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Convention, Cooperation, and Controversy
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My assigned topic relates to the growing use and influence of the word “missional” and its impact on the Southern Baptist Convention. Since others have already done so, and it is not my assigned topic, I won’t focus primarily on Baptist Identity, though I am convinced that a Baptist church must be a church on mission. However, I recognize there are many other issues in denomination life that others might wish to discuss. For those interested, I have recently addressed some of those issues in an interview at baptistcenter.blogspot.com.

In this paper, I will focus on the use of “missional”—and more importantly, on the need for missional engagement, work, and cooperation within our denomination. My presentation is almost certainly too long—a bad habit of mine—so I will release the paper at www.missionalnetwork.org for anyone who might be interested in the full length version. If you find it helpful, feel free to download and share as desired.

-Ed Stetzer

Toward a Missional Convention

The term “missional” is being employed with increasing frequency across the evangelical spectrum. Within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), it also seems that many are working hard to incorporate the term into our denominational vernacular. But are we really a missional convention? If so, then what are the signs of our missional identity? If we are not, then how can we, as Southern Baptists, move from merely assuming a new buzz-word to assuming an identity and common practice commensurate with this recently popularized word.

In addressing the above questions, it is necessary to trace the origin of the term, as well as examine its use within the context of the SBC. To be clear from the start, and contrary to some reports, “missional” is not a new word and it is not my word. Its origin goes back at least one hundred years. Its first mention in the *Oxford English Dictionary* comes from 1907 citing W.G. Holmes’ *Age Justinian & Theodora II*, stating “Several prelates, whose missional activities brought over whole districts and even nationalities to their creed.”

The first Southern Baptist, and the first missiologist, to publish using the term “missional” was Francis DuBose, then a professor and director of the World Missions Center at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. Dubose wrote about the concept of missional theology in his book *God Who Sends*. In it, he wrote, “Where have we missed the meaning of our pilgrim faith? Why has the biblical meaning of mission so escaped us? Where did we abandon the legacy of the Jesus way? We live before the mystique of the missional vision. But we seem to be able to keep it a vision—a vision at a safe enough distance to keep us from being compelled by its power.”¹ In May 1999, I

preached at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary chapel and contended that the entire church should assume a missional posture, explaining that, “The normative expression of New Testament Christianity is missional.”² I believe it even more strongly today.

Since that day, the word has been used with increasing frequency by an increasing number of Southern Baptist leaders, sometimes without regard for its etymological origins and twenty-first century contextual meaning. Ignoring both the base definition and normative contemporary application of the term has resulted in confusion. Put more plainly, part of the problem regarding the debate over what it means to be “missional” is that the term has been used by many people in different ways.

How Southern Baptists Have Used the Term Missional

“Missional” is used in most Southern Baptist contexts to describe the attitude of obedience to sharing the Gospel around the world that all believers should possess. Such a concept is nothing new to the 161-year-old Southern Baptist Convention. According to the first line of the final report from the Ad Hoc Committee on the Cooperative Program, “Southern Baptists have always been a missional people.”³ Statements such as these clearly reveal a common understanding of this term by many Southern Baptists as reflective of our historical commitment to the Great Commission and Great Commandment.

While some have suggested that the “missional” concept is little more than a passing phase, the emphasis on being missional cannot be dismissed so easily. In numerous instances the term’s use has become more prominent—and for good reason. Danny Akin’s 2006 SBC nominating speech gave special emphasis to the fact that his

second VP nominee was “missional.” At the North American Mission Board (NAMB), the “Enlistment Team” has been renamed the “Enlistment and Missional Networks.”

The Southern Baptists of Texas now have a “Missional Leader’s Network”⁴ (title is theirs) and recently tied the idea of “missional” to the Cooperative Program.

Southern Baptists have always been a missional people. From the inception of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845 we have always rallied around the command of Christ to carry the Gospel to the entire world. At the heart of our local churches, and of all organizations and agencies beyond the local church, is the desire to share the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Cooperative Program was implemented to give each Southern Baptist a way to be a part of reaching the world for Christ through their local church. Sadly, we too often have allowed our focus to become ingrown and diverted from our evangelistic responsibility. Most of the strategies and initiatives in this report focus on telling the story of what we are currently doing through the Cooperative Program, but we must not fall into the trap of thinking we can reposition the Cooperative Program in the hearts of Southern Baptists by focusing only on what we are accomplishing.

It is vitally important that we also cast a new vision to Southern Baptists, a compelling vision that challenges them to use the immense resources God has placed in our hands to literally fulfill Acts 1:8 in our generation. We must place before our people, our pastors and our churches a challenge that is so big that it will require us to give sacrificially, pray passionately and become personally involved in reaching the world for Christ.⁵

Anthony Jordan, executive director for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma (BGCO), predicts a missional SBC based upon our past “missions-minded” orientation: “I am convinced we have set our course to be a missional people. We are dedicated to reaching people from every background. Every boy and girl ought to be able to hear about Jesus in their own language.”⁶ Jordan is right and courageous to say that we are not yet there, but have set our course to become missional.

Even some of our seminaries have begun to use the word missional. Not surprisingly considering its origin, the word is common at Golden Gate. However, some might be surprised to discover that New Orleans Seminary now has a class called “Developing a Missional Church,”⁷ and Jim Millirons⁸ recently led a conference at New

Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary called “On Missional Resurgence.” Missional church books are now required reading for evangelism students at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Seminary presidents and denominational executives are not the only ones within Southern Baptist life who see value in this term. Local church pastors are also calling for the implementation of the missional concept in one form or another. Ted Traylor, pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola Florida, recently called for a missional mindset, remarking at the Alabama Baptist Pastors Conference that being missions-minded is not enough. “Praying for missionaries is great, but if you’re just missions-minded and praying for someone else [when] you’re supposed to go yourself, you’re not being missional,” Traylor said. “It’s not a great thing to send people if God has told you to go.” Traylor told the crowd that the time has come for churches to move past being simply missions-minded and become missional. “The problem at Olive Baptist Church is that many people don’t really believe that half of our town is dying and going to hell,” he said, adding that the same goes for Alabama Baptist churches. “One out of every two people is lost in Alabama. We as Baptists are not missional because we don’t really believe that.”⁹ Statements such as these reveal a distinction between the historically “missions-minded” SBC and the need to be “missional,” or become missionaries ourselves and to lead our people into a clear mission. The question is whether or not Southern Baptists will take that mission up and, again, become a missional people.

