

Dr. Ed Stetzer
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Dr. Stetzer has planted churches in New York and Pennsylvania. He has trained church planters across the United States and on five continents. A former seminary professor and the former Nehemiah Project director of the North American Mission Board, Dr. Stetzer is now the director of research and missiology for NAMB.

Ed Stetzer is a fellow at the Baptist Center. He is challenging Southern Baptists to think biblically and missiologically about their contexts as they do ministry. We recently heard his views about a variety of issues in SBC life (see below for our recent interview). He has agreed to discuss his most recent paper at: <http://missionalchurchnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/03/toward-a-missional-convention-final.pdf>.
Listen to the audio at: <http://www.uu.edu/audio/Detail.cfm?ID=294>.

1. What do you see as the greatest strength of the Southern Baptist Convention right now?

I actually see at least two “greatest” strengths.

First, I am greatly encouraged that Southern Baptists, as a convention, have made it clear where they stand on issues of scripture. Many younger pastors do not know how far things had gotten off track. I remember being taught at an SBC seminary that the Bible was corrupted by Greek philosophy. We have come a long way. Today, we have settled it in our faith statement—we believe the Bible to be inerrant and totally sufficient.

Second, I am glad to see a heart for missions. Southern Baptists have always been a mission-minded people, but recently Southern Baptists have exhibited a passion to go beyond learning and giving to missions. They have a growing desire to be involved in missions, not as an additional program of the local church, but as a significant part of their local church identity. Many thousands of Southern Baptists volunteer each year for mission projects in every corner of the world. The number of men and women committing their lives to serve as long term missionaries continues to grow at an all-time record pace. Our North American Mission Board just recorded its largest ever “Annie Armstrong” offering for North American Missions. All of this is good news.

2. What do you see as the greatest weakness or problem in the Southern Baptist Convention right now?

It seems that many people, including some leaders, are unsure what a Southern Baptist “is.” For some, being a Southern Baptist has meant being a part of a “church style” that includes everything from worship styles, church organization, ethnicity, and a common vocabulary of church terms. Instead, I see it as a shared theology, cooperation, and a passionate commitment to the Great Commission. If this “identity confusion” remains unchecked it will likely lead to growing conflict in the near future. A conflict such as that would weaken our mission efforts and likely lead to a further exodus of younger and more creative leaders (not to mention ethnics and others).

It is imperative for our Convention to come to an understanding of those essentials on which we agree in order that we might continue to work together.

3. What do you think is the greatest threat or challenge to the Southern Baptist Convention right now?

Our greatest threat is division and the resulting fallout. It would be a tragedy—for which we would be held accountable to God—if, after the miracle of the conservative resurgence, we ended up not being able to cooperate together.

Among my greatest concerns is the fear that many churches will decide that partnership and identification with the SBC is not worth the conflict and bickering over non-essentials. One of the most common questions I am asked when I speak at non-denominational pastor events is, “Are you still SBC?” And it is usually a question from someone who once was SBC, and still holds the theology, but does not want to be a part of us anymore. That is a great concern for me.

We need to find a way to connect people... and it is not by shaming them or yelling at them. People will be a part of the convention when three things happen:

1. They see the SBC as one of the most efficient missions engines in the world
2. The SBC IS, and continues to be, the most efficient missions engine in the world
3. They realize that the partnership with the SBC empowers their church to fulfill its missional calling

Those of us in denominational leadership need to both “communicate the value” and “increase the value” of our partnership. Communicating the value is perhaps easier, but we also need to ask, “How can we as denominational leaders make sure every penny and every volunteer is making the most difference.” One of the things I see positive at NAMB right now is that we are in a season of hard questions—asking, “What should we be doing (and not doing) that will help our churches reach North America for Christ?”

4. What do you believe is the greatest opportunity for the Southern Baptist Convention right now?

That goes back to the first question. The greatest opportunity right now is for us to take our commitment to the fidelity of scripture and begin to apply it as missionaries in our own communities while we continue to support missionaries doing so around the world. We have the two things that make it possible—a love for the Word and a love for missions. We just need to put them together and act like biblically faithful and culturally relevant missionaries right in our own communities. With the same passion we embrace the Word, we need to engage our world.

5. Some have suggested that the Southern Baptist Convention is likely to decline in the near future. What is your assessment of the future of the Southern Baptist Convention?

I think the Southern Baptist Convention is already in decline in many ways. We just don't recognize it because we have inflated numbers due to how we count. We have gradually lost track of at least 30% of the typical church as they no longer live near the church facility. Also, while our convention churches have remained relatively “flat” in attendance and baptisms have slightly declined, the population has grown tremendously. That's decline.

