

The following paper was presented to the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary family in a chapel service. The format used is designed to facilitate an oral presentation. The same paper in a more formal style will be available in the near future.

“The New Methodists”
Reflections on the SBC Today
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For the last three and a half years, following the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, I have been immersed heart and soul in the recovery and restoration of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. An invitation to address the SBC evangelism directors at a recent meeting in New Orleans came as a breath of fresh air, allowing me to lay the burden of recovery down for at least awhile and return to the passion of my adult life: the study of Southern Baptist evangelism. With world class assistance from Dr. Bill Day, Mrs. Christi Gibson, and James Thompson, I took a deep look around and for months have been digesting what I saw. I have drawn some conclusions I feel I must share with you today. Along the way, the preparation of this presentation became the preparation of my soul for our campus revival next week. May it be so for you as well.

The road we will walk begins with the amazing story of how Southern Baptists became the largest non-Catholic religious body in America. The best snapshot is this. In 1945 Southern Baptists baptized approximately 257,000 people into their churches. In 1955, only ten years later, they baptized approximately 417,000 people, almost **doubling** in just ten years. To quote an ancient Hebrew expression: Wow! That is amazing, phenomenal growth.

How did we do it? The easiest way to explain it is this: **Old McBaptist had a farm!** Southern Baptists developed a way of doing church very similar to the way a farmer raises crops. For instance, farmers need *land* in order to produce a harvest. Southern Baptists realized they needed a permanent presence in a community in order to reach that community, and so from their earliest beginnings they emphasized *church planting*. They knew starting churches would give them a continuing presence in the place where prospects lived.

Farmers know the crop they want to grow must match the **climate** they have.

You can grow cotton in Mississippi, but it doesn't do well in northern Canada. To have evangelistic results churches needed a climate **continually** affirming for the congregation the importance of sharing Christ with the lost. Southern Baptists used *decisional preaching*, that preaching which calls for an immediate and public response, to help create and maintain a climate emphasizing evangelism in the worship services of our churches. In many ways the format of evangelistic crusades and revival meetings was **absorbed** into the normal style of worship for Southern Baptist churches. The invitation following every sermon was a weekly reminder that no one was right with God **until** they made a personal response to Christ. This was a constant reminder of **why** evangelism must be a priority in the programs and ministries of the church.

Farmers know they cannot get a harvest without **planting seed** in the soil. Southern Baptists realized that most of the unconverted did not come to church. They knew they had to get the gospel outside the walls of the church, and they did so with *personal evangelism* throughout the community. For example, the typical Baptist church would devote at least one night a week to **evangelistic** visitation, going out to the families in the community for the specific purpose of sharing the gospel with them. Evangelism was not limited to pastors in the pulpit. It also involved the people of the church in face to face conversations with people they knew and did not know in the community.

Farmers know that planting seed will not in and of itself produce a crop. Once planted in the soil, that seed must be **cultivated**. It needs enough water, but not too much. Bugs and disease must be kept at bay. Southern Baptists knew that sharing the gospel one time with a lost person would usually not result in conversion. A **process** of cultivation was necessary for those who heard the gospel but did not respond immediately. *Sunday School* became the cultivation strategy for SBC churches. It was the only thing you could join in an SBC church without being a member. Churches expected most Sunday school classes to have lost and unchurched people present on a regular basis.

Why Sunday School? It was an efficient way to harness the power of **"Biblelationships"**. That is my word to describe the combination of Bible teaching and relationship building at the heart of the Southern Baptist approach to Sunday School. All ages were involved in Sunday School. Those who came would hear the Bible, promoting better understanding of the gospel, **and** they would form meaningful relationships with Christians in the class. Sunday school

classes taught the Bible **and** had ice cream fellowships. There were devotionals and hymns, **but** they also sent members to visit classmates in the hospital and prepare massive amounts of food for those who lost loved ones. The **Biblelationship** combination of teaching Scripture **and** nurturing relationships was a powerful tool for cultivation, often used by the Holy Spirit to draw closer those who had heard the gospel but not yet responded.

With the right climate, proper planting, and cultivation, the farmer knows his crop will ripen and be ready for **harvest** in due time. Southern Baptists used *revival meetings* as their primary harvest tool. For at least one or two weeks each year the whole attention of the church was focused on the simple question, “What is the status of your relationship with God?” Many a revival message included simple explanations of how to become a Christian and powerful appeals to repent and believe. It became a very normal time for those who had heard the gospel clearly explained **over time** and formed **meaningful relationships with Christians** in the church to come to the point of faith themselves.

It is important that we understand the true nature of the genius of Southern Baptist evangelism. It was not the individual methods used that produced such an incredible harvest. Rather, **the interaction of those methods with each other** created an **integrated process** described in the New Testament as sowing and reaping. Wheels alone can generate power. But if you add cogs to those wheels so that they form a **gear**, you multiply the power those wheels produce. Old McBaptist, **integrating** church planting, decisional preaching, personal evangelism, Sunday School, and revival meetings with each other, had a great farm that produced much fruit.

