



# **FUNDING YOUR CHURCH PLANT**

Should an Independent Baptist  
Accept Funds from the SBC?

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## Introduction

**T**here are two years of ministry that stand out as launching forth moments in my mind.

The first is 1986 when the Lord led my wife, Terrie, and me to Lancaster, California, where a small and struggling congregation of twelve members asked us to come. We didn't know it until some weeks after we arrived, but the church was involved in two lawsuits and a foreclosure. We did know that the church could not afford to pay our support. We asked a few likeminded churches to support us as we got started and lived on a shoestring budget until our church grew and was able to pay us a salary.

The Lord blessed. To His glory, our church has seen tens of thousands of people saved. We have been able to start a

Christian school and a Bible college, have built nearly \$90 million in buildings, and for the past several years have given over \$1 million annually to missions. All of this has been without receiving money from a denomination or fellowship.

The second year that stands out so clearly is 1995 when our church family voted unanimously to begin West Coast Baptist College. That fall, we opened our doors to forty-three students. Since 1995, the Lord has allowed us to see over three thousand graduates serving Him around the globe. Many of these graduates are church planters—here in the States and on mission fields around the world. I thank God for each of them and for their faith to follow the New Testament pattern of serving in or planting churches as centers for the spread of the gospel.

Over recent months, some church planters have asked me about the assistance they have been offered by representatives of the North American Mission Board (NAMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). They have either been approached directly by representatives of NAMB or introduced at meetings where the hosts present the SBC funding and affiliation as an option for assistance. These church planters or “re-planters” are told that if they simply sign to agree with SBC doctrine and provide some support back to the convention, they can receive funds from NAMB. It seems to them an expedited process for getting engaged in the work of church planting to which God has called them, and they have asked what I think.

While I understand the attractiveness of this offer, I also know from experience—my own and the many church planters our church supports—that it is not as essential or helpful in the longview as it may initially seem. I would like to respectfully submit to the reader some thoughts and biblical principles to be considered in this matter.

My own background is independent Baptist. I'm grateful for the mentoring I received from men such as Dr. Lee Roberson who aided the planting of hundreds of churches—directly throughout Tennessee and indirectly through training church planters at Tennessee Temple University. Although Dr. Roberson was educated at Southern Baptist schools, he became an independent Baptist, and he trained the church planters at Tennessee Temple in independent Baptist principles for funding both their church plant and their missions programs.

When it comes to independent Baptist church planters today being offered and receiving funds from NAMB, there are significant reasons that I do not encourage this partnership which I would like to share with you in these pages. These are principles for consideration I shared with a college class I taught recently. I offer these thoughts prayerfully, as well-intentioned men may not realize some of the “yoking” that takes place in these support relationships. Also, I have asked several men who are within the SBC to read this article for accuracy. Their comments and insight have been helpful. Several commented they regret the truths I have revealed, but agree the concern is warranted. I am not writing to condemn

people who have taken funds from NAMB. But I am not convinced that the preachers considering this route are thinking this through with a big-picture view and considering “the end of a thing” (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

Allow me to explain.



# 1

## Concerns for the Direction of the SBC

I pray for victories for the biblical conservatives remaining in the Southern Baptist Convention. And while I am grateful for the conservative resurgence of the SBC in the '80s and '90s, there are current trends within the convention that are deeply troubling. I wrote about some of these concerns in my book *Keep the Faith*, which includes Dr. Don Sisk's story of leaving the convention and his present-day concerns for it as well.<sup>1</sup>

My study of recent convention history and my interviews with godly men, including Dr. Jerry Vines (a previous president of the SBC), have given me sufficient facts to state that the convention which once returned to the inerrancy of Scripture and a submission to its authority is now a body

struggling with a myriad of theological and practical issues. As you read through some of these issues in the coming pages, consider the significance of them and what a financial tie to them means for a new church planter and for that church plant in the decades to come.

From my conversations with those who have been approached by NAMB, it seems they are under two inaccurate impressions: First, that the SBC is fully conservative in doctrine and practice with all churches and SBC entities aligning with the *Baptist Faith & Message* doctrinal statement. As much as I wish this was true, it is not, as you'll see throughout the next few pages. Second, that the funds from NAMB are more or less "free money" without a significant commitment to the SBC as a whole. This is also inaccurate. Church planters who receive funds from NAMB are (understandably) required to give money back to the SBC. In fact, the official list of expectations for NAMB church planters includes this: "Lead church plant in a minimum of 10% missions giving: minimum 6% to SBC Cooperative Program and 4% to other SBC Great Commission causes."<sup>2</sup> Thus, church planters who receive money from NAMB are choosing to plant an SBC church, and their church plant will be tied to the SBC for years to come. With these facts in mind, church planters should thoroughly consider the direction of the SBC and how that relates to the Cooperative Fund to which they will be contributing.

