

Tom Ascol
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Tom Ascol has served as Pastor of Grace Baptist Church since 1986. Prior to moving to Florida he served as pastor and associate pastor of churches in Texas. He has a BS degree in sociology from Texas A&M University (1979) and has also earned the MDiv and PhD degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. His major field of study was Baptist Theology. He taught two years as an adjunct professor for New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in their SW Florida extension.

Tom serves as the Executive Director of Founders Ministries, an organization committed to reformation and revival in local churches. He edits the Founders Journal, a quarterly theological publication of Founders Ministries, and has written numerous articles and contributed to several books. He regularly preaches and lectures at various conferences throughout the United States and other countries. He also authors the Founders Ministries Blog.

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

The greatest strength of the SBC that I see is our unashamed declaration that the Bible is God's infallible, inerrant Word of God. Without commitment to this formal principle of reformation, the many other good things that the SBC does would be undermined and eventually eroded completely. The convention has in place a wonderful structure that is ready to engage many spheres of culture through various ministries (NAMB, IMB, ERLC, Seminaries, LifeWay, etc.). For that structure to serve kingdom purposes as faithfully as it ought, the doctrinal and spiritual advanced that have been taken place over the last 25 years must be strengthened.

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

Our failure to take seriously the sufficiency of Scripture. We have affirmed the authority of Scripture, but we are far from believing or teaching that it is enough to guide and form life and ministry in the church, as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 teaches. Too many of our leaders seem satisfied to stop with the recovery of the formal principle of reformation and appear to be uninterested or unwilling to recover the material principle--the actual content of the Bible's message. Consequently, in many ways the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been lost and left unrecovered in many sectors of denominational life. If this is true, and I believe that it is, then it does not finally matter how loudly we proclaim our commitment to inerrancy if we remain unwilling to recover and reaffirm the biblical Gospel.

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

Pride. If you believe what many prominent SBC pastors and denominational leaders say then you would conclude that Southern Baptists are the greatest group in the kingdom of God. That kind of attitude is a breeding ground for a myriad of spiritually fatal diseases. Two of the most potent of these are the inability to be self-critical and spiritual presumption.

Too many of our conservative leaders in the SBC have repeatedly demonstrated over the last ten years an unwillingness to receive criticism of anything related to "the cause" (the conservative resurgence). Questions and warnings from fellow conservatives have been dismissed as disloyalty or worse. Too often pragmatic responses have been offered for actions which, according to the Bible, are inexcusable.

This mentality further calcifies the deadly assumption that we all know and agree on what the Bible means when it mentions the Gospel, conversion, and church. Many Southern Baptists see no need to reexamine these basic, essential ingredients of the Bible's message, yet it is overwhelmingly clear that the vast majority of our church members in the SBC have little if any biblical understanding of these life-and-death matters. Indeed, simply raising this issue is judged by some leaders to be a waste of time--time that could be better spent spreading the Gospel, seeking conversions and growing churches. But if we are mistaken in what these spiritual realities are, then it is disastrous to go on promoting them as if we are doing the Lord's will. I have written more on this here:

<http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ63/editorial.html>

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

The opportunity to repent of our pride and blatant disobedience to God's inerrant, infallible Word. When over half of our church members cannot be found and our Lord's teachings in Matthew 18:15-18 and Paul's instructions to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5 are blatantly ignored by the overwhelming majority of our churches and pastors, the table is set for an honest admission of our desperate condition and a sincere expression of repentance.

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?

I am fearful that it might become increasingly irrelevant to more and more churches and pastors. I do not think that this is inevitable, and I sincerely hope that it does not happen, but I do fear that the current trajectory we are on may lead us that way. God has given the SBC some leaders who are models of faithfulness in spirituality and integrity. If those leaders do not speak up plainly and loudly in calling for honesty and integrity throughout our denominational structure, then I do not think that we will find the spiritual strength to deal with our problems in a humble, Christ-honoring way.

I am hopeful, however, that there is a growing number of pastors and churches who recognize that the SBC, for all of its good and potential usefulness, has some serious problems which must be addressed if we are going to move forward into the future with making a positive impact for Christ's kingdom. If those with these convictions can be united to deal honestly and forthrightly with our denominational problems, then there is reason to hope that our future can be full of greater blessing than we have seen at any time in our past. If the serious problems are ignored, I think the SBC will simply decline into kingdom irrelevancy.

