

# A Pastor's Take on #SBC22

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## Introduction

What follows is a report and reflection on the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). I am no one of particular importance. I served, along with several others, as a representative (Messenger) from my church at this historic meeting. In it, we engaged in what some see as a cumbersome and often confusing organizational endeavor to fulfill a mission. Not all churches are organized or affiliated as we are. As such, the first part of this report explains a little historical and theological context about our tribe of churches. Following that, there is a report of some (but not all) actions taken by our Convention. Finally, I end with some reflections on what happened and where we go from here. If you are looking for more concise treatments and different perspective, they are everywhere on the internet (figuratively speaking of course). I hope this is somewhat helpful to you.

A Baptist Church is convictionally and confessionally an autonomous congregation of people, rejecting any ecclesiastical authority beyond the local church apart from the headship of Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church. At the same time, Baptists have recognized the Kingdom opportunity and collaborative influence of cooperation; therefore, it is not only permitted but advisable to partner together with other people of like faith and practice to fulfill the biblical mandate of *mission*. (Notice I did not speak of “missions” which is generally thought of as cross-cultural evangelism and discipleship but *mission* which includes evangelism and discipleship both within one’s culture and cross-culturally and involves both the great commission and the great commandment). The most obvious partnerships occur where there is doctrinal and practical alignment, such as within a Convention such as the SBC.

The SBC is not properly considered a denomination, but more accurately a Convention (a convening) of churches who confess common doctrinal truths that we hold dear individually and share as a Convention. For us, that means we confess to believe the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, a broad doctrinal statement that is affirmed by cooperating churches. This set of doctrines is affirmed not only by our churches, but also by our seminaries, mission boards, and agencies. It serves as an anchor point of doctrinal alignment on primary (as well as some secondary/tertiary) beliefs.

Our Convention meets annually for the purpose of proclaiming the Word of God, worship, and joint engagement of mission in our meeting location city. Tied to this annual meeting is a series of ancillary meetings such as Committees, Associations, Networks, and a Pastor’s Conference. These gatherings are not part of the Annual Meeting but are traditionally part of the practice of gathering physically together.

Englewood Baptist has a longstanding practice of sending some of its pastoral staff (and at times others) to represent the church at this annual meeting. This is how our church and every

other one of the 48,000 plus churches lends its voice to the practices and opinions on matters important to these churches. In our system of cooperation and our understanding of polity, this is a privilege and responsibility for our church because the Messengers of the Convention represent the leadership of the Convention. On a practical level, since the Convention only gathers two days per year, we entrust day-to-day responsibilities of governance of the Convention and its entities to Trustees who are elected by the Convention and are entrusted with the responsibility of representing the interests of the 48,000 member churches. This means that the Convention, while having direct ownership, exercises representative leadership through the trustees.

Each board of trustees employs vocational employees to handle the day-to-day operations. For example, Dr. Akin is the President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and is entrusted to lead the school to fulfill its mission. He is accountable to the Board of Trustees. The Trustees are accountable to the Convention of churches comprised of messengers from each member church. The Convention *cannot* direct daily affairs of the Seminary; however, it can elect Trustees or petition current Trustees to carry out its interests; thus, the local church is ultimately (and I believe accurately) the headquarters of the SBC.

Additionally, the Convention elects officers that are volunteer servant leaders. The President of the Convention appoints (among other things such as presiding over the annual meeting and serving as an ex-officio member of several committee) a Committee on Committees that nominate the other committee members who are affirmed by the Convention at its annual meeting.

Why such a detailed explanation of the Convention structure and system? It is my hope that this understanding will bring some clarity to what can be a confusing process and context for some of the decisions of the Convention.

The 2022 annual meeting had a heavy responsibility before it. Issues such as addressing reported sexual abuse, doctrinal clarification, and addressing concerns of a loss of doctrinal fidelity were to be addressed by the convening messengers. While I will not discuss every issue dealt with over two days of meetings, it is my hope to bring clarity to some of the most prevalent by way of report to my local church to whom I am accountable, as well as others who might benefit from one pastor's perspective.

