

Greear calls for unity centered on the gospel

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Saying they faced a defining moment, the “most important crossroads” in a generation, departing SBC President J.D. Greear challenged Southern Baptists to hear the concerns of the entire body while unifying around the one true gospel and the Great Commission.

“If we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture as the rule for the church, let’s not rush into making the rules for the church we wish God had made had he understood the situation in 21st century America,” Greear charged the overflow crowd of messengers and guests Tuesday (June 15) at the Music City Center.

“I am committed to letting the Scripture, and the Scripture alone, be our rule for faith and practice. Anything else is unnecessarily divisive.”

Greear said the moment required courage like he said was shown during the self-described Conservative Resurgence of 40 years ago.

“Our defining moment is about whether we will let the gospel that our forefathers preserved for us define the identity and determine the mission of our convention,” he said.

He exhorted Southern Baptists to make clear their disdain of racism and sexual abuse while avoiding characteristics Jesus assailed among the Pharisees in Matthew 23. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for considering their own traditions equal to Scripture, adhering to minutia of the law while avoiding the meat of the law, and ignoring God’s focus on the outsider.

“I’m not saying that anyone who disagrees with me on something is a

Pharisee. No, for sure, I see some of these qualities present in me also,” Greear said.

But he challenged Southern Baptists to search their own hearts in the address, which drew several rounds of applause and standing ovations.

Embrace biblical justice

One standing ovation came when Greear, addressing racial tension within the SBC, spoke to “people of color,” and said: “We need you.”

Focusing on the minutia of the law, Greear said, can make Southern Baptists look like a congregation “that expends more energy decrying things like (critical race theory) than they have done lamenting and decrying the devastating consequences of years of racial bigotry and discrimination.”

Clearly understanding justice today requires “robust, careful, Bibles-open, on-our-knees discussions about it,” he said.

“Justice is a major theme in our Bibles, and so of course Satan, the angel of light, is going to produce counterfeits for it, and on this we need to ensure that we are more shaped by the Scriptures than we are by the world,” he said.

Most Southern Baptist laity and leaders—both Black and white—consider critical race theory at odds with the gospel, Greear asserted. But he encouraged Southern Baptists to clarify and strengthen their position on the theory while listening to Black Southern Baptists.

“We should heed the counsel of our leaders of color who tell us that our denunciations of justice movements fall on deaf ears when we remain silent on the suffering of our neighbors,” he said.

“And we must make certain that our zeal to clarify what we think about CRT is accompanied by a pledge to fight with [Black Southern Baptists] against all forms of discrimination against our neighbors; to make clear that we stand with our brothers and sisters of color in their suffering, lamenting the pain of their past and pledging to work tirelessly for justice in our present.”

Allow the gospel to define SBC identity

Greear exhorted Southern Baptists to maintain an identity defined by the gospel and not by tradition, and to be civil in its discourse and treatment of others.

“I’ve got many lost friends who approach politics and life very differently than me who are genuinely concerned about the suffering of the poor, burdened by the denigration of immigrants and refugees, and genuinely heartbroken over the damages that years of slavery and discrimination have left in the African American community,” Greear said.

“Why wouldn’t we want to go out of our way to affirm the validity of those questions, even in places where we differ with their answers?”

Southern Baptists should carry themselves and share the gospel in ways that don’t impede evangelism and fulfilling the Great Commission, he said, while also holding to scriptural truth. He exhorted Southern Baptists to avoid defining themselves by politics instead of the gospel.

“Whenever the church gets in bed with politics, the church gets pregnant, and the offspring does not look like our Father in heaven,” Greear quipped.

“We have to decide if we want our convention primarily to be a political voting bloc or if we want it to be a Great Commission people, because the rules of engagement for each are different. ... I recognize that the blessings

that God has bestowed on our country should never for one second be taken for granted.

“But ... God has not called us primarily to save America politically; he has called us to make the gospel known to all.”

Political calculus not equated with gospel faithfulness

Embracing autonomy and affirming the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message allows diversity without ambiguity, Greear said, referencing political differences and the minutia of church order.

“Let me be very clear, we are not talking about communicating ambiguity on things the Scriptures speak clearly on—the sanctity of life and marriage; the sinfulness of homosexuality; God’s design in gender,” he said. “These are things that faithful Christians cannot disagree on, and our consciences are captive in these areas to the word of God.

“I’m talking about application of those convictions into various areas—how it plays out in a local church, or what weight those things are given in a political calculus—places where the Bible speaks only indirectly at best.”

A shared belief in the sanctity of human life does not equate to the same decision at the ballot box, Greear said.

“We should discuss that,” he said. “But when we make our political calculus synonymous with gospel faithfulness, we do a disservice to Christ and the Great Commission.”

Greear called Baptists to make three commitments:

- **To be Great Commission Baptists.**

Greear called for it to be “more than a theme for our [2021] annual meeting, but a declaration of who we are and who we aspire to be.” He added, “at our best, our convention is a coalition of churches committed to doing whatever it takes to get the gospel to those who haven’t heard it.”

- **To exalt the gospel above all.**

Greear called the gospel “the North Star of our convention,” the guide for 175 years, and said it must remain that way.

- **To unify around the gospel and the Great Commission.**

Greear said “together,” while not a word that describes the external culture, should be true of Great Commission Baptists.

Referencing Christ’s prayer in John 17, Greear said, Jesus asked God to unify his church so “the world would know” the truth. He noted it is “not to be a unity at all costs,” but “truth [is] the center of our unity.”

“But gospel maturity means knowing which things should divide and which should not,” Greear said.