

1. We're certain our readers would like to hear your Christian testimony and about your call to ministry. Let's begin with that.

I was raised in a Christian home by God's grace. We attended a very small church that was led by a faithful bi-vocational pastor. I came to Christ during grade school through his faithful preaching ministry which complemented my parent's ministry in the home. Because of my theological upbringing, I was older before I fully understood how redeemed and secure in Christ I had been since the third grade.

My earliest sense of God calling me into ministry was in the 10th grade. Being raised in smaller churches, I had little concept of full-time vocational ministry. My boyhood pastors worked at a local bakery and in construction. So, I entered college with the intention to become a band director and a bivocational music minister. The Lord gently redirected my path and during graduate school at Mercer Law School, I surrendered to full-time vocational service in the local church.

I soon joined the staff at Second Baptist Church in Macon, GA, and served there until receiving a call to my current ministry in Blackshear. My wife, Andrea, and I will soon celebrate 25 years of membership in this wonderful Southeast Georgia church. I originally came as minister of music in 1996 under the leadership of Dr. Don Hattaway. Four months after he left to accept another church, Emmanuel extended a unanimous call for me to become the pastor in 2002.

2. Tell us, what is happening within the SBC, or not happening, that influenced you to accept a nomination for president at this specific time in history?

It has been a privilege to serve in numerous places in my association and in the Georgia and Southern Baptist Conventions. Most recently, I was the chairman of the SBC Executive Committee. When I vacated that position, I had no intention of serving in any broader capacity. But the Lord laid this potential assignment on my heart and I have simply responded out of a heart of obedience.

I deeply love the SBC but I have significant concerns about our condition. The recent report from Lifeway revealed that 2020 was a year of continued decline in nearly every major category. Many of these declines have existed for years and cannot be blamed on COVID-19.

There are three major emphases I would have as SBC president. First, I will lead our churches in an intentional evangelistic effort. The SBC needs a spiritual awakening that will lead to revival and evangelism. This would fill most of the 2 years of my presidency.

Second, I will champion the sufficiency of Scripture. I do not know of a leader in the SBC who does not verbally affirm the sufficiency of Scripture. Yet we have clear signs of the infiltration of Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and standpoint hermeneutics in our beloved Convention.

Third, I will seek to foster greater involvement in our Convention business. The time has come to take a strategic look into multi-site participation in the SBC. This is not a simple matter due to the legal and logistical questions to address. But the time and cost involved in attending the annual meeting makes it very difficult for many Southern Baptists to be a meaningful participant. We have become too "top down" in our decision-making. Greater access to voting and participation can strengthen participation, accountability, and transparency.

3. We've witnessed a decline in giving through the Cooperative Program over the past decade. What do you believe is happening, or not happening, within the SBC that has triggered that decline, and what do you believe can or should be done to ensure that the SBC has the financial means to reach the nations?

Let us be clear. The Cooperative Program is in steep decline. The first thing we need to do is acknowledge it, which is something many have failed to do. When I addressed this decline through the Executive Committee's ERLC Study Task Force, our work was accused of being deceptive. Many erroneously believe the CP is increasing.

Headlines in denominational press understandably try to paint the most positive picture. But in the last 12-13 years, CP giving has declined by around \$65 million nationally. And as of this article, we are 3% behind last year's receipts, a decline of millions more again this year.

As of 2019, 40% of our churches give "zero" through the Cooperative Program. And that percentage has increased from 25% to 40% since 2007. The actual number is nearly 5,300 additional churches giving "zero" through the Cooperative Program. And CP support is one statistic for which we have complete accuracy. Even if a church does not submit an ACP, we know whether they gave to Convention causes.

There are many factors including changes in generational giving trends, shifts in denominational support and more. But as I travel across the country, there is no question that many churches have withdrawn support because of their concern with the direction of the SBC. We have also elevated too many leaders who were not strong CP supporters in their local church ministries.

Responding to the concerns of the Baptist in the pew is a major part of any turnaround. Further, in today's church, giving follows mission. If Southern Baptists want a reversal in CP, we must cast a compelling vision for reaching America and the world with the gospel. And we must communicate why partnering with Southern Baptists is the most effective way to accomplish the church's mission.

4. Speaking of declines, we're also seeing continuing declines in the number of baptisms across the SBC. As a potential SBC president, what do you feel you could do to change the downward trajectory of baptisms?