Allow me to first share a few of the concerning recent trends within the SBC. Every one of the concerns listed here are significant biblical issues, especially for churches.

## **Ordaining Woman Pastors**

The New Testament is clear on the intrinsic value and spiritual worth of women. Both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and both are equal in Christ through salvation: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Throughout the New Testament, we also see women engaged in meaningful roles of ministry within the church.

But the New Testament is also clear that God gave men and women different roles in marriage (1 Peter 3:7) and in the church. Regarding the church, the Bible gives straightforward directions in both 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:35: “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” “And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

My wife Terrie is an avid student of God’s Word and a capable Bible teacher. She has spoken to ladies over the years and has occasionally given a testimony of thanksgiving in our church assembly. But scripturally, neither she nor I believe it is a woman’s place to teach or preach the Word of God in a mixed congregation.

Yet, in spite of the clear teaching of Scripture on this topic, and seemingly in an attempt to please our culture, I’m watching SBC leaders explain these verses away as they blur

the lines of male pastoral leadership in preaching settings. Here are a few examples:

### ***Saddleback Church***

For those who follow SBC conversations, Saddleback Church is the most currently talked about example of woman pastors. Here's what happened: On May 6, 2021, Saddleback Church, at the time an SBC church pastored by Rick Warren, ordained three woman pastors.<sup>3</sup> It wasn't until March of 2023 (nearly two years later) that the SBC finally made the decision to disfellowship Saddleback due to this issue.

End of story with the concern resolved, right? Actually, no. Saddleback itself is not letting go of this. Andy Wood, the current pastor of Saddleback Church (whose wife Stacie serves as a co-pastor and preaches at Saddleback)<sup>4</sup> doubled down on their church's position with a video describing why the church will continue to have women in pastoral roles.<sup>5</sup> And in a recent interview with Russell Moore (the previous president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission), Rick Warren asserted that he intends to bring this issue up at SBC's upcoming annual meeting in June in an attempt to get the decision overturned.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the SBC Executive Committee has been unwilling to allow a proposed amendment to the *Baptist Faith & Message* clarifying the SBC position on women pastors to come up for a vote at the annual SBC meeting. What will instead be voted on at the next SBC meeting is whether or not Saddleback should be allowed as an SBC church.<sup>7</sup>

But Saddleback is not the only SBC church with woman pastors.

### ***NAMB-funded Churches with Female Pastors***

Recently, a team of researchers from the Conservative Baptist Network (a group of men within the SBC) compiled a document describing their concerns in the leftward drift they are seeing with the SBC. On the subject of women pastors, they wrote the following:

In 2020, Nate Schломann discovered five NAMB-funded church plants that had female pastors.<sup>8</sup> NAMB claims to have extensive vetting wherein every church planter is assessed, trained, and coached through the Send Network.<sup>9</sup> Southern Baptists are concerned that NAMB evidently failed to recognize and consequently funded multiple church plants which contradict the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*.

A notable example, the North American Mission Board included Echo Church as a residency church where aspiring church planters can be mentored for future ministry.<sup>10</sup> This was while Echo Church had multiple female pastors on staff<sup>11</sup> and operated an “evangelistic” alcoholic beverage brewery.<sup>12</sup>

An SBC pastor, himself once a NAMB church planter recently posted similar concerns on twitter in an eleven-tweet thread explaining why their church is now earmarking funds away from NAMB. Among the reasons he gave

was egalitarianism. (Abbreviations are his for the brevity on Twitter.)

NAMB has an egalitarianism problem, and little progress has been made. When multiple egal church plants were found, no one was held accountable. The leadership up and down NAMB continually communicates that they are soft on this issue.