## **Report**

### **The most pressing issue before the Convention related to a 288-page report and recommendations from the Sexual Abuse Task Force (SATF).**

Background: During the 2021 Convention, the Messengers directed the President of the Convention to establish a sexual abuse task force (SATF) to oversee a third-party investigation of the SBC Executive Committee (EC) during the previous twenty years to determine the

veracity of claims that the EC had mishandled reports from individuals alleging charges of sexual abuse by pastors, ministers, and volunteers at certain SBC churches. This task force had very specific instructions and the Messengers further instructed the Executive Committee to fully cooperate with the investigation including producing documentation for investigation and waiving attorney-client privilege...a move to expose documents that were previously considered unavailable for examination related to reports received by the EC Staff and discussed by those staff members and the attorneys advising them.

Findings: The investigation and resulting report by the firm *Guidepost Solutions*, led to the production of material indicating that some members of the EC staff had received complaints and reports against pastors and ministers of churches affiliated with the SBC and had not acted to inform churches or impede the alleged abuse. The motive seemed to be an attempt to prevent or reduce potential legal liability. Nonetheless, the EC Staff neglected to act in material ways that would have exposed these alleged abusers. Furthermore, the conclusion of the report was that this failure to act allowed certain ministers to move about freely from church to church and resulting in harm to multiple victims, something that would have not been possible had the EC taken more definitive action to reveal the identities of the abusers. Additionally, the investigation revealed that the ECs corporate counsel and others actively impeded the exposure of some of these abusers and, with demonstrable knowledge that some of these were still in positions to harm victims, neglected to act in a way to safeguard those in harm's way. The ECs approach to a defense for their actions relied on our polity of autonomy for each church and a lack of direct authority over any of the churches of its membership or the clergy/ leaders that served them. Again, the EC and its legal counsel was seeking to prevent legal liability on the part of the Convention as its rationale.

Response: The Task Force and later the Messengers acted on this report in several key ways:

- The SBC established a reporting structure (hotline) and a continually improving process to facilitate the reporting of abuse directly to the EC and its designees who are committing to help victims seek assistance in pursuing remedy for such actions including: stopping the abusers from continuing to act; providing for third party investigations when warranted to investigate claims, resourcing victims in counseling and ministry (when appropriate), and training/education for churches to better equip local churches to act ethically toward reporters in pursuit of their restoration.
- The Messengers denounced in the strongest terms all incidences of abuse and issued public apologies to those victims who were harmed in years past and were ignored when seeking help from Convention leaders.
- The Messengers entered times of corporate repentance and lament for its actions and the ensuing harm experienced by those who deserved better by the church of Jesus.
- The Messengers further affirmed to prayerfully endeavor to eliminate all incidences of sexual abuse among our churches.
- The Messengers directed the President to establish a new task force to implement recommended measures to safeguard against such conduct happening in the future.

- The Messengers directed the establishment of a *Ministry Safe* database which would centralize the identification of abusers who were convicted or confessed to abuse, those who were found liable in civil claims, and those whose churches may report that they were credibly accused of abuse.
- The Messengers passed a resolution calling for the work of advocating for legislation that made sexual abuse by ministers more uniformly treated in all states and jurisdictions.

These steps were and are *beginning steps* toward providing safeguards against harm and demonstrating a willingness to own the responsibility to love the most vulnerable among us well and in a manner that reflects the dignity and worth of every single person.

These steps also, while not requiring (consistent with our polity) specific actions, encourage each local congregation to examine its own ministries to ensure that the church is not a place of harm or suspicion but a safe place to experience and encounter Christ within Christian community.

As for Englewood, we are a church with significant measures in place to guard against harm such as was detailed in the SATF report and recommendations. That said, we will continue to diligently seek to become better. Our earnest desire and biblical mandate is to bring honor to the Name of Christ, something that cannot be done if we act in a way of lesser diligence, care, and concern for those among us.

### **A second major issue before the Convention related to an allegation of a “liberal drift” among Southern Baptists.**

Background: There has been an ongoing exhibition of discord within the fellowship centered around “wokeism”, CRT (Critical Race Theory), a downgrade in doctrinal fidelity pertaining to female pastoral leadership in the church, and other related allegations. A faction has aligned within the Convention that alleges that such occurrences are prevalent, widespread, and require a “change of direction.” This group is closely tied to a movement within the SBC identified as the Conservative Baptist Network (CBN), which has sought to introduce distrust within the Convention calling for investigations, inquiries, and implying corruption in the highest levels. Several people supported by and representative of the CBN were candidates for various offices and elections. *All were defeated by votes of the Convention Messengers.*

Response: Speaking as your pastor, I have taken seriously the claims of this group and its messengers. While I am not an expert on every area, I have sought to understand their position, view it charitably, and research diligently the veracity of the claims. My loyalty is to King Jesus and my responsibility to you is to understand the Word of God as given by God and to guard the integrity of that Word while leading you as your shepherd to fulfill the will of God. My fiduciary responsibility is to this alone, not to the SBC in whole or in part.

