

**Morris H. Chapman**  
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Dr. Morris H. Chapman serves as the president and chief executive officer of the Southern Baptist Executive Committee, Nashville, Tennessee. Chapman previously served two terms as the president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1990-1992), along with several other prominent posts in SBC leadership. Chapman's ministry experience includes over three decades of pastorates in SBC churches, including his thirteen-year run as senior pastor of the historic 7,700-member First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, Texas. A native of Kosciusko, Mississippi, Chapman is a graduate of Mississippi College. Following college, Chapman earned both Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Chapman is married to Jodi, and they have two children and seven grandchildren.

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

The passion for, experience with, and funding of world missions has been and is the greatest strength of the Southern Baptist Convention. In Southern Baptist churches, God continues to stir the hearts of increasing numbers of church members of all ages to go wherever He leads to witness to the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has stirred the hearts of still others who remain at home to give joyfully and generously to world missions and our missionaries through the Cooperative Program.

Because of our strong biblical convictions, the world tends to characterize Southern Baptists as narrow-minded, unengaged in today's culture, and apathetic to the world's needs. Nevertheless, no denomination is better positioned to demonstrate the love of Christ and His power to save mankind than Southern Baptists.

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

Our greatest weakness is the tendency to "defend" our faith with a degree of severe and unforgiving dogmatism that in part creates a negative view of the Convention and helps perpetuate the idea that we are little more than a denomination of prohibitions. The truth is, we do stand unapologetically against those things of the world that grieve the heart of God. We are stouthearted in our doctrinal convictions. Nevertheless, we should and we must seize the initiative to trumpet the wonder working power of Jesus Christ our Lord to the world.

Jesus was courageous and unafraid to challenge the most powerful of men who served other gods, but He also spent hours on end speaking the truth in love to the lost while assuring them their sins would be forgiven if they would trust in Him for their salvation. We are doing ourselves, our denomination, and our Lord an injustice if we let the world see only our dogmatism without seeing the love of Christ.

In the Convention there appears to be a growing fondness for casting stones at each other, judging one another, and building our reputations at the expense of others. A divisive culture has been sown among Southern Baptists that does not honor Christ when measured against the Word of God. His love for us conquered sin through the sacrifice of His own life. We are to be like Him. His expressions of righteous indignation while He was on earth were real, but rare.

He came to die for us and in so doing let mankind know that God loves the world, period. God's wrath is the consequence of man's insistence upon sin, disobedience, hatred, and bitterness. Jesus preached the reality of hell from a heart of love, not hatred. Among the brethren, He sowed seeds of love, not dissension.

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

The greatest threat to the Southern Baptist Convention is bound inextricably to the greatest weakness of the Convention. I believe the greatest threat is the gradual deterioration of the collective heart that at one time beat steadily and strongly with a sacrificial love for Jesus and the unsaved. But that heartbeat seems to be weakening. When the heart stops beating, the Convention's physical infrastructure, its wide-flung missions enterprise, its educational excellence, and its religious liberty defense will collapse with the flutter of falling dominoes.

A lessening of interest in cooperative missions and theological education among Southern Baptist pastors is a direct threat to the Convention's long-term existence. The Convention is not hierarchical in its polity (government). The Convention is a network of churches that voluntarily bands together for the principal cause of world missions. This common commitment to missions is the primary reason the Baptist Faith and Message focuses only upon core beliefs of Southern Baptists. If we insist that every doctrinal nuance debated among Southern Baptists is a core belief, sooner or later, our missionary force will be depleted and the unsaved will be abandoned.

Our greatest challenge is, once again, to become a powerful spiritual force, empowered by the Holy Spirit, cooperating together and showing the world that Jesus lives! Although cooperation is not one of the doctrinal or missiological underpinnings of the Convention, it is an operational component based upon biblical principles that describes the methodological attitude and spirit with which we are to work together for God's glory and the advancement of His Kingdom on earth. Cooperation in the Convention cannot be forced and at the same time be effective. The desire to cooperate is born of the heart. It is more than a willingness to cooperate. It is a matter of wanting to cooperate.

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

Our greatest opportunity is to prepare heart, soul, mind, and organizational infrastructure to revolutionize the world spiritually in the 21st Century. In the first three questions, I spoke about preparing the heart, soul, and mind. Now I will address the issue of organizational restructuring. While restructuring as a subject may seem somewhat trite and boring, don't overlook the fact that savings in one area makes possible funding for another area of greater priority.