It is very obvious that whatever adherence to complementarianism NAMB as a whole has is begrudging, and not convictional.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Beth Moore***

Although no longer a Southern Baptist, Beth Moore was in 2019 when she announced on Twitter that she would be bringing a message in a Southern Baptist Church on Mother's Day.<sup>14</sup> In response to an SBC seminary professor who wrote a blog calling Moore out and highlighting the complementarian order of Scripture, Moore doubled down. Rather than clarifying or more fully explaining what role her presence and words would play in that church service, she wrote a series of tweets in which she claimed that the Holy Spirit was calling her "to draw attention to the sexism & misogyny that is rampant in segments of the SBC, cloaked by piety & bearing the stench of hypocrisy."<sup>15</sup>

### ***Additional Examples***

Mike Law, an SBC pastor in Virginia who proposed the amendment the SBC Executive Committee has prevented

from coming up for vote, says that what prompted his concern wasn't actually Saddleback Church. It was that in "just a five-mile radius of Arlington Baptist, I had noticed five other SBC churches that had female pastors on staff."<sup>16</sup>

This is not a limited issue in the SBC, relative only to one megachurch. This has to do with the convention itself and many churches within it.

For now, it is yet to be seen where the convention will stand—or if they will take a stand—on the subject of woman pastors. My greatest concern for the SBC on this issue is that denominations that change their position on women pastors invariably become LGBTQ affirming. (In fact, Saddleback Church is already partnering with LGBTQ-inclusive organizations in their outreach.<sup>17</sup>) There is something about a willingness to bend to culture on the biblical distinctions God makes for men and women's roles in the church that leads to caving to culture on all issues of gender and sexuality. Why any independent Baptist would consider any type of affiliation with the SBC when such questions are at play is amazing to me.

## **Weak Stand on LGBTQ Issues and Homosexual Involvement in Ministry**

Churches can say that they hold to the biblical definition of marriage and gender identity, even in their doctrinal statement. But if they refuse to address LGBTQ lifestyles as

sinful when it comes to church membership and ministry involvement, they do not really believe it.

At Lancaster Baptist Church, as well as all churches I know of with a heart for outreach, we invite all people to hear the gospel. But, according to 1 Corinthians 5, we cannot biblically allow people to become or continue as members who are living in open, sexual sin. Whether it is cohabitation or practicing homosexuality, we must draw the line where God does.

Yet, prominent churches within the SBC are clearly struggling here. Here are a few examples.

### ***First Baptist Orlando***

In prepared comments early last year, the senior associate pastor of First Baptist Orlando read a list of the variety of people attending and serving in the church. In these comments he said, “We have transgender, LGBTQ, straight, single, married, divorced, and cohabitating people. These same people attend, listen, serve, grow, and give.”<sup>18</sup> (It is worth noting that not only is First Baptist Orlando an SBC church, but this associate pastor, Danny de Armas, was formerly the head of NAMB’s board of trustees.)<sup>19</sup>

Not only does First Baptist Orlando allow people living in open sexual sin to be members in good standing, it also allows these members to baptize new converts. Recent social media posts show Joe Mills, an openly gay man who is currently “married” to another man, performing baptisms at First Baptist Church Orlando.<sup>20</sup>



## ***Echo Church***

A few years back, Andy Wood, then-pastor of Echo Church, more recently the new senior pastor of Saddleback Church, made these comments in a message titled, “What Does the Bible Say About LGBTQ+?”:

We embrace that diversity. And within that, we have people who are of different sexual orientations. We have people who are heterosexual, some people who are gay, and we have a lot of disparity and a lot of differences in our church. ... And we’re going to have to have an agreement on the front end that maybe on the backend we won’t all see eye-to-eye with one another, but we can create a community where we love each other, where we care for one another, and it’s a safe place to be different from people other than yourself.<sup>21</sup>

I can appreciate the desire to let unsaved people with sinful lives know that the gospel is for them, which was surely part of the motivation for Wood’s comments. But if we are unwilling to name the sins the Bible names, especially the sins that are currently prominent in our culture, we are not really calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus as their Savior.

Later in the same message,

Wood compares a gay person who struggles with giving up a relationship with their partner, to what he would do if God asked him to give up his wife Stacie. He begins to cry because he says he doesn’t know what he would do if God asked him to give up his wife. Why would God ask him to give up his wife? How are these two relationships

comparable? And he's suggesting that struggle is like a gay person giving up a homosexual relationship.<sup>22</sup>

These two examples are a sampling of the current trends among Christianity at large, including SBC pastors in particular, in struggling to make direct, forthright statements about God's standards of marriage, sexuality, and gender. I appreciate those who have taken a strong stance on it. It seems to me that they are in the minority and that the SBC as a whole is going to struggle with this in the years ahead.