How Others are Using the Term

Southern Baptists aren’t the only ones laying claim to the use of the word “missional.” Nearly every group, evangelical or otherwise, is making frequent use of

term. Subsequently, some Southern Baptists are reticent to employ the term because of its use and endorsement by others outside evangelicalism.

The General Commission on the United Methodist Men states that one of its goals is to promote “Programs of Mission in cooperation with all areas of the Church dealing with missional opportunities.”¹⁰

J. Bennett Guess in the February–March 2006 issue of the United Church of Christ *NEWS* writes “Since General Synod, and perhaps even before it, I’ve been feeling the need for a new missional emphasis, something energizing that draws us together—not apart—as we prepare to celebrate our 50th anniversary in 2007 and make our way beyond.”

Even the Unitarian Universalists have made common use of the term. In their *A Manual for District Staff and Volunteers: New Congregation and Growth Resources, Congregational Services* they write, “Missional strategies should be crafted to help define a congregation’s identity through a process of spiritual discernment.”

Among Baptists, the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has also used the word to point their congregations in a specific direction. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) has a whole “missional church” emphasis that it encourages its partner churches to adopt and employ.¹¹ In March 2005, *The Biblical Recorder* ran an article entitled, “Moderates asked to embrace ‘missional church’ movement.” In the article David Hughes, pastor for First Baptist Church Winston-Salem, N.C. is quoted saying, “a missional church is easier to describe than it is to define. It’s not just a church that does missions.”¹² In the same article, Brent Greene, minister of spiritual formation at Hughes’ church said, “The missional church is about being on mission 24/7.”¹³

What we can clearly see is that from one end of the theological spectrum to the other, many are claiming to be on a missional track of ministry. That frightens some and causes some to conclude that a missional emphasis is a liberal one—seeping into the conservative Southern Baptist Convention. But, not so fast...

Conservative Evangelical Use of Missional

Conservative evangelicals are also employing this term. The Wesleyan Church recently asked me to keynote their first ever national meeting to help them become a “missional denomination.” Randy Pope, pastor of the theologically driven and culturally engaged Perimeter Church in Atlanta, preached a message at this year’s Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) General Assembly entitled, “The PCA: A Missional Church?” from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. The Assemblies of God Department of U.S. Missions includes “missional” as one of their 4 values.¹⁴ The Evangelical Free Church is planning a “Missional Summit” for their leaders in 2007 and they have renamed their church planting leadership: “Missional Church Planting Team.”¹⁵ The Nazarene Church’s denomination has adopted “Missional” as their denominational goal. They describe themselves as Christian, Holiness, and Missional.¹⁶

The evidence is therefore overwhelming that the missional concept is breaking out all over evangelicalism (and beyond). Further confirming this trend are several recent articles in *Leadership Journal*. Eric Reed, the managing editor, spoke of missional as:

...a philosophy of ministry: that followers of Christ are counter-cultural, on a mission to change the culture. Missional refers to the specific activity of churches to build the kingdom of God in all settings where church members are at work rather than building up the local congregation, its programs, members, and facilities... Individual Christians in local congregations are taking new ownership of the mission. We are becoming missional.¹⁷

Some examples from *Leadership* that demonstrate this ecclesiastical metamorphosis include Northwood Church, an SBC church in Texas, a Chicago area Baptist Association led by Keith Draper, and Perimeter Church in Atlanta. Each of these ministries is at the same time solidly conservative, and unashamedly missional.

Still, not everyone within Baptist life is happy with the dissemination of the missional concept. One of the primary reasons for the hesitation of some to embrace being missional is that the term has long been associated with more ecumenical circles.

Missiologists David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, and Craig van Gelder wrote of the church's need to interact with and impact culture. To accomplish this, the church had to be appropriate to that culture and be focused on the mission of God. The terminology shifted, primarily because of Darrel Guder's popular book, *The Missional Church*. In fact, many outside evangelicalism who employ the term regularly come from ministries that were largely birthed out of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (involving Darrell Guder and others). Other organizations, such as Emergent Village, began to encourage the forging of cooperative partnerships between people and churches of vastly different theological vantage points. In so doing, some have created a dichotomy between the "doctrinal" and the "missional," suggesting that the point of unity for Christians is not theology, but mission. As a result, these groups defined the word in a different way than some of their predecessors.

Other writers, researchers, pastors, and missiologists from a conservative perspective followed suit, rallying around the missional cause with the recognition that it was both descriptive of the true church, and therefore prescriptive of how the church should operate. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, along with a

few others, challenged the church to reexamine its role in the world. Suddenly, missional books, blogs, conferences, and articles were almost everywhere.

The rapid and increasing use of the term “missional” caught the attention of still other evangelical groups such as 9Marks’ Ministries. Jonathan Leeman of 9Marks writes:

My guess is that conservative writers and pastors in the emerging church movement like Mark Driscoll, after tromping through some of the same fields as their liberal counterparts, reached down, pulled up the missional plant by the roots, and then transplanted it into conservative soil...

Ed Stetzer, for instance, frequently cites Newbigin, Bosch, and the GOC [Gospel and Our Culture Network] gang in his book *Planting Missional Churches*. Yet where a GOC writer will say something like “missional communities are cultivated through participation in particular social or ecclesial practices,” Stetzer will ask, ‘What does the Bible require for church?’ It’s probably unfair to say that conservatives like Stetzer want to build on a biblical foundation, whereas the ecumenicals don’t. It’s probably kinder to simply say that Stetzer sees *the Bible* as authoritative for the church’s mission, where as someone like Newbigin, drawing on the fiduciary epistemology of Michael Polanyi, will say that *Jesus* is the authority for its mission. What does this mean? It means that Newbigin does not want to give the Bible unqualified approval as Jesus’ inerrant word, so he pits Jesus and his word against one another.”¹⁸

Leeman’s analysis here is correct. In the ongoing discussion and development of the concept, I freely admit that conservative evangelicals did appropriate the term back from the ecumenical movement—even though Francis Dubose had used and defined the term earlier (as I learned from *God Who Sends*, required reading in my missions Ph.D. program at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary).

It was Tim Keller, however, who “pulled up the missional plant by the roots, and then transplanted it into conservative soil.” Keller’s influence is hard to understate when it comes to evangelical engagement in missional ministry (which may also explain why much of the “missional” talk in conservative circles comes from the Reformed tradition).