One other thing must be understood about this classic SBC paradigm for evangelism. It was not a planned program of the Convention. This was not a comprehensive strategy on how to design a church that was conceived, shaped, shipped, and promoted by Southern Baptist forefathers from the Sunday School Board, the Home Mission Board, or even some great evangelistic church. Old McBaptist and his farm, the SBC way of doing church, emerged **unconsciously** out of the biblical worldview being preached and taught in our churches. Southern Baptists did not vote to use this approach in all their churches at a Convention meeting. It just seemed the right thing to do. It embodied the biblical process of sowing and reaping (see for example 1 Cor. 3:6 “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.”), but these **particular** interactive

methods were not the result of a search for a way to embody that process in churches. The lack of comment on the way these individual methods became an integrated process characteristic of SBC churches is one of the more astounding discoveries of my research. We will come back to this later.

Let's go back to those baptism statistics. In 1945 the SBC baptized about 257,000 people. In 1955 the SBC baptized about 417,000 people. But since 1955 the SBC has never yet reached the mark of 450,000 baptisms. We doubled in baptisms in ten years, but then could not increase 35,000 in more than 50 years. What happened to the harvest? What happened to the farm?

For fifteen years I said: "Southern Baptists are a **harvest-oriented** denomination living in the midst of an **unseeded** generation." We reduced planting, neglected cultivation, and not surprisingly have found the harvest coming up short. I now realize something more is going on. Today I say: "We are the grandchildren of farmers keeping **harvest stories** alive over coffee and dessert at family reunions." **We are more like gardeners working the window boxes than farmers working the fields.** Why?

The **methods** we use are **not** the crucial issue. The Bible speaks little of methods. An open fire, an oven, or a microwave will all accomplish the same purpose. Tasks will **always** outlive methods. By the way, this applies to whatever better way of doing things some of you might develop as well!

The **amount of money** available to spend on evangelism is **not** the crucial issue. In 1906 W. W. Hamilton created the first department of evangelism for the SBC. With no budget allocation at all, he found a way for the department to make a great impact and grow to include more than 20 evangelists. After a tragic embezzlement by the treasurer of the Home Mission Board, the Board was nearly bankrupted and had to shut down the evangelism department for a decade. In 1936 Roland Q. Leavell was asked to relaunch the department with only one staff member— himself! With little money and no assistance he laid the groundwork for the greatest period of fruitfulness in the history of the SBC.

During that legendary period of 1945 to 1955, when we doubled in baptisms, the staff of the evangelism department never grew larger than 3 people, including a secretary. Money is important, even very important, but it is **not** the crucial issue reducing our fruitfulness. Having more money will not turn things around.

The **gospel's power** is **not** the crucial issue. Our message has the same power to transform any human life today that it had in the first century of the church. The penitentiary in Angola, LA is the only maximum security prison in the state. With more than 5,000 prisoners, it houses the largest collection of violent people in the United States, and has long been known as the bloodiest prison in America. More than 90 percent of the men have prison sentences so long they will die and be buried in prison. One would think this must be the worst possible setting for ministerial training, and these men must be the worst possible candidates for salvation, much less for a call to the ministry.

Thirteen years ago we began a program of training for ministry in the Angola prison, teaching a small group of prisoners whom God had touched, the same curriculum we teach here in Leavell College. The results have been stunning. We have had about 150 graduates to date. Upon completion of their studies each man becomes a pastor in some part of the prison. Call it a cell church movement! Violence has dropped dramatically. The prison has become a different place, amazing people in the justice system all over the United States. The impact of these prison preachers has been so great they are now being sent out two by two into other prisons to teach there what they learned in Angola. There is that ancient Hebrew expression again. Wow! The gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of incredible power still today!

What, then, is wrong? **Discipleship** is **the** crucial issue. The **spiritual state of the farmer (our churches and leadership)**, not the abundance of the harvest is the root of problems in SBC evangelism.

At the end of the day these hard truths are staring at me. **First, We are not anointed.** The conversion of a soul to Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit. The stirring of a church and community in revival and awakening is a work of the Holy Spirit. Neither of these works of the Spirit are **typical** in SBC churches today. We are not anointed. That "we" would be you, me and all of us at work in places with little evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit. We are so not anointed we have come to accept not being anointed as normal.

Second, We have been atomized. Scientists tell us that what looks like a solid wood pulpit is actually a composition of small particles called atoms. Those atoms are actually composed of even smaller particles, which are composed of

even smaller particles. Thinking about atomic particles can make one forget that whatever its composition, this pulpit does function as a single large and rather solid feeling piece of wood. It is a pulpit, after all. Many have become so focused on discovering a method that works, they fail to realize an **integrated process is far more important** than any one method that is a part of that process. You cannot separate sowing and reaping. One is **never** more important than the other. To focus on particular methods rather than an integrated process is a dead end.

