

baptist *is there a future* identity?

TWO DAY CONFERENCE EXAMINES PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE ISSUES FOR BAPTIST



Baucham leads worship service

Evangelist Voddie Baucham leads in a concluding worship service for the Baptist Identity Conference that was held on Union's campus April 5-6. Prior to the service President Dockery announced the addition of Baucham to the Union faculty as an adjunct professor of Christian Studies.



Thornbury and Poe lead panel discussion

Union professors Gregory A. Thornbury and Hal Poe lead a panel discussion entitled Baptist Identity and Post-Denominationalism at the Baptist Identity Conference held on Union's campus.

Speakers during Union University's Baptist Identity Conference called for a Baptist orthodoxy, more cooperation among Southern Baptists and examined the issues that confront Baptists in today's world.

About 300 participants gathered on the Jackson, Tenn., campus to reflect "on the mission, purpose and future of our shared service," according to Union President David S. Dockery.

Dockery told conferees that Southern Baptists need a confessional framework.

"Baptists need to cultivate a wholistic orthodoxy, based on a high view of scripture and congruent with the Trinitarian and Christological consensus of the early church," David S. Dockery, president of Union University, said. "Only in this way will we avoid the dangers of fundamentalist reductionism on one hand and the liberal revisionism on the other."

Dockery suggested that Baptist work cannot move forward without confessional convictions or confessional boundaries, but that does not mean we should expect uniformity of beliefs or convictions among Southern Baptists.

"Inherent in an historically informed understanding of orthodoxy," he explained, "is the need for some flexibility and variety lest we place straightjackets around our community and literally around scripture itself. The world in which we live with its emphasis on diversity and plurality may well be a creative setting for us to once again pray for a far-reaching rebirth of Baptist orthodoxy in our midst as we rediscover our heritage and identity."

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, said that cooperation is a necessity in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

"The Southern Baptist Convention is a network of churches volunteering to work with other like-minded Baptist churches," he reminded them. "Should this network fall apart, there is no Convention. . . Cooperation is enormously vital to the existence of the Southern Baptist Convention and its cooperating state conventions. Enough words cannot be strung together to state adequately the danger that lurks

in the shadows waiting to break down communication and cooperation among us. Where it is intentional, individuals must reassess their own attitudinal axiom. Where it is unintentional, church and conventions must reassess why the cooperative nature of our Convention is breaking down."

Chapman said that, even though Cooperative Program gifts each year continue to exceed receipts for the previous year, the trend in the percentage of total undesignated gifts given by the local church has slipped from 10.5 percent for a five-year period in the mid-1980s to 7.39 percent in 2001-2002.

"If the churches lose the vision and the understanding of the Cooperative Program, missions suffer," he said. "If missions suffer, the conventions suffer. If the conventions suffer, reorganization and reallocation of funding shall no longer be a choice."

In his keynote address, R. Albert Mohler spoke about the moral issues facing Southern Baptists today, as well as the changes in society that prove challenging for the denomination.

"The Christian worldview will either become the animating framework for all that we do—and we're either going to get down to the tangible issues of life—or we're going to miss the point entirely," Mohler warned. "We have to understand the background for this is a caustic secularism that has now reached the point that serious philosophers now argue that all that should be allowed in the public square are assertions without a secular rationale and a secular effect, which means if we're against same sex marriage, because—oddly enough, we think that God established what marriage is and we're allowed to believe that without being thrown in jail yet—we're not allowed to make that argument with any serious effect on public policy."

Mohler also pointed to trends in U.S. demographics and in church structure that challenge denominational identity.

"The large infrastructure of Southern Baptist life may not survive in the post-modern age," he said. He explained that "the denomination has grown in a social context from what was seen as agrarian with most of our people being farmers and tradesmen and merchants to a denomination that is charac-

terized as highly mobile, highly professional and largely metropolitan."

Mohler pointed out that we now have megachurches, which are made up of very large congregations, and microchurches that fit a niche in a particular community. Many of the members, he said, don't even know they are Southern Baptists, since they have only a vague awareness of what a denomination is.

Mohler said that the United States has seen a rise in ethnic and minority groups, but they are not well-represented in the Southern Baptist Convention. In terms of ethnic diversity, "we are not just behind, we are in another world," he said.

Based on those challenges, he emphasized that the decision about the survival of the SBC as it is today is not one that will be made by the executives of Southern Baptist agencies or by executives in state conventions, but by Southern Baptist churches and how they choose to confront the challenges.

"That decision will eventually be made by the churches, and the churches will point us to that future," he said.

Other speakers included:

- James Leo Garrett, Distinguished Professor of Theology Emeritus at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary;
- Stan Norman, director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary;
- Sam Shaw, pastor of Germantown (Tenn.) Baptist Church;
- Gregory Wills, director of the Center for the Study of the Southern Baptist Convention at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary;
- Russ Bush, senior professor of philosophy of religion, academic vice president and dean of the faculty at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary;
- Richard Land, president and CEO of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention;
- Voddie Baucham, an evangelist with Voddie Baucham Ministries;
- Harry L. Poe, Charles Colson Professor of Faith and Culture at Union University and
- Gregory A. Thornbury, director of Union University's Carl F. H. Center for Christian Leadership. www.uu.edu