Still, all of the examples cited above sufficiently serve to illustrate that no one in Christendom has a monopoly on the term, including Ecumenicals. And it is a shame that

in a time when we have lost an outward focus in Southern Baptist life, some of our theologians are reticent to lead us to a more mission-focused theology and missiology simply because the concept was also emphasized by our more liberal counterparts. Missional is not an ecumenical term, and it is certainly not their truth. “Missional” is central to who we are and what God created His church to be. As previously alluded to, “missional” does not refer to an activity or a program, but rather to the very nature of a true, God-honoring, biblical, mission-focused, contextualized church. You cannot separate the concept from this reality.

Due to space limitations, I cannot address here the theological and missiological underpinnings of the term. Instead, see, “The Missional Nature of the Church and the Future of the Southern Baptist Convention,” in the forthcoming book, *The Mission of Today’s Church: Baptist Leaders Look at Modern Faith Issues* (Stan Norman, ed., March 2007 from B&H Publishers).

Regardless of who has used the term and what they’ve meant by it, there can be no doubt that any Christian church that is true to its calling is thoroughly, consistently, and unapologetically missional. Therefore, the issues of who used the term first and who continues to invoke it are largely irrelevant and, I believe, a distraction from the bigger problem—we are far off mission.

Let me say then, that not all who use the term “missional” are missional. Some think of “missional” only as support of missions elsewhere in the world while neglecting their own neighborhoods. But missional churches seek to engage their immediate cultures as well as the *ethne* of the world. Giving to missions or going on short-term mission trips—as important as these are—do not fulfill our

missional calling, nor does focusing exclusively on the church and its community while ignoring the rest of the world. Though the church's immediate context is vitally important, the churches that are missional also focus on opportunities beyond their doorsteps to make Christ known. They involve the members in the ministry and mission of church and gospel. As stated in the most recent *Leadership Journal*, "Missional churches activate laity to carry out God's mission in their various spheres of life."¹⁹

Being Missional is not about Terminology, but Focus

Bringing the aforementioned observations to bear on the issue of "Baptist Identity" may be an uncomfortable process for some. Unfortunately, some Baptist leaders, like many others within the larger spectrum of evangelicalism, have a tendency to object to anything that someone else uses. If the liberals talk about "social justice," we cannot. If the mainliners talk about the kingdom, we must not. If the emerging church speaks of cultural relevance, we object to the terms. But the appropriate way to address mainline and emergent error is not to avoid these terms, but instead to define them in light of our Scriptural mandate. In fact, if we are consistent in rejecting any terms employed by those outside our theological tradition, the unavoidable result will be the rejection of even biblical language.

Many non-evangelicals also use terms like evangelism, gospel, kingdom, and, yes, missional in a way that we do not. But we dare not abandon such terms. Instead, we should be clear when defining terms to ensure their accurate usage. These terms were used originally by neither liberals nor conservatives. They were originally employed or

commanded by Scripture. The problem is that we spend so much time objecting to terms we never get around to changing our churches.

While “missional” may be a relatively new term, it is not a new concept. To the contrary, it is reflected in the pages of Scripture and seen—with varying degrees of clarity—throughout the ensuing centuries. Our Lord emphasized the strategic importance of a missional focus when He stated, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21). Earlier in his gospel, John speaks of the incarnation. In Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, he writes that the Lord “became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, *The Message*). Like our Lord, we are supposed to take up residence right among our neighbors. This is far from a new concept. In the ancient Epistle to Diognetus we find these words:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind by country, or by speech, or by dress. ... They do not dwell in cities of their own, or use a different language, or practice a peculiar life. They live in countries of their own, but simply as sojourners; they share the life of citizens, they endure the lot of foreigners; every foreign land is to them a homeland, and every homeland a foreign land.²⁰

For more than a century, we have embraced this idea as it relates to the foreign mission field, while simultaneously failing to realize that “missional” is not only global, but also local. The missional mandate includes our own neighborhoods and communities. It is precisely the implementation of international missions strategy in North America that is causing much angst. Nevertheless, such a shift is absolutely essential, as the evidence of a declining church so clearly illustrates.

It is not exaggeration to say that evangelical churches (including SBC churches) are failing to impact the lostness of North America. New statistics from the Leavell Center at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary show that 89 percent of Southern

Baptist churches are not effectively reaching the lost. According to the study, only 11 percent of the churches are experiencing healthy growth.

The Leavell Center's method of measuring church growth health was based on the following simple criteria:

- 10 percent total membership growth over five years
- at least one person baptized during the two years of the study
- a member-to-baptism ratio of 35 or less in the final year of the study (these churches needed 35 or fewer members each year to baptize one new convert)
- for the final year of the study, the percentage of growth that was conversion growth must have been at least 25 percent

New statistics also revealed the growing inability of North American churches to penetrate their cultural context and reach people with the gospel. The American Religious Identification Survey showed that every two years on average, an additional 1 percent of Americans identify themselves as having no religion. "One of the most striking 1990-2001 comparisons is the more than doubling of the adult population identifying with no religion, from 14.3 million (8%) in 1990 to the current 29.4 million (14.1%)."²¹

In addition, the number of unchurched people continues to increase, even with Barna's charitable definition of the unchurched. A Barna Group study explained, "Since 1991, the adult population in the United States has grown by 15 percent. During that same period the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million—a 92 percent increase!"²²

The above statistics demonstrate the struggle of SBC churches to be evangelistically effective. Day after day, as the culture around us becomes more unfamiliar and even hostile towards Christianity, many Southern Baptist churches separate themselves further from the culture they are called to reach, with a self-affirming and predictable comfortable denominational subculture contributing to this widening

distance. This chasm of cultural understanding makes it increasingly difficult for our “church culture” to relate to “prevailing culture.” Without intentionality, churches become less contextual, less indigenous, and less evangelistically effective over time. The final result of this drift is that we eventually become the very thing we abhor—a church that is not faithful to its biblical mandate to engage and transform culture with the gospel!

Those who oppose a contextualized mission based on a fear of the very real danger of cultural syncretism may be surprised to learn that Baptists on the American frontier, so often cited as a role model today, were often accused of being too “close” to the culture. They wanted to be “of the people.” They were accused of being—in today’s terms—too “culturally relevant.” Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians were scandalized by the earthiness and even worldliness of Baptists on the western frontier in the early 1800s. In every sense of the phrase, Baptists, like the incarnate Christ, “moved into the neighborhood” as they evangelized the frontier. Over time, *we* (Southern Baptists) have become the *scandalized* while others have been more effective at penetrating the culture, and more adept at “moving into the neighborhood.”²³

But deep down inside, we really do believe that culture is a relevant consideration when on mission. In fact, we demonstrate this belief every time we send new missionaries to foreign lands and, like Lottie Moon, expect them to don the clothes, live the customs, and be part of the community while proclaiming a faithful gospel. Therefore, we should not forbid North American missionaries, pastors, and laity from doing the very thing we train and expect international missionaries to do.