Baptisms across the SBC are at their lowest levels since before World War II. Despite having more money, more people, more resources, and more churches, we are seeing fewer and fewer people won to faith in Christ. In recent years, we have labeled many things as "gospel issues" while our gospel effectiveness seems to be in steep decline.

I pastor an evangelistic church. Emmanuel has averaged 63 baptisms per year in a small Southeast Georgia town. And we have done that without manipulation and man-centered gimmicks. I would be blessed to help take that soul-winning commitment across the churches of our Convention.

Through an emphasis I would call, "Crossover America," I would use the SBC presidency to primarily call our churches back to our one sacred effort: the propagation of the gospel. That is why the Southern Baptist Convention exists!

I envision a plan that would resource local churches with events and services that are intentionally evangelistic. Because this would be a local church emphasis, it would be easily accessible to churches of

all sizes, styles, schedules, and soteriological perspectives. "Crossover America" would also call on established churches to partner with churches and works in underserved and under-reached areas of our SBC to hold evangelistic events.

It will take prayerful and pastoral leadership to lead this effort. There are strained relationships across institutional lines in today's SBC. But we will need NAMB, every state and regional convention, Baptist associations and local church to accomplish the work. The need of the hour calls for a "whatever it takes" attitude among each of our Baptist partners.

Also, this cooperative approach can help us reach our communities with the gospel. But it can also help us find the Biblically-based unity that seems, at times, so elusive to Southern Baptists.

5. So much is being said and written these days about divisiveness within the SBC. We're sure you have ideas that you think will work to help the SBC deal with these divisions, to bring the SBC back together. What would you do as president to help heal some of the rifts that we've seen widening in recent years?

There are many fault lines in the Convention these days. And the reality is, no president or other human leader can solve those problems. We need a powerful move from God to humble ourselves before God and one another. But I do believe there are some things we can do to put ourselves in position to see the Lord do a great work.

First, we must understand that doctrinal precision leads to unity, not division. We will not achieve unity by sweeping doctrinal matters under the rug. Whether it is the debate of CRT and intersectionality, the discussion of complementarianism, or the matter of standpoint hermeneutics, we will not have true Biblical unity apart from agreement on doctrinal issues. And by "agreement," that may very well include the agreement to disagree on certain issues not explicitly addressed by the Baptist Faith and Message.

Second, we need more accountability and entity responsiveness. For a variety of reasons there is an atmosphere of confusion, mistrust, and frustration in many places across the SBC. There are too many cases where trustees appear to be serving the entity heads and not the churches of the SBC. I hope and pray we can address that perception.

Third, we need a fresh awareness of the Lord and a keen awareness of the lost world. That will go a long way toward bringing us together on mission. That is why I believe a two-year evangelistic focus will strengthen our bonds of unity and union.

To be clear, I do not think for a moment that unity will come merely by putting some events on the calendar. But a national evangelism emphasis will require humility, prayer, brokenness and repentance. It will require helpful and cooperative conversations. It will require the rebuilding of strained institutional relationships.

6. What counsel would you give to a church or church leader who may be considering ordaining women as preachers or deacons?

My simple advice would be, "Don't."

Our church practices complementarianism not merely because we *will not* allow a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. It is because we *cannot* allow it. We literally do not have that right. It is the Lord's church and He alone has the authority to determine the criteria for its leadership. God's Word is clear. Women preachers in mixed settings and women serving in authority over men in the Lord's church are simply not allowed according to the sacred text.

In 1 Timothy 2:9-15, Paul mentions this prohibition and cites the reasons for the restriction. And the reasons have nothing to do with the cultural trends of Timothy's day. And they have nothing to do with some specific problem or person in Timothy's congregation. The reasons given, under Divine inspiration, harken back to the Garden of Eden and the doctrine of creation.

Further, the Scriptural qualifications for the pastor are given in First Timothy 3. The criteria are clearly written in reference to a man. If we believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scripture then we must acknowledge the use of masculine pronouns. And regardless of how one seeks to apply the phrase, "husband of one wife," only a male can fit that description.

As I wrote in an article for "The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, "There are already leading voices who suggest that Southern Baptists should avoid this debate and merely unite around the essentials. But denominations and, in our case, conventions of churches exist because we have agreed to agree on far more than the mere fundamentals of the Christian faith. We are not a group of ecumenists. We are Southern Baptists."

And Southern Baptists have already agreed on the subject of women pastors.