In 1997, upon the recommendation of the SBC Program and Structure Committee, Mark Brister, Chairman, the Southern Baptist Convention completely dissolved seven (7) agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention, reducing the total number of entities from 19 to 12. The Home Mission Board was the linchpin of the study. The legal entity known as the Home Mission Board was dissolved and an entirely new corporation named the North American Mission Board (NAMB) was formed bringing together the ministry assignments from the Home Mission Board, the Radio and Television Commission, and the Brotherhood Commission.

The magnitude of the committee's assignment made it impossible to expect Southern Baptists to assimilate possible changes in all SBC entities at once. The decision to recommend no other changes

was the result of deciding that the overwhelming nature of the assignment was too big to accomplish all at once.

The question now is, “What are the pressing needs in the Convention that would set us free to be more effective in the coming years?” Possibilities include (1) improving the flow of information from SBC entities to rank and file Southern Baptists, (2) developing a SBC national strategy for providing theological education to future pastors, missionaries, evangelists, associate ministers, and directors of missions, (3) planning and executing the most aggressive and successful church planting strategy ever seen in the United States, (4) extending a study of the SBC infrastructure to entities not previously studied in depth, and (5) encouraging state conventions to study their infrastructures with the intent of prioritizing ministries, dissolving any that are ineffective and inefficient, thus freeing a greater percentage of Cooperative Program funds to be forwarded to the SBC. Aggressive efforts to reach the 50-50% division of CP funds, a recommendation by our forebears upon granting the state conventions the assignment of being the collectors of CP receipts from the churches, I believe, would be applauded by the churches in every state convention.

**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?**

The Southern Baptist Convention is a loose network of churches voluntarily bound together by basic Southern Baptist doctrine (Baptist Faith and Message) and a common commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission. The Convention shall not decline as long as the members of our churches continue to engage in soul-winning mission projects around the world. Neither shall the Convention decline due to any failure on the part of our churches or Convention if we continue to stand courageously upon the Word of God and obediently and courageously go to the ends of the earth proclaiming the Gospel. The decline will come only if we are distracted and encumbered by infighting about second and third-level issues; only if we continue to cover our eyes and ears while self-appointed political leaders wrestle for control of the Convention and attempt to unduly influence every major decision; and only if pastors of any given generation cease to lead their churches to see the worth of giving through the Cooperative Program to cooperative missions and theological education. It's the choice of the churches. The choice of the pastors and the people who worship the King of Kings and Lord of Lords Sunday after Sunday. The churches are not in the hands of the Convention. The Convention is in the hands of the churches.

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

The few older pastors that may consider leaving the Convention normally do so because they have been personally offended. I would guess that most of the time resolution is found and an older pastor decides to stay in the Convention. After all, his roots are here, his friends are here, and his calling is here. Someone has described those who have been Southern Baptist for a long time, “He is Southern Baptist born, Southern Baptist bred, and when he dies, he'll be Southern Baptist dead.” An older pastor normally continues to work to improve his Convention rather than to leave it.

Occasionally, an older pastor will leave because his doctrinal beliefs have changed and that's understandable. I fear that young pastors are tempted to leave before they have experienced all the ways God has blessed us through the years. We have a powerful history and heritage upon which to build the

future. In fact, because the Convention is a network of churches rather than a denominational hierarchy, the Southern Baptist Convention has the potential to be thriving even if other denominations are dying or barely surviving.

For reasons known only to God, He continues to bless the Southern Baptist Convention, sometimes in spite of us and hopefully many times because of us. I believe God is waiting upon Southern Baptists to be convicted by 2 Chronicles 7:14. If we ever really come under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the message sets our hearts spiritually ablaze simultaneously and collectively, I believe a Christ-centered, Bible-believing, God-honoring, soul-saving revival will sweep the United States. If this doesn't happen, we will have failed to humble ourselves before the Lord and depend wholly upon Him in our weakness (Eph. 4:15). A natural characteristic of a young man is to be impatient. I pray pastors of all ages in our Convention will lead us to such a revolutionary spiritual awakening that Southern Baptists will shake the dust of petty politics and self-seeking aggrandizement from our feet and see what God can do through any one man who says, "I will obey you, Lord, and none other."

