

James Rudy Gray
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A senior pastor of Southern Baptist churches for over 30 years, James Rudy Gray is Pastor of the Utica Baptist Church in Seneca, South Carolina.

He earned the associate degree from Anderson University; the Bachelor of Arts in Bible degree from Southern Wesleyan University, the Master of Arts in Counseling degree from Liberty University, and the Th.M. and D.Min. degrees from Luther Rice Seminary.

Dr. Gray has been actively involved in the Southern Baptist Convention and the South Carolina Baptist Convention in a number of ways. He currently serves as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, as the Parliamentarian for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, and as a Trustee for Anderson College.

A prolific writer, Dr. Gray serves as a regular columnist (the "At Home" column) for the Baptist Courier, and the "Counselor's Corner" column in Pulpit Helps. He is the author of the recent book Marriage that Works is Work.

He and his wife Anne have been married for over 30 years and have three adult daughters. For the past 20 years the Grays have led marriage and family conferences, retreats, and seminars. He is a National Certified Counselor with the National Board for Certified Counselors, a Board Certified Christian Counselor with the International Board of Christian Counselors, and a charter member of the American Association of Christian Counselors.

1. What do you see as the greatest strength of the SBC right now?

The Cooperative Program system of giving and support seems to be the strongest point in the opinion of many. Along with that is our strong identity as a Bible-believing people. Our greatest strength, however, is our churches. We have outstanding institutions, ministries, and mission boards, but without our churches cooperating together for a Great Commission purpose, we would be weak and ineffective.

We still have a strong and positive identity in the country, especially the south. Our Disaster Relief Ministries have allowed us to have a presence and opportunity for witness on a national scale that was not as strong in years past.

2. What do you see as the greatest weakness?

The growth toward a more centralized denominational structure is a great weakness because it reverses what has made our denomination strong: the churches. When the Executive Committee or any other entity seeks to keep our institutions in a hierarchical structure where they are submissive to the Executive Committee, we have created a relationship that will not work. When our State Conventions rule over the churches, we have created a situation that will not work. All of our institutions, mission boards, and agencies exist because of the churches. They exist to help the churches carry out the mission of Christ.

The Cooperative Program and Southern Baptist identity does not seem to be a feature of most of the new and emerging churches today. They do their own missions and raise up their own ministers from within their congregations often bypassing seminary education. This may be a reaction to the perception of centralization and exclusive religious politics that leaves too many churches out of the loop. Control of the SBC belongs to the churches of the SBC. This seems to me to be less and less the case today as power cliques and denominational structures becomes more and more self-perpetuating.

3. What do you think is the greatest threat or challenge to the SBC?

We must find a way to place our churches at the top of the convention food chain. Otherwise, more and more divisions among us occur among us. Simply keeping the churches together in some common commitment may be the most significant challenge we face. The mega-church model or even the purpose-driven model is not what will keep us together. Our denomination has been and continues to be a denomination of small to large churches, but not mega-churches. We need to find a way to help these churches which are the backbone of the SBC become more involved in the SBC. We need leaders who will listen to and respond to these types of churches.

4. What do you believe is the greatest opportunity for the SBC right now?

To strengthen churches and to help new church starts develop an appreciation for the commonly held Baptist beliefs (i.e. Baptist Faith and Message). If this can occur, we can continue to build a strong and fruitful discipleship and mission's ministry in the future. If new churches choose to bypass the denomination, our history, and our proven cooperative methods of working together, we will experience more and more splintering within our ranks. We have the opportunity to reach the world with the Gospel in a greater way than ever before. However, unless we know who we, know the Word, and find a way to reach the world without compromising the truth, we will likely miss our great opportunity.

From the foundation of a sure Biblical and Baptist identity, we have almost unsurpassed opportunities to reach people all over the world. However, we must first reach America.

5. Some have suggested that the SBC will decline in the future. What is your assessment of the future of the SBC?

The SBC is already declining in many areas. Within the next 20 years we are likely to see many older and aging congregations cease to exist. Some believe that the Baby boomers may be the last generation to experience a large and powerful denomination.

Unless we are able to reach and disciple the 40 and under age group, we will see a slow progression downward. I believe and I pray there will be a committed movement to reach this age group without compromising Biblical doctrine. That endeavor will be a tremendous task requiring the wisdom of God. It will require real prayer. I hope we will utilize new methodologies in the future but preach, teach, and live the same truth. I hope our future will find us growing strong churches rather than simply building attendance numbers. In the future, I believe we need to have membership requirements and become more concerned about the kind of Christians we have in our churches rather than the number of members on our church rolls.

