

Editorial: Two interrelated factors Baptists need to face

February 15, 2024

Baptists need to face two factors affecting our future. I hear some asking, “Only two?” No, but we have to start somewhere.

When thinking about our future, Baptists need to face the Southern Baptist Convention sexual abuse crisis and the decline of interest in denominations. These are interrelated, and facing one will include the other.

Both factors are significant, but neither is a death knell for Baptists if taken seriously and faced with the hope of the gospel.

Sexual abuse crisis

Baptists—Southern and otherwise—must come to grips with the consequences of the SBC sexual abuse crisis. Among a host of consequences, they must take seriously how many in the younger generations perceive the crisis and are responding to it. That statement has two parts.

Younger generations

By “younger generations,” I’m not referring to teenagers and 20-somethings. I’m referring to people in their 30s, 40s and 50s. For churchgoing Christians, those three decades are the “younger generations.” To use generational labels, these are the Gen Xers and Millennials.

A large portion—but not all—of Gen Xers and Millennials have given up on

the church. Many have left the church—whether leaving organized religion or Christian faith altogether—and become part of the nones.

Many among the younger generations are responding to the crisis with anger—and rightfully so. They don't expect the church and its leaders to be perfect, but they do expect the church and its leaders to respond to evil with less hypocrisy and duplicity.

The hypocrisy and duplicity are bad enough. That they became a pattern is, for many younger adults, unforgiveable. The pessimist in me doubts the church ever will win all of these younger adults back. The optimist in me knows there always is hope. For one, not all younger adults have given up on the church.

Perception management

As for how younger generations perceive the sexual abuse crisis, they see it for what it is—a horrific evil leaders addressed with perception management.

Baptists—Southern and otherwise—need to stop perception management. Beyond the evil of the sexual abuse itself, Baptist leaders' default to perception management for so many things has poisoned the denominations' future. More importantly, perception isn't what needs to be managed anyway.

Instead, Baptists and their leaders must earn trust again. And it won't be easy, won't feel good and likely won't happen quickly. We need to stop making excuses, stop putting the blame on the abused or other Baptists, and suck it up and do the hard work of righting the wrongs—even if we don't think we are responsible for those wrongs.

Notice my use of "we." We need to accept this is *our* problem, not *their* problem—even if we don't think we are responsible for the problem.

Denominational disinterest

Baptists—Southern and otherwise—also must come to grips with the fact people are less and less interested in denominations of any kind. It doesn't mean they're not interested in Christianity, but rather that they may not care what form it takes, despite how much is invested in the name "Baptist."

Disinterest in denominations has been building for decades for a host of reasons. The sexual abuse crisis aggravated the decline but did not initiate it. Recurrent infighting is another significant contributor to denominational decline.

Infighting

I have heard older generations bemoan the demise of Training Union. Many older Baptists credit Training Union with the SBC's explosive growth during the late 1950s through the 1980s, when the Convention Press curriculum was nearly ubiquitous in Southern Baptist churches. When churches stopped doing Training Union, churches stopped growing, so they say.

But the truth is more complicated than that. Even if Training Union was started again, simply teaching people how Baptists do church isn't going to make people interested in the denomination again. For one reason, denominational infighting has turned off a lot of people since Training Union was a thing—and Training Union didn't prevent that infighting.

When the SBC infighting became too big to contain within annual meetings, younger generations didn't only lose interest in the Southern Baptist denominational label, many found it distasteful. Some joined other denominations, plenty opted for nondenominational churches, and others simply left.

Baptists—Southern and otherwise, but especially Southern—need to accept this and accept what it will take to repair the damage done inside and outside the SBC—if repair is possible.

Why people don't care

Why people are disinterested in denominations should be taken seriously. Churches and religious leaders should ask people why they don't care and should listen without trying to convince of the rightness of one's denominational allegiance. It's likely the reasons will involve more than how much one does or doesn't know about Baptist distinctives.

When the time is appropriate to extol the virtues of Baptist ecclesiology, it might be more productive to explain how Baptist distinctives enable a person to follow Christ more closely than to argue Baptist is the best way to do church. I think most people interested in Christianity are more interested in following Christ than in denominational principles, anyway.

Interrelated factors

Going back to the SBC sexual abuse crisis: If Baptists want “Baptist” to be relevant in a positive way, they will have to convince the disaffected and disinterested that “Baptist” is not an accomplice to evil. Baptist polity—specifically local autonomy—was Baptist leaders' main defense throughout the sexual abuse crisis.

Many have been hurt in various ways by Baptist churches. That's another thing we need to come to grips with. Those hurt by sexual abuse and how Baptists handled it know about local autonomy all too well. Local autonomy was raised as the reason Baptist leaders just couldn't do anything about sexual abuse.

However cherished the principle of local autonomy may be or should be,

Baptists must face the fact many people see it—and likely other Baptist distinctives—as a means to ungodly or evil ends.

Baptists also will need to convince the disaffected and disinterested that Baptists aren't full of themselves. As much as I believe in Baptist distinctives, Baptist is not the pinnacle—the perfect expression—of Christianity. Nor is any other denomination.

Accepting these things does not diminish what it means to be Baptist. I believe it goes the other direction. Accepting these things and facing them squarely can enlarge what it means to be Baptist.

Accepting entails acknowledging. It's not easy to accept or to acknowledge what we don't like, but if our gospel proclamations are to be believed, we must take that first step of admitting where we have fallen short. And we mustn't stop there.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com. The views expressed are those of the author.