7. Resolution 9 has certainly created lots of controversy and concern within the SBC family. What are your feelings about critical race theory?

Every person has been created in the image of God. As common descendants of Adam and Eve, we are all members of one race. The human race. For these reasons, I am very concerned about the introduction of Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality into the conversations of the Southern Baptist Convention.

When the SBC relied on the Word of God as led by the Spirit of God, we were making progress in our ethnic relationships. But in the last two years, this discussion has created much confusion, division, and needless controversy in our Convention. That's because Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality are not tools of unity but rather they are weapons of division. And they are accomplishing that very purpose in the SBC. Therefore, I have spoken repeatedly about my concerns with Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality.

I am the primary author of a resolution entitled, "On the Incompatibility of Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality with the Baptist Faith and Message." This resolution will be presented to the SBC in Nashville for the 2021 annual meeting. I strongly urge my fellow messengers to support this resolution.

My ministry has been marked by ethnic inclusion. Our church reaches into our entire community regardless of ethnicity. In the state convention, I made a motion as GBC president to remove a church from our fellowship because of discrimination. As chairman of the SBC Executive Committee, I personally authored a constitutional amendment which specifies that churches found to discriminate on

the basis of ethnicity are not in fellowship with the SBC. That amendment should receive final approval in June.

Southern Baptists have much work, healing, and conversation on this issue. But we must begin with the agreement that the Word of God is sufficient to bring the people of God together in unity.

8. A high-profile role like that of the SBC president comes with certain pressures and headaches. Would you please share with us any experience or experiences from your ministry that you believe has especially prepared you for this role?

For starters, pastoring a local church has prepared me for this possible role. The SBC is not a convention of seminaries, entities, agencies, state conventions, or associations. We are a convention of local churches. And ministering daily in a local church is some of the best preparation I could have received.

I believe in many ways the SBC has lost touch with rank and file Southern Baptists. We will do well to have a president who has served from the local church all the way down to national positions. And I use the word “down” because the headquarters of the SBC is the local church.

In my ministry, I have served in the local association. We are the leading contributor to the Piedmont-Okefenokee Association. I have served the state convention as Executive Committee Chairman (2015-2017) and as president (2017-2018). It was also my privilege to serve as chairman of the SBC Executive Committee (2018-2020).

Because of these positions of service, I have described myself as an organizational insider but a relational outsider. Having led in some of the highest positions in the Convention, I definitely have institutional knowledge. I know how the Convention operates. But I am first and foremost a husband, dad, and a local church pastor.

I am grateful for friendships all across the SBC. But I have never “run with” the power brokers of the SBC. With so many challenges within our Convention, I am convinced we need a president who is relationally independent from those who presently control our Convention. As the only nominee whose household income is not derived in some way from the Cooperative Program, I believe I could represent well the average church and pastor within the Southern Baptist Convention.

9. Southern Baptists are people of The Book, and they will be looking for a president who stands with them on the infallibility of the Bible. Would you please share with us a time when you stood on God’s Word even in the face of opposition and/or criticism, whether from believers and non-believers?

Serving for decades in a local church there is hardly a way to isolate a single incident. Like many pastors, I have engaged in matters of church discipline that angered the wayward member and their family. I have refused to perform weddings for couples who would have been unequally yoked. Every pastor who takes his ministry seriously could testify of times where he has stood on the Word of God to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with all patience and instruction.

I recently completed preaching verse-by-verse through my 34th book of the Bible. Expository preachers will regularly encounter difficult subjects and confrontational topics. When a pastor preaches on sexual perversion, God’s will for marriage, gossip, envy, commitment to the church, giving, and more, he had better have steel-toed shoes and a pair of asbestos britches.

Like most pastors, I have received threats of, “We will leave the church” or “We will withhold our money.” In those moments, the God-called man proves he is not a hireling as he stands on God’s Word in the midst of opposition. The SBC is filled with faithful pastors who have that same level of commitment.

This resolve has also served me in service to the SBC. I am continually amazed at the viciousness that some SBC pastors and professing Christians utilize on social media. And it is often by those who claim to be advocates of unity and Christian civility. But I pray regularly for thick skin and a soft heart that will allow me to graciously stand for what I believe is right and true, even in the face of slander and false accusation.

These are indeed challenging days in our SBC. May the Lord grant us each wisdom, discernment and grace as we move toward SBC21 and beyond.