



# IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF BAPTISTS

Among the historical milestones the world marked in 2009 was the 400th anniversary of the Baptist movement. At such a time, it is natural to take stock of the work Baptists have done for generations and how well they are poised to face tomorrow's challenges.

With those weighty issues in mind, Union University's Office of Church Relations and R. C. Ryan Center for Biblical Studies hosted an October conference that captured the attention of Christian leaders and thinkers across the country: "Southern Baptists, Evangelicals and the Future of Denominationalism."

So lingering was the impact of the conference that the Biblical Recorder,

North Carolina's Baptist newspaper, devoted much of its final issue in 2009 to discussions and news accounts of the conference. The issue came out more than two months after the conclusion of the conference.

The Web site Baptist21.com ranked the conference fifth in its year-end "Top 10 SBC Stories and Events."

"(President) David Dockery has, amongst other things, turned Union University into one of the leading think tanks for Baptist life," wrote Jed Coppenger in describing the event for his ranking list. "Like in his past conferences, Dockery put together a line-up that included the most significant and helpful voices in Baptist life. And they didn't disappoint."

The opening session with Ed Stetzer of LifeWay Christian Resources and later President David Dockery's presentation, both were broadcast live on the conference's Web page and included what is known as a "Twitter-fountain." Viewers were able to post real-time comments and questions on Twitter.com, and those comments were displayed on screens in the conference facility at the Carl Grant Events Center.

Podcasts of every presentation were made available on the conference Web page, along with summaries of the discussions on Union's news Web page.

In addition to Stetzer and Dockery, other speakers included Timothy George, Robert Smith and Mark DeVine of Beeson Divinity School



in Birmingham, Ala.; President Danny Akin and Nathan Finn of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; President R. Albert Mohler of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; President Duane Litfin of Wheaton College; Michael Lindsay, a sociologist at Rice University in Houston; and Union University faculty members James Patterson, Hal Poe, Jerry Tidwell and Ray Van Neste.

#### **Ed Stetzer: Denominationalism — Is There a Future?**

The president of LifeWay Research opened the conference by asserting that denominations do have a future, but only within the context assisting the local church in ministry.

Stetzer said that in Baptist circles, the authority of each local church should make it plain that the future of effective denominational work

rests in maintaining a proper working relationship: “Denominational leaders are not the boss. They are the servants of Southern Baptist churches,” Stetzer said. “If the local churches believe we can be more efficient or more effective, then ultimately, the denominational structures must bow to the wishes of the churches.”

#### **James Patterson: Reflections on 400 Years of the Baptist Movement: Who We Are. What We Believe**

“History is messy,” Patterson said. “And in particular, Baptist history is messy.”

Patterson focused his lecture on the people and groups who made it possible for the Southern Baptist Convention to exist today — people like Thomas Helwys, whom Patterson referenced as an important part to the beginning of the “General Baptist tradition,” and Andrew Fuller, whom Patterson described as “an evangelical Calvinist.”

Patterson said that “even though our past is messy, Baptists have maintained a clear distinct denominational identity for 400 years. One of my concerns with the current generation... is forgetting some of these things.”

#### **Timothy George: Baptists and Their Relations with Other Christians**

Pointing to the text of Jude 3, George described faith in three senses:

“the faith,” “my faith” and “the church’s faith.”

George recognized the value of creeds in holding to “the faith.” He said creeds should be open to revision and should not be imposed by civil sanction.

“We don’t want to elevate any human-constructed statement, however venerable or wonderful it may be, on an equal level — much less above — the written word of God in Holy Scripture,” George said.

#### **David S. Dockery: So Many Denominations: The Rise and Decline of Denominationalism and the Shaping of a Global Evangelicalism**

In recent years, Dockery said denominational identity has been in a rapid decline. For example, he cited statistics indicating that in 1990, about 200,000 people in the United States classified themselves as “non-denominational.” By 2009, that number skyrocketed to more than 8 million.

“No longer do people identify with kindred spirits in vertical alignments, as Lutherans, as Anglicans, as Presbyterians, as Methodists or Baptists,” he said. “Instead, people identify more around other connections and identifying markers such as fundamentalists, conservatives, evangelicals, moderates and liberals. Thus liberal Anglicans and liberal Methodists have much more in common than liberal Anglicans and conservative Anglicans.”

He said that denominations will continue to have a place in evangelicalism in the future, and “denominations that thrive will remain convictionally connected to their tradition, while working and exploring ways to partner with affinity groups and networks, and seeking to understand better the changing global context around us.”

#### **Danny Akin: The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention**

Akin acknowledged certain “essential, non-negotiable” beliefs of the SBC, but he discussed the importance of diversity within the denomination.

“Some things are worth fighting over and dying over,” Akin said. “Some things are not. Some things are worth dividing over; some things are not.”

Southern Baptists have a history of racism, Akin said, and the denomination remains mainly white and Southern. Akin encouraged Southern Baptists to have “a new vision” for planting churches in demographically diverse areas. He cited locations such as New York City, where there are far fewer SBC churches per capita than in the South.

#### **Robert Smith: An Unchanging Gospel**

Smith said Christians have limited Christ in their preaching today and must return to the proclamation of Christ alone in their lives.

“We preach an unalterable and immutable gospel in a changing world,” Smith said, calling Christians to return to the Bible as the basis for their confession of faith.

