Jews do not consider synagogue attendance obligatory in any way. This is true in some American Orthodox congregation as well, but American Jewry cannot continue to construe this behavior as normative religious behavior and still be able to perpetuate a vibrant Jewish communal life. While on the surface it may seem that with the autonomous features of the Reform movement, congregants have the right to forgo *Shabbat* services—and they do as an inherent right as Reform Jews—but in the end, the spiritual health of the congregation will suffer.

Simultaneously with the issue of fewer congregants involved in congregational life is the perceived impression that the status and influence of the Reform rabbinate is lower than it was during the preceding decades. While the theological focus of the movement has ebbed, the therapeutic benefits of one's congregational membership have grown. While the Reform movement has seen its membership numbers growing, it has made a lateral move from that of a theological house to a social service agency for its congregants. Since the focus of the Reform synagogue is no longer primarily theological, it is at risk of losing its membership whenever social trends change. Even though within certain areas of the Reform movement there is much religious energy at work, apathy among many congregants continues not only to tear down the health of most Reform synagogues, but also leads to alienation and disaffiliation among those whose interest in Judaism has moved into a more pragmatic phase of a Jewish civil religion.

Most American Reform Jews today grew up in the 1950s through the 1970s, and a Jewish civil religion more appropriately fits their needs. Jonathan Woocher applied the concept of civil religion to American Judaism, and wrote that American civil Judaism affirms seven major tenets in Judaism: (1) The unity of the Jewish people, (2) Jewish mutual responsibility, (3) The importance of Jewish survival in a threatening world, (4) The centrality of the State of Israel, (5) The enduring value of Jewish tradition, (6) The importance of charity and social justice, and (7) The importance of American-ness.⁴⁹ But even an American civil religion cannot be sustained in the face of apathy, and as American society changes, so has it.⁵⁰ An American Jewish civil religion cannot be used as the sole basis for Jewish identity because of its inherent

⁴⁹Jonathan S. Woocher, *The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 63–103.

⁵⁰Jonathan S. Woocher, "Spirituality and the Civil Religion," in E. Abrams and D. G. Dalin, eds., *Secularism, Spirituality, and the Future of American Jewry* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), p. 21.

distance from Jewish tradition, and it is difficult to pass on such an identity to succeeding generations.⁵¹ Many younger Reform Jews are not compelled to attach themselves to the ideas of the civil religion. Indeed, why should they? Even though many young Jews have come from families of mixed loyalties, traditional and non-traditional, these traditions have been left behind in the ensuing decades, and they now have less commitment to continue with their families' historical connections.

Replacing this historical loyalty is a new "spirituality"—rather than a religiosity—and many American Jews today pursue this for the existential meaning they find in it.⁵² Many believe that their synagogues have not adequately nurtured their spiritual lives, that their leaders have hoped instead that religious commitment to one's historical faith would be sufficient. As a consequence, many American Jews are "bored" with their *Shabbat* services and flatly uninterested in becoming involved in other synagogue activities.⁵³ Other Reform Jews, however, are hoping their synagogues will assist them in rediscovering the Jewish ethnic identity they seek, and the Reform movement is trying to fill the void of both of these types of congregants. Nevertheless there seems to be more of a focus on meeting the needs of the spiritual seeker, rather than the ethnic identifier. And there is a perception that a void exists in providing spiritually satisfying religious messages and experiences that could fulfill the searcher of religious truth. To fill this void, the UAHC is providing workshops such as those presented recently at the UAHC Biennial Conference held in December 1999 at Orlando, Florida. The workshops most heavily attended were those with the following titles: "God and Theology", "Reform Worship in the 21st Century", and "Can We Pray What We Don't Believe?"⁵⁴

Conclusion

The approved Pittsburgh Platform was the result of a long and open process carried out in a liberal movement that has an acute appreciation for the importance of transparency and active consultation with its various constituencies. This openness is a tremendous asset for the Reform movement,

⁵¹Susser and Liebman, *Choosing Survival*, pp. 61–89.

⁵²W. C. Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994).

⁵³M. Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive? Looking Past the Holocaust Toward a Jewish Future* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 136–141.

⁵⁴D. N. Cohen, "Balancing Acts," *The Jewish Journal* (December 31, 1999): 14.

but it also makes it virtually impossible to create a document that is strong and unequivocal in both its theology and its approach to ritual behavior. The American Jewish community has become splintered into two main religious factions, orthodox and non-orthodox. In the midst of this the Reform movement continues to forge ahead in its quest to provide Judaic teachings that will not only nurture the souls of its laity, but also provide structure within a formidable individualistic society, so that a viable religious alternative can be preserved for generations to come in a continuously changing world. The Reform Jewish community commonly uses autonomy as its final arbiter in any discussion of social matters, and popular words in use that substantiate this difference are pluralism, egalitarianism, feminism, and inclusiveness.⁵⁵

American cultural norms continue to influence American Jews, and this contributes to the ongoing acculturation and assimilation that have contributed so heavily to the paralyzing apathy among American Jews.⁵⁶ With the adoption of *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, the Reform movement has shown that it is determined to continue to search for solutions for the widespread apathy. From an ideological point of view it remains religiously important to study and practice Judaic tradition. To continue with the Classical Reform tradition is not a genuine expression of Judaism for today's Reform Jews, nor is it spiritually fulfilling for those who need more substance in their lives if their lives are to have authentic meaning.

In pondering whether or not liberal Judaism can thrive in an individualistic society, the same question can be asked regarding the alternative embodied in the SBC. Can fundamentalist Christianity thrive in an individualistic society? The SBC experience would suggest that developing a clear sense of identity and drawing strong lines of distinction are not in themselves adequate responses. Merely developing statements or platforms of faith will not make ailing institutions healthy. The SBC has adopted a model designed to purge anyone who does not adhere to its vision; it uses the BF&M as its sword. This model leaves no room for error since actions taken under its direction are irreversible; once people's lives and careers are injured or destroyed, the damage cannot be undone. Unless those administering this model make no mistakes either in the interpretation or application of scripture (an attitude which as-

⁵⁵E. M. Umansky, "Feminism and American Reform Judaism," in R. M. Seltzer and N. J. Cohen, eds., *The Americanization of the Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 267–283.

⁵⁶S. C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

sumes there is only one correct interpretation/application), it may not prove to be the best choice for relating to a diverse society.

Perhaps the time has come to rethink the role of confessions in religious organizations. Perhaps a new model should be developed. Something along the lines of Supreme Court decisions might be beneficial. The court decides cases by voting, and the majority opinion is explained. At the same time, dissenting opinions often accompany the decision. Would the attaching of a dissenting opinion to the Pittsburgh Platform or the BF&M allow for those with diverse opinions to remain within each organization without being disenfranchised? Perhaps it would provide enough flexibility for each organization to make clear statements regarding the direction it is heading, while recognizing and encouraging legitimate points of discussion and debate arising from a diverse constituency.

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