## Social Justice & CRT

Every truly Bible-believing Christian stands against racism and injustice. But today's ideas of social justice, often linked with Critical Race Theory (CRT), are not friends of biblical Christianity.

I have written about specific concerns with social justice in the little book *Which Justice?* as well as in *Keep the Faith*. But in short, the social justice movement of today has much more to do with insisting that *categories* of people, as opposed to *individuals*, have not received justice over time and thus should be treated differently today—even when there are not immediate instances of injustice in an individual's life. Many who are driving the social justice agenda have openly-stated goals for the destruction of the nuclear family and the promotion of an LGBTQ agenda. Christians who jump on the social justice bandwagon find themselves tied to causes that have nothing to do with the gospel and often undermine the very foundations of the gospel.

Closely tied to social justice is an adherence to CRT. The premise of CRT is that “the very concept of race was constructed in order to benefit whites at the expense of people of color.”<sup>23</sup> A result of this approach is that “Even if a white person has never had a genuinely racist thought or he has repented of past racism, he is still a racist, white supremacist, because he is white and belongs to the majority.”<sup>24</sup>

These ideas are the antithesis of the gospel which teaches us that there is one race (the human race) which is a fallen race in need of a Savior. It also makes unity within a church impossible because it says that white church members will always be guilty of racism.

Yet, in 2019, at the SBC annual meeting, the convention passed Resolution 9, affirming that CRT could be used as a “set of analytical tools that explain how race has and continues to function in society.” While the resolution did “denounce the misuse of Critical Race Theory,” the decision to use it is a puzzle. Why use a theory at all that is actually anti-scriptural?

In their thorough document, *The Evidences of Concern within the Southern Baptist Convention*, a team of researchers from the Conservative Baptist Network documented several instances of CRT among SBC professors, presidents, and leaders.<sup>25</sup> Here are a couple who were included in their report:

Matthew Hall, the former dean of Boyce College at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 2016–2019, as well as the former provost and senior vice president of academic administration at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) from 2019–2022, and also a former research

fellow for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) from 2014–2022, was the guest of the *Coffee and Cream* podcast on July 15, 2018. In the podcast, Hall speaks to the racial reconciliation he believes is needed in the Southern Baptist Convention. Toward the end of the video he says the following:

I am a racist, okay, so if that freaks you out, if you think the worst thing somebody can call you is a racist, then you're not thinking biblically, because guess what, like, I'm gonna struggle with racism and white supremacy until the day I die and get my glorified body and in a completely renewed and sanctified mind. Because I am immersed in a culture where I benefit from racism all the time.<sup>26</sup>

Dhati Lewis, former president of Send Network, the church planting arm of the North American Mission Board (NAMB), on his podcast *Where Life Exists*, said the following. (Notice how these statements reveal a lack of clarity on the gospel as it attempts to conflate the gospel and social justice issues. The emphasis below is mine.)

The gospel is not simply a message for the afterlife. It has real-time, real-life applications for our day-to-day lives. . . . **The gospel is not good news without spiritual redemption and restoration, but the gospel is also not good news without emotional, economic, and social restoration, as well.**

...Traditionally, this is how we share the gospel, right? . . . God created the world, and it was good. We lived in perfect relationship with God, with one another, and

his creation. However: sin. Adam and Eve came in, sinned, and the whole world was put under a curse, bringing separation between us and God....But when we learn the truth of the gospel, we learn that Jesus came to earth, died for our sins, and rose again and that if we repent and believe, then we can have access to God.

...Do you recognize how this gospel presentation falls short? Sin caused brokenness to more than just our spiritual needs. I believe Tim Keller is spot on when he says we must neither confuse evangelism with doing justice nor separate them from one another. You see, the gospel demands the church engage holistically with our cities.<sup>27</sup>

Did you catch how in his second paragraph he articulated the historic, biblical gospel—really as defined in 1 Corinthians 15—that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, rose, and offers eternal life to all who believe, but then in the following paragraph said that this gospel presentation “falls short”? That’s deeply concerning.

These examples are a small sample of an ongoing sickness of social justice and CRT that seems to be spreading throughout the SBC.