Being Missional is about Missiological Thinking, not just Missionary Support

As mentioned previously, missiological thinking is not the same as missionary support. Simply put, being “mission-minded” alone does not mean that we are “missional.” Many churches that support cross-cultural missions do not carefully apply strategic missiological thinking or a focus on the mission of God within their own context. Unfortunately, some have confused missionary support—an important concern that needs more attention—with paying someone else to do missional ministries like evangelism and church planting, albeit on a foreign field. But this thinking precludes obedience to our Lord’s commission in our local context. Church members are unable to experience fruitful service through participation in *missional* work within their own community.

Many churches will go to great lengths and tremendous expense to involve members in “missional” activities far from home, yet fail to engage fully their own neighborhood. Perhaps one of the contributing factors to this seeming inconsistency is the ability for us to behave “missionally” for a short period of time in a “far country” where co-workers are and neighbors can’t see us. In these short-term/long-distance mission events, we are able to experience the passion of missional living without really becoming incarnational to our own context.

This approach to missional work is perhaps the unfortunate outcome of a separation between missions and evangelism in popular thinking among Southern Baptists and other evangelicals. To many, missions is something done “elsewhere” by “someone.” Thus, some churches that are “far-thinking” and “far-reaching” in terms of international missions are failing to reach the people in the shadows of their steeples.

North America is not viewed as a mission field. In fact, many believe it to be a “reached” field only in need of an evangelism strategy, not a true missional engagement.

What is needed is not merely an *understanding of missiological thinking*, but a *commitment to missional thinking*. While missiology concerns itself with study *about* missions and its methodologies, missional thinking focuses on *doing* missions in every geographical location. Such thinking is needed if the SBC is to remain faithful in its calling to serve churches by equipping them to impact their surrounding communities.

Perhaps this is why fewer rising leaders look to Southern Baptists as the source for missionally-effective strategies. Instead, they will often downplay their theological convictions to learn and implement the strategies of those who do not hold our biblical distinctives. They do so because they see the need for new indigenous expressions and they have not seen Southern Baptists as a whole engage in the necessary theological and missiological thinking to develop such strategies. Why has this shift taken place?

Perhaps one reason is that those who are most effective in one culture are unable to contextualize in the new. Those who were most successful in the last paradigm often have the most difficulty in the next. Such one-time innovators have seen certain cultural expressions of effective Christianity, and are unable to consider methods and models different from their own. They “know” what works. They have seen it work before (perhaps in 1954). They “know” if they just try, pray, and go as fervently as they did back then, it will work that way again. The problem is that with the exploding diversity taking shape on our continent, many present-day North American contexts are increasingly less like North America, and more like other parts of the world. Consequently, what was once effective in reaching those communities is no longer effective. We simply have not

recognized that the “how” of ministry is, in many ways, determined by the “who,” “when,” and “where” of culture.

“Missional” means building upon what we have been and is not a rejection of what we have been doing. To avoid confusion, let’s be clear: when a “missional” leader states that we must “engage and transform the culture for the cause of the gospel,” that is not a rejection of the “soul-winner” who states that we must “win the lost to Jesus.” They may be communicating the same objective. The objective is the glory of God through a kingdom focus that results in the salvation of the lost.

We have an opportunity before us through the Baptist Identity Conference to note that our move toward a missional denomination is one that embraces the best of our identity, celebrates the missional and work of the past, and catapults us toward a cultural engagement upon the North American continent that will see the salvation of Christ extend to the people groups of our communities.

Churches and denominations whose ecclesiology is partially defined by a particular cultural expression often lock themselves into that culture, remaining in that era’s music, methods, and strategies. This is where many Southern Baptists currently find themselves—trying to reach the 2000s with the formerly successful methods of the 1950s (or 1890s). Additionally, Baptists did best when they were locked into one corner of the nation geographically. Even when we broke out of the geographic south, we took a southern monoculture with us. We were successful because we had unlocked the missional code for early twentieth century southern culture, wherever that culture existed. While this approach is still successful in a few areas, it is a methodology that is increasingly found to be unconnected to its present cultural surroundings.

So what is the alternative? Southern Baptist churches must begin to think and act “missionally” in their settings. Presently, we are struggling with the challenge of finding the proper balance between cultural relevance and biblical fidelity. Churches need to realize that the United States and Canada are, in fact, mission fields, and as a result, begin to fulfill their missional heritage. To accomplish this, they must discern how best to connect with the current culture without compromising the gospel message.

This struggle is, of course, ongoing, as has been the case throughout the history of the church. From Tertullian to Calvin to Niebuhr, there has always existed a tension regarding how the church should interface with culture—a tension between the appropriate intersection between theology, ecclesiology, and missiology. With this reality in view, we should dialogue with the awareness that being Southern Baptist is about theology and cooperation, not a certain methodology. To be Southern Baptist means that we believe certain things and cooperate together to build God's kingdom.

What a Missional Southern Baptist Church Looks Like

If Southern Baptists are to be, once again, the vibrant body that we have been in the past, we need *not* return to the *methods* of the past. G.K. Chesterson explains, “We are learning to do a great many clever things. Unless we are much mistaken the next great task will be to learn not to do them.”²⁴ It would appear Southern Baptists have not yet done so.

God has blessed three-week revivals, radio preaching, Sunday School enrollment campaigns, and bus ministry. God used these indigenous and contextual methods in their time. But our task is not to pine for methods. Instead, our focus must shift from the

methods of those times to the *motives* of those times—which involved reaching the lost with the best practices of the day.

Today, Southern Baptists must stop treating North America as a monocultural continent. Every culture and sub-culture that now exists on this continent needs the gospel to be explained fully at a different starting point, but with the same ending point. Milfred Minatrea explains it this way, “At the core, it is not the number of activities a church is involved in that defines success, but whether those activities result in accomplishing God’s mission for His church.”²⁵

Missional churches in our day are different from churches that choose to enshrine the methods of past cultures. They are also frequently different from one another. Joe Thorn observes “The more similar the context, the [more] similar the churches will look incarnationally, but each community is somewhat different and requires the Gospel and kingdom to be preached/demonstrated in different ways. As I see it, a missional church must therefore be at least 3 things: sent, engaged, and incarnated. The ‘missional church’ is almost a redundant expression. The people of God are inherently a sent people. It is who we are, and that gives birth to what we do. We just tend to forget this.”²⁶

Tim Keller gave the following five elements of a missional church:

1. Discourse in the vernacular.
2. Enter and re-tell the culture’s stories with the gospel.
3. Theologically train laypeople for public life and vocation.
4. Create Christian community which is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive.
5. Practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level.