This controversy brings me great pain. Some of my friends align with the CBN. My alma mater (Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary) has taken very public steps to affirm, support, and further the cause of the CBN. My unwillingness to affirm their line of reasoning places me on the outside of the circle looking in. Fortunately, I have settled who I am. I choose to act charitably toward my friends who see these issues differently than I do without feeling a need to break fellowship with them over that disagreement. My assessment is that we agree on far more than we disagree. If I am ever forced to choose between my friends in the CBN and faithfulness to the Lord, His Word, and my responsibility to lead this church, rest assured I will choose Jesus, His Word, and my calling every time. Furthermore, know that in the leading and teaching ministry of this church, there is a high level of mutual accountability among our pastoral team. We each choose loyalty to Jesus over loyalty to one another and will endeavor to spur one another along to fidelity to Christ above all recognizing that the potential for doctrinal error is real for anyone and that accountability is best provided by everyone.

What does this mean to you and me?

- I pray it gives you some sense of comfort that none of this escapes us and you know where our stated allegiance to Christ is. Furthermore, we are not strangers to you but those who have labored in love among you.
- We will continue to guard and call our family to preserve the unity of the faith and the demonstration of unity in our family. We will not gossip or permit unwholesome or unfruitful conversations that distract us from the mission and call of Christ. In other words, if someone is speaking or acting in a manner that threatens the unity of this body, we will seek to restore that unity beginning with the reminder, “We don’t talk that way at Englewood.”
- If you believe that some Twitter commentator or YouTube conspiracist, or even famous pastor in a distant city is more credible than the pastors you know and are charged to shepherd you, I urge you to biblically address that with your pastor(s) to resolve the concerns you have. John MacArthur (for instance) has been a great help to me through the years through his writings; however, he is not my pastor, nor the pastor of Englewood.

Related to the Office of Pastor, our Convention heard from our Credentials Committee regarding investigated reports that Saddleback Church in California was no longer in friendly cooperation with our Convention due to ordaining two women as pastors. Prior to any action by the Convention the Credentials Committee withdrew a recommendation in order to continue its work to understand and reconcile any misunderstandings of this great SBC church. Dr. Rick Warren appeared before the Convention personally to affirm his love and appreciation for the Convention as a fourth generation SBC pastor. He did not offer any new commitments to change his stance on Saddleback’s pastoral staff. A discussion is ongoing in the Convention regarding the BFM2000 and whether the church could remain in friendly cooperation if a woman served as a pastor in title without being the senior pastor. This is the issue that the Credentials Committee continues to pursue.

My observation: The Credentials Committee, despite apparent pressure from advocates of immediate action to affirm or remove Saddleback, appears to want to “get this right” and to clarify precise opinions. Based on an observation from Dr. Adam Greenway (President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) the root issue relates to the fact that the SBC is a confessional rather than Creedal body (meaning, to this point, member churches are not required to agree with all of the BFM2000 as a condition of affiliation (though most clearly do and all are believed to agree with the doctrines as presented). Dr. Greenway’s perspective is important as a scholar, pastor, and trusted voice in the SBC. If the SBC should desire to make affirmation of the BFM2000 a prerequisite to fellowship and define the tenets more stringently than they currently are, the issue of how to relate to churches that call women pastors would become more clear.

On June 21, Dr. Denny Burk, another biblical scholar offered additional commentary that I found helpful in illuminating the concerns of doctrinal alignment as it relates to affiliation with the SBC. You can read it [HERE](#).

Response: Englewood does not call anyone to serve in the office of pastor except those men who are qualified and called according to the Scriptures. I believe that the title “pastor” should be reserved for those who meet the biblical qualifications of the office of pastor/elder/overseer. I further hold that it is unhelpful and even confusing to call anyone “pastor” who lacks the biblical qualification and calling to the *office of pastor*. We should strive for clarity in our choice of words.

