

Southeastern News

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST SYNTHESIS CRACKING, RESHAPING, ACCORDING TO CHURCH HISTORIAN

WAKE FOREST, N.C. - The Southern Baptist synthesis is "not breaking up," but is "cracking" and "reshaping," caused by internal and external stresses and the emergence of a new way of doing things, a church historian said here.

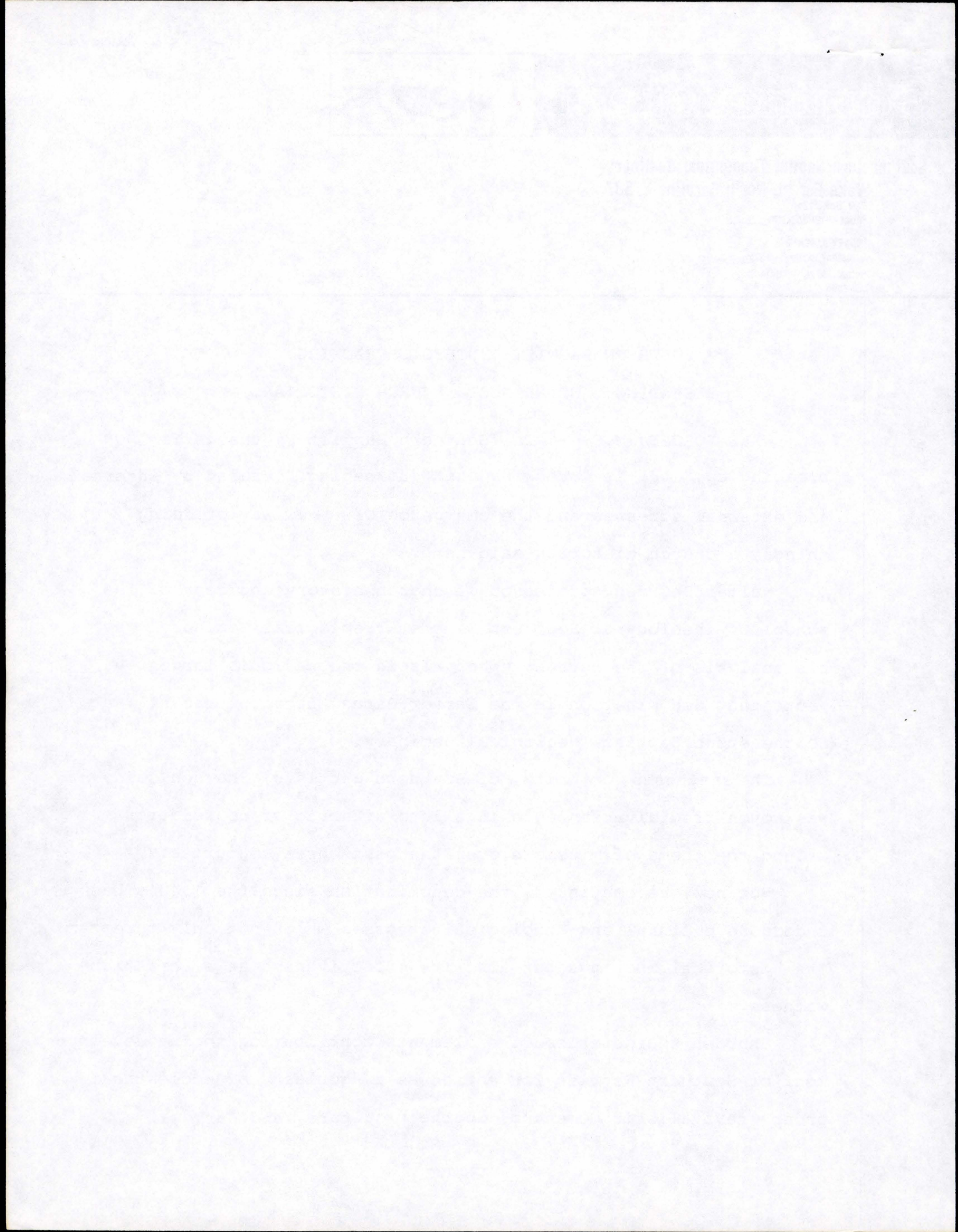
Walter Shurden, professor of church history and dean of the school of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, gave his analysis of the current upheavals in the nation's largest protestant denomination in the Carver-Barnes Lectures recently at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The synthesis, or unity, of Southern Baptists, Shurden said, was woven from diverse beginnings into a fabric of cooperation around the theme of missions over the past three centuries.

