

Why Southern Baptists Declined and What to Do, Part 1 (June 2014) Paige Patterson, President Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

The lugubrious prognostications about Baptist futures are known and experienced by all. LifeWay annually tells the sad story of reversals in numbers, and statisticians weigh in on the analysis. The latest major assessment comes from Molly Worthen, appearing recently on *The Daily Beast*. As I view all of this, I do not find myself, as do some, in a hand-wringing posture. I am concerned but hardly in panic. The following observations will spell out why I am actually finding some reasons for rejoicing.

First, for 50 or more years, our churches have been in competition, each wanting to baptize more than the other churches in the association. A pastor with 300 or more baptisms comes to the notice of the denomination and often gets his ticket stamped for denominational preferment. In the process of this race for numerical achievement, our church rolls have become gorged with people who “walked the aisle” and were baptized but remained as lost to genuine conversion as Judas. The evidence? Consider the “non-resident” Baptists, who number in the millions. How about raucous business meetings with mean-spirited church members terminating pastors and disenfranchising weaker saints who are poorer or less influential. How about vindictive blog postings and Twitter responses with little regard for veracity, absolutely no accountability, and the complete absence of Christian virtues? Consider missions stewardship or rather the lack thereof. And what of burgeoning congregations led by preachers of motivation and prosperity rather than prophets of God? I could go on, but the point is that unregenerate people seldom behave like saved folks.

“In the process of this race for numerical achievement, our church rolls have become gorged with people who “walked the aisle” and were baptized but remained as lost to genuine conversion as Judas.”

Padding the rolls with the “baptized lost” has finally caught up with us. That sad state is reflected with attitudes, actions, and the decline of responsible church membership. Much of the decline is one of the healthiest developments on the horizon. Like Gideon, we had too many to function as a spiritual army. I suspect we need to lose a million more (They are already lost according to Scripture (1 John 2:19). Almost total forfeiture of church discipline has been the inevitable fruit in the mad scramble for baptismal recognition. And once our memberships became full of lost men and women, no viable church discipline could be harnessed in most churches.

Another indication of the lostness in our churches is the covenant between the world and the contemporary churches hatched in the name of the rejection of legalism. There certainly are Southern Baptist legalists, and they are just as unfortunate as Southern Baptist antinomians. But many of the covenants of the past were the products of love for Jesus, who warned us not to love the world. Frequently a pious, godly heart lay behind behavioral and attitudinal choices. The culture is strong and has exerted its oppressive sway over the churches in a hundred ways, from music to psychotherapy to clothing attire to personal habits to social networking. A simple truth is that the more the church looks like the world, the less it looks like her Lord.

“Padding the rolls with the “baptized lost” has finally caught up with us.”

The one statistic that does concern me is the diminution of baptisms. This stat is unnecessary and unacceptable for people of the Book. Having read all the sophisticated analyses, I venture quaint, elementary, simplistic, New Testament rationale.

Why Southern Baptists Declined and What to Do, Part 1 (June 2014) Paige Patterson, President Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Our preachers have become so spectacular, our media so massive, our emphasis on talking about “gospel” so persuasive, our programs so comprehensive, and our organizations so pervasive that we simply no longer need to be witnessing churches. One can have church planting movements to exponential proportions (and I advocate such), but baptisms will still falter if the church does not return to being a witnessing church.

Our precious people must be taught to love and to seek the lost. They must learn to be good conversationalists and great listeners, waiting patiently until the friend with whom they are communicating, in the process of the exchange, opens the door for witness. Buttressed by the power available only in the Holy Spirit, the members of Christ’s body must be endued with power (and from that, courage) to share the saving claims of Christ with the lost. The pastor must lead. What he preaches and teaches about witnessing will be worthwhile only if his people see him witnessing and bringing men to Christ.

“Our preachers have become so spectacular, our media so massive, our emphasis on talking about “gospel” so persuasive, our programs so comprehensive, and our organizations so pervasive that we simply no longer need to be witnessing churches.”

Another factor in failing baptisms is theology. Any theology that either purposefully or unintentionally makes you less aggressive as a personal witness needs to be jettisoned. I am a premillennialist, but I have known people of my millennial perspective who were so absorbed in the details of the eschaton that they virtually witnessed to no one. I am well aware that I will win no popularity contests for surfacing the theological issue, but I want to remind everyone that we did not fight the battle for the reliability of the Word of God for the sake of the doctrine itself. We fought it for the sake of the salvation of all lost men and women, who outside of a sure Word from God would not be saved.

The battle for the Bible was joined because anyone could see that liberalism would never lead churches to evangelize. What we obviously have seen less clearly is that a conservative view of the Bible is insufficient to transform twice-born men into avid evangelists. As Vance Havner so poignantly noted in his high-pitched, prophetic voice, “It is possible to be as straight as a gun barrel theologically and as empty as one spiritually.”

What we obviously have seen less clearly is that a conservative view of the Bible is insufficient to transform twice-born men into avid evangelists.

The issue is quite simple. Can you and will you say to any individual you meet, “Christ died for your sins, and if you will repent of your sin and trust Christ alone, you can be saved.” This is not a matter of election or of the sovereignty of God. No orthodox Christian can deny either doctrine. Where we differ is on the question of what exactly is meant by election. Be that as it may, an upturn in baptisms depends on an undergirding evangelistic theology and a focus on witnessing in the local churches. With that mindset and heart purpose, baptisms will see a significant increase. I conclude—the loss of baptisms is about the failure to develop witnessing churches.

In the second part of this series, I will outline how a pastor can lead his church to be a witnessing congregation.

<http://theologicalmatters.com/2014/06/04/why-southern-baptists-declined-and-what-to-do-part-1/>