

## Southern Baptists, an Unregenerate Denomination (Part 2)

By Jim Elliff



Note: Thanks for your many responses to the first article. Here is some practical counsel about what should be done. The problem I'm addressing reaches beyond the SBC. I know this denomination best, however, since I'm a third generation Baptist minister. My brother and brother-in-law have served as president of the SBC. I led the Center for Biblical Revival in one of the SBC seminaries. For these reasons and more, I believe I have an understanding of the situation that faces our largest evangelical denomination. I'm doing my best to address this problem because I care deeply about it.

This is the second in a two-part series.

### Facing the Dilemma

What must be done? I suggest five responses:

1. We must preach and teach on the subject of the unregenerate church member. Every author in the New Testament writes of the nature of deception. Some books give major consideration to the subject. Jesus Himself spoke profusely about true and false conversion, giving significant attention to the fruit found in true believers (Jn. 10:26-27; Mt. 7:21-23; Mt. 25:1-13, etc.). If this sort of teaching creates doubt in people, you should not be alarmed, nor should you back away from it. Given the unregenerate state of so many professing Christians, their doubts may be fully warranted. In any case, as one friend told me, "Doubts never sent anyone to hell, but deception always does." Most will work through their doubts, if they are regenerate and if we continue to preach the whole truth. Contrary to popular opinion, all doubts are not of the devil. Speak truthfully the whole counsel of God. You cannot "unsave" true believers.

It is true that there may be some who are overly scrupulous and overwhelmed by such examination. But most who will be affected are those who are too self-confident, having based their assurance on such shaky platforms as their response to an invitation, praying a perfectly worded "sinner's prayer," or getting baptized. If they are unregenerate, they may take offense and leave. But if they are truly regenerate, patient teaching and care will help them to overcome their doubts and gain *biblical* assurance. Such preaching may even result in true conversion for some who are deceived. And don't forget that the overconfident ones are not the only ones at risk. Quiet, sensitive, insecure people can be deceived also.

2. We must address the issue of persistent sin among our members, including their sinful failure to attend the stated meetings of the church. This must be done by reestablishing the forgotten practice of church discipline. Each church should adopt guidelines that state just what will happen when a member falls into sin, including the sin of non-attendance or very nominal attendance. Such discipline for non-attendance is clearly found in the history of Baptists—but more importantly, in the Bible.

Everyone in the church, including new members, should be made familiar with the biblical steps of church discipline. Jesus said that a person who was lovingly, but firmly, disciplined by the church, and yet failed to repent, should be thought of as "a heathen and a tax collector" (see Mt. 18:15-17). Though David committed atrocious sins, he was a repenter at heart (see 2 Sam.12:13; Psalm 51). Every Christian is a life-long repenter and church discipline brings this out. (See

"Restoring Those Who Fall," in *[Our Church on Solid Ground: Documents That Preserve the Integrity and Unity of the Church](http://www.CCWonline.org)*, [www.CCWonline.org](http://www.CCWonline.org))

Leaders must get into the homes of all our erring church members, seeking either to bring them to Christ, or to reluctantly release them to the world which they love more than Christ. Nowhere in the Bible are we taught to keep non-believers on the rolls. As a side benefit from church discipline for the SBC, remember that when we reduce our membership to what it actually is, we will be amazed at the statistical improvements in the ratio of members per baptism and members to attenders. Of course, statistics are not worth dying for, but obedience to God's Word is.

We are never to aggressively pluck the supposed tares from the wheat as if we had absolute knowledge (Mt. 13:24-30; 36-43). We might be mistaken. However, loving church discipline is a careful process by which the obvious sinner in essence removes himself by his resistance to correction. The church is made up of repenting saints, not rebelling sinners (see 1 Cor. 5). The slight improvement in the disparity between membership and attendance in the last couple of years is likely due, in major part, to some churches beginning to practice church discipline—a matter of obedience that thankfully is regaining credence among us. Some have removed hundreds from their rolls in this process, and regained some also.