But now, he continued, the denomination since the 1940's has undergone cultural and theological stresses which not only threaten its historical moorings but also its effectiveness as a Christian witness.

Shurden characterized the elements contributing to the development of Southern Baptist Convention as a "goulash" of ecclestical order, revivalistic momentum, Southern culture, and narrow

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sectarianism.

Contributing to the mixture in the 18th century were the Baptists of Charleston who emphasized theological consensus, ministerial education and stability.

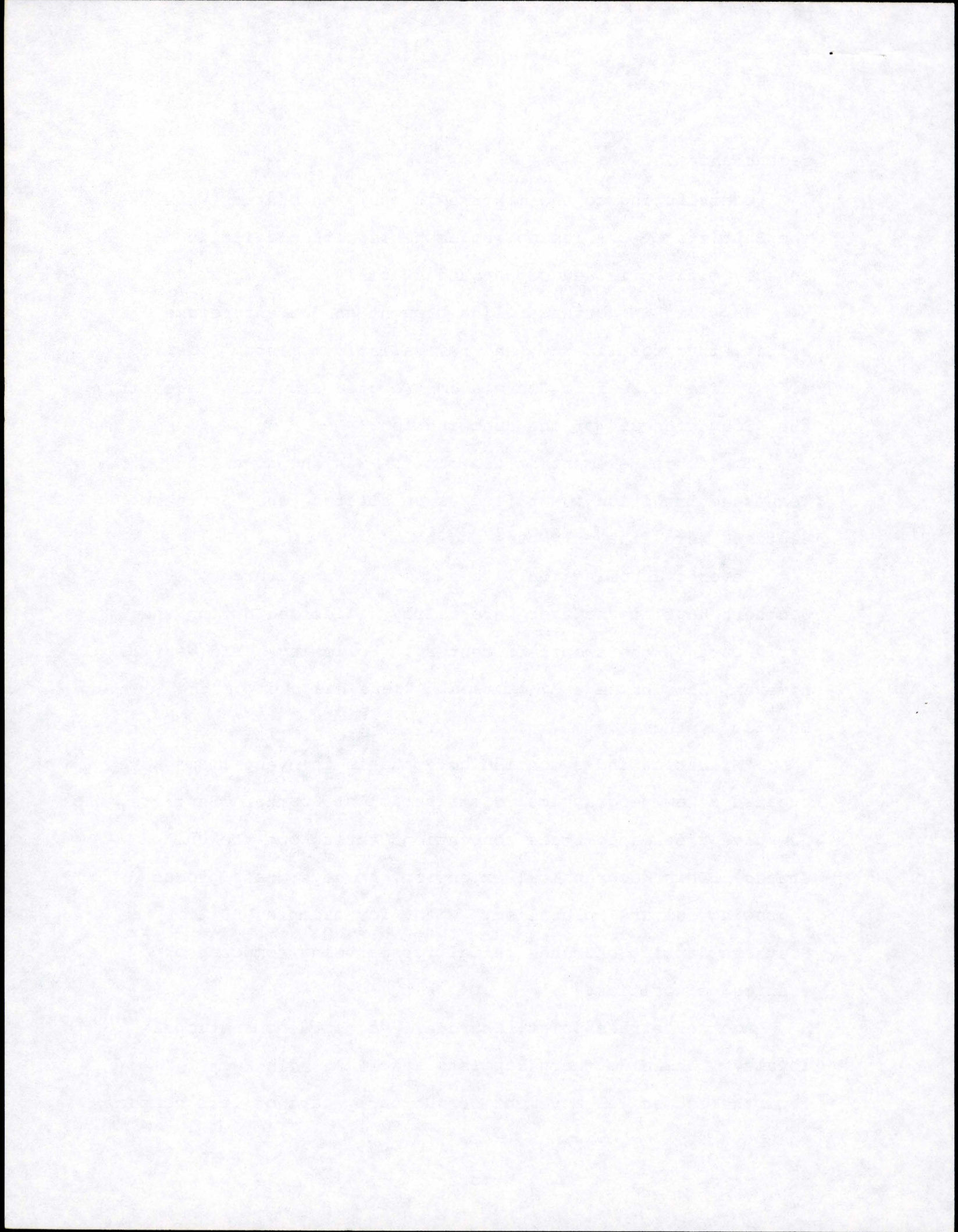
Baptists in North Carolina brought an "adventuresome spirit, love for liberty, and revivalistic momentum" to the body, while those from Georgia contributed a cultural identity, the "Southernness" of the denomination.

