

Dr. Emil Turner
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Dr. Emil Turner is the Executive Director of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. Turner, a native of Bastrop, Louisiana, is a graduate of Louisiana State University and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served the Arkansas Baptist State Convention as executive director since January, 1996. Previously, Turner was pastor of First Baptist Church, Lake Charles, Louisiana, from 1991-1996. He pastored Mount Olive Baptist Church, Crossett, Arkansas from 1983-1990. He has also served as pastor of First Baptist Church, Harrisonburg, Louisiana, on the church staff of Hillvue Heights Baptist Church, Bowling Green, Kentucky, in the area of education and evangelism, and as a campus director for Campus Crusade for Christ.

Turner, who has a heart for evangelism, seeks to encourage Arkansas Baptist churches to tell the good news of Jesus Christ in their communities, nation, and the world. He is committed to missions, having participated in various international and national missions partnerships, including Europe, Bulgaria, Brazil, Korea, Nevada and Iowa, and has served as a trustee for the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

One of Dr. Turner's most recent contributions to Southern Baptists, Louisianans, and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary has been his extensive direction and vision in involving Arkansas Baptists in disaster recovery in the Gentilly community of New Orleans where NOBTS resides.

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

Planting new churches is making us stronger and positioning us for future generations of ministry. Whether these church starts are traditional, "emergent" or the result of differing visions within established churches, the result is that more people are being reached with the gospel, more "people groups" penetrated, more money flows to missions, more missionaries are sent, and our denomination makes a greater impact on our culture. Our church planting efforts mean that more people go to heaven and less people go to hell.

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

Victims of our successes, we find ourselves unable to communicate what is actually being done to serve Christ. We are often redundant in ministries because we are unaware when ministries duplicate each other. In addition, we are surrounded by people and churches that have solved problems that others face, but we are usually ignorant of such solutions. This is surprising in light of the "connectedness" of culture, but it is a real weakness. Very few people know that a particular small rural church has developed a ministry that has eliminated meth addiction in its community. Very few people know that a particular urban church has been able to transition to become interracial. Because we are large and aggressive denomination, we can not keep up with the impact of our local churches. Ministries and skills are not being shared in ways that serve the whole denomination.

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

Twenty years ago I would have answered that our greatest challenge was a type of liberalism that robbed churches of vitality and strength. Today, I believe our challenge can be described as a growing legalism that limits our ability to reach lost people, and focuses us on “policing” one another. While the SBC remains diverse, that diversity appears to be less theological than methodological. If we are not vigilant, legalism will do to us what liberalism was unable to do: make us sterile and cold.

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

The Disaster Relief work has positioned the SBC to be the most influential force in New Orleans, LA. We can make a profound change that city if we will use the influence God has given us through our service there. We should be sending evangelism teams and church planting teams (with the guidance of the local association) to harvest the souls of those made ready by our DR teams. Never before have we had an opportunity to shape the culture of a major American city.

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?

Our missions focus, our constant concern for evangelism, the renewed interest in the Cooperative Program, the new church starts, the impact we have made recently through disaster relief efforts, the number of seminarians all convince me that we will be here until Jesus comes back.

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

In the early 1980's I agonized over this issue. I had been a staff member with Campus Crusade for Christ, and was convinced that the SBC was not as evangelistic, nor as conservative as should have been. I was frequently offered the opportunity to pastor non-denominational churches. About that time I took a course under Dr. Howe, at NOBTS on the history of the SBC. It changed my thinking. I realized that the evangelism and Biblicism that I held dear were in the “DNA” of our denomination. I could not find a place where I could be more at home.

The last quarter century has confirmed my decision. The SBC did not disintegrate, nor slide into ineffectual liberalism. My ministry has been far more effective because of the cooperation with so many churches. My contributions, though weak, and limited have been multiplied like loaves and fishes and sent across the world. Anyone wishing to leave the SBC should ask two questions: Can you find a denomination with more compassion for the lost world? Can you accomplish more alone than you can with the SBC?

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?

Calvinism's impact on the SBC has been overstated. While it is a flash point for theological discussion, churches (which by the way, make up the SBC) are not shifting theological positions in any significant way. Calvinism becomes a point of contention in a church if a pastor attempts to press it upon the congregation, but I have observed many pastors who hold reformed theology who never make it an issue in their churches. The maturity of these pastors allows them to preach what they believe, while guarding their churches from controversy over this theological perspective. I do not believe Calvinism will rob us of our evangelistic zeal, nor do I believe that those who reject Calvinism have a defective theology.

The greatest danger from our current discussion of Calvinism is personal and individual. For some reason, theological debates seem to be accompanied by spiritual pride. Where pride exists there will be a quenching of spiritual power and ministry regardless of the theological positions you hold.

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?

Reactions against elders as church officers are based on Baptist history and on tradition. Older church members often react against the idea of the "rule" concept as much as they do the "elder" concept. While many of us believe that the terms "elder" and "pastor" should be seen as synonymous, I believe the New Testament allows for the leadership of elders as one of the models of church government. Practically, I have yet to see how elders enhance a church's ability to minister and reach lost people. Some pastors have assumed that by replacing deacons with elders that the church would function more smoothly. My observation is that this is true for a brief period of time. The second generation of elders functions much like deacons. The title or office of the church leader is secondary to the qualities within the leader. It matters little what the leader is called if he is godly, evangelistic, loves his church and his pastor, and seeks God's Kingdom here on earth. Fighting over the title of a church leader is far more hurtful to the church than anything else a leader can do.

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

This movement is so eclectic and so diverse that it is difficult to say any one thing about it that is true of the whole movement. At the turn of the last century, the Arkansas Baptist State Convention had an intentional strategy to start "county seat" churches in every county in Arkansas. Some of them were no doubt weak, had poor leadership, and suspect theology. Now those churches are very different than they were 100 years ago. In the 1970's, the Jesus Movement gave rise to a very non traditional religious expression by people who had little or no church experience. Today, many of us who were involved in the Jesus movement are leaders in traditional SBC churches. A few years ago the "church growth movement" was in vogue. Today the principles of that movement are commonly practiced in SBC churches. No one knows what will happen to churches in the "emergent church movement". But twenty five years from now, some of those churches will be strong and making a solid impact, others will not. Our response should be to help clarify doctrinal non-negotiables for those attracted to that movement, and strengthen and encourage what is good. We must be careful not to disparage it through the use of "straw men" and negative stereotypes, but provide solid biblical guidance where possible.

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

I believe we stand on the verge of universalism. We are losing the ability to speak about hell with any authority. Even in a state as traditionally Baptist as Arkansas, we have lost a church to universalistic theology. Our church members do not pity their lost friends, and our preachers are reluctant to speak of people going to hell. I believe two factors have created this threat. One is the unwillingness to oppose culture. We are too quick to exchange immediate relevance for truth, whenever truth is unpopular, or hard to defend.

The other factor in this threat is the opposite extreme from our unwillingness to confront culture. In our desire to oppose immorality we have forgotten that morality is not holiness. We are called to be holy, not just moral. We can preach against abortion, pornography, and homosexuality and never go beyond morality. Conversion is necessary for reforming society. May God give us a heart that breaks not just because of the evil of immoral people, but because of the horrible eternity in store for those who die without Christ.