The reason missional churches look different is because they are willing to take a risk to engage their culture. There is always risk in contextualization, and many churches are unwilling to take that risk. Some choose not to risk the condemnation of those who

are comfortable within the crumbling walls of a Christendom that is more informed by modernity than by Scripture. Some cannot understand because they choose to equate contextualization and missional thought with compromise. Some cannot understand because they love their “church” culture too much. Some cannot understand because they value the paradigms of the past more than they value people of the present age, and as a result, will gladly lose their children, their children’s friends, and an entire sub-culture of their community in order to preserve their traditions.

We see this same emphasis in Southern Baptist life. Many voices call for a “return” to something to answer the problem of denominational decline. Influential voices confidently assert that a return to certain cultural expressions of ministry, preaching, and evangelism will cause the church to reclaim its effectiveness. Now in fairness, some of these emphases are needed and helpful. Others however, are simply a reaction against the culture by reemphasizing the models that were successful the past.

I don’t want anyone to “come back” to a specific paradigm of church beyond that which is commanded in scripture. Instead I want them to, in the words of Adrian Rogers, “come to Jesus.” For when they do, Jesus speaks lovingly to them and sends them to people who live in culture.

Misinformed and fearful persons will always resist what they do not understand or what does not blend with their preferences. However, if the church is willing to be missional, and its theologians and thinkers are willing to assist it, the kingdom will advance to new tongues, tribes, contexts, and cultures. It is important here to note that most of the theologians in Southern Baptist life have been, and continue to be, generally absent from the important conversations about the intersection of church and culture

among young leaders (though thankfully, there are a handful of notable exceptions).

While many in the theologian class are still unsure about Rick Warren's Hawaiian shirts and PowerPoint projector, young leaders are struggling with how to be, do, and tell the gospel in homosexual communities, transitioning inner cities, and vast suburban wastelands—and they look to others for the answers. It should not be so.

As the church rediscovers its missional mandate, it can receive a renewed passion to be a people on mission—taking the contextualized message and unchanging gospel into cultures and to people untouched by existing churches. Solid missional and theologically-sound churches can be planted, revitalized, or grown—if we will choose to engage our culture and be part of the solution, not continue to lob grenades of half-truths and caricatures into missional church contexts.

If the theologian class can partner with best-practice leaders, the end result can be theologically sound, missionally vibrant churches engaging the culture while remaining true to the “faith once delivered to the saints.” Perhaps we need a conversation, or even a gathering like this, to discuss how we can engage cultures with biblically-faithful and culturally-relevant ministry and affirm all different kinds of biblically-sound churches.

At first glance, the result may look culturally different. To God, the result is the same. From His perspective, the Word has become flesh in a new setting, as these new churches express that missional mindset. And it is no less valid than if they were new indigenous churches in Africa or Asia.

How can this happen? How can we find that balance? It will require at least three things: missional churches must contend for the faith, contextualize their ministries, and cooperate with other churches for the kingdom of God.

Contend (Jude 3)

Many Southern Baptists have already given their opinions on what the missional church should be. I suggest that it should be “incarnational” (deeply connected to the community), “indigenous” (reflect to some degree the culture of the community), and “intentional” (their methodologies have purpose leading to a focus on the mission and purposes of God). It is this balance of biblical fidelity and cultural relevance that helps the missional church shape a cohesive strategy for reaching its lost community. NAMB has officially adopted this language to define a missional church, “A missional church is a biblically-faithful and culturally-appropriate reproducing community of disciples sent on mission by God to advance his Kingdom among all peoples.”

NAMB included the words “biblically-faithful” for an important reason. The missional church will always contend for the gospel in its setting, because that is its nature. It is being obedient to its calling. It sees not only its obligation, but also recognizes its opportunities. On the other hand, when a church withdraws or isolates itself from its culture, it can no longer represent the Lord effectively—even though it has the words of life. Many churches withdraw by default. They do not understand their culture, nor do they know how to engage it.

Two hindrances often occur when churches try to contend for the gospel without engaging their society. First, they are seen as irrelevant, and consequently, their message is also viewed as irrelevant. Second, the church does not really know the needs, desires, or concerns of those around them, nor do they see the possibilities that exist to act upon these opportunities and speak to people’s hearts. Missionaries all over the world have to learn the culture to engage it. If we viewed ourselves as missionaries, thinking and acting

“missionally,” we would have greater success in contending for the gospel. In short, we must contend for a high view of scripture and for what we believe as biblically-shaped Christians. The scriptures are always relevant in this and every culture—but we are not the scriptures and we would do well to remember that.

Contextualize (1 Corinthians 9:22-23)

Some approaches to mission strategy, such as colonial and institutional missions, did not work in the past because they had the wrong focus. During the colonial era for example, the intent of western missionaries was not only to make converts, but also to conform the converted into good westerners. When we realized the error of colonial missions, we began to plant indigenous churches which looked different from culture to culture and from generation to generation. They developed their teaching from the unchanging biblical text and their methods from the ever-changing cultural milieu. A definition from 1938 might be helpful:

An indigenous church, young or old, in the East or in the West, is a church which, rooted in obedience to Christ, spontaneously uses forms of thought and modes of action natural and familiar in its own environment. Such a church arises in response to Christ’s own call. The younger churches will not be unmindful of the experiences and teachings which the older churches have recorded in their confessions and liturgy. But every younger church will seek further to bear witness to the same Gospel with new tongues.”²⁷

If Southern Baptists could simply adopt this attitude in our current denominational environment, an unstoppable synergy would result in the conversion of souls, the transformation of lives, and the revitalization of entire areas by the power of the gospel. Such has been, and should continue to be, the essence of Baptist cooperation.

When speaking of “contextualization,” I mean to describe a concept once known as “indigenization.” The conceptual shift from the latter term to the former is this: the

definition of *indigenous* is “born within the culture.” Apart from Jewish culture, the Christian faith manifestly is *not* born within a culture and thus is not indigenous. The faith cannot become genuinely indigenous to a culture from which it is not born. This becoming a part of the culture—blooming where it is planted—is a process called “contextualization.” Modern missiologists then, espouse the contextualization of the gospel within every culture on Earth.

