

## The New Methodists

March 13, 2013

Most of my adult life has been spent in the study of Southern Baptist Evangelism. For several years, following the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, I was immersed heart and soul in the recovery and restoration of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. An invitation to address the SBC evangelism directors at a meeting in New Orleans came as a breath of fresh air, giving me a reason to lay the burden of recovery down and return to the passion of my adult life: the study of Southern Baptist evangelism. The prolonged absence from previous habits of research and study gave me “fresh eyes” as I renewed my research and reflections on SBC evangelism, and I noticed things unnoticed before. I have drawn some conclusions I feel I must share with you today. Along the way, the preparation of this presentation became the preparation of my soul for seeking a stirring of God’s Spirit in my heart and across the Southern Baptist Convention. May it be so for you as well.

The road we will walk begins with the amazing story of how Southern Baptists became the largest non-Catholic religious body in America.

The best snap shot is this. In 1945 Southern Baptists baptized approximately 257,000 people into their churches. In 1955, only ten years later, they baptized approximately 417,000 people, almost **doubling** in just ten years. To quote an ancient Hebrew expression: Wow! That is amazing, phenomenal growth.

How did we do it? The easiest way to explain it is this picture: **Old McBaptist had a farm!** Southern Baptists developed a way of doing church very similar to the way a farmer raises crops.

For instance, farmers need **land** in order to produce a harvest. Southern Baptists realized they needed a permanent presence in a community in order to reach that community, and so from their earliest beginnings they emphasized *church planting*. They knew starting churches would give them a continuing presence in the place where prospects lived.

Farmers know the crop they want to grow must match the **climate** they have. You can grow cotton in Mississippi, but it doesn't do well in northern Canada. To have evangelistic results churches need a climate **continually** affirming for the congregation the importance of sharing Christ with the lost.

Southern Baptists used *decisional preaching*, that preaching which calls for an immediate and public response, to help create and maintain a climate emphasizing evangelism in the worship services of our churches. In many ways the format of evangelistic crusades and revival meetings was **absorbed** into the normal style of worship for Southern Baptist churches. The invitation following every sermon was a weekly reminder that no one was right with God **until** they made a personal response to Christ. This was a constant reminder of **why** evangelism must be a priority in the programs and ministries of the church.

Farmers know they cannot get a harvest without **planting seed** in the soil. Southern Baptists realized that most of the unconverted did not come to church. They knew they had to get the gospel outside the walls of the church, and they did so with *personal evangelism* throughout the community.

For example, the typical Baptist church would devote at least one night a week to **evangelistic** visitation, going out to the families in the community for the specific purpose of sharing the gospel with them. Evangelism was not limited to pastors in the pulpit. It also involved the people of the church in face to face conversations with people they knew and did not know in the community.

But Farmers also know that planting seed will not in and of itself produce a crop.

Once planted in the soil, that seed must be **cultivated**. It needs enough water, but not too much. Bugs and disease must be kept at bay. Southern Baptists knew that sharing the gospel one time with a lost person would usually not result in conversion. A **process** of cultivation was necessary for those who heard the gospel but did not respond immediately. *Sunday School* became the cultivation strategy for SBC churches. It was the only thing you could join in an SBC church without being a member. Churches expected most Sunday school

classes to have lost and unchurched people present on a regular basis. Why Sunday School? It was an efficient way to harness the power of ...

... **“Biblerelationships”**. That is my word to describe the combination of Bible teaching and relationship building at the heart of the Southern Baptist approach to Sunday School. **All ages** were involved in Sunday School. Those who came would hear the Bible, promoting better understanding of the gospel, **and** they would form meaningful relationships with Christians in the class. Sunday school classes taught the Bible **and** had ice cream fellowships. There were devotionals and hymns, **but** they also sent members to visit classmates in the hospital and prepare massive amounts of food for those who lost loved ones. The **Biblerelationship** combination of teaching Scripture **and** nurturing relationships was a powerful tool for cultivation, often used by the Holy Spirit to draw closer those **from all age groups** who had heard the gospel but not yet responded.

With the right climate, proper planting, and cultivation...

