

A Resurgence Not Yet Realized: Evangelistic Effectiveness in the Southern Baptist Convention Since 1979

Thom S. Rainer

Thom S. Rainer is the founding Dean of The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served as pastor of churches in Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, and Indiana. A prolific author, Dr. Rainer has lectured, preached, and led conferences on church growth across the United States. Among his many books are *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Zondervan, 2001), *The Unchurched Next Door* (Zondervan, 2003), and *Breakout Churches* (Zondervan, 2005).

When Adrian Rogers was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979, hopes were high among many conservatives that significant changes or improvements would take place in at least four areas. Both written and anecdotal sources make clear that the foremost issue was doctrinal. And the six Southern Baptist seminaries were the focus of the doctrinal reformation.

The strategy was cogent and clear. The president's appointment powers would eventually reach the boards of trustees of the seminaries, who would hire new conservative professors and administrators for those seminaries. Those professors would then teach new generations of students, who would in turn lead churches toward greater biblical conservatism.

No informed observer can deny the efficacy of this strategy. Today all six seminaries are led by undeniably conservative presidents, and the faculties are dominated by conservative professors.

A second, but not unrelated, focus of reformation was the engagement of culture. Conservatives were anxious to make clear statements of biblical values on issues such as marriage, sexuality, and the sanctity of life. A primary venue for this expression was the annual Southern Baptist Convention, particularly through resolutions voted on by the messengers. Issues of cultural engagement from a conservative and biblical perspective

dominated the approved resolutions since 1979.

Southern Baptist leaders are at the forefront of cultural engagement. R. Albert Mohler Jr., the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, hosts a daily, nationally-syndicated radio show that focuses primarily on cultural engagement.¹ Mohler also writes a daily e-commentary that typically discusses cultural issues.²

When George W. Bush was re-elected as president of the United States in 2004, pundits across the political spectrum expressed surprise at the significant role that "values" played in the president's victory.³ Bush was a regular speaker, usually by live video, at the annual Southern Baptist Convention. He recognized the important role Southern Baptists played in moving forward his social and political agendas.

Many Southern Baptist leaders have made regular visits to the White House under the conservative Bush administration. A national news magazine noted the close relationship between President Bush and Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"As director of the political arm of the Southern Baptist Convention," the magazine noted, "Richard Land has enjoyed a long and close relationship with the born-again Bush." The magazine believes

that this will continue in the second-term Bush administration: "And Land, 57, who will continue pushing a pro-life, anti-gay-marriage agenda, will have a special role to play in the White House."⁴ The conservative resurgence can be credited with significant victories on both fronts of theological reformation and cultural engagement.

A third area of measurable success is in the arena of international missions. Many conservatives were concerned that the direction of the Foreign Mission Board was less conversionary, following the dialogical path of the mainline denominations. The newly-named International Mission Board, however, took a clearly-defined conservative and conversionary direction. The numerical results are noteworthy.

At the end of 2004, the IMB had 5,237 appointed field personnel. The church membership of affiliated IMB churches exceeded seven million in 2003. In that same year the board reported over 500,000 overseas baptisms. And also in 2003 missionaries and nationals started 16,721 churches. Volunteer missionaries, primarily laypersons from Southern Baptist churches, exceeded 25,000 in number in 2003.⁵

Though pundits may disagree on the extent of the success of the conservative resurgence in these three major areas, few will argue that doctrinal fidelity, cultural engagement, and international missions are decidedly more conservative today than in 1979. But there was yet a fourth area of focus of the conservative resurgence. It is the evaluation of that issue that is the subject of this article.

The Conservative Resurgence and Evangelistic Effectiveness

Prior to the impetus of the conservative resurgence, Dean Kelley wrote a landmark book demonstrating that conservative churches are much more likely to grow than moderate or liberal churches. The 1972 introduction of *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* ignited a debate in the American church landscape on the relationship between theological beliefs and growth of churches.⁶

Kelley was no fundamentalist. He served as an executive with the liberal National Council of Churches. Southern Baptist conservatives pointed to that book and other studies to rally members and messengers to turn the convention to a more conservative direction. And one of the primary benefits of the resurgence, we were told, would be an unprecedented evangelistic harvest in the denomination. Did the resurgence succeed in this arena?

