

# **Commentary: SBC CEO on the Law Amendment**

May 22, 2024

The Southern Baptist Convention will soon consider final action on an amendment to the SBC Constitution stating that a cooperating Southern Baptist church “affirms, appoints, or employs only men as any kind of pastor or elder as qualified by Scripture.”

This is a significant decision which raises important issues related to Baptist theology, polity and practice and has the potential to profoundly impact not just the Southern Baptist Convention, but the entire Southern Baptist denomination.

When the SBC Executive Committee forwarded the amendment to the convention in 2023, it did so with a recommendation that the amendment be declined. This remains the position of the Executive Committee and reflects my position as well. Here are some of the reasons for our position, along with some suggestions for a path forward.

## **Foundational agreement**

The theological commitments which underlie the proposed amendment reflect my belief pastors should be men. When faced with the challenge of establishing church governance as a church planter, my choices were defined by those beliefs. We instituted church governance with only men in the pastor/elder/overseer role. Since leaving pastoral ministry, we have consistently joined churches that maintained this leadership standard.

For the past 20 years, I upheld this standard as a seminary president committed to teaching in accordance with and not contrary to the Baptist

Faith and Message 2000. While I have advocated for women in other roles, my consistent belief and practice for 40 years has been to limit pastoral leadership in local churches to men.

Despite the fact the proposed amendment reflects my beliefs and practices, my concerns about the following implications and consequences of its adoption lead me to oppose it.

## **Title or function**

One concern about the proposed amendment is whether it applies to the title or function of a pastor. Does it mean a woman cannot use the “title” pastor, or does it mean a woman may not “function” as a pastor?

If the issue is the title, then churches with women called “pastors” can come into compliance by simply changing their title to evangelist, minister, director, coordinator or some other descriptive word.

This creates the problem, however, of allowing women serving as “teaching pastors” to become “teaching ministers” and continue to function in whatever way their church permits. This does not seem to fulfill the goal of the amendment.

If the issue is function, then the SBC Credentials Committee must investigate job descriptions, church governing documents, work records and personnel policies of local churches to determine if a woman is functioning as a pastor.

This is unsustainable due to the number of churches to be evaluated by a volunteer committee which meets once a month. It also places the SBC in the role of evaluating the internal operations of local churches—even including if male pastors are “qualified by Scripture”—a role it was never intended to fulfill.

# Tensions surrounding autonomy

Southern Baptists believe in local church autonomy—an outgrowth of our convictions about soul competency, priesthood of believers and the sufficiency of Jesus to provide immediate access to God for every individual and congregation. We extend our conviction about autonomy to denominational structures as well. No church has any authority over any other church, and no denominational group has authority over any church or any other denominational group.

Conventions do, however, have the right and responsibility for defining the scope of their participation—in historic Baptist language, “being in friendly cooperation.” One concern, much broader than but related to the current issue, is the change in the SBC in the past 25 years about who/what constitutes the SBC and what defines “friendly cooperation.”

The SBC Constitution states, “The Convention shall consist of messengers who are members of Baptist churches in cooperation with the Convention.” Note these careful and important distinctions—the Convention consists of messengers, not churches; and the churches are in cooperation, not in membership.

About 25 years ago, the first public list of churches in the SBC was created by the SBC Executive Committee staff as an administrative tool. Some have wrongly interpreted this as a list of “member churches.”

During this same time frame, the SBC Constitution has been amended several times to add qualifiers to what it means for a church to be in cooperation with the SBC. Over time, “membership” language has crept into our vocabulary and documents.

In previous generations, the SBC Credentials Committee evaluated the credentials of messengers to be sure they were from cooperating churches.

In recent years, the Credentials Committee's role has been redefined as an arbiter of whether a church is a "member" of the SBC.

This is more than wordplay. The shift from defining the Convention as consisting of seated messengers to consisting of member churches is a substantive change that is reshaping our identity.

This raises two important questions. First, how does the amendment relate to local church autonomy? Second, what happens when a church is removed from the SBC for having a woman pastor?

The SBC has the right and responsibility to define who can participate in its annual meeting—messengers must come from cooperating churches. The SBC also has the right and responsibility to define the actions of its entities. These decisions reflect the convention's autonomy and do not infringe on local church autonomy.

On the other hand, churches have the right and responsibility to determine their leaders and governance structure. Churches can make any leadership decision they choose. But, if the amendment passes, those churches which include women in pastoral leadership will be removed from the SBC—by voluntary withdrawal or by convention expulsion. This is the tension that results when church autonomy intersects with convention autonomy.

Historically, the convention has favored local church autonomy and avoided actions which might imply or attempt control of the churches (SBC Constitution, Article IV). That precedent needs to be heeded in this case as well.