“Too much preaching has become christologically bankrupt and deficient,” he said. “You can hear many sermons and Jesus is never mentioned, even though he’s the one who is doing the speaking. Brothers and sisters, many people have not heard about him, and those who’ve heard about him don’t really know who he is.”

#### **Duane Litfin: The Future of American Evangelicalism**

Litfin believes the Southern Baptist Convention is wrestling with its identity, its calling and its future and said this is not the first time this question of destination has surfaced.

“The problem is those sorts of questions don’t stay answered,” Litfin said. “[The environment] is constantly throwing a new question to us, questions we can’t avoid... It does not pose the same questions but new ones of what it means to live out that previous answer in the kaleidoscopic environment of the 21st century.”

Denominations may come and go, Litfin said, but Baptists are in a good place because of their emphasis on the local church instead of hierarchical institutions.

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**Michael Lindsay: Denominationalism and the Changing Religious Landscape in North America**

Lindsay is adamant that churches must use the institution of a denomination.

"The issues that our church is going to face in the coming years and frankly, the demographic shifts that are already underway, are too significant for us to fall back into a simplistic individualism," he said. "We will not survive unless we think institutionally."

Lindsay concluded: "We have to figure out how to pool our resources and talents we have at our disposal to advance not just the aim of our individual organization but instead to advance the Lord's work in redeeming the very structures of our society by creating contexts in which human flourishings can occur and in which we can work together for the common good."

**Hal Poe: The Gospel and Its Meaning: Implications for Southern Baptists and Evangelicals**

Poe emphasized that although the gospel message does not change, it is important to answer questions relevant to

the current culture rather than relying on established presentations of the past.

"The essential Christian faith embodied in the gospel never changes, but the questions that people and cultures ask change with each generation and each age," Poe said. "Jesus is the answer, but Christians do not always attend to the question, so they can explain how Jesus is the answer."

**D. Mark DeVine: Emergent or Emerging: Questions for Southern Baptists and North American Evangelicals**

DeVine has spent most of this decade studying the emerging church. He said the movement got his attention after an emerging church congregation helped revitalize a declining congregation where he served as pastor in Kansas City, Mo. DeVine said



many churches, including Southern Baptist churches, have failed to account for the changing culture. They continue to practice evangelism and ministry as they have for generations.

"We didn't think missionally to do it because we didn't have to, said DeVine. "Now with the changing cultural landscape, we have to treat our own land as a mission field."

DeVine said emerging church leaders sometimes fail to recognize the benefits of a larger denomination and the historical success of the SBC.

**R. Albert Mohler: Faithfulness to God's Word**

Mohler urged young Southern Baptists to focus on faithfulness to God's word rather than numbers or statistics. He said that faithfulness should be followed by taking the gospel to the nations.

"Those (numbers) are not unimportant, but it is the heart of the denomination that is the bigger issue — the clarity of our vision, the essential importance of our mission," he said. "It is going to be yours and you are going to decide what to do with it."

Mohler talked about how the so-called "Bible Belt" has changed and no longer exists in the form familiar two generations ago.

"Any denomination that bases its future on the confidence of cultural Christianity deserves to die with that culture when it dies."

**Ray Van Neste: The Oversight of Souls: Pastoral Ministry in Southern Baptist and Evangelical Life**

Van Neste reminded pastors, professors and leading intellectuals in the evangelical community of the greatest responsibility of a pastor: "Our central task is not managing good programs, drawing large crowds or even delivering powerful messages,"

Van Neste said. "Our central task is shepherding souls as they depart the city of destruction and hazard their way toward the celestial city."

Van Neste argued that ministry to the individual, such as in-home visits and personal knowledge of members in the congregation, is just as vital as ministry to the masses.

**Jerry Tidwell: Missions and Evangelism: Awakenings and Their Influence on Southern Baptists and Evangelicals**

After reviewing the Baptist heritage in relation to the Great Awakenings that took place across the world, Tidwell concluded with a look at what sparked those revivals and what is necessary for another revival in this day and age.

"In the Awakening, people had a fresh vision of God's sovereignty and God's holiness just like Isaiah [in Isaiah 6] and it became a 'woe is me' moment, and God visited his people," Tidwell said. "It is my heart's desire that the next cry that we hear from the Baptist family will be 'Woe is me, for we have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.'"

**Nathan Finn: Southern Baptists and Evangelicals: Passing on the Faith to the Next Generation**

Finn's address focused on the relationship between Southern Baptists and evangelicals and "what it means to pass on the Southern Baptist and/or evangelical faith to the next generation." He drew a distinction between evangelicals, who have a high view of Scripture, and evangelicalism, which is a religious movement.

Finn said Southern Baptists should embrace some of the ideas inside evangelicalism, such as the authority of Scripture, and should partner with other evangelicals in working toward the common goals of Christianity. ☞

**Note:** Union students Kimberlee Hauss ('11), Nick McFerron ('10), Katie Shatzer ('10) and Elizabeth Waibel ('11) contributed to this story.



**Looking back at the conference**

Links to speaker biographies  
[www.uu.edu/events/baptistfuture](http://www.uu.edu/events/baptistfuture)

Link to Audio of each presentation  
[www.uu.edu/audio](http://www.uu.edu/audio)

Summaries of each presentation  
(under October 2009)  
[www.uu.edu/news/releases.cfm](http://www.uu.edu/news/releases.cfm)