

Identity conference questions SBC's direction

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JACKSON, Tenn. (ABP)—The future should be bright for the Southern Baptist Convention, but it won't be if infighting continues, SBC President Frank Page insisted at a conference on Baptist identity.

Page, pastor of First Baptist Church of Taylors, S.C., urged Southern Baptists—who have been squabbling over narrowing doctrinal parameters and other issues—to stick together.

“But if we continue to break into factions that continue to fight each other and focus on turf-protectionism, the future will not be bright,” Page said.

He spoke during “Baptist Identity II: Convention, Cooperation and Controversy,” a winter conference at Union University in Jackson, Tenn.

Page wove a theme of unity throughout his message, which focused on the need for Baptists to remain together despite disagreements.

He cautioned that dissent and debate should not devolve into anything that would reproach the gospel. The Apostle “Paul didn't say, ‘Whose side are

you on?” Page said. “He asked, ‘Are you preaching Jesus Christ?’”

The conference comes amid intra-denominational disagreements among Southern Baptist conservatives and fundamentalists, who have controlled the 16-million-member SBC for almost three decades. Recently, internal differences—over issues such as control and cooperation, speaking in tongues, the place of women in leadership roles, censorship and alcohol use—have signaled some unraveling at the edges of the denomination.

For well over a year, some conservatives have expressed their displeasure with what they perceive as narrowing fundamentalism in some SBC circles. Page won the SBC presidency last June with support from allies who want more flexibility and transparency in the convention.

The three-day conference at Union University was organized in an attempt to discuss what the future of Southern Baptist life might look like.

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson began the second day of the conference by asserting contemporary Baptists could learn much about how to relate to each other from Anabaptists—the Reformation-era ancestors of modern Baptists.

“If modern Baptists are to find a way out of our current malaise, we must, like the Anabaptists did, find a way to make church membership more meaningful,” said Patterson, himself a former SBC president.

Baptist churches—both in the Anabaptists’ time and today—are lacking in their ability to effectively discipline and provide guidance to new converts, he said. “We are showing a lack of care with new converts. And a disciplined church is necessary for the church’s witness.”

Patterson, a key figure in conservatives’ rise to SBC power, noted Anabaptists’ refusal to change their minds on issues unless convinced by Scripture should be a testament to contemporary Baptists.

Only God can know people's religious motivations, Patterson said, chastising those who spread slander and gossip from within Baptist ranks.

"That should be shameful among any Baptists today," he said.

Patterson's remarks come less than a month after his dismissal of a female professor from her position at Southwestern's School of Theology solely because she is a woman became public knowledge.

In January, Baptist blogger Wade Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla., wrote a widely circulated essay on kerussocharis.blogspot.com that denounced Patterson for dismissing Hebrew professor Sheri Klouda. Patterson adheres to a strict interpretation of biblical texts that he believes mean women should not be allowed to teach men, even in seminary.

While Patterson avoided the topic during his speech, members of the audience later said they wished the subject had been addressed. They included Baptist bloggers who have played a key role in recent SBC dissent and Page's election. Interaction with the bloggers was a part of the conference program, and several attended.

Benjamin Cole, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Arlington, and another blogger who has written about Klouda on baptistblog.wordpress.com, said he wished Patterson had more time to answer questions. Patterson only answered two questions after his presentation.

Cole had planned to ask Patterson if he agreed with a thesis by author Roland H. Bainton that Anabaptists had been among the earliest reformers to advocate for women's education, suffrage, ordination and holding church office.

"I wanted to ask him about what contemporary Baptists could learn from Anabaptists in that area," Cole said. "Anabaptists were among the first to

support women's suffrage, and by the early 20th century, they supported the election of women to serve in the faculties of their schools."

Other conference presenters included Thom Rainer, president of Lifeway Christian Resources; Mike Day, director of missions for the Mid-South Baptist Association in Memphis; Russell Moore, dean of the school of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; David Dockery, president of Union University; Ed Stetzer, missiologist and research team director at the North American Mission Board; and Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University.

More than 300 people attended the conference.

The first Baptist identity conference was held in April 2004.

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