My observation was that much of this progression was accelerated when J. D. Greear became the SBC president—a role he served in for three years, due to Covid. Although there is much to appreciate about Greear and his emphasis on outreach, his openness to social justice has been undiscerning at best and led the SBC in a less gospel-focused direction.

Although not a Southern Baptist, Timothy Keller has similarly articulated the need for greater involvement in social justice issues in his book *Center Church*, which has undoubtedly influenced many Southern Baptists in shaping their ministry philosophy for church planting. (In his book, *Gospel*, J. D. Greear said Keller’s “thinking has so permeated my own that I can no longer really tell where his stops and mine starts.”<sup>28</sup>) In his book, Keller says that we cannot change culture simply “through lots of conversions.”<sup>29</sup> I disagree. Scripture teaches that the truly converted become “a new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17). As someone grows in their faith, everything about their life will change, including developing biblical viewpoints on moral and social issues. Those who insist that a focus on social justice must accompany the gospel can do the gospel itself an injustice by seemingly suggesting that the gospel alone is not enough to transform lives. In a personal interview I had with Dr. Jerry Vines a few years ago, I mentioned this concern, and he offered an important insight: “If everything is the gospel, then nothing is the gospel.”<sup>30</sup>

I’m concerned that the current trend of churches to lean into social justice issues, even at the expense of clarity on the gospel, is rooted in a lack of conviction in the sufficiency of Scripture to address cultural and personal sins. But using the world’s answers to solve problems will not only be ineffective; it will pull churches away from a dependence on Scripture as their final authority for faith and practice.

## Alcohol Consumption

Like some of the other topics mentioned in these pages, alcohol consumption is significant because of its blatant disregard for Scripture. Actually, the SBC used to be known for its stand against alcohol. (What is today the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission actually traces back to a standing Committee on Temperance in the early 1900s.<sup>31</sup>)

But as recently as 2006, the topic of alcohol was raised at the SBC's annual meeting with vigorous discussion. The *Baptist Press* reported: "A lengthy debate on a recommendation concerning the use of alcoholic beverages consumed the Resolution Committee's report in the morning session. In a departure from recent years, the committee needed the evening session to complete its report."<sup>32</sup> After the meeting, "former SBC president Bobby Welch ... told SBC Life the biggest surprise for him from the convention was 'that several Southern Baptist pastors actually came to a microphone and publicly promoted the drinking of alcoholic beverages and wanted the SBC to do the same.'"<sup>33</sup>

In the end, the resolution passed, which included "our total opposition to the manufacturing, advertising, distributing and consuming of alcoholic beverages" and "we urge that no one be elected to serve as a trustee or member of any entity or committee of the Southern Baptist Convention that is a user of alcoholic beverages."<sup>34</sup> However, research conducted by LifeWay just twelve years later reported that

“About one third of Baptists admit to drinking alcohol.”<sup>35</sup> One SBC professor summed it up well: “I believe we are seeing a change from total abstinence to a trend of acceptance of alcohol among Southern Baptists,” said Evan Lenow, an ethics professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. “The emphasis has moved from warnings about alcohol to highlighting Christian freedom.”<sup>36</sup>

It is worth pointing out that the NAMB code of conduct requires abstinence: “I will abstain from the consumption of any alcoholic beverage or illegal drugs.”<sup>37</sup> However, my observation is that the SBC as a whole is weakening on this issue.

## **Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC)**

Those familiar with SBC cooperative program know that is used to finance the North American Mission Board, International Mission Board, six Southern Baptist seminaries in America, and the ERLC.

Initially formed as the public policy arm of the SBC, the ERLC seems to be consistently pulling left from the stated position of the SBC as a whole. In recent decades, the ERLC has shown remarkable drift. Rather than taking firm and clear stands for religious freedom and the moral positions stated in the SBC’s *Baptist Faith and Message*, such as the sanctity of life, traditional definition of marriage, and biblical gender distinction, the ERLC has leaned into issues of social justice and wokism.



For instance, a recent report revealed that the ERLC received a \$701,000 donation from Servant Foundation, the organization behind the He Gets Us campaign. (NAMB received another \$7,000.)<sup>38</sup> This campaign features video ads about a Jesus who, as one author wrote, “is nothing more than an inspiring human who relates to our problems and cares a whole lot about a culturally palatable version of social justice.”<sup>39</sup>

Another example took place in 2022 when Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed to the US Supreme Court. The ERLC twitter account posted the congratulations of its president, Brent Leatherwood, saying, “Despite the philosophical and legal differences individuals like me will have with her, Judge Jackson’s confirmation is a history-making moment. We should appreciate it as such.”<sup>40</sup> Considering Justice Jackson’s advocacy for pro-choice, unwillingness to define a woman, and lenience to pedophiles, a tweet like Leatherwood’s seems like a poor representation of the SBC.