...the farmer knows his crop will ripen and be ready for **harvest** in due time. Southern Baptists used *revival meetings* as their primary harvest tool. For at least one or two weeks each year the whole attention of the church was focused on the simple question, “What is the status of your relationship with God?” Many a revival message included simple explanations of how to become a Christian and powerful appeals to repent and believe. It became a very normal time for those who had heard the gospel clearly explained **over time** and formed **meaningful relationships with Christians** in the church to come to the point of faith themselves.

It is important that we understand the true nature of the genius of Southern Baptist evangelism. It was not the individual methods used that produced such an incredible harvest. Rather, **the interaction of those methods with each other** created an integrated process described in the New Testament as sowing and reaping. Wheels alone can generate power. But if you add cogs to those wheels so that they form a gear, you multiply the power those wheels produce.

Old McBaptist, **integrating** church planting, decisional preaching, personal evangelism, Sunday School, and revival meetings with each other, had a great process that produced much fruit.

It embodied the biblical process of sowing and reaping, (see for example I Cor. 3:6 “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase), You would find it interesting to know that these particular interactive methods were not the result of a search for a way to embody that process in churches. The lack of comment on the way these individual methods became an integrated process characteristic of SBC churches is one of the more astounding discoveries of my research. We will come back to this later.

Let’s go back to those baptism statistics. In 1945 the SBC baptized about 257,000 people. In 1955 the SBC baptized about 417,000 people. But since 1955 the SBC never yet reached the mark of 450,000 baptisms. We doubled in baptisms in ten years, but then could not increase 35,000 in more than 50 years. What happened to the harvest?

We have more churches, more Baptists, more ministries and missionaries, and more resources, but less fruit. What happened to the farm?

For many years I said: “Southern Baptists are a harvest -oriented denomination living in the midst of an unseeded generation.” We reduced planting, neglected cultivation, and not surprisingly have found the harvest coming up short. While this is still true, I now realize something more is going on.

Today I say: We are more like gardeners working the window boxes than farmers working the fields. The focus of our attention has become more internal, inside the church, than external, in the field. You can get a beautiful bouquet for the table from a window, but to get a cash crop you have to work the field.

Given the present state of most of our churches, “We are like the grandchildren of farmers keeping harvest stories alive over coffee and dessert at family reunions.” The most important question facing the SBC today is: Why?

The methods we use are not the crucial issue. The Bible speaks little of methods. An open fire, an oven, or a microwave will all accomplish the same purpose. Tasks will always outlive methods. By the way, this applies to whatever better way of doing things some of you might develop as well!

The amount of money available to spend on evangelism is not the crucial issue. In 1906 W. W. Hamilton created the first department of evangelism for the SBC. With no budget allocation at all, he found a way for the department to make a great impact and grow to include more than 20 evangelists. After a tragic embezzlement by the treasurer of the Home Mission Board, the Board was nearly bankrupted and had to shut down the evangelism department for a decade.

In 1936 Roland Q. Leavell was asked to relaunch the department with only one staff member— himself! With little money and no assistance he laid the groundwork for the greatest period of fruitfulness in the history of the SBC.

During that legendary period of 1945 to 1955, when we doubled in baptisms, the staff of the evangelism department never grew larger than 3 people, including a secretary. Money is important, even very important, but it is not the crucial issue reducing our fruitfulness. Having more money will not turn things around.

The gospel's power is not the crucial issue. Our message has the same power to transform any human life today that it had in the first century of the church. The penitentiary in Angola, LA is the only maximum security prison in the state. With more than 5,000 prisoners, it houses the largest collection of violent people in the United States and has long been known as the bloodiest prison in America. More than 90 percent of the men have prison sentences so long they will die and be buried in prison. Most would agree these men must be terrible prospects for salvation, much less for a call to the ministry.

In 1995 began a program of training for ministry in the Angola prison, teaching a small group of prisoners whom God had touched the same curriculum we teach in the Seminary's Leavell College. The results have been stunning. We have nearly 200 graduates to date, and upon completion of their

studies each man becomes a pastor in some part of the prison. Call it a cell church movement! Violence has dropped dramatically. The prison has become a different place, amazing people in the justice system all over the United States.

