

# Convention, baptist II Cooperation Identity and Controversy

## UNION TAKES THE LEAD IN ADDRESSING KEY DENOMINATIONAL ISSUES

Visitors from across the country came to Union University in February for the second Baptist Identity Conference. A follow-up to the inaugural event in 2004, this year's theme was "Baptist Identity: Convention, Cooperation and Controversy." More than 300 attended the conference sessions in a three-day period.

"Registration numbers were strong and represented both the geographical and ideological breadth of our convention," said Charles Fowler, Union's senior vice president for university relations. "This in itself is strong affirmation of the importance of these conversations."

The list of presenters reflected a variety of backgrounds and convention roles. Educators joined a pastor, mission experts, the LifeWay Christian Resources president and the convention president to examine crucial issues from a variety of perspectives.

"It was a much needed conversation for Southern Baptists as we seek to better understand our history and heritage in order to build a new sense of cooperation for our shared service in the 21st century," said Union President David S. Dockery, who was one of the 10 presenters. "Each speaker addressed a key issue facing Southern Baptists at this time in our history."

Buddy Gray, pastor of Hunter Street Baptist Church in Hoover, Ala., said

the conference was refreshing.

"It was good to see the different perspectives, and yet I think all the speakers were saying the same thing," Gray said. "Let's center on the gospel and what it means to truly be the church."

Several bloggers attended the conference and reported on the sessions as they were in progress. Steve Weaver, pastor of West Broadway Baptist Church in Lenoir



City, Tenn., said there were two contributions of the conference that will leave a lasting impact.

"First, the opportunity for open and, for the most part, civil discussion of issues of high importance for Southern Baptists," Weaver wrote on this blog. "This opportunity for dialogue has been severely lacking in the past and although the blogosphere has emerged

as a means of dialogue between individuals, it cannot replace face-to-face opportunities for the exchange of meaningful issues. Dr. David Dockery and Union University should be commended for facilitating this discussion by all interested Southern Baptists."

Secondly, Weaver said the conference topics can provide a helpful framework for continued discussions in the future.

"Serious issues such as these require serious thinking and debate," Weaver wrote. "At this conference we have seen a model of how such issues can be engaged in an amiable way, even with those with whom we disagree. If this conference raises the level of debate among Southern Baptists by providing helpful categories for debating the issues and a model of Christ-like humility for all of us to emulate, the legacy of this conference will be one of eternal significance for the millions of lost souls that could be reached with the gospel through our cooperation."

Coverage of the addresses included live cable television and Internet video streaming via EPlus TV6 and the Union Broadcasting System. Audio files were posted online and on-site digital copies of each address were available almost immediately.

What follows is a brief chronological look at each conference presentation.

### MIKE DAY

Director of Missions, Mid-South Association

"THE FUTURE OF BAPTIST ASSOCIATIONS AND STATE CONVENTIONS"



Mike Day

Day said both state conventions and Baptist associations are seeking to be relevant. He observed that much of what occurs in Southern Baptist life related to its various levels (national convention, state conventions and local associations) is confusing to members of local churches.

Day listed several elements of a new paradigm.

It is church-driven. "A new paradigm affirms the Great Commission was given to churches and not a denomination," Day said.

It is priority-based, focused on church starting, church mobilization and leadership development.

It is to be resource-focused. Under the new paradigm the association would have no programs to maintain. "It uses collective resources to assist churches in fulfilling the mission God has given to them," he said.

It is institution-free. "The association of the future may have to own a building, but does not have to own camps, ministry centers, or schools," the Memphis DOM noted. "That does not mean associations would not support those institutions. It just means they would not own them."

It will be strategically-managed, staffed by directors of missions who are catalytic and facilitative in their leadership.

It will be regionally located but not geographically bound.

It is denominationally connected, but not in the traditional way. Under the new paradigm, the association would not necessarily rely on the state convention. "If this paradigm plays out to its fullest, the association and state convention as we know it will cease to exist," Day said.