Evangelicals continue to struggle with presenting the unchanging gospel in an ever-changing cultural setting. Contextualization often feels to them like cultural compromise. In a Southern Baptist culture still recovering from a battle over truth and liberty, diverse expressions of church seem to lose biblical truth in an expression of methodological liberty. It just does not feel right.

Every culture is imperfect and thus at times hostile to the gospel. However, cultures remain the context where Jesus Christ meets persons by grace.²⁸ We must pay attention to the culture if we are to be truly missional.²⁹ Preaching against culture shows misunderstanding of what culture is—preaching against it is like preaching against someone’s house. It is where they live. There are good things and bad things in it—but it is where people live and where we need to meet them. Just as we exegete the biblical text, we must exegete the culture where we seek to proclaim that biblical text.

Reggie McNeal, until recently the director of leadership development for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, was quoted saying, “One of the hallmarks of the missional church is its move to connect to the community. We have been trying for years to get the community to connect with us. Now the church is connecting to the

community.”³⁰ This contextualizes the church’s ministry—and many Southern Baptist churches are engaging the culture for the cause of the gospel.

Yet while Kingdom work like this continues, the fight about contextualization goes on within the Southern Baptist Convention. Like a giant tug of war, each side is pulling hard. One side see these missional expressions as culturally-relevant dangers. The battle lines soon become clear: Cultural relevance versus biblical faithfulness—a classic tyranny of the “OR.”

To be sure, cultural relevance can be confusing. On one hand, the church can be so focused on cultural relevance that it loses its distinctive message, it ceases to be salt and light, and this is a very real threat. It has happened to countless churches and denominations. On the other hand, the church can also decide that culture does not matter. Such a perspective will lead to a church whose message is indiscernible and obscure to those who are “outside.”

Let me propose an alternative: one that actually describes both the “missional” concept as well as the essence of Baptist identity through the centuries. Our churches need to be *biblically-faithful, culturally-relevant, counter-culture* communities. For my full treatment of that short sentence, see my article in the *Catalyst Monthly*.³¹ In short, we must recognize that we must do more than just contend—we must contend and contextualize as a counter-culture. Without such, our Convention has no future outside of its cultural and geographic confines. But we do have a future, and that means that SBC churches can and should look different from one to another. But looking different makes it harder to cooperate.

Cooperate

We must be known as the Convention that believes in biblical fidelity *and* engaging people in the culture. And we must learn to do it together. I recognize that many churches have not yet moved from inerrancy to sufficiency, but as a Convention we have settled the theological issues and have developed a clear confession. The Protestant Reformers had a saying that well-describes our current challenge: *ecclesia semper reformanda*—the Church, always reforming. Now that we have experienced a necessary theological resurgence and reform, we must move toward a missional resurgence and reform of our churches. We have our theology settled. Now let us get our mission together.

Make no mistake: I am not one who says, “Let’s just cooperate around missions and not worry about theology.” (See my article on the subject at SBCLife.³²) Theology matters—and this is precisely why we had a resurgence of conservative theology. But, a theological renaissance that is not followed by biblical evangelism and mission is odd indeed. Yet that, according to Thom Rainer as cited in *Baptist Press*, is exactly what has occurred:

Between 1950 and 2003 annual total baptisms remained basically the same, a “classic plateau.” In 1950 Southern Baptists baptized 376,085, while 377,357 were baptized in 2003. Throughout the period, the highest level of baptisms was 445,725 in 1972 and the lowest was 336,050 in 1978, the year before the beginning of the conservative resurgence. More troubling, Rainer asserts, is the spike in congregational baptism ratios— “How many members does it take to reach one person for Christ in a year?—which he regards as the preferred “measurement of evangelistic health since it takes into consideration church size.” In 1950, one person was baptized for every 19 members of SBC churches. In 1978, the baptismal ratio increased to 36 to 1, and by 2003 the number had climbed to 43 to 1. A lower ratio is desired. “The trend in total baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention thus depicted a clear pattern of plateau. But the more revealing measurement of baptism ratios reveals consistent evangelistic deterioration,” Rainer argues. “The baptismal ratio since the onset of the conservative resurgence has worsened. The trend is negative

and disturbing. Though numbers are not ultimate measures of spiritual realities, the data we do have indicate a denomination in evangelistic crisis,”³³ he adds.

A couple of things should be noted regarding these figures. First, there has been an enormous population increase since 1950, so the “flat” baptism totals actually reflect a dramatic decline when observed against the backdrop of a growing U.S. population. Second, the Annual Church Profiles report that Southern Baptist membership has grown substantially, and though many who are reported as members cannot be located, a larger membership should mean that we have more members evangelizing the lost. But it doesn’t.

My own analysis found that from 2004 to 2005, every baptism category, by age, went down—except one. The one category that went up? Preschoolers—those under five years of age. That makes me nervous. Though I am not one to say that a five-year-old cannot trust Christ, it is hard to see the march toward infant baptism as good news.

Total annual baptisms by Southern Baptist churches also show alarming trends. In 2005, 11,740 churches reported zero or one baptism. This is an increase of 5.6 percent of churches who baptized no more than one person. Over 55 percent of churches baptized no youth (12-17 year-olds) in 2005, up from 52 percent the previous year. The number of churches baptizing ten or more declined to 10,062 in 2005. This is down from 10,598 in 2004.³⁴

To quote Cal Guy: “We apply the pragmatic test to the work of the theologian. Does his theology motivate men to go into all the world and make disciples? Does it so undergird them that they, thus motivated, succeed in this primary purpose? Theology must stand the test of being known by its fruit.” Our theological resurgence was necessary and important, but to date it has not passed the “Cal Guy” test. The time has

come for biblically-faithful believers to take the message to people in the culture. And we must learn to do that together.

Cooperatively fixing this problem will not be easy. We have no historical precedent in denominational life for cooperating with such incredibly diverse expressions of church and ministry. On the contrary, it is telling that the discipleship arm of the Southern Baptist Convention was called the “Baptist Sunday School Board” until just a few years ago. For decades, Baptists had Sunday School (with attendance pins), 9 verse invitation hymns, suits, and King James Bibles and everyone knew what a Southern Baptist looked like. Judson Allen explains it well in the 1958 *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*:

A Southern Baptist tends to remain a Southern Baptist, whether he lives in Virginia, Georgia, California, Ohio, or Montana. He needs not easily adjust to a church fellowship in which methods and practices are different from those to which he has been conditioned. Churches which are methodologically different are automatically suspect.