The fourth element in the mixture was the so-called Tennessee tradition identified as an attitude that Southern Baptists were "the only ones God had."

Never a denomination with a monolithic hierarchy, Southern Baptists however were fairly solidified during the early part of the twentieth century. Following World War II, however, Shurden says "phenomenal stress has been on the Southern Baptist synthesis."

"Migration and a continuing emphasis on evangelism" have created a new geographical distribution of Southern Baptists, who now have affiliated state conventions throughout the United States. This geographical expansion, he says, has "produced a growing cultural pluralism," with, for example, 30 % of the Southern Baptist churches in California being composed of ethnical minorities.

Another stress point, Shurden says, is denominational loyalty. While Southern Baptists stayed "a country mile" away from the ecumenical movement of the early part of this century,



"some Southern Baptists who would have been the sharpest critics of that kind of ecumenism are right in the middle of a new fundamentalist ecumenism."

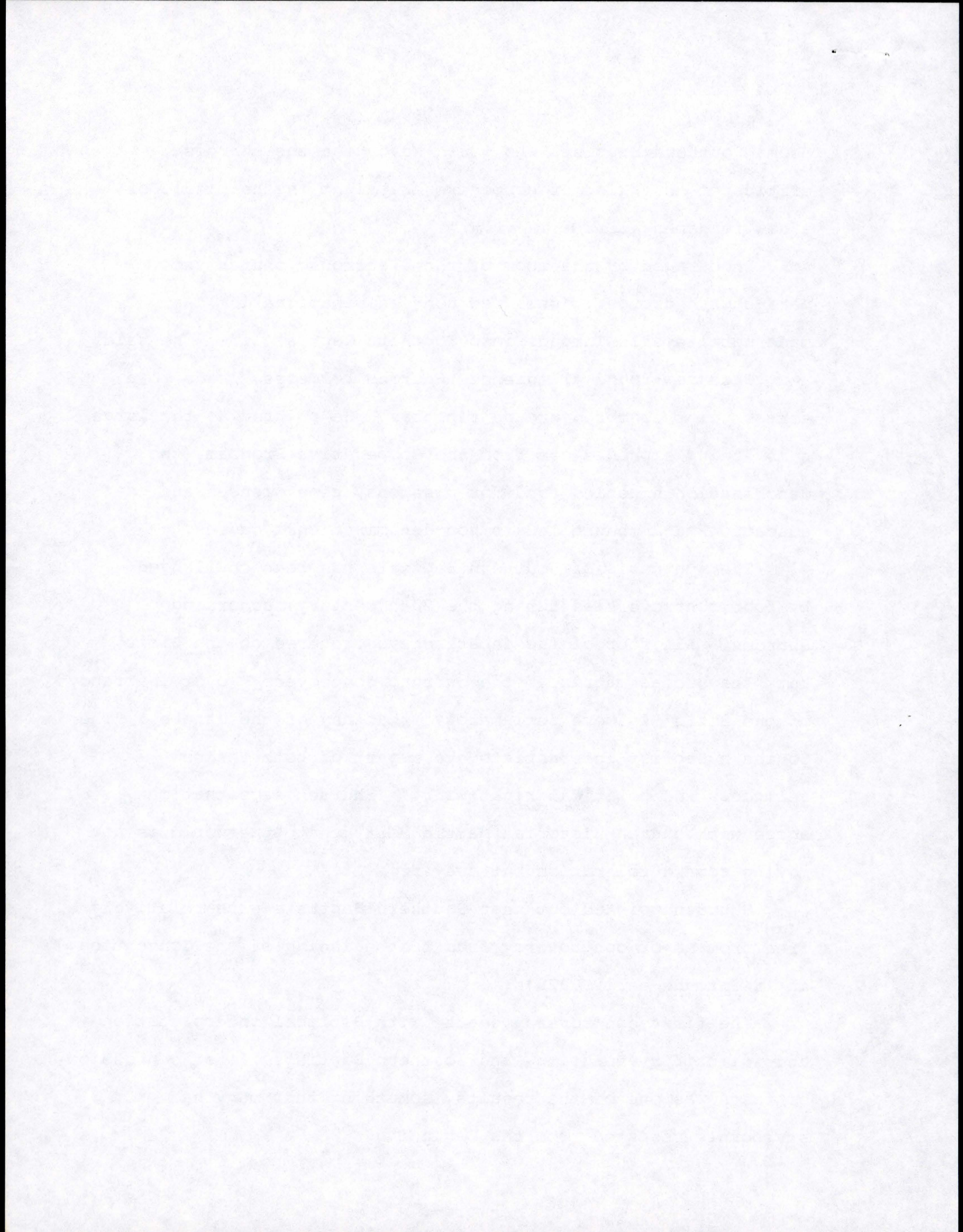
Encouraged by the boom of the electronic church and... para-church groups..."this new non-denominationalism has made unbelievable inroads into Southern Baptist life," he said.