First, there are not 16.2 million Southern Baptists. Truthfully, there are at least 8 million that we are not able to locate. There are 16.2 million people on our church roles and about 5 million of them go to

church each week. Spurgeon was attributed with saying, “a faith that won’t get you to church on Sunday, likely won’t get you to heaven.”

Second, most of our churches are not thriving. Your NOBTS Leavell Center study did a good job pointing it out—89% of our churches are not growing through healthy evangelism. If almost 9 out of 10 of your churches are not reaching people evangelistically, that's decline—a drastic and dangerous decline.

Thirdly, the SBC is made up of churches—many of whom are doing quite well. But, it can also be said that the SBC really IS the Cooperative Program. It’s the way we work together and fund missions. The numbers show that churches are giving less to the CP every year. Most of our national leaders already know this but we don't talk about it much. The SBC is in decline because the churches are not as committed to cooperation through the Cooperative Program. Al Mohler put it this way in 2003:

"The large infrastructure of modern Southern Baptist life may not survive in the postmodern age. That decision will not be made by the executives of Southern Baptist agencies, nor by the executives of conventions and state conventions. That decision will eventually be made by churches and the churches will point us to that future.... For the young generation the issue is this, ‘Is the Southern Baptist Convention the answer to a question anyone is asking?’”

6. What would you say to a young (or old) pastor who is considering leaving the SBC? Why should they stay a Southern Baptist?

I would tell them, “don't.” As a matter of fact, I just wrote an email to a young pastor of a well-known megachurch asking me if it was worth it—and I told him it was.

But, honestly, I find myself making that statement with more frequency today than ever before. We have already preached most of my middle-aged Purpose Driven friends out of the convention and now it seems that some want to do the same to the next generation. We need understand that if we keep choosing our traditions over our young pastors, we may have our traditions; we will not have our young pastors.

I am not here in SBC life because I need a job. I was neither reared nor redeemed in a Baptist church. I became a Southern Baptist in college because I believed the theology and loved the cooperation. I am here by choice and by conviction, not chance or convenience. Our church gives 10% to the Cooperative Program, 3% to our Association, and 7% to direct church planting—not because we have to, but because we want to do so.

Mainly, I am Southern Baptist because of missions. I know there are many negative issues in the convention and some of our churches scare me. But I can find nowhere else that has a consensus of belief on scripture and theology, and funds the largest denominational mission force in the history of protestant Christianity. Nowhere else, period.

So, I am committed to stay and do whatever I can to be part of the solution. This Convention is too valuable a resource for the Kingdom to walk away. It is worth every ounce of our investment to bring it

into the 21st century. I believe that the things Frank Page and others are saying are true: this is a new day. Things are going to get better.

I see a lot of good things. Schools like yours (NOBTS) are modeling the way—through innovative approaches to education, and a diversity of professors teaching forward-thinking ministry models (and asking hard questions like these). Thom Rainer is leading Lifeway to think biblically about how to reach and disciple people in culture. NAMB is getting even more focused on evangelism and church planting (see article here: <http://www.christianindex.org/2859.article>). Many of our state conventions and associations are providing initiatives to promote broader involvement. The IMB is challenging us to think about people groups, and to be committed to work with other like-minded conservative evangelicals to take the gospel to every group of people on this planet.

There is a lot of good going on and now is not the time to bail out. I think we will see some positive changes in the next few years.

For me, the SBC is my extended faith family. Anyone with family knows that they are both wonderful and weird, which is why there is an audience for Jerry Springer and for Chicken Soup for the Soul books. Large family get-togethers can be fun and awful at the same time. Some members make me crazy, cringe, and wonder how we share a last name or DNA. Then there are the times when they make me laugh, make me proud, and make me happy that they make the world's best mashed potatoes.

The SBC is not only my extended family, it is a community, it isn't always neat and tidy and is sometimes downright messy. But it is the best family I can find, and we share common bonds that really matter.

7. The resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC has been a controversial issue in some ways. What is your perspective on the resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC?

I have mixed feelings which I will share below.

However, I share them not to be divisive, but hopefully to “provoke one another on to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). The convention should want, and does need, all Calvinists who affirm the Baptist Faith and Message and want to cooperate for the purposes of God's kingdom. Furthermore, it is often the Calvinists who remind the convention about important theological issues like regenerate church membership, theologically driven ministry, and other important emphases. We need such theologically minded people in our convention today.

For many, Calvinism in SBC life boils down to a few key leaders (who I happen to like, but that is another story). However, if we extrapolate the numbers from Lifeway Research, there are over 4000 SBC churches with Calvinist pastors—and recent indications are that the influence of Calvinism is growing. So, I am not sure there is just one type of Calvinism in SBC life.