As to the second question, when a church is removed from the SBC—declared "not in friendly cooperation"—there are several striking consequences.

The messengers from the church will not be seated—or will be

“unseated”—at the annual meeting. Trustees who are members of those churches must change their church membership or resign from SBC entity boards. The IMB cannot appoint missionaries and NAMB cannot fund church plants sponsored by excluded churches.

Seminary students endorsed by excluded churches must pay non-SBC tuition—typically twice the amount paid by a Southern Baptist student. SBC entity employees who are required to be members of a Southern Baptist church must move their membership to another church or resign from their job if their church is excluded.

GuideStone participants in excluded churches may lose their disability insurance—provided through partnerships with state conventions—and may lose other retirement benefits and protections tied to SBC affiliation. These benefits are defined legally, and exemptions cannot be granted arbitrarily.

Excluded churches can continue to attend the SBC annual meeting as guests, shop at Lifeway, invest through GuideStone and give to convention causes. In short, they function like non-SBC churches currently do now—presence allowed, business accepted, but participation restricted.

## **Legal concerns**

Some of the losses mentioned above have legal implications for all members and leaders in excluded churches, beyond a woman who has the title or function of a pastor. Some of these changes and their future results—like loss of disability coverage and changes to retirement programs—increase the likelihood of litigation resulting from these decisions.

For these reasons, the Credentials Committee must document every step of its process, preserve every form of communication and seek legal guidance while making its decisions. If dozens of churches are excluded or removed

from the SBC in an adversarial fashion, the legal risk may increase accordingly.

A related concern is the implications of these actions concerning the legal wall of autonomy which protects the SBC from being held responsible for the actions of churches. If the SBC involves itself this intricately in the internal operations of churches—inquiring about and making decisions about titles, job descriptions, service responsibilities and deciding biblical qualifications appropriate for local church leaders—it may be contributing to an erosion of the legal protection autonomy provides.

Some enterprising attorney with a cooperative judge may make the case that a convention with this much vested interest in the internal workings of its churches is responsible for their other actions as well. If that happens, increased litigation by and among churches and entities may be in our future.

## **Convention processes and procedures**

The processes and procedures which will be used to implement the amendment may also produce other unintended consequences for the SBC annual meeting.

The time spent hearing the appeal and announcing the results about Saddleback Church during the 2023 annual meeting was just over 17 minutes. If reports there are hundreds of SBC churches that have a woman with the title or function of pastor are true, then those churches can now dominate future annual meetings.

If they choose not to comply with the new constitutional requirement, the Credentials Committee must recommend and the Executive Committee must declare every one of those churches not in friendly cooperation. Once that happens, these churches can appeal the decision to the SBC during its

next annual meeting before a final expulsion vote.

Even if the time is cut to 10 minutes per church, if 25 of these churches appeal each year over the next several years, the appeal processes will take hours, and excluding churches will become the centerpiece of the SBC annual meeting.

## **Past precedent**

All these processes and procedures can be adjusted or corrected, but it may be hard to do so while simultaneously addressing the issue. Since precedents have been established, it may be difficult not to maintain them.

The practice of amending the constitution to include issues like homosexuality, sexual abuse and racism has set a precedent which, for some, supports adopting the current amendment. But the current issue is different than past issues in two significant ways.

First, the past decisions narrowing the definition of a cooperating church—homosexuality (1992/1993), sexual abuse (2019/2021) and racism (2019/2021)—were intended to show our unity rather than define new positions.

Virtually every Southern Baptist church supports those positions, evidenced by the small number of times churches have been removed for these reasons. Since these narrowing definers were adopted, only 13 churches have been removed from the convention for any of these reasons (eight over homosexuality; four over sexual abuse; one over racism).

In addition, four churches were removed for failing to cooperate in resolving these issues. That's 17 churches in the past 32 years.

The current amendment is different. It enforces an interpretation of our doctrinal statement which may result in the exclusion of hundreds of

churches. This conflict at the national convention will likely spread to state conventions, associations and various other Baptist entities—like colleges, foundations and others. All of them have their own constitutions, membership policies, doctrinal statements, accreditation standards and legal requirements to meet.

These denominational entities are not owned, controlled by or accountable to the SBC and therefore must grapple with these issues independently and individually. Significant conflict may occur in some of these settings as the debates ensue. That has not occurred with the other issues added to the constitution.

Second, the previous issues—homosexuality, sexual abuse and racism—have a defined moral component. They are sinful acts clearly condemned in the Bible. Women serving in pastoral roles are not in this category. Gender leadership roles are a debate about interpreting the Bible, not about submitting to its authority.