That said, here at Englewood, *some* of the elements of the *task of pastoring* are carried out every day by our Connect Group Leaders, teachers, deacons, and even our broad ministry staff. There has not ever been any concern that a ladies’ Connect Group leader might be functioning as a pastor (as we recognize those men, qualified by Scripture, that are called to lead as under shepherds of the flock of God called Englewood). I can cook without being a chef. I can fix a clogged sink drain without being a plumber. I can change a light switch in my home without being an electrician. This is the difference between function and office. Many people serve and care for the body of Christ; but, not all of these are called as pastors. This distinction is about biblical fidelity and a desire to honor the will of God; it is not a statement of value or an act of oppressive misogyny.

One final thing, I do not personally believe that Pastor Rick Warren’s actions are coincidental or benign. He intentionally chose to ordain two existing ministers on his staff as pastors last year and it appears he did so to make a point. I commend the Credentials Committee for not knuckling under to the pressure to act in a way that broke fellowship when it is not yet clear if reconciliation is possible. As Christians, we ought to stand on truth. FULL STOP. One of those truths is that Christ does not desire that we work to separate, but that we seek unity around the revealed will and Word of God. Just as with every account of biblical church discipline, if a separation over biblical issues occurs, we should do so courageously and humbly, but only after exhausting every avenue to reconcile around the gospel.

## **Additional Resolutions and Actions of the Convention**

Other matters of importance were introduced within our Convention meeting including our continuing concern for the dignity and value of every life (from the womb to the tomb) and resolutions reflecting these values were introduced.

These resolutions related to:

- The work to continue to speak on behalf of the unborn and pray for the overturn of Roe v. Wade.
- The work of the church to minister to victims of violence, particularly gun violence and to work in appropriate ways to advocate for the Image of God in each person.
- The work toward a biblical sexual ethic, loving our neighbors well who have embraced the dangerous and dehumanizing sexual ethic of the LGBTQ+ agenda, seeking for their restoration to God's good design for human flourishing.

Other resolutions were considered, and many passed. The lack of detail here is not a statement of perceived importance, but a function of time and space. See [HERE](#) for a helpful guide.

In other matters:

Our Convention celebrated the commissioning of 52 new missionaries to the nations through the IMB. These join the 3,600 missionaries and their 2,850 children currently serving around the world bringing the gospel to bear among the least reached in the world.

Dr. Paul Chitwood soberly reminded us that every day, 157,690 enter into a Christless eternity and the majority of them from among the 3,000 plus Unreached and Unengaged People Groups of the world. This serves as a challenge to all of us to continue to live with glory of God and the importance of the Gospel Enterprise first and foremost in our minds.

This in addition to the multiplied hundreds of new church plants in our country helping to reach the 275 million lost of the United States alone.

Response: Our missionary endeavors are the primary reason we choose to cooperate together with the vast number of churches of SBC. We have the world's best support system, funding mechanism, and strategy to fulfill the Great Commission. Apart from our SBC partnership, we would find it difficult to fulfill the mission faithfully.

### Overall Reflections:

Seven reflections that I pray guide my actions in the days ahead:

First, the events leading up to and involving this Convention have forced me to spend a great deal of time considering, "How did we get here?" Particularly as we look at what seems like an

overwhelming culture of sexual abuse within the church...what went wrong? Or is it as some critics claim, a systemic problem that cannot be fixed but only burned down?

I have come to think that the issue, the failure, the cause of such unchecked, self-interested evil...is **us**. Our entire governance system, which I believe in, by the way, is built on the premise that every entity, agency and commission is accountable to its trustees/governing committee/directors. The unchecked actions of the General Counsel to the Executive Committee are the fault of a Trustee Board that assumed the best and accepted the words without inspecting the facts. If the values exhibited by the EC did not reflect the values of the Trustees representing the Convention of Churches, then the Trustees failed to demand changes so that they would. Were some or many of the Trustees ignorant of what was taking place? It seems likely; however, that does not change the responsibility.

*How did predators go unchecked in churches?* Did you know that 90% of churches do not even require background checks of its volunteers? There is limited if any accountability, lackadaisical processes in place for visible accountability, and a lack of courage to call out bad behavior. None of these single failures is ultimately responsible perhaps; but, taken together, they create the environment that breeds and leaves unchecked bad actions that harm real people and tarnishes the Name of Jesus.

In many cases, when allegations of abuse were reported, victims were coerced to remain silent to “protect the church.” Leaders were sent away quietly to protect the unity and testimony of the church. Many of these failures have now come to light and are the rightful source of shame, embarrassment, and dishonor toward the Name of Jesus. This alone is sufficient to prompt all Christ-followers to act...to restore the Name and fame of Jesus! I believe that the best way to do that is through humble acceptance of responsibility, intentional moves toward examining and correcting deficiencies, and a dogged determination to get it right.