My concern is not with Calvinism per se, but with a form of “nostalgic Calvinism.” Nostalgic Calvinism leads to endless discussions of “solas” rather than an evangelistic impulse. I think the talk of “hyper” Calvinists is a straw man—“hyper-Calvinism” is a technical term in theological circles. I don't know any in SBC life. But, I do see many self-identified Calvinists who are constantly discussing the 18th century

as the golden age of theology and praxis in Baptist life. So, I don't want them to get over Calvinism, but it would be nice if they got into the Third Millennium. At times, I am convinced some “nostalgic Calvinists” have forgotten our mandate is to see men and women brought into the kingdom, not into Geneva.

I think one of many positive examples is J.D. Greear and Summit Church (see <http://www.summitchurch.cc/>). The Summit Church in Durham, NC is a church that takes the Reformed tradition seriously yet remains relevant and contemporary in its approaches to ministry. Its explosive evangelistic growth is a testimony to biblically-faithful ministry.

Nostalgic Calvinism, like so many other “yearnings” for past days, sounds great in the classroom or the conference. But we need a “faith once delivered” lived biblically in culture and transforming lives. There has always been a stream of Reformed minded people in SBC life. Great. Let’s reach the lost together. Let’s cooperate for missions. Let’s even have good honest discussion about theology (as Drs. Patterson and Mohler did so well at the last SBC Pastors Conference). But, let’s talk about God’s heart for the lost at least as much as we talk about the five solas. Reformed theology is incomplete when it does not give birth to passionate evangelism.

Two hundred years after the Reformation, William Carey stood up and presented a treatise, “An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens.” Within a few months, the first mission society was formed and money was collected using Andrew Fuller’s snuff box. But at that meeting, he was sternly rebuked, “Young man... When God pleases to convert the heathen, he'll do it without consulting you or me.” Although few would use those words today, it seems that a few in the Reformed tradition are critical of every means—and use none of them. Yet, they often do not have much of an alternative other than the argument that the “means” of others is wrong.

It was the Calvinists that launched the modern missions movements—but they did it by discovering the use of means. With the great need in the world today (not to mention the clear mandate of scripture), we can wait 200 years to figure out that we don’t know who the elect are and that we are called to proclaim the gospel to all, using diverse means, for the glory of God.

Before I went to work for the denomination, I was a pastor. One thing sticks out from that time—I think God received just as much glory when we baptized 51 people in Lake Erie one Sunday as He did when I preached that salvation is God’s work alone.

8. The issue of elder rule has been controversial in many churches. What is your perspective on ruling elders as an expression of Baptist church polity and ecclesiology?

I am not comfortable with “ruling elders” as Baptist ecclesiology. I am comfortable with “leading elders.” However, a case could be made that part of the “church tradition” among some Southern Baptists is that Deacons served very much as leading elders. In recent years however, there has been a concerted effort by churches to return the Deacon to the role of “servant.” This has, in some cases left a void of leadership that many are now finding filled by some form of “elder” leadership.

At the church I serve as a volunteer, I am a pastor/elder and we serve as a plurality of elders. We see that there are two church offices—pastor/elder and deacon. We think that there are some pastors/elders who teach and some who do not. In the near future, our church may add some pastor/elders to our leadership who do not preach.

But, I am a congregationalist. I think that churches need to choose their leaders—and ruling elders tend not to do that. Ruling elders tend to be a self-perpetuating board. I think that the final seat of authority, under the Lordship of Christ, is the congregation. They choose their leaders under the Lordship of Christ.

Also as a congregationalist, I think churches can choose their leadership structure. I think that the roles of pastors and deacons are biblically described and prescribed, so they should exist. I don't really care what people call them, but the roles and offices do exist and they are biblical. Many great SBC churches have pastors/elders/deacons, pastor/administrative team/church council/deacons, etc. Names are less important than roles and offices.

9. What is your perspective on the emergent church movement?

I am not sure there is a movement... There are many conversations and organizations under the umbrella of what has been called the "emerging church."

It is not a big secret that I have written some things that well-known emergent leaders do not like. I have the unfortunate distinction of having been called "unhelpful" by the head of Emergent (http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/is_emergent_the.html). However, there are also some who think that anyone who says something kind about some emerging church leaders must be apostate. My hope is that we can be discerning enough to see the good as well as the bad, and to know the difference.

I want pastors who lead biblically-faithful churches in emerging culture to be in the SBC. I think that when we start throwing around labels without discernment, we will “preach them out”—much like we did to many contemporary church leaders in the 90s. I just don't think we need another purge of biblically-faithful, God-centered churches, that do things differently than we do.

