

Conference explores the gospel and the future of the church

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FLOWER MOUND—The inexplicable joy and extravagant generosity of suffering Christians can touch the hearts of cynics in an increasingly secular society, J.D. Greear, pastor of The Summit Church in Durham, N.C., told a conference prior to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting.



J.D. Greear (Photo/Amber Dion)

“Nothing puts the gospel on display quite like generosity,” Greear said, describing how a Roman jailer came to faith in Christ through the joyous and gracious witness of the imprisoned prisoners Paul and Silas.

Acts 16, which records the story of the Roman jailer’s conversion, also describes two other dramatically different individuals whom God touched—a religious seeker named Lydia and a demon-oppressed slave girl.

“The gospel is for all people at all times,” but different strategies are

required to reach drastically different people with the gospel, Greear said.

The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission sponsored “The Gospel and the Future of the Church” conference June 8-9, prior to the SBC annual meeting in Dallas, in partnership with The Village Church in Flower Mound and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Most—but not all—of the conference speakers are involved in the Acts 29 church-starting network or the Gospel Coalition, neo-Calvinist groups that draw primarily from evangelicals popularly identified as “young, restless and Reformed.”



Matt Chandler, lead pastor of The Village Church in Flower Mound, speaks to a conference on The Gospel and the Future of the Church, held at his church facility. (Photo/Amber Dion)

Find courage rooted in God’s glory

Christians gripped with anxiety because they feel a loss of favor and privilege in society need to discover courage grounded in the depth of

God's glory, said Matt Chandler, lead pastor of The Village Church, the host congregation for the conference.

"It's a long fall from a seat of power to being considered bigots," he observed.

Shallow "religious platitudes and bumper-sticker Christianity" lack the substance to provide God's people with the courage necessary to face an age of unbelief, Chandler insisted.

"Courage rooted in anything other than the glory of God will not weather where you and I are going," he said.

Christian courage looks like integrity, devotion and hospitality, he insisted, urging followers of Christ to engage non-Christians by offering "open homes and open tables."

"We must not participate in the increased hostility of our day," he said.



Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, speaks at a conference on The Gospel and the Future of the Church. (Photo/Amber Dion)

Remember the exiles

As the church seeks to engage culture, it can learn from the Old Testament example of the Hebrew exiles, said Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

“Exile language can be dangerous” when Christians use it to express a siege mentality or nostalgia for a time before a loss of privileged positions, Moore warned.

However, it can be instructive in reminding God’s people they are worthy of judgment but have received grace, he asserted.

The church can offer a sign to the larger culture of how God uses people who recognize their “brokenness, sinfulness and need for grace,” Moore said. The challenge for Christians is to avoid the temptation to “preach grace without truth or truth without grace.”

The cross looks foolish to nonbelievers

In an increasingly secular America, Christians should not be shocked when nonbelievers view the cross as foolishness, said Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.



Al Mohler (Photo/Amber Dion)

“Nothing is more lacking in intellectual sophistication than a bloody cross,” he said.

In the mid-20th century, American Christians were lulled into complacency by a sense of mainstream acceptance, when Christianity was appropriated as an ideological weapon distinguishing the United States from atheistic communism, he noted.

“There never really was much Christianity in cultural Christianity,” Mohler said.

Today, the “nones,” people who claim no religious affiliation, represent the fastest growing segment of society—one in five American adults and one in three American adults under age 30, he noted.

Decades ago, American Christians treated the first chapter of 1 Corinthians—which describes the cross as “foolishness to those who are perishing”—like a fire extinguisher behind glass that only should be broken in case of emergency.

“There is no text in the Bible that is behind glass just in case we need it,”

he insisted.

But to those who have treated some biblical texts that way, Mohler issued a challenge: “Break some glass. Smell the smoke. ... Preaching the gospel is never the wrong thing to do.”

Good News, not fake news



H.B. Charles (Photo / Amber Dion)

The future of missions depends on Christians having confidence in the gospel message and proclaiming it boldly, said H.B. Charles, pastor of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.

“The gospel is not fake news,” Charles said. “The gospel is Good News you can trust. ... We need to get the gospel in, get the gospel right and get the gospel out.”

The gospel does not just contain power; rather, according to the Apostle Paul, the gospel is the power of God for salvation and reveals the righteousness of God, he asserted.

“The gospel is where the bad news of sin meets the good news of

salvation,” Charles said.

God shows no partiality but offers salvation to all who believe without distinction, he insisted.

“Racial reconciliation is essential to gospel proclamation,” Charles said.

Second-hand exposure to Scripture not enough

In response to an unprecedented level of biblical illiteracy, the church should “raise the bar in an age of low expectations,” said Jen Wilkin, author and Bible teacher from The Village Church.



Jen Wilkin (Photo/Amber Dion)

“We don’t know the Bible like we should,” she said.

While she acknowledged the value of small groups of Christians feeling a sense of community, too many are focused more on people learning about each other than about learning the Bible.

“The church is staring into a post-Christian culture, and it will not do for us not to know our sacred text,” she said.

Wilkin warned against being satisfied with secondhand knowledge based on what others teach about the Bible rather than doing the hard work of personal Bible study. Too many Christians are content to be “curators of the opinions of others about a book we do not take the trouble to read,” she said.

Wilkin called for Bible-centered discipleship that guards against false teaching, undergirds the study of doctrine, reinforces unity of belief around essentials, makes Christians more charitable toward people with different views on secondary issues and diminishes the “expert/amateur divide” by giving people tools to learn for themselves.