

Rick Lance
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Dr. Rick Lance, executive director of State Board of Missions and treasurer of the Alabama Baptist Convention, is an integral cog in the mission and ministry of Southern Baptists. The state missionary, "vital leadership stretches to over 3,200 churches and over one million Baptists in Alabama. Before assuming his present duties, Dr. Lance pastored SBC churches for over three decades, leading churches like the 5000-member First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa. Dr. Lance has served in a number of denominational roles, including being a trustee, trustee chairman, state convention president, and most recently, President of the SBC Executive Directors Association.

Dr. Lance received a B.A. from Samford University in religion, and he earned his M.Div and Ed.D. at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Lance and his wife, Pam, are currently members at Vaughn Forest Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. They have two daughters. Additional sermons, writings, and news articles pertaining to Dr. Lance, "ministry can be found at <http://www.ricklance.com/>.

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

I perceive our greatest strength to be the growing reaffirmation of who we are as Southern Baptists. We have defined ourselves concerning the basic doctrinal matters in a confessional way, which is the Baptist tradition. We are now reaffirming our belief in the missional relationship we have in the Cooperative Program as the life blood of our Southern Baptist life in terms of missions support locally and globally. This reaffirmation process is the sign of a vibrant and mature denomination.

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

As a Southern Baptist, I find the role of critic an unnatural role for me to play. I suppose our weakest point is the same one that I see in American culture in general, namely a sense of apathy due to self absorption. Our culture worships personal happiness, and that idolatrous spirit causes us to be less committed to the mission of Christ which is to "seek and to save those who are lost".

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

I would suggest that the problem of apathy is the one challenge which comes to mind. Apathy is subtle but pernicious. Although we all believe that people without Christ are lost, we do not make that conviction the driving force of our lives. If we do not believe in intentional evangelism, then we practice unintentional universalism.

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

There is no other denomination or faith group better poised to make a kingdom difference in the 21st century than Southern Baptists. We have the missional mandate, the financial means and the relational

structure to see this happen. My prayer is that we as a denominational family will keep our eyes on the prize and go forward together for Christ.

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 future, by its very nature is uncertain, but I believe that those who forecast a decline of Southern Baptists are grossly mistaken. Obviously, we have our innate challenges as we go forward, but that does not mean diminishment for us. There are those who predict the decline of the U.S. as well. I am old enough to have been around when the predictions on both fronts were made in earlier decades. As a card carrying Baby Boomer, I have heard that when my generation came of age that we would see the decline of all foundational institutions in government and in denominations. The boomers are not as loyal as the World War II generation, but we have not destroyed those foundations on which we were built as a people. As you can see, I am sometimes disturbed by naysayers who want to bury the best of the past and present in order that they can create their view of the future.

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 younger pastors with whom I meet and fellowship don't seem to be as negative about the denomination as much as those I read about in the blogosphere. However, to those younger men who seem inclined on going it alone, I would say that there are times when you will never know you need a denominational family until you don't have one. During the desperate days of disaster relief on the Gulf Coast, I talked to numerous people who were most appreciative of the organized efforts we have in our state conventions in this vital area of ministry. The young church planters in our state are very appreciative of assistance which comes their way in salary and site commitments made possible by the gifts of Alabama Baptists through our Cooperative Program. The Southern Baptist Convention and the state conventions do not exactly fit the definition of a denomination in the old world sense of the term. We are more of a network of churches united in missions and ministry than a denomination like some of the others we know in the past or present.

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?

As a child of the fifties and sixties, I lived through the dominance of humanism in popular culture. Although, I am not a theologian or a sociologist or as some would say a culturist, I believe that the resurgence of Calvinism might be best explained as a response to the over emphasis on human centered thinking in our culture. I am not a Calvinist as interpreted by the acrostic TULIP, but of course as a Baptist, I am highly influenced by the Reformation. As a state missionary, I travel extensively in my state and beyond. Therefore, I do know something about church conflict in the present manifestations, and I will have to say that, in some cases, the promotion of the so called Calvinist view has caused some strife in churches. I believe that any pastor, who is committed to the propagation of the Calvinist view of theology, should make that view very clear in the beginning of the process of discussion with the search committee and with the leaders of the fellowship. If the theological perspective is that serious of a matter to them, then being upfront about those convictions is the best and most healthy approach to take.

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 subscribe to the offices of the church as stated in our Baptist Faith and Message. I am a traditionalist in the truest sense of the word. I believe in the ministries of deacon and pastor for the local church. Yet, I do believe the local church has the autonomous right to use other forms of church polity. Again, if a pastor intends on leading a church in a different way from the current practice the church utilizes, then he needs to be candid with the leadership before becoming pastor. For some churches non-traditional practices in polity are used and celebrated, and for that I can be grateful. However, I am fond of the traditional pastor and deacon led church which affords congregational affirmation in decisions and direction of the fellowship.

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

The term Emergent Church Movement has appeared on my radar screen in recent years, and I have sought to better understand it. I must say the term itself bothers me somewhat, but I know that there is not a perfect description which can be utilized to define and describe any movement. Based on my admittedly scant reading concerning this trend, I must say that I am concerned that there are theological deficiencies which are being presented by some who raise this banner before the evangelical world. Time will tell whether the movement is a healthy one, but at present I remain an interested and concerned observer.

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

My evangelical roots and revivalist or Sandy Creek background would compel me to underscore the doctrine of evangelism as being the big issue of all generations. I guess I do theology in a three tier fashion. There are core beliefs which have to be defined which represent the first tier. The deity of Christ, the authority of Scripture and the necessity of salvation through Christ are three such beliefs. The second and third beliefs are to be debated and discussed but total uniformity will most likely never be realized. The doctrine of evangelism must be taught and personified in every generation or we will not be a Great Commission people. It must be a first tier belief for Southern Baptists in every generation or we cease being the people of God. I sense an apathetic attitude among even the strongest of believers today and this truly grieves me. I am a John 3:16 Christian who also affirms the truth of 1 John 3:16. I appeal to all evangelicals, especially Southern Baptists to be on mission with the Great Commission.