The Thesis: A Resurgence Not Yet Realized

The thesis of this article is that the conservative resurgence that began in 1979 in the Southern Baptist Convention has *not* resulted in a greater evangelistic effectiveness in the denomination. A corollary to the thesis is that, without the resurgence, the evangelistic effectiveness of the denomination would be much worse.

To use a medical metaphor, the resurgence slowed the bleeding of lost effectiveness, but the patient is still not well. Despite great expectations of an evangelistic harvest, the Southern Baptist Convention is in no better condition evangelistically than it was in 1979.

This article will demonstrate the numerical realities of evangelistic stagnation in the denomination. But the research presented will be more than descriptive.

Note the title of the article: “A Resurgence Not *Yet* Realized.” The research will provide several hypotheses for the stagnation and offer prescriptive suggestions for greater evangelistic health. The present picture is painted with some level of gloom. The future picture offers hope if definitive changes are made.

Methodology of the Research

The primary approach of this research is statistical and numerical analysis. Such an approach has admitted weaknesses that should be addressed.

First, numbers are not an ideal measurement in most Christian research. Indeed, some of my previous works have been criticized for an overemphasis on numerical realities. For example, baptismal numbers are among the key statistics we use. But numerical measurements of conversions are an approximation at best. We cannot know with certainty if a baptism measured is a true conversion. Matters of the heart between a person and God are not always best expressed by numerical measurement. Second, numerical analyses do not take into account external and contextual factors. For example, a church that records twenty-five baptisms in a non-growing community of 300 persons may be much more effective than a church with the same number of baptisms in a fast-growing metropolitan area of two million persons. Third, corporate spiritual realities cannot be measured. The spiritual health of a church simply has no corresponding numerical reality.

Essentially our research looked at three data-based components. The first of the data was total baptisms. Baptisms are often perceived to measure the total conversions in a Southern Baptist church.

But caution should be used when equating baptisms with conversions.

First, on some occasions total baptisms may understate conversion growth. Some churches have evangelistic efforts that do not result in baptisms in their specific congregations. They may refer recent converts to another church for a variety of reasons.

Second, baptisms may also overstate conversion growth. In a recent survey of Southern Baptist members, we found that 17 percent of those surveyed had been baptized two or more times. While the reasons behind these multiple baptisms vary (and some are really strange), the net effect is that a conversion is counted more than once.

Perhaps the primary reason baptisms can overstate conversions relates to our polity of baptism by immersion. Most Southern Baptists believe that a Presbyterian can be a Christian without being immersed, even if we disagree with pedobaptism doctrinally. But that Presbyterian is immersed when he or she becomes a Southern Baptist. That particular baptism then represents a person who has been a Christian for some time, not the recent conversion of an unregenerate person.

A second data component we used is church membership. That particular number can be more problematic than baptisms. A majority of Southern Baptist churches overstate their membership significantly by failing to keep accurate membership records. Those churches that have attempted to discover the number of “real” members often find a number of those on the rolls have died or cannot be located.

Despite the inherent problems with this data, we had to use that data which was available to us for this research. We

thus approach our work recognizing the limitations of the data we used, but also recognizing that the data can give us valuable insights into the evangelistic health of our denominations.

A third measurement we used is called the “baptismal ratio.” It is actually a combination of the numerical measurements of baptisms and membership. We will explain this ratio more fully in a subsequent section of this article.

Total Baptisms as an Initial Indicator of Evangelistic Effectiveness

Membership and baptismal data have been retained by the Southern Baptist Convention since 1845, with the exception of the period between 1861 and 1871. For the purpose of this study, we felt that fifty years of data would be sufficient to demonstrate clear trends. We thus first looked at total baptisms in the denomination from 1950 to 2003, the most current year for which we had data.⁷

Our purpose in reviewing this data is straightforward. If baptisms are at least

somewhat of a reflection of conversion growth in the Southern Baptist Convention, a lengthy trend can give us insights into the overall evangelistic effectiveness of the denomination.