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

I don't think everyone should be Southern Baptist. However, I am concerned by the number of pastors (especially younger pastors) who are talking about leaving the SBC. From my vantage point what seems

to be motivating many of them is the lack of spiritual authenticity that they see in many of the denominational programs, promotions and emphases. Here is what I typically say to someone who is thinking of leaving the SBC. "Ask yourself two questions: 'What can I do tomorrow that I cannot do today if I were to leave the SBC tonight?' Then, 'What can I do today that I could not do tomorrow if I left the SBC tonight?' When the number of positive answers that can be given to the first outnumber the positive answers to the second, it is time to leave. Until then, hang in there and work for reformation and revival."

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 in the SBC is a type of theological homecoming. It is beyond dispute that the theological consensus of the SBC our our founding in 1845 was Calvinistic. As Timothy George has noted, every one of the 293 delegates who attended the constitutional meeting in August, Georgia in 1845 came from churches or associations that held to the Second London Confession of Faith (in some cases in its Charleston or Philadelphia expressions). In the early decades of the 20th century that consensus broke down and soon was overtaken by strong emphasis on pragmatism, perhaps most notably demonstrated in the "Million more in '54" campaign. The shift of theological commitments from the center of our identity to the periphery resulted in denominational amnesia. We simply forget who we were.

The conservative resurgence was the first stage in our denomination's doctrinal recovery. With the reestablishment of a clear confession of Scripture's full authority as the Word of God written, it is inevitable that there should follow a recovery of the message of Scripture as historically understood by those who founded the Southern Baptist Convention. That is what is happening. We are witnessing a return to the faith of our fathers.

I see that as a very healthy thing, though, just as was true with the conservative resurgence, it has not been without its problems. Some have used their newly recovered understanding of the doctrines of grace as an excuse to become pugilistic in their treatment of those with whom they disagree. Others have mistakenly allowed their recognition of the absolute sovereignty of God to diminish their full commitment to the absolute responsibility of people. Still others have regarded commitment to truth as a license not to love. None of these are justified and all are to be roundly condemned as sinful. Fortunately, such follies have been a minority report among those who are returning to the evangelical Calvinism of our Southern Baptist forebears.

What is equally and perhaps even more troubling is the intensity and frequency of hostile opposition to those who have come to believe what James P. Boyce, John A. Broadus, P. H. Mell. W. B. Johnson, R. B. C. Howell and other founders taught and believed. Some denominational employees at every level have misrepresented the views of many of their fellow Southern Baptists when speaking against Calvinism. Occasionally these misrepresentations have taken the form of attacks and have resulted in stirring up considerable trouble for pastors and members of local churches.

What I find most grievous and offensive are the inexcusable misrepresentations of historical and theological views on this subject that have come from many academicians in the SBC. Those is such positions should know better than simply to recite an old, erroneous party line about Calvinism.

Fortunately, with the ready access to many sources of information today, church members and pastors no longer have to take theological and historical assertions as fact simply because they are cited by a reputed scholar. In fact, some supposed scholarship in this area has been exposed as being very suspect, at best.

Tom Nettles' newly revised book, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, forcefully demonstrates the preeminence of the doctrines of grace in our Southern Baptist heritage and convincingly argues for their biblical validity. His book, though first published more than 20 years ago, has never been seriously engaged much less refuted.

So I see the resurgence of the doctrines of grace in Southern Baptist life as a good thing and as a movement of God that is continuing to grow. I believe that it could well be the beginnings and foundation of the revival that we so desperately need.

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 don't think that Baptist churches should necessarily have "ruling elders" per se. I do believe in a plurality of elders, as did many Baptists in history. However, Baptists--especially Southern Baptists--have never made this a test of fellowship. I would not want to make it that either. A plurality of leadership in a church is a good thing, as well as being supported in the New Testament. This form of church government is completely consistent with congregationalism and need not become a form of Presbyterianism. It saves the church from the pastor becoming a little pope, and it also saves the pastor from becoming any church member's puppet.

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

As I understand it, it is far from a monolithic movement. Many of the things that they are protesting, I also protest (a dead liberalism and superficial or legalistic Fundamentalism). But much of what I see being proposed as the cure strikes me as being worse than the disease.

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

Well, as I have already said, I believe that in many respects we have lost the Gospel. Nothing is more important than that. Perhaps the most significant, observable manifestation of that for us is the large number of unregenerate church members that we have. In that sense, ecclesiology will be a vitally important issue for Southern Baptists to confront honestly in the next few years. We must be willing to define simply what constitutes a church on the authority of the New Testament. Then we must apply that definition to forty-two thousand assemblies that we call churches within the SBC.

John Dagg, the first writing Southern Baptist systematic theologian said that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it. If he is correct, then many of our churches are in far worse shape than most of us want to admit. Jesus' words to the churches in Asia from Revelation 2-3 give me reason to remain hopeful, however. He is a patient High Priest and, as Lord and Head of the church, has promised to build His church throughout history until the new heavens and new earth appear.