Today it is still true: “Churches which are methodologically different are automatically suspect.” At the NAMB Center for Missional Research, we recently completed a study of over 2,200 SBC seminary graduates from 1998 to 2004. One question dealt with the issue of what Allen calls, “methods and practices.” The results speak to Allen’s comments. Graduates were asked to choose the church ministry paradigm that best fit their church. The most common answer, chosen by 39 percent, was traditional-progressive: “churches that rely on programmatic structure to address the spiritual needs of the community. These churches often use Sunday School, but may not exclusively use SBC programs.”

The second most common approach is the choice most similar to the 1958 version referred to by Allen. Twenty-four percent of the graduates chose traditional program: “Churches that rely on traditional SBC programs (e.g., Sunday School, Discipleship Training, Brotherhood, WMU, and Music) to address the spiritual needs of their community.” We should rejoice and be thankful for their ministry.

Next, with 17 percent, was Purpose Driven: “Churches that deliberately align their activities with the PDC five purposes of church (worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism) identified by Rick Warren.”

Additionally, 9 percent chose relation-based churches with structure and growth driven by face-to-face relationship (e.g., house church, cell church, and international Christian communities.) Emerging, post-modern churches (4%), affinity churches targeting a particular affinity or ethnic group (3%), and seeker churches, with Sunday services exclusively targeting the unchurched (3%), round out the responses.

Since only 24 percent would look like the kind of church described in Allen’s article, we need to decide if we want to give the others the reception that Allen described. Although it is no longer 1958, it certainly can feel that way for churches with diverse methodologies when they attend many denominational events. If we continue to treat these methodologically diverse pastors as “automatically suspect,” they will choose a different path—and our Convention will be weaker. We need to find ways to cooperate.

Although over 98 percent of those graduates who responded agreed that they believed in inerrancy, they tended to differ on other issues or hold positions contrary to those held by those churches that Allen mentions. For example:

- 78 percent of those graduates also believe that “a culturally-relevant style is important for a church to be evangelistically effective.”

- 26 percent are verse-by-verse preachers (to be more specific, 26% of the respondents indicated that they preached “Primarily explanation or commentary on the biblical text...” more than 90% of the time)

These are our graduates. Our young leaders. And we need them even if they do things different in their context than we do in ours. We’ve already told a whole generation of “Purpose Driven” pastors that they’re really not needed or wanted in today’s SBC. Are we intent on communicating this same message to the next generation? Is it our intent now to go on to the next generation who dare to call themselves emerging, even when some disapprove of the term?

Cooperation is a God-sized task, and it will take all of us in missional cooperation to build the kingdom of God. But we have learned from history, theology, and the best of missional practitioners, that as we engage our local community, we will become better partners with others who wish to reach the world cooperatively. Those who are excited about reaching their community for Christ will certainly be more energized to support the Cooperative Program to make a global impact for Christ.

For too long we’ve cast a suspicious glance (and sometimes even verbal assaults) at others in our denomination who don’t dress like we do, who enjoy different music, who use projectors and praise bands, who don’t have Baptist in the name of their churches, who preach differently, who have small group ministries outside the church facilities, who don’t use the same curriculum we do, who don’t have evening services, who don’t utilize an “altar call,” who are reaching people with whom we do not feel comfortable, and who differ with us on secondary issues. (And, yes, sometimes those comments have been directed the other way as well.)

Southern Baptists may have concerns and suspicions about “new ways,” but from our inception in 1845, we have been deeply committed to reaching our communities. A growing number are now beginning to realize that this commitment requires a missional engagement of culture accompanied with a proclamation of the timeless, unchanging gospel. This requires new expressions, strategies, and systems. Such a shift will be difficult over the noise of those who oppose the contention that we can be both biblically-faithful *and* culturally-relevant. However, our task is not to listen to those who love church culture more than they love Christ’s commands. Christ will build his church through pastors and churches that engage the culture in a biblically-discerning manner.

The real question is this: Will the Southern Baptist Convention and its entities be seen as partners in the process of raising up new indigenous expressions of Southern Baptist churches? If we can embrace diverse forms of scripturally-sound church and ministry, we can again see the kingdom impact that I believe God wishes to renew in us. Can we cooperate? Or, will our contending be in vain as those who have contextualized to different communities no longer work with us—not because of their theology but because of their ministry expression.

Conclusion

We can no longer continue trying to reach North America with “one-size fits all” methods and an inward denominational focus. The shift toward a missional SBC will consequently necessitate a change from the way many churches are doing ministry.

Baptists have a choice—we can argue about whether we’ll use the noun “missionary” or the adjective “missional,”—or we can recognize that a lost world needs

us to stop arguing about nomenclature and obey Christ's commands. Simply put, it does not matter what you call it, it matters that you do it. And we are not doing it.

Within the wider world of evangelicalism, the issue is settled—most evangelical denominations have decided they need change and they want to be “missional.” At the same time, we may not be ready. Too many of our denominational and church leaders are still objecting to casual clothes in worship, while other churches and organizations are reaching people in diverse cultures—including those who wear casual clothes.

Furthermore, many young leaders, who have been alienated and marginalized, are not pining away hoping that the SBC will welcome them back. Many of them have moved on to networks and other partnerships where they can get on mission instead of getting into an argument. The result of this phenomenon has become the “elephant in the room” for Southern Baptists. There is a reason so many churches are forming networks—they are doing so because they do not see ours as their best investment of time and energy. If our seminaries do not teach cultural engagement, our agencies primarily espouse strategies from a past era, and our associations reject anything that does not look like a tent revival, it will be little surprise that our young leaders consider us “out of touch.”

The first step in organizational decline is that you lose your creative people, who decide to go on to more entrepreneurial settings. We have already lost most of this number. In fact, we have actively pushed many of them out by teaching and preaching against them in many SBC contexts and venues. The next step in decline is that the most competent among us begin to leave. Although I do not think we are yet at this point, we are rapidly approaching it. This is apparent to me as I observe the best and brightest

among us who do not consider denominational involvement as helpful, or as a good use of their time. They put their time and resources elsewhere. The most competent denominational leaders are two generations away from emerging leaders. And I ask in this context: where are the 40-50 year old versions of greats like Adrian Rogers, Jimmy Draper, Ed Young, or W.A. Criswell?