The impact of these prison preachers has been so great they are now being sent out two by two into other prisons to teach there what they learned in Angola. There is that ancient Hebrew expression again. Wow! The gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of incredible power still today! **WHAT THEN, IS WRONG?**

**Discipleship** is the crucial issue. The **spiritual state of the farmer (our churches and leadership)**, not the abundance of the harvest is the root of problems in SBC evangelism. At the end of the day this is the hard truth staring at me. The best question then, is: What is wrong with us?

**First, We are not anointed.** The conversion of a soul to Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit. The stirring of a church and community in revival and awakening is a work of the Holy Spirit. Neither of these works of the Spirit are **typical** in SBC churches today. We are not anointed. That “we” would be you, me and all of us at work in places with little evidence of the activity of the Holy Spirit. We are so **not** anointed we have come to accept not being anointed as **normal**.

**Second, we are Distracted.** For many, many years we have had a Great Commission strategy, firmly in place. It was widely known and clearly understood, creating a “work the plan” mentality among our ministries and church leaders. After decades of immersion in this “work the plan” mentality, we began dividing our attention into smaller pieces absorbing more and more time and energy on internal issues.

When we noticed the stalling out of Baptism numbers, we gave that particular bottom line more and more attention. We began a passionate search for methods to make the harvest bigger. In so doing we were distracted from the health of the PROCESS that had been culminating in what was an expanding harvest of souls.

When we noticed the liberal drifts of our schools and publications, we invested massive energy and resources in a successful call back to the Bible. We later followed that with a call on the part of some for Southern Baptists to embrace Calvinism and a Reformed theological identity, a discussion that began dividing those united in the call for a return to the inerrancy of Scripture and splitting a number of our churches.

In 1996 we began a massive restructuring of SBC entities. Some were eliminated. Others were combined with other entities or merged to create something new. This was managed with a only a moderate amount of tension. About a decade later we began yet another restructuring process. This time the SBC funding distribution process was the focus. Again it unsettled relationships & created tensions, often among those who were together in the previous restructuring. Along the way it rendered nearly invisible and negligible in impact the largest evangelistic effort the SBC had ever undertaken.

My point is to comment on the EFFECT, not the wisdom or necessity of these SBC wide discussions. After decades with an identity and strategy we embraced wholeheartedly, we began viewing the future with uncertainty, a new experience for modern Southern Baptists.

Dealing with such distractions drained confidence in our understanding of and commitment to the SBC's Great Commission game plan. The high tide of strategic confidence for which we were quite well known in the Evangelical world began to ebb, making our plans sound more like wishful thinking than expected success. Today we are more like a driver in unfamiliar territory than a racer roaring down the track.

More importantly, **Southern Baptists are becoming the new Methodists.**

I love Methodists! They played a key role in the First and Second Great Awakenings. Their concept of a circuit riding preacher was a brilliant strategy for the circumstances of the day. With it they were able to multiply church starts faster than they multiplied church pastors, enabling them to evangelize the

American Frontier in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They made holy living a core value and were called Methodists because they went about it so systematically and methodically. Much of what Southern Baptists know about evangelistic harvesting we learned from Methodists. Many have observed Methodists and Baptists and noticed their kinship. I love what a Presbyterian minister in the movie *"A River Runs Through It"* would tell his sons about Methodists. Watch and listen:

"Methodists are just Baptists who can read."

The Methodists of today, however, have changed much through the years. Their efforts in evangelism and missions have **greatly** diminished. The passion for holy living has been replaced by behavior blending with the culture, rather than contrasting with the culture. Their greatest theological fight is over the normalcy of homosexuality. But most surprising of all, they have set new records for the **fastest** loss of membership in the history of the church in America. Having observed these changes in Methodism, I find myself admitting today that we are following in their footsteps. **Southern Baptists are the New Methodists.**