### **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?**

The resurgence of Calvinism is largely a reaction against the shallowness of Baptist doctrinal instruction during the era of moderate-led seminaries coupled with a strong interconnection of the principle of sola scriptura ("scripture alone") with Reformed doctrine during the Protestant Reformation. Since the principle of sola scriptura resurfaced during the inerrancy debates of the Conservative Resurgence, it is only logical that its relationship with Reformed doctrine would also emerge. An additional reason for the resurgence of Calvinism is that a wide-open Arminianism under the guise of Open Theism must be refuted. Generally, where a heresy surfaces its closest theological polar opposites will appear and gain a relatively wide following.

The Scriptures reveal numerous "antinomies" (apparent contradictions between two equally valid principles). For example, how can Jesus be fully human and fully divine? How can Scripture be fully the Word of God and a work to which we must give all diligence? Similarly, how can salvation be totally an act of God, independent of human means, and a human response to a divine initiative? Calvinism, drawing heavily on a logical system of thought, seeks to address these questions through the lens of Divine Sovereignty.

The resurgence of Calvinism is both to be expected as a historical reality that surges in popularity every few generations and as a healthy conversation about the sovereignty of God in comparison to the responsibility of man.

One danger is that pastors are tempted to accept church pastorates in churches that are not Calvinistic, and then strive to drive them into the Calvinistic camp, thereby destroying an otherwise strong and healthy church. Another danger is that the truly warm-hearted, "evangelical" Calvinists often are misunderstood by second-generation successors, potentially resulting in a decline in evangelism and missions. As long as the conversations can remain cordial and warm-hearted, we always have been able to work together for the missionary, educational, and benevolent needs of the Convention and the world. The sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man both are taught in the Bible. Both are necessary elements in the salvation experience. A healthy tension (an antinomy) exists in the Bible with regard to

these two important biblical truths. Both are present in the salvation experience. Man is often tempted to design a theological theory in light of a biblical antinomy in order to clarify what God is trying to say. Man's system will be inferior to God's system now and forever. Why is it so difficult to accept from God what we cannot fully explain? After all, He didn't begin to tell us everything He knows, but what we need to know to be redeemed and live righteously.

### **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 concept of elder rule is based upon the interpretation of a single verse in 1 Timothy 5 that is not a clear and compelling interpretation. The mention of "elder rule" is not accompanied by an explanation that compels the church to adopt elder rule. On the other hand, Baptists have historically interpreted the data of Scripture to view the three terms pastor/elder/bishop as an interchangeable way of expressing three facets of one office, serving under the authority of the local church. Such an argument is biblically compelling. You may wish to read the article recently posted at <http://www.morrischapman.com/article.asp?id=65>.

The term, "ruling elders," in my opinion, is a contradiction to congregational rule, the practice found in most Southern Baptist churches. Changing the terminology to "leading" elders does not change the practical outcome. An elder system of government cannot effectively co-exist with congregational rule in a Southern Baptist church for an indefinite period of time.

Regardless of good intentions, the introduction of elder rule in a typical Southern Baptist church will soon replace, not enhance congregational rule. Elder rule dilutes the Pastor's leadership as the visionary leader. Elder rule has the potential to cause a pastor to believe he has dictatorial authority with no accountability to the congregation. When this happens, it is a recipe for disaster both for the pastor and the church.

A number of pastors, especially first-time pastors, are accepting invitations to become pastor of a Southern Baptist church although mistakenly underestimating the importance of congregational rule and its importance in the life of that church. I would caution pastor search committees to examine closely a pastor's doctrinal beliefs, especially on those issues that seem to be bubbling to the surface of debate in the Convention at any given time. I would encourage all pastors to get to know your people over a period of time and earn their trust before you begin making drastic changes. This is especially true when the change has the force of doctrine.