Are there risks to doing so? Of course. Would it be easier or less costly to simply pull out, pull away, and disavow the institution? Perhaps. But are we ever called to live comfortably, rather than righteously and reverently?

I believe that the right course of action is to trust the Lord in repentance. This is not only (nor exclusive of) remorse. An element of that repentance must also be repair. We must rebuild the broken walls that protect us and promote the honor and glory of God. This is hard, and most helpful. Further, it faithfully fulfills the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Second, we must continue to work toward unity around the gospel. That means we should seek to gather and keep the family large. In times when doctrinal alignment is challenged, we should work to find ways to stay together, resorting to separation only as a last resort. That’s true for us as a Convention, for our church, as well as for our individual families. Jesus said we would be known by our love for one another, not how quickly we break fellowship with people who are different. This is a balancing act of sorts, an understanding of an ever-present tension in our lives. Inevitably, the gospel itself will divide people but those who go out from us should have

to (in paraphrase of CH Spurgeon) leap over our bodies as we throw ourselves wholly in their paths, seeking to block their way while pleading for their return to our common faith.

Third, we should be quicker with *charity* than *criticism*. Some of those who decry a liberal drift also have gone on record acknowledging that widespread drift is not evident in our seminaries or across the vast majority of our pulpits. They are angry about a few things, and they comment loudly and often. Sure, some liberalism may exist, but before we brand someone as a theological liberal or a social compromiser, we would be wise to understand his or her position clearly and seek to win them humbly to our way of thinking. Doing so would make the fault lines of our disagreement more clear and if unable to be bridged, at least there would be agreed upon differences.

Fourth, we must be on guard against the allure of this world's values. Here is what I mean. I saw an ugliness around political alliances that grieved me. While the SBC Pastor's Conference was going on, one of the candidates for Conference president was speaking at a meeting of a faction of SBC pastors that wanted to "change the direction." He is a precious brother in Christ. Many who followed him were dejected in his not being elected. The same is true in the SBC Presidential election, and other offices. It is as if there was loyalty to a political faction/party over loyalty to the entire body. When candidates lost, claims were suggested of impropriety, rather than acknowledgement that, perhaps, the Lord's will was done and they (that supported candidates that lost) were on the wrong side of the Lord's will. I recognize that I am susceptible to the same draw in my own heart; and I recognize that this is not the biblical example. When Judas' replacement was chosen to become one of the twelve, there were two men nominated and only one was chosen. What we don't read in the following verses is a call for a recount and a charge of ballot stuffing. (See Acts 1:15-26).

Fifth, we must guard our common work. One of the fruits of our unity is the resourcing of our mission force. Their work is so important to us. We should guard the unity so that we can continue to serve and resource our field personnel to fulfill the mission. Every time a family disagreement is splattered across the front page of some media outlet, we distract from the mission and threaten the resources that support our vital work.

Sixth, we cannot rest. Much work has been accomplished in the Pro-life movement, toward doctrinal fidelity, missional unity, and racial reconciliation. Much work remains in each of the areas and more. We must keep plowing while the sun is shining. Night comes when no man can work (John 9:4). If Roe is overturned, we cannot take a victory lap. The work of helping moms choose life and to build homes to flourish while raising children to know and love God is just beginning. The work of valuing the Imago Dei in every person of every ethnicity is only beginning. The work of pressing forward in the mission is only beginning. As Dr. Chitwood reminded us again, the biggest problem in the world is lostness and the gospel alone is the cure. We are stewards of that cure. We must bring the gospel to bear in every place and among every people on earth.

Seventh and finally, I want to be part of the solution. Life is too short to simply comment from the stands or criticize online. I want to be part of finishing the task, of making a difference, of spreading the fame and Name of Jesus. I want to compete, and not only to compete, but to win the prize! I want to go to heaven one day with my tongue hanging out and hear my Lord say, "Well done, hoss." I want to see lives changed, the broken find healing, the oppressed find justice, and the overlooked feel seen. That requires more and not less of me. More humility, more diligence, more effort, more devotion, more empathy, and more risk. And it will be worth every bit. I pray that I get the privilege to bring countless others with me as we pursue this high calling of representing the King in the expansion of His Kingdom for the glory of His Name.