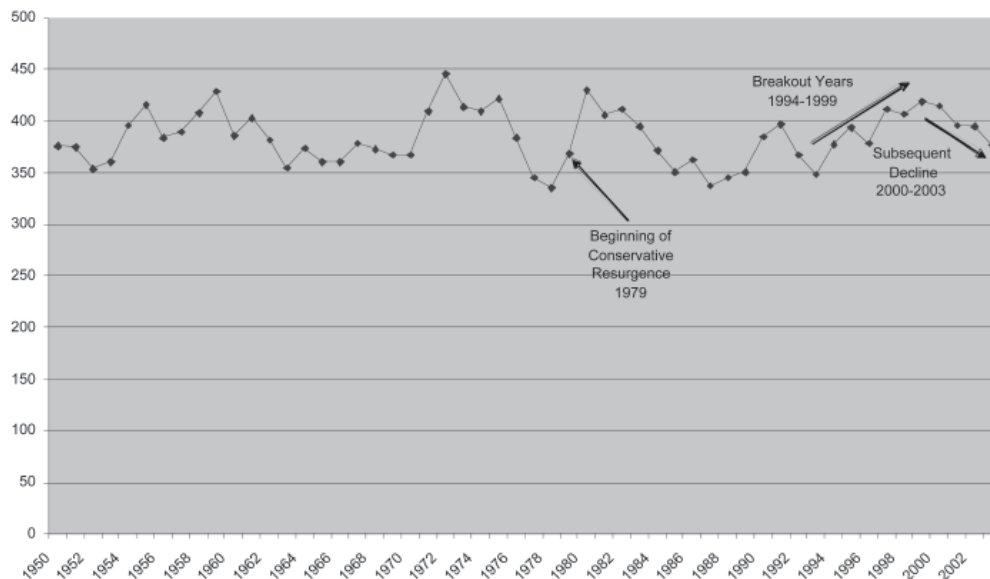
Another helpful feature of this data is the trend of baptismal growth since 1979, the beginning of the conservative resurgence in the denomination. The results are fascinating but discouraging.

Simply stated, the Southern Baptist Convention is reaching no more people today than it did in 1950. The pattern in the graph below is a classic plateau. In 1950 Southern Baptist churches baptized 376,085 persons. In 2003 the total baptisms were 377,357, a difference of only one-third of one percent.

For over fifty years the number of baptisms has been in a tight range. The highest recorded baptisms took place in 1972, a total of 445,725. The lowest in this period was 336,050 in 1978, the year before the onset of the conservative resurgence.

What are the numerical results for baptisms from 1979 forward? Are there any discernible improvements in overall

Total Baptisms, Southern Baptist Convention, 1950-2003
(Baptisms in Thousands)



baptismal trends for the past quarter-of-a-century represented by the conservative resurgence? Sadly, the answer is “no.”

Those of us who follow these trends found hope in the years 1994 to 1999. This period was the longest uptrend in baptisms since 1950, and is represented on the graph as “breakout years.” Unfortunately, the growth trend did not continue. With the advent of the new millennium, baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention have declined for four consecutive years.

Again, caution must be taken in looking at these results as precise measurements of evangelistic health. But with the limitations of the data noted, we must conclude that the evangelistic growth of the denomination is stagnant, and that the onset of the conservative resurgence has done nothing to improve this trend.

Baptismal Ratio as a Measure of Evangelistic Effectiveness

In addition to utilizing total baptisms as a measure of evangelistic health, another measure has been used for several years. The baptismal ratio utilizes both the membership of the church and the total baptisms. We prefer this measurement of evangelistic health since it takes into consideration church size.⁸

For example, a church with a membership of 800 should have more baptisms than a church of 30 in membership, all other factors being equal. The baptismal ratio thus measures numbers of members per baptism. In very rough terms, the ratio attempts to answer the question: “How many members does it take to reach one person for Christ in a year?”

