

Loveless gospel attracts no one, Southern Baptist pastors are told

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LOUISVILLE, Ky.—Until Baptists demonstrate love for each other, the gospel of love they preach will not attract others, speakers told the opening session of the annual Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference June 21.

Considering the theme "What if?" Mac Brunson, J.D. Greear and Charles Colson imagined a convention of Baptists winsome enough to attract others who currently do not see a loving community worthy of their own life investment.

Brunson, pastor of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Fla., told the story of a dog food company that had the best marketing and sales staff, but sales were down because dogs didn't like the product. He asked fellow pastors gathered at their annual pre-SBC preaching fest why they are not reaching people.

Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship based in Lansdowne, Va., speaks during the June 21 evening session of the 2009 Southern Baptist Convention Pastors' Conference at the Kentucky Exposition Center in Louisville, Ky. (BP Photo)

"They don't like us," he said. "And if you'll walk out of this room and into the hallway and listen to the conversation, you'll discover we don't like each other very much either."

Brunson, former pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, pointed to five attitudes that should characterize Christian's dealings with each other—harmonization, identification, intention, compassion and submission.

It pays to be nice

Baptists have a tendency to “square off” over divisions and seek first to discover differences about each other, rather than areas of agreement, he said.

“Why can’t you find something you can agree on?” he asked. He expressed dismay at some of the discussion over the Great Commission Resurgence proposed by SBC President Johnny Hunt. “My stars, can’t we agree on the Great Commission?”

Christians who do not return evil for evil, nor insult for insult present a positive witness before a watching world, he stressed. Brunson mentioned The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness, written by two women who rose to the top of the advertising business by following a simple philosophy: “It pays to be nice.” He suggested Baptists try that tactic.

“If they don’t like us, they won’t listen to us,” he said.

Fervent for religion or Christ?

Greear, pastor of the Summit Church in Durham, N.C., which has grown from 400 to 3,000 under his leadership, asked why people are not being won to Christ in large numbers as they once were.

“What has changed about us? God is the same,” he said. Greear preached from Matthew 23 to explain the difference in people who are “fervent in religion” to those who are fervent for Christ.

“Over time, religion tends to displace the gospel among God’s people,” he said. “Like a virus, it grows up out of the sinful hearts of men and chokes out the gospel.”

Like the Pharisees of Christ’s day, we see negative traits in others but not

in ourselves, Greear said.

"Religion makes us horribly ineffective at evangelism" because we tend to win others to church, rather than to Christ, he said.

Jesus said the Pharisees of his day were willing to go around the world for one convert and implied they could not find a convert closer to home. He suggested Baptists ask if they have slipped into the same attitude.

When religion replaces the gospel

He listed several ways to know if religion has misplaced the gospel—religious people are obsessed with recognition; they substitute religious ritual for a love for God and over love of others; they elevate secondary traditions above knowing God; they are more aware of others' sins than of their own; and "they think we're always talking about somebody else."

Implying throughout that Southern Baptists need seriously to consider if they are just religious people instead of people who hunger for the touch of God, Greear said, "Religion emphasizes conformity to a standard, not passion for God."

Baptists exclude brothers and sisters because they don't agree in some minor details. "How can you not be ashamed?" he asked. "You are straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel."

The likelihood that people attending the annual SBC meeting his week will view others as villains is a tragedy, he said. "We're so consumed by these secondary things we couldn't see a movement of God if it went right past our face."

People don't hear the gospel because they are "turned off by the condescending and self-deluding way we talk" about the sins of others, Greear said. "Gospel people speak with humility."

He urged Baptists to “repent of the self-righteousness that thinks there is something about us that makes us better than others.”

“God has brought us back from the deadness of liberalism,” he said. “God has brought us too far to trade the deadness of liberalism for the deadness of traditionalism.”

Get ready for restricted liberty

Charles Colson, a frequent speaker at the Pastors’ Conference, which was the first forum where he gave his Christian conversion testimony three decades ago, said America’s current “economic meltdown” can be traced to moral failure of politicians.

America faces a “perfect storm” that he considers more dangerous for America than the problems in the midst of the Great Depression in 1932. He attributes it to the loss of “Protestant work ethic” in favor of an expectation that “this world is to meet every one of my materialistic needs.”

Colson warned that the current perilous times provide “unprecedented opportunities for government to expand,” and that limitations on what pastors can say from the pulpit without threat of losing tax exemption or fear of arrest are forthcoming.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked. “Are you ready to say ‘no’ to Caesar when Caesar says you can’t preach what the Bible says we must preach?” He referred to “hate speech” legislation that he interprets to mean a preacher could not call homosexual behavior sin, and potential loss of the ability for medical personnel to decline to do abortions.

“As government power expands, inevitably it restricts human freedom,” said Colson, once in President Richard Nixon’s inner circle.

Accentuate the positive

He found positives in recent reports that say 10 percent fewer Americans self-identify as Christians. The same research found an increase to 34 percent in those who self-identify as born again evangelicals, he said.

“One-third of Americans declare Christ is King, yet the culture deteriorates,” he said.

“What would happen if we really started to disciple that one-third of Americans so they had a Christian world view and were sold out to Christ? You’d see a revolution in this country.”

“The most critical thing churches can do is disciple members to know what they believe and why they believe it,” he continued. Referring to the difficult times the United States faces, Colson asked, “What better time to do the best of things, to show people winsomely what we believe?”