When Jimmy Draper was planning the first national “young leaders” meeting, he asked me for suggested speakers. I told him what we needed most was a nationally-known pastor who had credibility with young pastors, and who was also still clearly connected with the denomination. His voice went up in excitement as he asked “Exactly, who?” With sadness, I replied “That’s my point.”

Many young leaders have chosen other paths and networks—and as a result we have lost both their influence and the chance to influence them. If we want to keep the creative and competent among us, we need courage. We need courage to speak to fringe elements within our Convention—those who have been given a platform in an earlier struggle and are now empowered by the Internet and e-mail. And our message to them should be that we want, need, and affirm all kinds of scripturally-sound churches.

In reflecting on this exodus of young leaders, I must confess that I have grown both weary and encouraged at the same time, a feeling that many tell me they share. But, let's not get lost in the terminology. That’s not the issue. I think Packer's wisdom, when addressing renewal terminology, is quite appropriate here when discussing the m-word (missional). He explained,

We should not make an issue of this or any other verbal preference. As Thomas Hobbes observed long ago, words are the counters of wise men (“they do reckon by them”), but they are the coinage of fools, in the sense that unless certain words are used—the right buttons pressed, as we say—fools cannot recognize that the thing to

which they apply the words has been spoken of at all, however many equivalent words may have been employed in place of their beloved shibboleths. We should take to heart Hobbes's warning and remember that two people can use different words and mean the same thing, just as they can use the same word and mean different things.³⁵

It is critical that we now come to a point of heeding the use, and more importantly, the meaning of the term "missional" as used by DuBose in 1983. Though none of us has been as bold, DuBose accurately summarized it in this manner when speaking about the cross of Christ and its use of ornamentation in our building and thought: "The ornamental beauty of a bejeweled cross in comfortable Christendom is not the biblical meaning of the beauty of the cross. The New Testament meaning of beauty is the beauty of missional purpose—the vicarious and redemptive suffering of Jesus which was the climactic act of the mission of God through his Son."³⁶

So, let me close with this. Missional, in the end, is simply a word. In fact, it is not even a word that matters. It is irrelevant. But in a declining denomination, a missional *emphasis* does matter. Can we allow some of our brothers and sisters to use one word and others of us to use another? Can we also agree that we are off mission and need to get back on? Factions will not help, and I have no interest in creating another one based on the "missional" label. Still, we need to recognize the importance of missional ministry in all kinds of churches. Traditional churches can and should be missional as well, which is why we affirmed such churches in *Breaking the Missional Code*. I'd simply ask, "Can the biblically-faithful traditional church join hands with the boomer Purpose Driven church and partner with the scripturally-sound emerging church?" I hope so.

Does that mean any and every theological position or practice can and should be part of the SBC? No, certainly not! I am a Baptist, not because I was reared or redeemed at a Baptist church, because I was not. I am a Baptist because I a Biblicist. Based on my

best understanding of scripture, “Baptist” and “biblical” are, and should be, synonyms. And problems are created when they are not. Problems come when we place history, tradition, or even consensus over the authority of scripture (something which I believe the BFM2000 adeptly avoided). But the Southern Baptist Convention is a convention with which we joyfully affiliate and partner for a cooperative mission from a common theological persuasion (the current Baptist Faith and Message). It is not a Church, like a Lutheran Church, with which we align in a common or required paradigm of ministry.

I am ready to see Southern Baptists united by our common, already agreed to, theology and mission. Personally, I am ready to cooperate, even with those who are different from me. I won't ask Paige Patterson to become as reformed as I am. I won't ask Al Mohler to sing the music I sing with his shirt untucked. I won't ask Morris Chapman to don my silly glasses, or utilize video clips in illustrating his sermon. I don't mind being the only participant on the printed schedule pictured without a tie³⁷ (though it might be nice if there were a few more).

I won't ask them to do it like me and will expect them not to ask me to do it like them. I want to be in a Convention where we agree on enough to get on mission. If we can't do that, we should start preparing for our inevitable denominational demise today. But if we can, the future is as bright as our churches—all of them, from many different paradigmatic backgrounds—cooperating together to reach a lost world through a missional effort that represents the essence of our history and identity. Let's listen to the invitation DuBose laid out almost a quarter century ago: “Through the biblical concept of the sending, we have come to see the Christian life as a missional pilgrimage, a journey

in mission— more, a journey *into* mission—an odyssey that will end only in the eschaton.”³⁸

Southern Baptists began the Cooperative Program for the purpose of “eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort, for the propagation of the Gospel.”³⁹ I’m ready to **contend** for theologically sound ministry, **contextualize** in different contexts, and **cooperate** for the task of the gospel. That sounds like “One Sacred Effort” to me—and I am ready to join hands in a new SBC—a missional one. Will you join me?

When the subtitle of this conference, and several of the presentations, focus on “controversy,” it should concern us. That fire of controversy can and will burn us all—and hinder the spread of the gospel. The nations—ours and people’s around the globe—are waiting for that gospel. To use a metaphor, let’s not fiddle and fuss as Nashville burns. That fire of controversy is a fire that will spread—to Alpharetta, Richmond, state conventions, associations, and our own churches. We have all smelled the smoke. As we fight the fire at helpful meetings such as this, a lost world continues to wait for the saving message of Christ. Let’s get on mission—and let’s do it together.

Ed Stetzer is missiologist and senior director of the Center for Missional Research at the North American Mission Board.

¹ DuBose, Francis M., *God Who Sends* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1983), 14.

² Ed Stetzer, speaking to Southern Seminary on May 14, 1999. Reported by Baptist Press.

On-line: <http://bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=998>

³ <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=24519>

⁴ <http://www.sbtexas.com/missions/mln.htm>

⁵ <http://www.baptist2baptist.net/b2barticle.asp?id=286>

⁶ <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=24425>

⁷ <http://www.nobts.edu/ProDoc/DMin/Specializations.html>

⁸ Contend, Contextualize, and Cooperate was birthed in a lunch conversation with Jim, who is leader of the “missional emphasis” at the Georgia Baptist Convention.

⁹ <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=24417>

- ¹⁰ <http://www.gcumm.org/Resources%202001/UMM%20mission.html>
- ¹¹ <http://www.thefellowship.info/CL/FF/MC/FAQ.icm?print=y>
- ¹² http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2005/3_24_2005/ne240305moderates.shtml
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ http://usmissions.ag.org/missionaryfinances/agusm_manual.pdf
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- ²² <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=163>.
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