## **Doctrinal fidelity**

Proponents of the proposed amendment may agree some of the concerns mentioned so far are valid. But, for them, these are a price worth paying to preserve doctrinal fidelity. They will not be persuaded to moderate their position to enhance cooperation, avoid legal risks, protect polity, improve morale or preserve financial resources.

While they may regret conflicts and setbacks resulting from their position, they view them as the cost of standing for biblical fidelity and a more doctrinally pure, theologically aligned convention.

The debate about women in pastoral roles centers on biblical and theological interpretations about complementarian and egalitarian positions. Southern Baptists are decidedly complementarian. The current



discussion, however, centers on what it means to be complementarian and if this issue should be a test of fellowship.

Some theologians categorize doctrinal issues into various groupings. My description of this (see my 2011 book *The Case for Antioch*) includes three groupings—convictions, commitments and preferences. Some also call these first, second and third order or primary, secondary and tertiary doctrines.

Using my terminology, convictions are doctrines which define the Christian faith. You are not a Christian if you deny one of them. An example would be the bodily resurrection of Jesus. These are doctrines *worth dying for*.

Commitments are doctrines which define denominational fellowship, cooperation or unity. This is what makes a Baptist different than a Methodist. Examples would include baptism by immersion or security of the believer. These are doctrines *worth dividing over*.

Preferences are doctrines that define local church fellowship. Examples of these would be church governance or worship practices. These are doctrines *worth debating* but which also require deference among believers.

The doctrinal aspect to the current debate over women in pastoral roles rests on an important decision—where to place gender leadership roles on a theological continuum.

For some, this is a third order doctrine—to be decided by local churches without regard to how other churches function. For others, the role of women in pastoral leadership is a second order doctrine. It defines what it means to be a Southern Baptist—on par with baptism by immersion or security of the believer. And for some, this is a primary doctrine or a test of biblical orthodoxy, meaning it reveals if you “believe the Bible” or not.

While most Southern Baptists agree Christians may differ on gender leadership roles—meaning they are not a primary doctrine—the SBC is now deciding if gender leadership roles will be a secondary instead of a tertiary doctrine. This is a needed clarification for some; a major change for others who believe this has been and should remain a tertiary issue.

We are deciding if gender leadership roles are a doctrine worth dividing over instead of a doctrine worth debating.

While some may believe the amendment is necessary to guard against the cultural slide related to gender and sexuality, keep in mind the actions of messengers in 2023—using the confessional statement to declare two churches were not in friendly cooperation because of their stance on women serving in pastoral roles. This happened based on our doctrinal convictions without the aid of the amendment.

## **Doctrinal conformity**

Recognizing some doctrines as worth debating—but not worth dividing over—acknowledges the theological differences that exist, and have always existed, among Southern Baptists. By adopting this amendment, a new level of doctrinal conformity will be enforced across the SBC.

For proponents, the need for this amendment emerges from a conviction that greater doctrinal alignment is needed among Southern Baptist churches.

Most Southern Baptist pastors and church members view the denomination through the lens of their local ministry context and their personal belief system. They know how they interpret the Bible and believe most Southern Baptists agree with them—or should.

Some either do not appreciate the breadth of theological diversity in the

SBC or, if they do understand it, find it troublesome or threatening. They want a denomination with greater doctrinal conformity.

Over the past 40 years, God has allowed me a panoramic view of the SBC. I have preached in hundreds of churches, spoken at a major meeting in every state convention and at dozens of associational meetings across the country.

In addition, I have spoken at churches and conferences for many ethnic or minority groups in the SBC. I was a state executive director for almost 10 years and worked with a diverse collection of more than 400 churches in the Pacific Northwest.

From my perspective, the doctrinal diversity in Southern Baptist churches, associations, state conventions and denominational entities is much more significant than most people realize.

For example, I have preached in Southern Baptist churches that did not permit men and women—even married couples—to sit together on the same side of the sanctuary and in churches with women in pastoral leadership. I have worked with pastors who are fundamentalist, conservative, moderate and liberal.

I know professors who are Calvinists and others who are anti-Calvinists. I have heard Southern Baptists describe themselves as Anabaptists, reformed, charismatic and all kinds of hyphenated combinations.

We have churches where only the King James Version can be used. Some Southern Baptist churches accept non-baptistic immersion for membership, consider all attenders as members, or reject any form of membership—thus no longer insisting on regenerate church membership.

I have consulted with churches that have a variety of governance models—pastor/deacon, pastor/elder/deacon, staff-led, elder-led, elder-

ruled and those that use a church council or board of directors approach.

When multi-cultural and multi-racial dimensions are added to the mix—including how titles and vocabulary are shaped by culture and language—the doctrinal diversity among Southern Baptists becomes almost too broad to describe.