The calculation of the ratio is simple. Total membership is divided by total baptisms. A church of 200 with 20 bap-

tisms would thus have a baptismal ratio of 10, usually stated as 10 to 1. In other words, that particular church reaches one person for Christ each year for every ten members.

The ratio is informing on an aggregate basis as well. In 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention had 351,951 members; in 1950 the number was 7,079,889; and in 2003 the membership was 16,315,050. One would expect baptismal growth just due to the overall membership growth. The baptismal ratio, however, shows the number of members needed to reach one person, and thus allows a more accurate assessment of evangelistic effectiveness year by year.

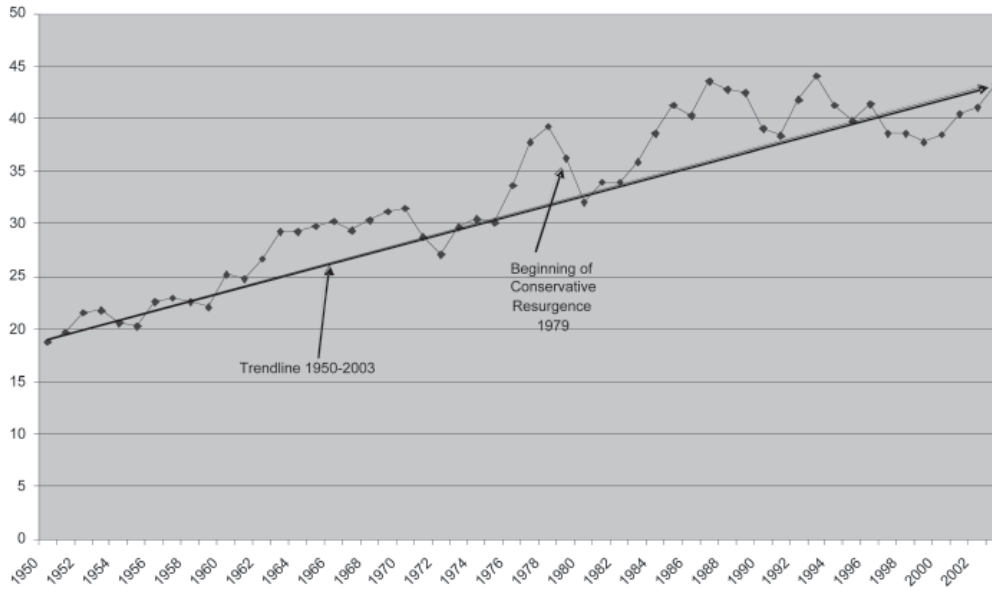
The following chart shows the baptismal ratio from 1950 to 2003. Note that lower ratios depict greater evangelistic effectiveness. The upward trend noted in the chart is thus a negative trend. In 1950 one person was baptized for every 19 members. In 1978, the year prior to the beginning of the conservative resurgence, the denomination was baptizing one person for every 36 members. By 2003 the ratio had worsened to 43 to 1.

The trend in total baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention thus depicted a clear pattern of plateau. But the more revealing measurement of baptismal ratios reveals consistent evangelistic deterioration.

The baptismal ratio since the onset of the conservative resurgence has worsened. The trend is negative and disturbing. Though numbers are not ultimate measures of spiritual realities, the data we do have indicate a denomination in evangelistic crisis.

An honest evaluation of the data leads us to but one conclusion. The conservative resurgence has not resulted in a more evangelistic denomination. Indeed

Southern Baptist Convention Baptismal Ratios: 1950-2003
(Lower Is Better)



the Southern Baptist Convention is less evangelistic today than it was in the years preceding the conservative resurgence.