In what ways are we similar? **Universalism** is settling into our pews as more and more Southern Baptists believe and behave as though they believe a personal relationship with Christ is not necessary for one to be right with God. **Tolerance** is beginning to overtake conviction as growing numbers of us are less comfortable with taking a firm stance on moral or doctrinal issues. Fuzzy is more comfortable than clear. **More importantly, our behavior**, the way we live our lives, is blending more and more with our culture. We are growing ever less distinct and recognizable in the crowd of our nation's population. It is becoming as easy to get drunk at a Baptist wedding as any other kind of wedding. We go to the same movies, watch the same TV shows, and get comfortable using the same coarse language our neighbors use. It is as likely for a Baptist kid to choose a school or community soccer tournament over church as any other kid in the neighborhood. It is not a coincidence that we are also moving from growth to plateau to decline in the membership of our churches.

Since 1983 I have been saying seventy percent of our churches are plateaued or declining.

If we apply the traditional measurement of growth to the 2007 SBC church statistics, the number of growing churches is about the same as it has been for a long time, the number of plateaued churches is smaller, and the number of **declining** churches is **larger**. But the most recent news is more sobering than that. Look at this next chart carefully.

The green line indicates the number of growing churches. (8, 765) The red line indicates the number of plateaued churches. (13, 323) The black line indicates the number of declining churches. In 2011, for the first time we had more declining churches than growing churches. (9, 174)

The bottom line: On the whole our Great Commission momentum as a Convention has disappeared. To quote a different ancient Hebrew expression: Uh Oh! What is happening? What I have come to realize is that also included in our evangelistic process in our days of greatest growth was a very aggressive discipleship process. Our Great Commission strategy for many years included a widely known and clearly understood process for discipleship.

Here is a snapshot of some of the elements of discipleship process that was found in the typical Southern Baptist church of any size and location. A Sunday night program included small group discipleship training for **all ages** of the church **and** an evening service. Each January there was a four to six day Bible conference teaching one book of the Bible to all ages. At least once and often more frequently there were special events called study courses to train every age group in some aspect of Baptist and church life. In addition there was a weekly missions training program for young boys and girls, along with youth camp and children's camp in the summer. Plus more. **Though often criticized for overemphasizing conversion, in reality the opposite is true.**

**In the era of our greatest evangelistic growth, typical SBC churches had more discipleship activities than evangelistic activities. Aggressive evangelism was matched by aggressive discipleship. We were disciplistic. That is another one of my words. By it I mean an evangelistic discipleship that continually seeks to incorporate both evangelism and discipleship at the same time.**

When did this emphasis on aggressive discipleship began to fade? During the late sixties. When did our evangelistic fruitfulness began to fade? During the seventies. When our baptismal numbers started to weaken, we intensified our focus on evangelistic strategies and methods, but we failed to reinvent or replace our discipleship process. Hear this from one who is an evangelist by calling. **We should have paid more attention to our discipleship process.**

Apparently the biblical worldview that unconsciously inspired doing church like a farm in SBC life is like the baton for the USA Men's relay team in the Beijing Olympics.

You are looking at a picture of some the fastest sprinters the U.S. ever produced, but all their speed and talent meant nothing, because the baton fell between them. Earlier Southern Baptists did not have a task force that developed the "Old McBaptist" paradigm an intentional plan for the **Convention** on how to do church evangelistically in order to reach people. But over time, our churches and various leaders, by the grace of God, worked out an evangelistic discipleship that wove the process of sowing and reaping into ordinary process of church life.

As time went by and the world changed, that biblical worldview inspiring evangelistic discipleship dropped between SBC generations. The heart for evangelism remained strong, but the concern for discipleship was significantly weakened. When we did make an SBC plan for evangelism, we planned to improve the **harvest** component of our Baptist farm, not the integrated process.

As time has gone by, we neither **maintained nor reinvented** the process that made us so fruitful in earlier days. Time had its impact. It always does.. Now

others may be running the race, but we are still trying to get a fresh grip on the baton of a **discipl-istic worldview. Remember my word! Dicipisitc means an evangelistic discipleship that seeks to incorporate both evangelism and discipleship at the same time.**

To put this another way: how we do church matters! While we increased the emphasis on how our way of doing church affected the lost, we failed to notice how it was affecting the saved.