Yet, the ERLC consistently attempts to straddle the fence on matters of conviction—citing a biblical answer while at the same time giving unclear verbiage and virtual nods to those who disagree. One example is an article published on the ERLC website for parents whose child is dealing with gender identity issues. While affirming the biblical position on gender in one paragraph, the very next sentence counters that this truth “needs to be nuanced.”<sup>41</sup> It is this nuancing of truth that is concerning.

While the ERLC is supposed to represent the concerns of SBC churches, it seems to push its own agenda instead. One example was during the COVID lockdowns—a time when the ERLC should have stood up for the religious liberty of autonomous churches to assemble. Incredulously, the ERLC instead argued that the shutdowns did not actually infringe upon religious liberty.<sup>42</sup> Some Southern Baptists felt that the ERLC did more to defend the government shutdown of autonomous churches than to defend those churches' religious liberty.<sup>43</sup>

Concerns over the direction of the ERLC have led a growing number of leaders and churches within the SBC to call for the ERLC to be abolished.<sup>44</sup> A couple years back the SBC executive committee created “a task force to evaluate objectively the effect the ERLC is having on the Cooperative Program” of the SBC.<sup>45</sup> “The unanimous report found the work of the ERLC to be “a source of significant distraction from the Great Commission work of Southern Baptists.”<sup>46</sup> At the SBC 2022 national convention, a motion was made to abolish the ERLC. One messenger said, “I would love to live in a world where a bold and faithful ERLC advocates for just policies, but that’s not the world we live in. ... Abolishing the ERLC is better than continuing to fund a compromised ERLC. ... Too often the leadership speaks for DC against the pews, not for the pews to DC.”<sup>47</sup> However, the motion was overturned, and the ERLC continues.

## **Summary Thoughts on These Concerns**

So, where do these concerns leave independent Baptists who are considering partnerships for church planting?

One Southern Baptist educator, preacher, and friend recently shared with me that many in the convention who are conservative remain concerned with NAMB as it pertains to woke philosophy. Although NAMB has substantial funds, this friend doubts the discernment its leaders use in the distribution of such funds.

I am aware that there are thousands of churches within the SBC. My guess is that many of these churches are pastored by faithful men who believe and preach the Bible. I am also aware of many who have concerns over the issues mentioned above. Additionally, there are a handful of SBC leaders who have formed the Conservative Baptist Network to fight these trends. I appreciate their work.

However, considering the prevalence of these issues, the fact that SBC churches send money to organizations tied to these issues, and the reality of the SBC's annual meeting with member churches at some level tied to the organization's decisions, it seems unwise for independent Baptists to partner with the SBC.

Many younger independent pastors may not know the stories of men like Lee Roberson and Don Sisk who left the

convention, but the issues I am sharing convince me that there is no reason for any independent Baptist pastor to seek alignment with the SBC now. As Amos 3:3 questions, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” A similar question is echoed in 1 Corinthians 14:8, “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” My advice to independent Baptist church planters is to not place themselves in partnership with a group that is not giving a certain sound regarding the direction in which they are heading.

# 2

## The Independent Baptist Model of Raising Support

Church planting can be an expensive endeavor. Historically, church planting has been one of the great areas of cooperation between independent Baptist churches as they give to individual missionaries to meet the common goal of church planting.

Most church planters with assistance from NAMB will still need additional support, which they will raise. I would propose bypassing institutional/denominational money entirely and seeking support only from local churches in order to retain an unaffiliated status.

### **The New Testament Pattern**

Church planting is really a form of missions. In fact, it was the primary focus of the apostle Paul in his missionary work. And

for this work, we see a New Testament model of individual churches supporting missionaries.

- **A single church was the *sending* church for Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.**

As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. (Acts 13:2–3)

- **Later, Paul and Barnabas reported back to this church.**

And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. (Acts 14:26–27)

- **Additionally, other local churches, including the church at Philippi, could support Paul.**

Now ye Philippians know also, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but ye only. For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity. (Philippians 4:15–16)

This model places a focus on the autonomy of the local church and the missionary/church planter's accountability to his sending church. I believe this model is followed in the independent Baptist method of sending and supporting churches. And I believe this has contributed to missions

and church planning being one of the great strengths of the independent Baptist movement. Today, there are fifteen thousand independent churches supporting thousands of missionaries who are currently on the field and planting churches.