Do we therefore conclude that, from an evangelistic perspective, the resurgence did more harm than good? Is it possible to see where the Southern Baptist Convention would be today if the change toward more conservative leadership had not taken place? We believe such an exercise is possible and revealing. We turn to data of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches to provide us these insights.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a Point of Comparison

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) was officially organized in 1991, and has its headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. The CBF identifies itself as follows: "We are a fellowship of Baptist Christians and churches who share a passion for the Great Commission of Jesus Christ and a commitment to Baptist principles of faith and practice."⁹

The purpose of the CBF has been an issue of debate since the organization's inception. Many conservative leaders of

the SBC see the CBF as a breakaway moderate and liberal group from the SBC. But CBF leaders contend that they represent true Baptist principles, and that conservatives have taken the denomination from its historic roots.

While this article will not resolve the differences of opinion between the leaders of the two groups, it is generally recognized that the conservative resurgence represented change, while the direction of the CBF was a continuation of pre-1979 values. Is it possible to see where the Southern Baptist Convention would be today if the evangelistic effectiveness of the CBF was normative in all churches? We believe we can provide an approximation of that reality.

Getting data on CBF churches is not difficult if the churches can be identified. The CBF website provides web addresses of a number of CBF churches, but states clearly that the churches cited do not constitute a list of their churches.¹⁰ The site further notes that the CBF includes some 1,800 churches, but does not identify those churches.¹¹

Our researchers were able to locate

638 churches that noted affiliation with the CBF, about one-third of the total the organization claims to have. We believe this total to be a very good sample to evaluate the evangelistic effectiveness of the CBF. The data we used represented the church year ending in 2003. Note the comparisons below to all SBC churches for the same year.

<i>Total Membership of 638 CBF Churches:</i>	460,462
<i>Total Membership of 43,429 SBC Churches:</i>	16,315,050
<i>Total Baptisms of 638 CBF Churches:</i>	4,994
<i>Total Baptisms of 43,429 SBC Churches:</i>	377,357
<i>Baptismal Ratio of 638 CBF Churches:</i>	92.2 to 1
<i>Baptismal Ratio of 43,429 SBC Churches:</i>	43.3 to 1

The last set of data is the most revealing since it allows comparisons regardless of the number or size of churches. The

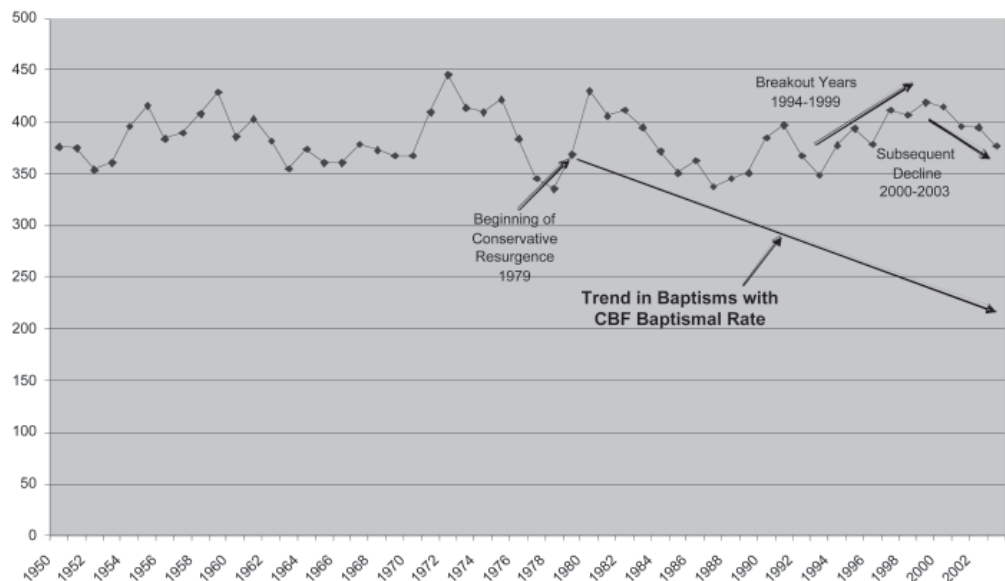
results are incredibly noteworthy. The CBF churches in our study have baptismal ratios that are more than twice as bad as the SBC ratios.