I would dare offer one other word of counsel to young pastors. The people you pastor are not perfect, but don't forget, neither is the pastor. Love them and lead them, but don't drive them or force them. When we preach the "unsearchable riches of Christ" God will stir their hearts and prepare them to accomplish the vision He has given you. Above all don't abuse your calling by preaching at people who have offended you. God's Spirit brings conviction, not your anger or bitterness. In fact, rid yourself of any wrongful spirit before you enter the pulpit. Ultimately, you may need to engage a person in serious conversation about a matter, but don't lecture that person from the pulpit. One great freedom in preaching a sermon series through a book of the Bible is that the pastor cannot be accused of "choosing" a Scripture passage for the primary purpose of preaching to a disgruntled church member or members. The tendency to do so may be partially responsible for driving the younger generations to believe that preaching topical sermons is the better way to connect with the present culture than preaching expository sermons.

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

Most Southern Baptists remain uninformed about the emergent church paradigms that are, well, “emerging” presently in North America. Before reaching ultimate conclusions about all aspects of the emerging church paradigms, we need to examine the concept and determine if any new methods have merit. We need to remember that all emerging churches are not the same. In fact, all younger, emergent, and emerging pastors are not to be considered one and the same. For that matter, the terms younger, emergent, and emerging are not necessarily synonymous with each other. The Southern Baptist Convention has many fine younger pastors who lead their churches differently than we did in earlier generations and yet they are strongly committed to the inerrancy of God’s Word and have a spirit of love and loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ and the Southern Baptist Convention.

As in every movement, large and small, radicals and extremists exist and they are among the emergent church crowd of today. They embrace heretical beliefs, employ aberrant practices in worship, and preach a diluted Gospel. Such undisciplined and unprincipled behavior will not usher in the next great awakening in America and likely will hinder many from knowing Christ as their personal Savior.

We have the obligation to know who’s who among the emergents crowd lest we condemn all by condemning a few. We should become knowledgeable about the emergent church and reserve judgment for those whose actions and words prove them to be heretical in their faith and practice. We should be careful not to speak falsely against those who are honestly trying to find God-honoring methods more suitable for reaching this generation of unsaved for Christ. And we certainly must be careful about condemning a younger pastor simply because his methods are innovative. My prayer is that God will give the people and their pastors spiritual wisdom in the application of their enormous creativity.

If emergent pastors are experimenting with preaching other than the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, eventually they will find themselves bereft of power. Large crowds for a season can be quite intoxicating and give the false impression that God is blessing. The fact is that the Bible is our road map to salvation and sanctification, righteousness and holiness, missions and evangelism, and nothing teaches people God’s Word in a brief period of worship each week like an expository sermon. When a pastor preaches and teaches God’s Word his people never have to wonder if they are simply hearing what he thinks compared to hearing what God thinks.

Some younger Southern Baptist pastors are insisting that the consumption of alcoholic beverages is not prohibited in the Bible. While the Bible never says that a drink of wine is a sin, it is filled with principles for living a pure life as a testimony to what Christ did for us on the Cross (e.g. Romans 12:2). The Bible tells us we are set apart and that we are a peculiar people. Why? For the purpose of being seen as different from the world’s crowd. Rather than argue the finer points of biblical interpretation, why would we not pray, “Dear Lord Jesus, there are some things I will not do, though there be no biblical injunction per se against them, because they are perceived to be an integral part of the world.” I am suggesting that while we live in the world, we are not to be of the world.

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

The most significant theological issue confronting Southern Baptists and all evangelical groups is the sole sufficiency of Christ for salvation. In the future, when a tidal wave against Christ and Christ alone

as the way of salvation threatens to sweep our witness off the face of the earth, I believe we will pinpoint this moment in history as the beginning of a rising tide. We have less time than we think to fortify our witness for the ridicule and disdain that will come first upon the organized church, make its way through the ranks of nominal Christians, and finally slam against the people who are guided daily by the Holy Spirit and whose only desire is to honor Christ and glorify the Father.

As a boy growing up in Mississippi attending a Southern Baptist church, I could not have imagined that to believe in the veracity of Scripture, especially the sufficiency of Christ, would ever thrust a person into a confrontation with individuals who would argue that there is more than one way to heaven. Already, the debate has erupted at the highest levels of intellectualism. Soon it's coming to your community. When the tidal wave comes, those who have tried to keep one foot in the Kingdom and the other foot in the world are going to be shocked that their faith will not stand up under the barrage of ridicule. This reason alone is enough to cause us to fall on our faces before the Lord, confess our disobedience, and unashamedly profess to the world that He is our Savior and Lord.