Changes and innovations were added to make the church **more welcoming** to the lost and unchurched in many of our churches, but **little** was done to improve the way we inspire evangelistic discipleship and make it more desirable for believers in most of our churches to look like Jesus.

Upon reflection, the most significant and influential death in the modern history of the Southern Baptist Convention was the death of our discipleship process.

Let me say this again. The defining characteristic of Southern Baptists at our best was being discipl-istic, having a passionate evangelistic discipleship. We refused to let go of one in order to pursue the other. When we loosened our grip on one to strengthen our grip on the other, we ultimately weakened both **dramatically.**

Today, **we** do not know who we are. The **world** does not know who we are. Our **lost friends and neighbors** do not know who we are. In the New Testament world believers lived differently than their neighbors. That is how they came to be called Christians, which was a term of derision, not respect. **Our problem is not that more of us don't witness to our neighbors. Our problem is that more of us do not look like and live like Jesus.**

If we do not produce children, youth, and adults who live out a biblical worldview, no strategy for doing church will make us salt and light in the world. If we are not salt and light we cannot penetrate our culture. Let me illustrate by letting you listen to four voices. Any country music fan will recognize the first voice as the legendary Johnny Cash. It is hard to imagine a baby boomer who

cares about music not recognizing the second voice as Bob Dylan, one of the most distinctive voices of his generation. Number three is for a younger generation. Urban music fans of today are bound to recognize Eminem as the third voice. He is the one of the most popular musical artists on the scene today, the only rapper to win an Oscar for music.

The fourth voice? Only his mother and the Shazam apps for I-phones would know that is Ron Dante singing Rock Me Gently. His style is smooth and clear. His rendition of this song was in a very popular commercial. But it lacks the distinctive quality you cannot help but notice in the others.

Southern Baptists are not losing our voice. We are losing the **distinctiveness** of our voice in the midst of today's culture. We are **blending in** with the lost more than we **are standing out**.

Here is the most important lesson. Aggressive evangelism without aggressive discipleship will eventually undo itself, as will aggressive discipleship without aggressive evangelism.

The most crucial issue in SBC evangelism today is the need to reinvent a process to bring our children, youth, and adults to spiritual maturity in an evangelistic way. We need discipl-istic churches!

Baptist believers must be taught how to be the distinctive presence of Christ in the culture. We must be the salt our neighbors cannot fail to taste; the light the world around us cannot fail to see. As Jesus himself noted in Matthew 5:13-14, salt that is not salty is not good for anything but throwing out. Light that is under a bushel is useless. We are the textbook illustration of why the Great Commission Commands us to baptize and teach!

Is there more to SBC problems than this? Yes! But there is at least this.

We are becoming the New Methodists.

In 2 Chronicles 7:14-15 we read,

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” But don’t stop there. Keep Reading!

The Lord goes on to say, “But if you turn aside. . . Then I will pluck you up from my land. . . and this house that I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight. . .”

The picture you are seeing is the Western Wall of the temple mount in Jerusalem, also called the wailing wall. The large stones at the base of the wall are all that is left of God’s temple during the time of Jesus. The crowds you see are there every day. Jews and pilgrims from all over the world come to see and weep over what was lost and pray that one day all will be restored. Here is what we know stated as simply as I know how to state it.

In times past God has worked through our Southern Baptist churches in a mighty way. In times present God is not working in a mighty way through most of our churches. How are you going to respond to this? How am I going to respond to this?

If we as a people do not repent now, only one question remains: To what wall will our children return to weep and remember the glory of what the SBC was?

What is needed now? PRAY! We do not need a task force. We do not need a five step plan. We do not need a clever and insightful book. What we need is for God to move in our hearts. What we need is repentance over what we missed and overlooked as we took our place on the stage of greatness. What we need are clean hearts and a willingness to follow if only God will have mercy and lead us to fruitfulness again.

I leave you at this wall, for it is to this wall that God has brought me in my spirit as I prepared this presentation. Perhaps he intends to bring you to the wailing wall as well. May God have mercy on us all. If He does not move, we cannot advance.