Part of the genius of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 and the historic polity of the SBC is their elasticity. We have practiced a broad orthodoxy, emphasizing cooperation instead of conformity as a hallmark of our success.

By codifying a narrower interpretation of one part of our confessional statement in our constitution, this may become a precursor to similar actions on other issues.

Many Southern Baptist churches are out of alignment with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 on issues like regenerate church membership, Lord's Supper practices, mode and purpose of baptism, democratic church government, church/state relationships and more. Many Southern Baptists disagree on key doctrines like the atonement or eschatology.

Some of these issues seem more important than the current debate, yet most Southern Baptists seem willing to tolerate diversity on these other issues.

It will be interesting to see if clarifying the parameters on women in pastoral leadership leads to efforts to enforce conformity on other doctrinal issues. My sense is those initiatives will not be well-received by many Southern Baptists—including many proponents of the current amendment.

# Disengaging quietly

While the focus of much of the debate about the proposed amendment is on churches which will leave or be excluded after its adoption or rejection, I am also concerned about two other categories of people who may disengage from the SBC over this amendment.

Multiple pastors have told me that while they are not formally leaving the SBC over this issue, they are quietly disengaging. They are too focused on the demands of pastoral ministry to participate in denominational infighting over something they do not perceive as worth the battle.

For some of them, the missional value-add of remaining in the SBC has been eclipsed by the reputational conflict-subtract of association with our brand. In short, for some, the SBC is just not worth the hassle anymore.

My final concern is the potential impact of this decision and the tone of the debate on women across our denomination. The focus of this debate has centered on one phrase from the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (amended 2023)—“the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.” There has been very little discussion of the rest of the same sentence.

The full sentence states: “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.” The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (amended 2023) clearly advocates “women are gifted for service.”

Southern Baptists, including the same messengers who voted affirmatively on the proposed amendment last year, also recognized and placed women in important leadership roles.

For example, at the 2023 SBC annual meeting, 79 new

missionaries—including 41 women—were commissioned for service and sent around the world. At that meeting, multiple women spoke from the platform, chaired important committees, and made motions as messengers.

Women executives and faculty members at SBC entities were on the platform and recognized for their leadership. And, perhaps most importantly, many women were elected as trustees of SBC entities. In those roles, women share the ultimate authority to lead SBC entities and, in several cases, have served as board chairs.

Women are serving and will continue to serve Southern Baptists as trustees, executives, professors and directors at our entities. They will continue to serve as missionaries, ministry leaders and program administrators of our mission boards. Women will continue to serve as ministers, deaconesses, chaplains, counselors, administrators, project managers, committee chairs and team leaders in local churches.

Women are gifted for ministry. It is difficult to imagine how we can move forward without their significant contribution. We must acknowledge and celebrate the important leadership roles Southern Baptist women fulfill in our churches and denomination.

## **A path forward**

For the past 40 years, I have set aside my personal beliefs and cooperated with many churches and leaders who do not share my positions on various issues. I have worked in friendly cooperation with Southern Baptist churches *I would not join as a member*.

I have cooperated with others for the *overall mission of getting the gospel to people who have not heard it*. Many other leaders have done the same for me in the name of cooperation.

Being in friendly cooperation is not just giving through the Cooperative Program. It requires acknowledging significant differences while working together—all while debating and defending our positions—on our overarching, eternal mission of getting the gospel to people who have never heard it.

To demonstrate this commitment to cooperation, rather than adopt the proposed amendment, let's pursue the following path forward.

1. Let's use our current processes to respond to churches which clearly and intentionally operate outside our confessional statement, declaring them "not in friendly cooperation" when necessary.

2. Let's keep debating the issue of gender leadership roles in churches with the goal of persuading churches to change their position or practices rather than removing them from the SBC.

3. Let's persuade people about the unique role of pastors and the importance of preserving that title for specific functions. Not every church leader is a pastor. We need to do more than change titles, we need to elevate the pastoral role so that it towers above other leadership roles in title, calling, function and stature.

4. Let's recommit to cooperation in pursuit of God's eternal mission. We are a diverse, messy collection of churches with leaders opining on every imaginable issue. We must celebrate our diversity rather than striving for conformity, while doubling down on what the SBC came together to do in the first place—getting the gospel to people who have never heard it.

5. Let's focus our energy on external threats instead of internal battles. Global secularism and religious persecution are increasing daily. We are dissipating energy and resources on infighting when we need to stand together with as many believers as possible to overcome true enemies of the gospel.

May God give us grace to pursue his eternal mission, together, despite real differences which have always been and will always be part of our movement.

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