This new-found allegiance, Shurden believes, leads to a stress point centered around finances. He pointed to the large sums "being siphoned off from the Cooperative Program (the denomination's pooled fund for missions, benevolences and education) and channelled to non-denominational causes."

The synthesis of Southern Baptists has been challenged by four controversies during the 20th century, according to Shurden. All four of the debates have centered on the Bible, but "the social matrix of the current controversy (over inerrancy of the Bible) is more inflammatory" than any of the others. "The Southern Baptist inerrantists are a part of both the new religious and political right-wing." Shurden says that many agree with church historian Martin Marty that "the world is not moving toward toleration but away from it."

Shurden pointed out that Southern Baptists were relatively free from major controversy from the beginning of the Convention in 1845 to the early 1920's.

The first controversy dealt with Biblical interpretation and scientific evolution, and Southern Baptists' first confession of faith was one of the results, something that many had stubbornly resisted from the beginning.



Two other debates, the Elliott controversy in 1963 and the Broadman Bible Commentary controversy in 1972, resulted in the firing of a seminary professor and the re-writing of the commentary on Genesis.

The current controversy, Shurden believes, will produce a polarization among Baptists, accusations against Baptist college and seminary teachers, intensification of the debate, and possible jeopardizing of the Convention's Bold Mission Thrust.

Shurden sees the current issue as political rather than doctrinal. "They (the inerrantists) are going after the machinery of the Convention and the minds of the people," he said.

While the official state Baptists papers are solidly against the movement, two unofficial Baptist papers are promoting the controversy. He also believes The Baptist Faith and Message Statement written in 1925 and revised in 1963 is also being used. He said that the prediction of Baptist historian W. W. Barnes of a trend toward creedalism is accurate. "Creedalism is not creeping among us, it is galloping," Shurden said.

Even though Baptists historically have shunned creedalism, Shurden said, it is not his primary concern. "The unique thing, and the most dangerous thing," he said, "is that we now have for the first time in the Southern Baptist Convention a highly organized, apparently well-funded, partisan political party who are (sic) going not only for the minds of the Southern Baptist people but for the machinery of the Southern Baptist Convention."

"In no controversy in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention," he said, "has the system been misused in this way. Those who say that 'this is just the same old thing' are unaware of our heritage."

