

SBC Pastors' Conference wrapup: Focus on love to make impact

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LOUISVILLE, Ky.—Southern Baptists need to focus less on themselves and their institutions and more on the love of Christ if they hope to make an impact on the world, speakers told the Southern Baptist Convention Pastors Conference.

“The SBC is far too comfortable in a world that is racing toward hell,” said **Alvin Reid**, professor of evangelism at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

Southern Baptists have reached a “tipping point” in their attitudes toward traditional ways of carrying out evangelism and missions. “We have become so institutionalized that we are more focused on maintaining our institutions than on a movement of God,” Reid said. If financial appeals were more focused on the gospel, he suggested, “people would give like never before.”

Southern Baptists, in the face of massive physical and spiritual needs around the world, have “retreated into our nice buildings, sitting in our comfortable chairs insulated from the inner city and the spiritual lostness of the world, while we design programs for ourselves,” Alabama pastor **David Platt** said.

If Southern Baptists retreat from their mission, God may “leave us to wander in the wilderness until we die. He has done it with thousands of churches in the United States, and we are fools to think he could not do it with any one of us,” Platt warned.

“The danger,” he said, “is that we have a tendency to craft Jesus in our own image—a nice middle-class American Jesus. And if we do this, then we need to realize that when we gather to worship, we are no longer worshipping Jesus—we are worshipping ourselves.”

SBC President Johnny Hunt said Christians often say that tragic events—like the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the economic depression—are attempts by God to attract America’s attention.

“But I’ve turned a little,” he said. “I realized God isn’t trying to get America’s attention. He’s trying to get our attention, the church’s attention. ... When we begin to conduct ourselves in such a way that we do everything with tenderness and holiness and compassion and full of the love of God, then God will get the nation’s attention. But he’s going to get our attention first.”

Until Baptists demonstrate love for each other, the gospel of love they preach will not attract others, several speakers told the Southern Baptist Pastors’ Conference.

Mac 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 why Southern Baptists are not reaching more people.

“They don’t like us,” said Brunson, former pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas. “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.”

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.

J.D. Greear, pastor of the Summit Church in Durham, N.C., asked why people are not being won to Christ in large numbers as they once were.

“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, Christians often see negative traits in others but not in ourselves, Greear said. 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.”

Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research, outlined three principles Christians have to live by in order to create “a love-driven unity to unite us in common mission with a common purpose for the glory of God”—walk worthy, display right attitudes and live God’s unity. “The nations need our witness and not our conflict,” Stetzer said.

Anyone who won’t forgive can’t rightly claim to be a man or woman of faith, added Tom Elliff, former SBC president. “Faith is acting on the basis of the revealed will of God,” he said. “If you will not forgive, you are denying the truth that God is sufficient for you.”

Pastor Mike Landry of Sarasota (Fla.) Baptist Church said Christians are playing with fire if they try to share the gospel without a heart for people. Christians should value people and not just see them as a means by which the church can grow, he explained.

“We’ve got to get to the point where we see people as important ... If that happened, if we ramped up our missions efforts by maintaining that same love, we would see far more people come to know Jesus.”

A former presidential candidate and a former presidential aide challenged the Southern Baptist pastors to confront cultural collapse.

Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor, presidential candidate and host of a Fox News network TV program, challenged pastors to refocus on biblical roles of leadership, both in the family and the church.

“How can we expect God to bless a nation if we violate his order that he created male and female and we get confused what marriage means. ... Hear my heart, people have a right to live any way they want, but no one has a right to change the basic definition of marriage, because it’s not changing social instruction. It’s changing the entire picture of Christ and his church.”

And failure at leading and developing roles in the family—the most basic God-given institution—means there is “something horribly amiss in our culture,” Huckabee said.

Charles Colson, former Watergate conspirator turned founder of Prison Fellowship, said America’s current “economic meltdown” can be traced to moral failure of politicians.

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 to say ‘no’ to Caesar when Caesar says you can’t preach what the Bible says we must preach?” he asked.

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.

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.

“The most critical thing churches can do is disciple members to know what they believe and why they believe it,” Colson said. 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?”

Based on reporting by Norman Jameson of the N.C. Biblical Recorder; Robert Dilday of the Virginia Religious Herald; and Jennifer Rash, Grace Thornton & Brittany Howerton of the Alabama Baptist