Some decline may actually be a sign of integrity and health. When we boast about having over 16 million members and yet less than 8 million are actually involved in church, something is wrong. In the future our numbers may decline some, but our spiritual vitality could actually increase.

6. What would you say to a pastor who is considering leaving the SBC?

I would first listen to him so I could try and understand what he is thinking and feeling. Depending on what I learn from that exchange, I would counsel him to leave the SBC only if he had the witness of the Spirit in His heart and the confirmation of the Word in his life.

It may be that a pastor who is considering leaving simply needs encouragement to stay. He may need to know more about our history and heritage or about the many ways we can minister the Word to the World through Cooperative Program Ministries. He may even have an unrealistic view of the new denomination or church he is moving toward. In the end, the decision to leave would, of course, be his to make.

7. The resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC has been controversial for some. What is your perspective on this resurgence?

I believe it is a natural response to a return to a belief in an inerrant Bible. It is in many measurable ways a return to the theology of most of our founding fathers. I personally do not call myself a Calvinist although I do believe in the doctrines of grace. My pastor of history is Charles Haddon Spurgeon who was also called a Calvinist. I want to be like Spurgeon in this regard: He knew doctrine and he was committed to evangelism and missions. Someone once asked him how he could give a call for people to believe since he believed in the doctrines of grace. Spurgeon replied that if God had painted a yellow stripe down the back of the elect, he would walk up and down the streets of London pulling out shirt tails. When he found a yellow stripe, he would witness to that person. Since God had not done this, Spurgeon said he would continue saying, "Whosoever will, let him come!"

The key issue in our convention is not the teachings of one single man (like John Calvin) but the doctrine contained in God's Word. The issue is whether or not we get our beliefs from a genuine and careful study of the Word of God. For me and many of my friends in the ministry, our beliefs do not originate with John Calvin but in the Scriptures themselves.

8. The issue of elder rule has been controversial in many churches. What is your perspective on elder rule, Baptist Church polity and ecclesiology?

I believe a local Baptist church is autonomous. If they want elders, they can certainly have elders. My understanding of the Scripture equates pastor, elder, bishop as the same person. Baptists, by and large, have had a pastor or pastoral staff and deacons. Quite often, the pastoral staff functions as the administrators and leaders of the congregation while the deacon body serves as servant leaders meeting the legitimate needs of the membership. Frankly, in practical terms, I believe pastors (pastoral staff) are elders.

Elders/pastors do not rule. They lead. They are servants of Jesus who lead according to the teachings of the Word. Ultimately the final decision lies with the congregation itself as a body.

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

As I understand the term, the emergent church is an attempt to build a postmodern church for a postmodern culture. Apparently, different streams of thought and belief flow into this hard to define movement. I believe there are some common traits, however. Experience trumps theology. Dialog replaces dogma. Conversation is valued over preaching. Change is to be embraced while tradition is relegated to the past. The authority of the Bible is virtually disregarded while the feelings of the individual are highly regarded.

I believe it is a movement dependent on the culture. As the culture changes, it changes with it. While there is some merit in this approach (no one can live in a culture and remain unaffected by it) there is also danger. G. Campbell Morgan once observed, "It is not the job of the preacher to catch the spirit of the age but to correct it."

At its heart, the emergent church movement, I believe, is a reaction against what its adherents believe is the failure of the institutional or established churches.

Institutional and established churches do need to make some changes to reach out to the culture surrounding us. However, we must reach out with the Word of God and not with relational, emotional, or even environmental substitutes.

10. What would say is the most significant theological issue confronting Baptists today?

The conservative resurgence has led us to a place where we accept the Bible as God's inspired and inerrant Word. Now, the issue that is before us is how we interpret that Word of Truth. Biblical exposition is woefully needed in the pulpits of our churches. Some of the practices that were flatly opposed during the resurgence are now being revisited by another generation of Baptists. Many of the newer Baptists of today sound much like the moderate Baptists of 25-30 years ago. I believe the most significant issue is again the doctrine of infallibility and inerrancy. Any interpretation that disregards the Bible as truth without any mixture of error is bound to be flawed.

Calvinism is a term that the media and many others want to be the major theological issue among Southern Baptists. It may become the issue. If it becomes our major point of theological focus, let us pray it gets in that position because we have fervently prayed and diligently studied the Word. Then, again, if we do that, Calvinism will probably not be a major issue at all. What we believe must be based in the Word of God. How we interpret the Word must be centered in our belief that it is indeed the Word of God.