I do think that there is some serious theological error in part of the “emerging church” and I have written about it (see below). We need to speak clearly when the clear teaching of scripture is disregarded or misunderstood. Furthermore, there are some emerging churches where there is solid theology but an unhealthy emphasis on Christian liberty (language, alcohol, etc.). We need to speak honestly about the need for discernment and maturity in such contexts. But, most importantly, we need to rejoice when we find a biblically-faithful church in emerging culture, just as we would a biblically-faithful traditional church or a biblically-faithful Purpose Driven church.

With that said, let me excerpt and summarize some of what I wrote about the Emerging Church in an earlier article. See <http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/pastors/1372534.html>.

I do believe that some are taking the same Gospel in the historic form of church but seeking to make it understandable to emerging culture; some are taking the same Gospel but questioning and reconstructing much of the form of church; some are questioning and revising the Gospel and the church. I have identified three arenas in which emergent leaders are working.

First, there are those I call “relevants”. These are young (and not so young) leaders who some classify as “emerging” that really are just trying to make their worship, music and outreach more contextual to emerging culture. Ironically, while some may consider them liberal, they are often deeply committed to biblical preaching, male pastoral leadership and other values common in conservative evangelical churches. The churches of the “relevants” are not filled with the angry white children of evangelical

megachurches. They are, instead, intentionally reaching into their communities (which are different than where most Southern Baptists live) and proclaiming a faithful biblically-centered Gospel there.

Secondly, there are those I refer to as “reconstructionists”. The reconstructionists think that the current form of church is frequently irrelevant and the structure is unhelpful. Yet, they typically hold to a more orthodox view of the Gospel and Scripture. Therefore, we see an increase in models of church that reject certain organizational models, embracing what are often called “incarnational” or “house” models. They are responding to the fact that after decades of trying fresh ideas in innovative churches, North America is less churched, and those who are churched are less committed. If reconstructionists simply rearrange dissatisfied Christians and do not impact lostness, it is hardly a better situation than the current one. Lastly there are those I identify as “revisionists”, many of whom are being read by younger leaders and perceived as evangelicals. They are not—at least according to our evangelical understanding of Scripture. We significantly differ from them regarding what the Bible is, what it teaches, and how we should live it in our churches. I don’t hate them or question their motives and I won’t try to mischaracterize their beliefs. But, I won’t agree with them. “Revisionists” are questioning (and in some cases denying) issues like the nature of the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, the complementary nature of gender, and the nature of the Gospel itself. This is not new. Some mainline theologians quietly abandoned these doctrines a generation ago. Does that mean we cannot learn from them? Certainly not. I read mainline theologians like Marcus Borg and George Lindbeck like others in the past read Karl Barth. These are good thinkers, but deeply wrong on issues I hold as important. I read many emerging church writers the same way. They ask good questions, but I am driven to Scripture for the answers.

Let’s affirm the good, look to the Scriptures for answers to the hard questions. And, yes, let’s graciously disagree when others hold views contrary to our best scriptural understanding of God, Bible and church.

10. What would you say is the most significant theological issue confronting Southern Baptists in this generation?

I don't know if I can do just one. Let me throw out four that matter:

Cooperation: We have to decide that we have decided to work together. The promise of the Conservative Resurgence and the BFM2000 was that we would get to the point where we would trust each other enough to get on with our mission. So far, that has not happened. I think we need a biblical theology of cooperation and we need one quick!

Regenerate Church Membership: As a convention, we have a great sin that we have not addressed: most of our churches are filled with “members” who are not Christians. This is an unimaginable occurrence by scriptural standards. Members are not prospects. Prospects are lost people in need of a life-changing encounter with Christ. Members are believers in covenant community with each other. We need to get that straight.

Ecclesiology and Innovation: I recently wrote and presented a paper on biblical church innovation. We need to get a discussion going on what innovation is, why we do it, and what we should (and should not) innovate. Approaches to church have diverged in ways unimaginable twenty years ago—and the issue of how to innovate in biblical ways has been lost in the rush to be trendy. All the while a significant population of our churches think that any innovation which results in a loss of a perceived “Southern

Baptist Culture” is to be avoided at all costs. We have an ongoing misconception that Biblical conservatism and cultural conservatism are synonymous. They are not. This is a major issue which we need to figure out together.

Missiology: We must drill down into our cultures here in North America and learn all we can about the people who live all around us. We must be willing to give the last full measure to take the gospel in the contextual heart language of these identified cultures. We must seek to stay biblically sound and culturally relevant. We must embrace those among us who are willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel. We must place more value on the command of our Lord to make disciples among all people groups, more than we value our “way” of doing church