3. We should be more careful on the front end of church membership. In my estimation, the public altar call (a modern invention) often reaps people prematurely. Others will disagree or can perhaps make significant improvements on the traditional "invitation system." We have used this method in our evangelism because of our genuine zeal to see the lost converted. But in our zeal, we have often overlooked the fact that many who do what our method calls for (i.e. respond to our invitation) may not be converted.

Though sacrosanct to Baptists, careful study should be done related to the historical use of the invitation system evangelistically. For eighteen hundred years the church did not use such a method. It was not until its principle originator, Charles Finney, a true pelagian in his theology, promoted his "new measures." Earlier preachers were content to let true conviction play a greater part in conversion. They needed no props for the gospel—no persuasive techniques to prompt people to make a "decision." Instead of relying on a method, their confidence was in the preached Word and the Holy Spirit. Baptist giant, C. H. Spurgeon, for instance, saw thousands converted without the use of an "altar call." His *message* was his invitation. We should always offer a *verbal* invitation in our gospel preaching, meaning we must invite people to repent and believe. But there is no real benefit, while there is much potential harm, in our inviting them to the front of the church and then assuring them that their short walk or tearful response proves their conversion.

We don't need better methods to get people down to the front. What we need is more biblical content and more unction in our preaching. You cannot beat sinners away from Christ when God is bringing them in (see Jn. 6:37, 44-45). When as many as 70-90% of "converts" are giving little, if any, evidence of being saved after their first weeks or months of emotional excitement, questions should be asked, both about our understanding of the gospel and about our methods. Forget the fact, if you must, that there is no clear biblical precedent for the altar call. Even considering the matter pragmatically ought to make us quit. Though prevalent in our churches for decades, it has not helped us. (See "Closing with Christ," [www.CCWonline.org/closing.html](http://www.CCWonline.org/closing.html))

The dangerous practice of receiving new members immediately after they walk the aisle must finally be abandoned. Also, more careful counsel should be taken with those entering in as members from other churches. And add to this a need for much deeper thinking concerning childhood conversion. An alarming percentage of childhood professions wash out later in the teen and college years. For unconverted yet baptized church kids, the more independence they are granted, the more they live out their true nature. (See "Childhood Conversion," [www.CCWonline.org/cconv.html](http://www.CCWonline.org/cconv.html))

4. We must stop giving immediate verbal assurance to people who make professions of faith or who respond to our invitations. It is the Holy Spirit's job to give assurance. We are to give the *basis* upon which assurance can be had, not the assurance itself. Study 1 John in this respect. *What* things were written so that they might know they have eternal life? (1 Jn. 5:13). Answer: The tests given in the book. The Bible says that the *Holy Spirit* testifies to our spirit that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16).

5. We must restore sound doctrine. Revival, I am finding as I study its history, is largely about the recovery of the true gospel. The three great doctrines which have so often shown up in true revival are: 1) God's sovereignty in salvation, 2) justification by grace through faith *alone*, and 3) regeneration with *discernible* fruit. Revival is God showing up, but the blessing of the presence of God is directly affected by our beliefs. God most often comes in the context of these and other great doctrines, preached penetratingly and faithfully, and with the unction of the Holy Spirit.

As an illustration of our doctrinal reductionism, repentance is often forgotten completely in gospel presentations, or else it is minimized to mean nothing more than "admitting that you are a sinner." Also, "Inviting Christ into your heart," a phrase never found in the Bible (study the context of Jn.1:12 and Rev. 3:20, the verses used for this), has taken the place of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. The doctrine of God's judgment is rarely preached with any carefulness. And comprehensive studies of the meaning of the cross are seldom heard. Merely looking over the titles of the sermons which awakening preachers preached in the past would surprise most modern pastors.