Third, Southern Baptists are becoming the new Methodists.

I love Methodists! They played a key role in the First and Second Great Awakenings. Their concept of a circuit riding preacher was a brilliant strategy for the circumstances of the day. With it they were able to multiply church starts faster than they multiplied church pastors, enabling them to evangelize the American Frontier in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They made holy living a core value and were called Methodists because they went about it so systematically and methodically. Much of what Southern Baptists know about evangelistic harvesting we learned from Methodists. Many have observed Methodists and Baptists and noticed their kinship. I love what a Presbyterian minister in the movie “A River Runs Through It” would tell his sons about Methodists. Watch and listen:

[“Methodists are just Baptists who can read”]

The Methodists of today, however, have changed much through the years. Their efforts in evangelism and missions have **greatly** diminished. The passion for holy living has been replaced by behavior **blending** with the culture. Their greatest theological fight is over the **normalcy** of homosexuality. Most surprising, they have set new records for the **fastest** loss of membership in the history of the church in America.

Having observed these changes in Methodism, I find myself admitting today that we are following in their footsteps. **Southern Baptists are the New Methodists.**

In what ways are we similar? **Universalism** is settling into our pews as more and more Southern Baptists believe and behave as though they believe a personal relationship with Christ is not necessary for one to be right with God. **Tolerance**

is beginning to overtake **conviction** as growing numbers, particularly of younger Southern Baptists, are less comfortable with taking a firm stance on moral or doctrinal issues. **Our behavior**, the way we live our lives, is **blending** more and more with our culture. We are growing ever less distinct and recognizable in the crowd of our nation's population. It is becoming as easy to get drunk at a Baptist wedding as any other kind of wedding. We go to the same movies, watch the same TV shows, and get comfortable using the same coarse language our neighbors use. It is becoming as likely for a Baptist kid to choose a school or community soccer tournament over church as any other kid in the neighborhood. It is not a coincidence that we are also moving from growth to plateau to decline in the membership of our churches.

Since 1983 I have been saying seventy percent of our churches are plateaued or declining. If we apply the traditional measurement of growth to the 2007 SBC church statistics, the number of growing churches is about the same as it has been for a long time; the number of plateaued churches is smaller; and the number of **declining** churches is **larger**. If we add **minimal** evangelistic standards to the way we measure church growth, the shift is even more dramatic.

The most recent study of SBC churches recording a ten percent or more increase of membership over a five year period indicates 30.3 percent of our churches are growing. If we add the requirement of at least **one baptism in the first and fifth year of the study** to those 30.3 percent of growing churches, only 23.5 percent would still qualify as growing. If we add an additional requirement for growing churches to have a ratio of at least **one baptism per 35 members**, the percentage of growing churches drops to only 11.9 percent. By comparison, from 1945 to 1955 the approximate ratio of baptisms per member for the whole SBC was in the twenties. If you added one further requirement that growing churches have at least **25 percent of their new members coming through conversion**, only 11 percent of that 30.2 percent would still be classified as growing.

To summarize, using **minimal** evangelistic standards instead of membership growth alone, reveals only 11 percent of SBC churches are growing today. To quote a different ancient Hebrew expression: Uh Oh!

What is happening?

Apparently the biblical worldview that unconsciously inspired doing church like a

farm in SBC life is like the baton for the USA Men's relay team in the Beijing Olympics. You are looking at a picture of some of the fastest sprinters we have ever had, but all their speed and talent meant nothing, because as you see, the baton fell between them. Those earlier Southern Baptists did not devise a comprehensive blueprint as a **Convention** on how Southern Baptists would do church evangelistically in order to reach people. Our **churches** developed an evangelistic discipleship that wove the process of sowing and reaping into ordinary process of church life.

As time went by and the world changed, that **biblical worldview** inspiring **evangelistic discipleship** seems to have dropped between SBC generations. When we did make an SBC plan for evangelism, the focus of the plan was on improving the **harvest component** of our Baptist farm, not the integrated process. **As time has gone by, we neither maintained nor reinvented the process that made us so fruitful in earlier days. Time had its impact. Now others may be running the race, but we are still trying to get a fresh grip on the baton.**

To put it another way, we put so much emphasis on how our way of doing church affected the **lost**, we failed to notice how it was affecting the **saved**. Changes and innovations were added to make the church **more welcoming** to the lost and unchurched, but **little** has been done to improve the way we inspire evangelistic discipleship in believers.

Upon reflection, the most significant and influential death in the modern history of the Southern Baptist Convention was the death of **Discipleship Training**. I am talking about the death of an SBC discipleship **process**, not a particular discipleship training program.