### FRANK PAGE

President, Southern Baptist Convention

"THE FUTURE OF THE COOPERATIVE PROGRAM"



Frank Page

Page said Southern Baptists must have a mindset similar to that of the Apostle Paul when he was in prison. Though his circumstances weren't ideal, Paul chose to focus on the positives –

his ability to preach Christ to those he otherwise might not be able to reach.

Christians often find themselves in difficult situations, Page said, but the tendency is usually to ask God for a way out of the trouble.

"Our first response is, 'God get me out of it. God rescue me from this difficulty,'" Page said. "But in so doing we have often short circuited God's desire to teach us great and mighty things. ... If we have the right mindset, then we can experience some great victories from God."

Page related the importance of having the right mindset to the Cooperative Program, the mechanism through which Southern Baptist churches pool their resources to fund mission endeavors.

"The Cooperative Program was started in 1925 so that the word of God might be preached to the needs of the earth," Page said. "It is my prayer that the future of the Cooperative Program will be bright so the brothers can preach the word of God fearlessly and courageously."

But that will only happen, the SBC president said, if Southern Baptists adopt an attitude of Christ-like selflessness.

"Often times in our convention we have broken into groups that want to know 'Who's side are you on?' rather than 'Are you preaching Christ?'" Page said. "There are people in the Southern Baptist Convention who think the convention belongs to them. There are many groups that think that way. I have felt that way at times myself."

But Page said "this convention does not belong to me, nor to you. It is a Jesus convention."

### THOM RAINER

President, LifeWay Christian Resources

"EVANGELISM AND CHURCH GROWTH IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION"



Thom Rainer

Rainer cited statistics showing that in 1950, Southern Baptists baptized 376,000 people when the denomination had 7 million members.

In 2005, when the SBC was 16 million members strong, SBC churches baptized only 371,000 people.

"Alarms are sounding loudly," Rainer said. He pointed to several reasons for the SBC's downward spiral in the area of evangelism. Eschatology is one reason,

because Rainer said Southern Baptists are increasingly abandoning a belief in a literal, physical hell. Lack of such belief diminishes enthusiasm for evangelism, he said.

Rainer also listed ecclesiology as another reason. On a given Sunday, according to statistics, only about 7 million of the SBC's 16 million members attend church.

"It would appear that our church rolls are filled with non-members and, likely, unregenerate members," Rainer said. "That which is dead cannot tell another person how to have life."

Rainer said far too many church members, including pastors, admit to having no witnessing or evangelistic relationships – and individual Christians no longer feel like evangelism is their responsibility. Instead, churches relegate evangelism to a specific church program in which few people participate.

"When evangelism is not my responsibility, it does not happen," Rainer said.

### PAIGE PATTERSON

President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

"WHAT CONTEMPORARY BAPTISTS CAN LEARN FROM ANABAPTISTS"



Paige Patterson

Patterson listed six characteristics or practices of the 16th century Anabaptists that he said should become priorities in 21st century Southern

Baptist church life: a redeemed, disciplined church; faith witness baptism; the Bible as the source of authority; a church that looks different from the outside world; the Lord's Supper as a fellowship trust; and courage of conviction.

Patterson said the Lord's Supper and baptism were treated as acts of solemn commitment in the Anabaptist congregations of southern Germany and Switzerland.

"The Anabaptists, like their New Testament counterparts, baptized with confidence those who wished to profess their faith in Christ," Patterson said. "But they also made certain that the new believer understood that he was acting out the death of the old man and the resurrection of a new man."

The name Anabaptist literally meant "rebaptized," since most early converts also had been baptized as infants.



As Anabaptists professed a belief that baptism should be reserved for people capable of making their own decisions, Patterson said many were tortured, burned at the stake or drowned.

“Remarkable courage, doubtless born of sincere convictions and enhanced by the power of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit transformed suffering, sorrow and even death into superlative witness,” Patterson said. “Our churches will have to recover the Anabaptist vision of suffering as a part of what it means to follow Christ.”