## **The SBC Cooperative Program**

The idea behind the SBC Cooperative Program is to expedite missions by encouraging all SBC churches to contribute to a central fund.

One drawback to this model is that individual churches have no control over where their money goes. This reality was one of the key reasons for the major independent Baptist pull-out from the SBC in the mid twentieth century. At the time, conservative churches were realizing that their missions dollars were going to support seminaries that were actively teaching against the fundamental tenets of Christianity and Baptist doctrine. (The book *Keep the Faith* includes a few pages of testimony from Dr. Don Sisk relating this as a catalyst for his own separation from the SBC and why he would still not advise someone to be part of it today.<sup>48</sup> Specifically, he mentioned that only “a small percentage of the SBC cooperative mission program goes to actual on-the-field, gospel-preaching missions work.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, a growing number of SBC churches are supporting missionaries directly, rather than through the cooperative program, because they feel it to be less wasteful.

Although some of the concerns of the '70s and '80s have been mitigated by the Convention's conservative resurgence, I don't believe the concerns are obsolete, especially related to the issues we already noted: trends toward social justice, ordaining women, gay church membership, and others. These unresolved issues mean that churches that give into the central cooperative program may be supporting seminary professors and church plants (home and foreign) that are caught up in woke ideology. Additionally, part of the cooperative fund goes to the six SBC seminaries, the ERLC, and NAMB.<sup>50</sup> So, churches that have concerns relative to these entities may be still funding them.

I was made a similar offer for support by a California state fellowship when Terrie and I prepared to move to Lancaster. It was from a group with whom I had much in common and with whom I closely fellowshiped. However, I didn't accept their offer because I did not want to accept money that would come with strings attached—even if it was something as simple as the expectation to attend regular fellowship meetings. It's a decision I have never regretted. I am especially grateful that today we are free to support church planters and missionaries directly and have no financial obligation to a denomination or fellowship. Additionally, this has also given us the freedom to directly plant churches, including the Los Angeles Baptist Church in downtown Los Angeles and many others. The church plants and the 220 missionaries we support receive every dollar we send. Meanwhile, money sent through conventions have a large percentage kept for



administrative expenses. The direct method of support is one of the strengths of the independent Baptist philosophy of missions and church planting.

Several years back, David Azzarello, a man I saw come to Christ over thirty years prior, felt God calling him to resign the pastorate and begin full-time church planting. As he shared this burden with others, he was soon approached by representatives from NAMB, offering to support him as a church planter. The offer they made was for a modest monthly salary with the stipulation that the churches he planted would be SBC churches and give 10 percent of their budget back to the SBC. He called me to discuss their offer. I shared with him my concerns over the SBC cooperative program and encouraged him to follow the historic independent Baptist model of raising support from individual churches. His initial reason for considering the SBC funds was that it seemed like a more efficient process to get to full-time church planting. He has since shared, however, that the process of visiting multiple churches as he raised his support was helpful for him. He has led each of the churches he planted in this model of supporting missionaries. Currently, he is in the midst of his eighth church plant.

## **Concerns with NAMB in Particular**

In addition to the difference of philosophy for church planting, there is reason to question the effectiveness and transparency of NAMB as a whole.

Will McRainey, former head of the two-state Southern Baptist Convention of Maryland and Delaware (and who is in a current lawsuit with NAMB), suggests that statistics do not bear up the effectiveness of NAMB or of the convention's stated renewed commitment to the Great Commission. In an article about this, he notes that there is a 70-year low in SBC baptisms, both nationally and per church, and a 40-year low in number of SBC churches started.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in a report that came out May of 2023 shows the SBC continuing its recent downward trajectory with a loss of 457,371 members—the largest single-year numerical drop in more than one hundred years.<sup>52</sup> (Perhaps this is one reason young independent Baptists are being approached to join the convention.)