Here is a snapshot of some of the elements of discipleship training that were found in the typical Southern Baptist church of any size and location. A Sunday night program included small group discipleship training for **all ages** of the church **and** an evening service for worship and Bible teaching. Each January there was a four to six day Bible conference teaching one book of the Bible to all ages. At least once, and often more frequently, there were special events called study courses to train every age group in some aspect of Baptist and church life. In addition there was a weekly missions training program for young boys and girls, along with Vacation Bible School, youth camp and children's camp in the summer. Plus more.

Though often criticized for overemphasizing conversion, in reality the opposite is true. In the era of our greatest evangelistic growth, typical SBC churches had more discipleship activities than evangelistic activities. Aggressive evangelism was matched by aggressive discipleship. We were discipl-istic. That is another one of my words. By it I mean an evangelistic discipleship that is always seeking to incorporate both evangelism and discipleship at the same time.

When did this emphasis on aggressive discipleship began to fade? During the late sixties. When did our evangelistic fruitfulness began to fade? During the seventies. When our baptismal numbers started to weaken, we intensified our focus on **harvest** strategies and methods. We should have paid more attention to our discipleship process. The defining characteristic of Southern Baptists at our best was being discipl-istic, having a passionate evangelistic discipleship. We refused to let go of one in order to pursue the other.

Today, **we** do not know who we are. The **world** does not know who we are. Our **lost friends and neighbors** do not know who we are. In the New Testament world, believers lived **differently** than their neighbors. That is how they came to be called Christians, a term of derision, not respect. **Our problem is not that more of us don't witness to our neighbors. Our problem is that more of us do not look like and live like Jesus.** How long has it been since you heard a joke about Baptists? This is not necessarily a good thing. If we do not produce children, youth, and adults who live out a biblical worldview, no strategy for doing church will make us **salt and light** in the world.

Let me illustrate by letting you listen to four voices. Here is the first one. Any country music fan will recognize the first voice as the legendary Johnny Cash.

Now for number two. It is hard to imagine a baby boomer who cares about music not recognizing the second voice as Bob Dylan, one of the most distinctive voices of his generation.

Number three is for a younger generation. Urban music fans of today are bound to recognize Kanye West as the third voice. He is the one of the most popular musical artists on the scene today.

The fourth voice? Only his mother and the Shazam apps for I-phones would know. [Ron Dante, Rock Me Gently] His style is smooth and clear. His song was in a very popular commercial. But his voice lacks the distinctive quality you cannot help but notice in the others. Southern Baptists are not losing our voice. We are losing the **distinctiveness** of our voice in the music of today's culture. We are **blending in** more than we are **standing out**.

Here is the most important lesson to learn from our present circumstances. **Aggressive evangelism without aggressive discipleship will eventually undo itself.** The most crucial issue in SBC evangelism today is recovering or reinventing a process to bring our children, youth, and adults to spiritual maturity in an evangelistic way. We need **discipl-istic** churches! Baptist believers must be taught how to be the distinctive presence of Christ as **both** missionary and minister in the culture. We must be the salt our neighbors cannot fail to taste; the light the world around us cannot fail to see. As Jesus himself noted in Matthew 5:13-14, salt that is not salty is not good for anything **but throwing out**. Light that is under a bushel is **useless**.

Is there more to SBC problems than this? Yes! But there is at least this. We are becoming the New Methodists. We must be aware of where the road we now travel will lead. I am a man of immense hope in what the future can bring to the Southern Baptists of today. God is not necessarily through with us yet! I do have reasons for that hope, but they will have to wait for another day. Yet I am deeply moved over how serious are the realities we are facing today. If we are not willing to name them, face them, and respond to them . . .

I close with this. Here comes the sermon. In 2 Chronicles 7:14-15 we read, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." But don't stop there. Keep reading! The Lord goes on to say "But if you turn aside. . . Then I will pluck you up from my land. . . and this house that I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight. . ."

The picture you are seeing is the Western Wall of the temple mount in Jerusalem; also called the Wailing Wall. The large stones at the base of the wall are all that is left of God's temple during the time of Jesus. The crowds you see are there every day. Jews and pilgrims from all over the world come to see and to weep

over what was lost, and pray that one day all will be restored.

Here is what we know about the current state of SBC churches expressed as simply as I can do it. In times past God **has** worked through our Southern Baptist churches in a **mighty** way. In times present God **is not** working in a mighty way through our churches. Is this acceptable to you? To me? How are you going to respond to this? How am I going to respond to this?

If we as a people do not repent now, only one question remains: To what wall, will our children return to **weep** and **remember** the glory of what the SBC was?

I leave you at this wall, for it was to this wall that God brought me in my spirit as I prepared this presentation. Perhaps he intends to bring you to the Wailing Wall as well. May God have mercy on us all.