**RUSSELL MOORE**  
Dean, School of Theology,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
“THE LEGACY T. T. EATON”



Russell Moore

Moore recounted how Thomas T. Eaton, a Union graduate and faculty member, frequently became embroiled in heated debates over matters such as baptism and the Lord's Supper. This occurred while Eaton was a Louisville pastor and editor of Kentucky's Baptist newspaper, the Western Recorder.

“At the heart of the 19th century Baptist concern was a conviction that the ordinances matter,” Moore said. “The 19th century Baptists argued so much about the Lord's Supper precisely because they believed it was important - indeed, crucial.”

Moore said many Baptist congregations in the 21st century do not focus on that significance, and fail to view the Lord's Supper as a celebration of Christ's victory over sin.

“We chew tiny pieces of what seem to be Styrofoam and cough back shot glasses of juice while scrunching up our faces and trying to feel sorry for Jesus,” Moore said. “Jesus doesn't want us to feel sorry for him. He gives us the supper as a victory party in advance, declaring that we are invited.”

Moore also discussed Eaton's apprehensions about parachurch groups. He said Eaton feared these well-intentioned organizations would displace the primacy of the local church.

Moore said some of Eaton's fears proved unfounded, but that his overall concern was justified.

**DAVID S. DOCKERY**  
President, Union University  
“THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION SINCE 1979”



David S. Dockery

Dockery said Southern Baptists are in danger of losing the gospel itself if they continue the infighting that has characterized the denomination in recent years.

“It is time to move from controversy and confusion to a new consensus and renewed commitment to cooperation,” Dockery said. “We need to take a step back not just to commit ourselves afresh to missions and evangelism, as important as that is. We need to commit ourselves foremost to the gospel, the message of missions and evangelism, the message that is found only in Jesus Christ and his atoning death for sinners.”

While a Southern Baptist “identity” was easy to recognize in past decades, Dockery said that's not the case today.

Even before the conservative resurgence in the denomination that began in the late 1970s, “the intactness had started to unravel in the past 30 years” due to such developments as multiple Bible translations, the impact of parachurch groups, a diversity of music, varied worship patterns and “heroes” outside of SBC life.

“Today Southern Baptists seem to be a gathering of loosely connected - if not balkanized - groups,” Dockery said.

This balkanization, often fueled by differences over secondary theological issues, could re-ignite a battle, Dockery said - one in which those engaged are “prone to concentrate on the frustrations or disappointments, while never thinking of the ultimate issues or implications for which the battle is being fought.”

“The ultimate danger to the gospel lies not in the nuances of our differences, but in the rising tides of liberalism, neo-paganism and postmodernism that threaten to swamp Southern Baptist identity in cultural accommodation,” he added.

To battle these threats, Dockery called for Southern Baptists to become more familiar with their heritage.

He also challenged Southern Baptists to recommit themselves to the gospel. He said he did not “hold out doctrinal uniformity as a goal,” but called for “renewed commitments to the inspiration, truthfulness and authority of Scripture, with an accompanying commitment to a hermeneutic of acceptance over against a hermeneutic of suspicion, as well as a re-establishment and reaffirmation of the gospel center.”

**GREGORY A. THORNBURY**  
Dean, School of Christian Studies,  
Union University  
“THE ‘ANGRY YOUNG MEN’ OF THE SBC”



Gregory A. Thornbury

After researching many of the blogs from young pastors who were supposedly “angry,” Thornbury concluded that the sentiment was more frustration than anger.

That frustration isn't limited to a certain segment of denominational life and exists across the board, Thornbury said - from those who bemoan the lack of respect for men in positions of authority, to those lamenting the demise of revivalism and the rise of Calvinism, to



Calvinists tired of being misrepresented as anti-evangelistic.

“What unites them all is a deep and abiding dread that ‘I don't belong in the SBC,’ Thornbury said. “Somehow, impossibly, everybody feels persecuted. Everybody feels that they're being misunderstood and misrepresented. Everybody feels that they're on the outside.”

To address these concerns, denominational leaders should emphasize more strongly the basics of what it means to be a Baptist, Thornbury said. He cited regenerate church membership as one example.