### **Be Healthy or Be Ashamed**

Which army would you rather have? Gideon's first army or his last? No church, and no denomination, should call itself healthy unless *more* people attend than are on the roll. This is a standard kept by most of the world, and was kept by our great-grandparents in Baptist churches as well. We would be closer to the revival we desire if we would admit our failure, humbly hang our heads, and seek to rectify this awful hindrance to God's blessing. When we boast of how big we are, we are bragging about our shame.

In the Philadelphia Baptist Association Minutes, our first association, our initial American statistical record shows that five times as many people attended the association's churches as were on their rolls. Greg Wills in *Democratic Religion in the South* (Oxford University Press, 1997, p.14) reports that three times the number on the rolls attended Baptist churches, then located mostly along the eastern seaboard when surveyed in 1791 by John Ashlund. In 1835, the *Christian Index* of Georgia recorded that "not less than twice the number" of members were in attendance.

Today, in rough numbers, it takes 300 people on our rolls to have 100 attenders. In the 1790s, it took only 33. Or, to put it in larger figures, it now takes nearly 3000 people, supposedly won to Christ and baptized, to result in a church attendance of 1000. Then, it took only 333. Our potency has diminished to such an extent that we must "win" and "baptize" over 2,000 more people to get to the same 1000 to attend.

Apparently, being orthodox in terms of inerrancy and infallibility is not enough, though without these doctrines we have no foundation for true evangelism. A lot has to be done, and a lot undone. And, sadly, we have been actively transporting this mainly American problem overseas for many years.

To conclude, I suggest two remedial steps for the convention as a whole, in addition to what was suggested for the churches:

1. We might reverse some of our proclivity to continue as normal if we introduced our preachers more accurately in our evangelism meetings and convention settings. Try using this introduction: "Here is Brother \_\_\_\_\_, pastor of a church of 10,000 members, 6400 of whom do not bother to come on a given Sunday morning, and 8600 of whom do not come on Sunday evening. He is here to tell us about how to have a healthy, evangelistic church."

It might be better to ask a man to speak who shepherds 100 members, all of whom attend with regularity and all of whom show signs of regeneration—a man who, in the last year, has baptized 5 people who stick—rather than a pastor of 10,000 members, 7000 of whom do not come—a man who has baptized 1000 in the past year, 700 of whom cannot be found. The smaller, but more consistent numbers of the first pastor reveal a far more effective ministry and thus a far better example for other churches. (Please understand that I don't like this talk about "numbers," but this is the main way we evaluate people and churches as Baptists. I am sure God is not really impressed with any of our statistics.)

2. We should establish a study group to explore our presently deplorable situation and to track its history. This group should also seek to re-examine the biblical mandate to have a regenerate church. Then this study group should report back with a strategy to help us out of the dilemma. They should be painfully honest. I am hopeful that individual churches will act without this prompting, but this would be an added stimulus to getting us to our fighting weight as a denomination. Some church leaders will not act without this sort of backing since independent action would be a departure from the *status quo*.

Our only alternative is to carry on in the old way—the way that produces 70-90% fallout. By continuing on as we are, we will gradually blur, and eventually obscure altogether, any distinction between the professing and the authentic Christian. In the end, we will look like every other mainline, liberal denomination. We are only one-third to one-tenth alive now. If we want to avoid complete deadness, we must take dramatic measures immediately. Like cotton candy, our apparent size does not add up to much.

Our forebears, especially those who died for the biblical concept of a regenerate church, would hardly recognize our compromised condition. It will admittedly take us down a notch or two, in the estimation of the rest of professing Christianity, when millions are removed from our rolls. But humility and a new reality might be the starting place for God's greatest blessings on us yet!

The next time someone asks how your church and your denomination are doing, tell the truth. Tell them that we have a new confidence in the inerrant Bible. Tell them that we have seminaries that promote orthodoxy, and new evangelistic fervor among the true believers. Tell them we have a lot to be excited about. But also tell them that when considered as a whole, most Southern Baptists need raising from the dead.

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