

## **“Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?”**

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When a joke becomes cliché, it needs to be retired. But one wisecrack that just won't die is the old saw about the legendary ability of Baptists to disagree. Put two Baptists in a room, so the saying goes, and you'll get *three* opinions. Although this well-worn remark still produces an occasional chuckle, lack of common conviction is no laughing matter.

Today, Southern Baptists live in a world of breathtaking developments in the culture war. The rapid normalization of homosexuality and the very real possibility of same-sex marriage, the massive assault on the sanctity of human life in America through abortion and emerging biotechnologies, and the breakdown of the traditional family threaten the American Republic – and challenge the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ to respond.

But at the same moment our age presents us with an unprecedented opportunity to be salt and light, Southern Baptists face an internal crisis of growing proportions. Much ink and talk has already been spilled on the question, but few will deny the poignancy of the following queries: “Are we living in a post denominational age?” “Do Southern Baptists collectively possess the mutual passion for truth that will be required to confront the encroaching darkness enveloping the West?” “Are we committed to the Great Commission enough to take the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth?”

Before we too quickly and glibly give comforting answers to these questions, we need to pause for sober consideration. Recent indicators seem to forecast impending trouble. On September 23, 2003, the SBC Funding Study Committee reported to the Executive Committee that churches sent substantially less to the Cooperative Program last year in terms of percentage than they did during a comparable period during the 1980s. And as every caring Southern Baptist knows, as the Cooperative Program goes, so go our denomination's efforts to bring the gospel to the nations.

Southern Baptists would do well to embark upon a season of reflection about the doctrinal, moral, and evangelistic commitments that bind us together. They must consider which alternative they will choose: a common future together with shared convictions about how to confront the evils attending our age, or increasing fragmentation, churches isolated from one another, and a weakened cultural presence.

On Monday and Tuesday, April 5-6, 2003, Union University hosted a forum for this very conversation to take place. Many of our foremost denominational leaders attended to consider carious aspects related to one central theme: “Baptist Identity: Is There a Future?” The speakers include R. Albert Mohler, Jr., Morris Chapman, Richard Land, James Leo Garrett, David S. Dockery, Russ Bush, Stan Norman, Greg Wills, Sam Shaw and Voddie Baucham. Their task was to remind us of the historic convictions that have strengthened and sustained our denomination for decades. Baptists have a concrete reservoir of theological content that, if drawn upon, reinforce our belief that the brightest days for Baptists are still to come.

The results of the conference met virtually every expectation. Hundreds of participants from the mid-South region made their way to Union to see what Baptist life together

might look like in the coming years. Contrary to the caricature that Southern Baptists cannot agree, the presenters at this conference displayed a remarkable unity. Three words describe content delivered during the presentations: clarity, conviction, and charity.

**Clarity.** In the first three lectures, James Leo Garrett of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Greg Wills of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and L. Russ Bush of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary looked to Baptist History in order to gain insights for the present. Garrett outlined how Baptists have, in the main, always been unafraid and unashamed to make public their theological confessions. Building upon that central theme, Wills divulged its correlate: not only did Baptists have theological confessions, they also made them tests of fellowship. If a person or church failed to exhibit like doctrines and practices, Baptists have historically been willing to say, “If you cannot agree with us on these central beliefs, then you are not a Baptist.” Russ Bush reiterated this theme by detailing how our fathers in the faith were faithful because they kept themselves lashed to the mast of the authority of Scripture.

**Conviction.** Following the historical perspective, David Dockery, Morris Chapman, Stan Norman, and R. Albert Mohler underscored the importance of Baptist conviction for cooperation in the future. David Dockery, President of Union University, demonstrated that Baptists are always at their best when their core doctrinal beliefs about the Godhead, Scripture, and work of Christ square with the ancient orthodoxy of the early church. Only such fidelity will give the Baptists the verve they will need to meet oncoming cultural challenges. For his part, Morris Chapman, President of the Executive Committee of the SBC, exhorted his hearers that Southern Baptists must return to a strong connection between the churches on theological grounds. Only such robust associationalism will offer the collective courage that we will need to bear witness to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Stan Norman of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, concurred with the conclusions of the conference, and outlined the core axioms which make the name “Baptist” a distinct theological identity. Ultimately, R. Albert Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, summed up the mood of the entire conference. Pointing to the conservative resurgence in the SBC, Mohler stated that Southern Baptists had been given a “second chance” to be a great denomination once again. “Southern Baptists,” he asserted, “must embrace the challenge of confronting these issues not merely defensively, but rather, as a process of using contemporary debates on present issues to frame a theological reality that is in constant conversation with the apostles, with the [church] fathers, with the reformers, with the evangelicals.”

**Charity.** The addresses by Dockery, Chapman, and Mohler left the conferees looking outward to the cultural mandate that frames our responsibility in the future. The three final addresses by Sam Shaw, Richard Land, and Voddie Baucham outlined a concrete action plan for the Baptist future. Sam Shaw, Pastor of Germantown Baptist Church in Germantown, Tennessee, discussed the boldness and vibrancy that must accompany the local church’s witness if it would reach an increasingly pagan culture. In this context, pastors must lead the way with courage, and prepare their churches to meet the needs of local communities that no one else is meeting. Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission of the SBC, reminded his listeners that it was the Baptist vision for a free church in a free society that has contributed to the robust Christian faith that has undergirded the core values that have made the American experiment great. Finally, Voddie Baucham, the impressive apologist/evangelist from Houston, preaching

from John 13, informed a standing room only chapel filled with Pastors and Union University students that the meaning of being a Christ-follower is defined by service. Jesus, Baucham said, knew who he was as Son of God, and this confidence freed him to be the servant of sinners.

In retrospect, the Baptist Identity conference was a high watermark event for the Union University community. Those who were present will remember that in the Spring of 2004, that preeminent Baptist theologians, historians, and institutional leaders found common ground to discuss, as E. Y. Mullins once put it, “the dangers and duties of the present hour.” Southern Baptists must take decisive action to build unity within our denomination if our efforts to embody the Great Commission are to be effective. These actions must be thoughtfully determined. If we give ear to the words of our conference presenters, our forward focus will begin with a recommitment to the theological convictions that shaped our historic identity. This theological framework coupled with a genuine Christ-honoring love for mankind must be the foundation upon which we build our identity and embrace a promising future.

Note: The addresses for the Baptist Identity Conference are still available via streaming audio at <http://www.uu.edu/audio/>.