

Jim Richards
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Dr. Jim Richards serves as founding Executive Director of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. A native of Louisiana, Richards earned the M.Div. degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the D.Min. degree from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. He has been honored as a Distinguished Alumnus by both seminaries. Before coming to SBTC, Richards served for 21 years as a pastor in Louisiana, and then as a Director of Missions in Bentonville, Arkansas. He is a popular preacher, and has helped guide SBTC to unprecedented success. The SBTC will be hosting the Southern Baptist Convention in San Antonio this month.

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

The vast number of people in the churches who love the Lord Jesus with all of their hearts provides the greatest strength of our convention. While there are many challenges, Southern Baptists still have a wonderful resource in tender hearts surrendered to God's will.

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

Voices of criticism seem to be getting more attention than they should. While injustices call for prophets, problems should be dealt with in a Christ-like spirit. Disagreements should be handled in Christian dialogue, not derogatory accusations.

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

The greatest challenge for the present is to provide for the future. Cultural shifts in attitudes about denominations have influenced the current emerging generation of leadership. There is an ignorance of, ambivalence about or antagonism against the Cooperative Program. Advocates other than denominational employees must testify about the quality investment for missions and ministry provided in the Cooperative Program.

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

Southern Baptists could provide the leadership for the Evangelical community. While Evangelical Ecumenism is a threat to Baptist Distinctiveness, Southern Baptists can seek a spiritual awakening without compromising our identity. Let us give a call to all who share Baptist Distinctives to join us in touching North America and the 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?

This may be correct if you count nickels and noses. Our church rolls are bloated with non-attendees and unbelievers. We are not as large as we say we are. I would not view a more accurate reporting of numbers as a weakness but a strength. If God does not move upon us with a spiritual awakening, revival

or whatever you want to call it, we will decline. The future of the SBC is as bright as the promises of God.

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

There are two reasons a person should be a Southern Baptist. Although the SBC is not a confessional fellowship, there is confidence in what is being taught in seminaries classes and presented on the mission field. Secondly, there is no greater funding vehicle than the Cooperative Program for missions and ministry. When an affinity group cranks up, they devise a system very similar to CP to focus on a particular type of ministry. Minimizing bureaucracy is a good goal, but oftentimes there are gaps in accountability, quality or security. No other evangelical denomination has the strength of the SBC coupled with the doctrinal integrity.

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 think it is historical amnesia to pretend that most of the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention were not Calvinists. As someone said, all Southern Baptists are Calvinists it is just a matter to what degree. The threat to the SBC is not Calvinism but "Hyper-Calvinism". Adding an "S" for soul-winning on the end of TULIP cures the concern about Calvinism. The question is what kind of Calvinist will be involved in SBC. If they are like, Broadus, Boyce, Graves, Dagg and Johnson we will be fine. If they get more evangelistic about Calvinism than Jesus, the SBC will have a problem.

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?

The New Testament clearly teaches congregational autonomy. No one person or group can lord over God's flock. However, as long as a congregation retains the right to choose leadership, then delegation of authority seems acceptable. In a lot of cases, when a group (lay and/or full-time vocational) is selected it becomes the final authority. The church should always have recourse never surrendering their autonomy.

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

Ed Stetzer has characterized the emergent church well. He divides the movement into three groups, Relevants, Revisionists, and Reconstructionists. The first group is faithful to doctrinal truth but seeks to be more contemporary in their approach to reach people. The Revisionists are a mixed bag. While experimenting with various approaches to doing church, some are abandoning doctrinal truth. The final group are in doctrinal error and do not present the gospel truthfully.

Being biblically faithful is non-negotiable. Being culturally relevant is fine. Being culturally immersed is not. When being relevant causes you to jettison biblical positions, then you are on the wrong side of the emergent church movement.

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

Biblical Sufficiency is a term that may take on different meanings. Let me give you mine. The Bible is sufficient to lead us into all truth. Accepting the inerrancy of the scriptures enables us to find the biblical application for every doctrine and practice.

Biblical sufficiency is the umbrella for a number of issues. What we believe about the nature of the church, evangelism, missions, and practical Christianity must all be based on the Word of God.

The church is a body of baptized (immersion) believers covenanted together to carry out the teachings of Christ and His Word. When we believe in Biblical sufficiency we will accept that a New Testament Church will have certain characteristics:

It will teach salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. This will include security of the believer. There are many fine Christian groups who love the Lord and are going to heaven but they do not affirm the security of the believer. That group forfeits the right to be called a New Testament Church.

Baptism by immersion of believers only. This is a church ordinance. The Great Commission was not given to every believer but to the church. Otherwise any pre-teen girl who is saved could baptize her newly converted friend in the swimming pool.

The Lord Supper is non-sacerdotal. There is no saving grace in the elements. The Supper is a church ordinance.

The church is autonomous as a Theo-democracy. The body may empower smaller groups or individuals to make decisions, the church retains the ultimate decision making ability.

The Bible is the final rule of faith and practice. This means that no extra-Biblical revelation takes precedent over the Word of God. All experiences are filtered through the grid of the Bible.

When we believe in Biblical Sufficiency we will seek to win people to Jesus Christ. Different methods should be employed to win people to Christ. I believe we need to put as many different hooks in the water as necessary in missions and evangelism. What is missing is a real belief in the eternal damnation of the ever-living soul.

Practical Christianity is based upon principles from the Word of God. The use of alcohol as a beverage, gambling and viewing lewd sexual content as entertainment are clearly in violation of principles from the scriptures.

We say we believe the Bible. The world is watching to see if we are going to live it.