Additionally, there are concerns about the financial transparency of NAMB itself. One group that is calling for an audit of NAMB cites this concern:

The NAMB church planting budget has grown from \$23 million to \$75 million in 10 years, but the number of new church starts has dropped to less than half the number a decade ago. How is NAMB spending \$50 million more in church planting and getting less than half for it? Where is that money specifically going?<sup>53</sup>

Researchers from the Conservative Baptist Network found that

Not only has the North American Mission Board lacked transparency concerning finances, but they have also stopped disclosing how many appointed missionaries were assigned to some aspect of church planting.<sup>54</sup> This

number was reported in the SBC Annual up until 2012, but after 2012 it has not been reported since.<sup>55</sup>

The SBC pastor I mentioned earlier who cited his concerns regarding egalitarianism as a reason to defund NAMB also mentioned this lack of transparency saying, “NAMB needs an audit. We do not trust where all the money is going.”<sup>56</sup>

Independent Baptists who see partnership with NAMB as a fast way to get to the work of church planting would do well to consider the statistics, the problem of NAMB’s testimony, and the direction of the Convention.



# 3

## Hope for the Future of Independent Baptists

I'm aware of the flaws of the independent Baptists. I wrote an entire book about how to correct these issues in *The Road Ahead*. But it is short-sighted for independent Baptists to not assume there are flaws in the Southern Baptist Convention as well. There is real danger in going from one ditch to another by over-correcting from a disappointment.

For me, I am grateful for my heritage of non-conformist, Anabaptist forefathers and for the soulwinning and missions spirit of the independent Baptists. Rather than leaving this movement, I prefer to work for balance and gospel momentum. Indeed, I'm grateful as I see a renewed emphasis on church planting among independent Baptists. And I am thankful to be part of supporting these church planters.

It is my conviction that for independent Baptist pastors to partner with a body such as the SBC that is struggling with such clear issues is the antithesis of the instruction in Jude 3 to “contend for the faith.” I can love and appreciate men who aren’t where I am on every issue. But I cannot condone the bridge building that is currently being encouraged that will attach independent Baptist church planters to a group that is struggling with significant biblical issues.

I do appreciate the work of those within the SBC who are preaching the gospel and leading people to Christ. But one does not have to join a group simply because he appreciates the good within that group. I still believe that being independent allows for greater liberty of conscience and stronger forward momentum in church planting, missions, and soulwinning.

Shaping all of the concerns I have shared in these pages is an overriding passion for the Great Commission of Christ. As independent Baptists, we *must* engage in strategic church planting in which we deliberately saturate metropolitan areas with the gospel and plant churches.

Can we do a better job at this? We can and we must! Can we espouse new ideas for collaborating on church planting? Yes. But we must consider the trends of the day and the identity of the church that is to be planted. We must stand unapologetically for the whole counsel of God in our generation.

Church planting is larger than funding a church’s start up costs. It requires many levels of sacrifice in prayer, soulwinning, and discipling new believers in the faith. It

requires faith and vision to establish a biblical congregation that is bound to the Word of God and constrained by the love of Christ. The decisions made and direction taken in the early years of a church plant will have ramifications for decades to come. Thus, as one old preacher used to say, we must not sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the immediate.

Many of us pastors warn parents, “What you do in moderation, your children may do in excess.” There is truth to that statement for pastors and churches as well. If you compromise your convictions to raise support for planting a church by receiving money from a group that has an unclear stand in several areas, those may be the very areas your church leans into in the years that follow.

For these reasons, I encourage independent Baptist church planters to look beyond the days of raising support and ask themselves what kind of church they want to plant.

To assume that there is little difference between independent Baptists and Southern Baptist churches is incorrect. If you, as a church planter, have any concerns about the direction of the SBC and about funding ministries that are tied to this direction, I would encourage you to not set aside those concerns for quick, up front support.

Conversely, if you are an independent Baptist and believe in the biblical model of churches supporting the planting of new churches, I would encourage you to seek the support of other churches and then get to the community where the Lord has led you and diligently begin sharing the gospel and discipling new Christians. I believe that you will discover—

and more emphatically with each passing year—that the extra time in raising support was a small trade off for the blessings of pastoring an independent Baptist church.



## Conclusion

I love our Baptist distinctives, and I have personally taught them to hundreds of new believers. I recognize the autonomy of the local church, and I pray for revival in my life and the church I pastor. Yet, we must not fall into the “same team” ideology with people who are compromising the truth. It is my prayer that the principles shared in these pages will cause some preachers to pause, pray, and then proceed for the glory of God and with the future of local Baptist churches in mind.



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