“There should not be people in our membership rolls who never come to church, show no discernible evidence of conversion or holiness and who are not currently now participating in a local body of believers,” Thornbury said. “That shouldn't be the case.”

The denomination also needs a rediscovery of holiness and ancient forms of discipleship, a renewed awe and wonder of the Bible and a return to the prophetic voice of the church, Thornbury added. Such emphases will allow Baptists to focus on what's important and not waste time debating over secondary matters.

**JIM SHADDIX**  
Senior Pastor, Riverside Baptist Church  
Denver, Colo.  
“THE FUTURE OF THE TRADITIONAL CHURCH”



Jim Shaddix

Shaddix suggested that the traditional church has often failed the youth of America by exposing them to a dead, lifeless Christianity.

“If they're not dropping out of church altogether, they're being captured by philosophies like the emerging church,” Shaddix said. “Both of those venues - no church at all or the emerging church - champion for a belief in nothing. That has to tell us something. It has to tell us that our young people are not running to something. They are running away from something.”

To recapture the hearts and minds of young people, Shaddix said the traditional church must remain committed to biblical premises and intentionally disciple its people through the teaching and exposition of Scripture. Traditional churches must resist the temptation to



re-invent themselves everytime a new fad comes along.

“The traditional church isn't built on passing styles and forms,” Shaddix said. “Many traditional churches have an admirable reverence for the past. They honor the past in a healthy way.”

**ED STETZER**  
Missiologist, North American Mission Board  
Alpharetta, Ga.  
“TOWARD A MISSIONAL CONVENTION”



Ed Stetzer

Stetzer said churches must balance biblical fidelity and cultural relevance if they are to be effective in reaching a lost world.

“Day after day, as the culture around us becomes more unfamiliar and even hostile towards Christianity, many Southern Baptist churches separate themselves further from the culture they are called to reach, with a self-affirming and predictable comfortable denominational subculture contributing to this widening distance,” Stetzer said. “This chasm of cultural understanding makes it increasingly difficult for our ‘church culture’ to relate to ‘prevailing culture.’”

Stetzer argued that Baptist churches need to embrace a more “missional” approach to their work, meaning they need to engage themselves in outreach in every context -- not just overseas, but in their local neighborhoods as well.

“What is needed is not merely an understanding of missiological thinking, but a commitment to missional

thinking,” Stetzer said. “While missiology concerns itself with study about missions and its methodologies, missional thinking focuses on doing missions in every geographical location. Such thinking is needed if the SBC is to remain faithful in its calling to serve churches by equipping them to impact their surrounding communities.”

Missional thinking may mean that churches adopt differing methodologies to reach different cultures, Stetzer said. But that shouldn't mean they are looked upon as suspect.

**TIMOTHY GEORGE**  
Dean, Beeson School of Divinity,  
Samford University  
“THE FUTURE OF BAPTIST IDENTITY IN A POST-DENOMINATIONAL WORLD”



Timothy George

George advocates a retrieval of Baptist heritage as a means of renewal for the convention today.

“We will not meet tomorrow's challenge by forgetting yesterday's dilemma,” George said. “But neither will we win tomorrow's struggles by fighting yesterday's battles.”

George argued that a return to Baptist teachings and beliefs of the past “will help us deal constructively with the issues and controversies we face today. ... This will help us to place in perspective some of the questions that still generate more heat than light within our own Southern Baptist fellowship.”

“When matters of secondary and tertiary importance are elevated to a level of primary significance, and placed right next to the doctrine of the Trinity or justification by faith alone, then we are veering away from orthodoxy to orthodoxy, from tradition ... to traditionalism,” George said.

George also addressed the question of whether Baptists are Calvinists.

“Historically and empirically, the answer to this question is, some are and some aren't,” he said. “And it has been thus way among Baptists for nearly 400 years.”

George urged caution for both those who are Calvinistic in their theology and those who reject Calvinism. He said Baptists have something to learn both from John Calvin and from John Wesley. ✠