We placed this data on the baptismal chart shown earlier to depict the evangelistic results of the Southern Baptist Convention if all 43,429 churches had the same level of evangelistic effectiveness as the 638 CBF churches.

If the CBF churches are representative of where the Southern Baptist Convention would be today, the conservative resurgence has been critical to the evangelistic health of the denomination. Based on CBF baptismal rates, the number of baptisms in the SBC in 2003 would have been 176,953 instead of 377,357, less than half of the actual total.¹²

On the one hand, the conservative resurgence has not resulted in improvements in the evangelistic health of the Southern Baptist Convention since 1979. On the other hand the evangelistic health of the denomination would be much worse without the resurgence if the CBF is a barometer of “what might have been.”

**Total Baptisms, Southern Baptist Convention, 1950-2003
(Baptisms in Thousands)**



Possible Reasons for the Evangelistic Struggles of the SBC

The primary purpose of this article has been to gauge the realities of the evangelistic effectiveness of the Southern Baptist Convention utilizing widely-available data. We have concluded that evangelistically the denomination is on a path of slow but discernible deterioration. In this section we seek to discern possible reasons for the decline.

Hypothesis #1: The Evangelistic Fields in the United States Are Much Less Receptive than They Were in Past Years

Jesus' teachings on the parable of the sower and soils (Mark 4:1-20) clearly depict different levels of receptivity to the gospel. Can the evangelistic struggles of the Southern Baptist Convention be explained by an American harvest field that is becoming less receptive to the gospel?

On the surface this hypothesis seems plausible. After all, few would deny a cultural trend exists in America that is clearly moving away from Christian values. But does this trend mean that non-Christians are therefore less receptive to the gospel?

Unfortunately, I am not aware of any research that has attempted to measure gospel receptivity over the past fifty years. I did, however, recently lead a research team on a similar project for a single year. The concept of the research was to interview lost and unchurched Americans, attempting to discern their receptivity to the gospel.¹³

The researchers asked a series of thirty-three questions to over 300 persons representing Americans from a variety of ages, genders, and geographical, racial,

and ethnic backgrounds. Each of the persons was self-identified as an unchurched non-Christian. Though such surveys have obvious weaknesses when dealing with spiritual matters, we did uncover some revealing insights.

The researchers categorized the unchurched persons into five groups according to their responses. The group called U1 (unchurched one) represented the most receptive group to the gospel. The U5 group included those who were most antagonistic. Three other groups fell between these two extremes. Note the results.

U1	Highly Receptive	11%
U2	Receptive	27%
U3	Neutral	36%
U4	Resistant	27%
U5	Antagonistic	5%

We estimate that there are 160 million unchurched people in America. Nearly 61 million of these non-Christians are receptive or highly receptive to the gospel. Only 8 million have an antagonistic attitude toward Christians and the gospel. This research thus demonstrates that receptivity is not likely the reason that Southern Baptists are less evangelistic.

In another portion of this study, eight of ten unchurched indicated that they would come to church if they were invited. Unfortunately, few had ever been invited to church. It appears that receptivity to the gospel is strong. And it appears that relatively few Southern Baptists are either inviting people to church or sharing the gospel with them.

Hypothesis #2: Socioeconomic Gains Tend to Reduce Evangelistic Health in Christian Groups

We believe this hypothesis has merit, but we know of no study that has tracked the socioeconomic status of Southern Baptists since 1950. Material comfort may very well diminish evangelistic enthusiasm, but we have no definitive data to prove or disprove this hypothesis in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Hypothesis #3: Southern Baptist Leaders Are Not Personally Evangelistic

The evangelistic health of a denomination is ultimately a local church issue. Denominations are neither evangelistic nor non-evangelistic; the churches and their members are the true indicators of evangelistic health.

Church members tend to follow the priorities of the leaders who serve in their churches, and the senior pastor is the person of primary influence. We recently conducted a study of senior pastors related to their habits of personal evangelism. Those surveyed were not exclusively Southern Baptists, but they included a good representation of SBC pastors.¹⁴

The surveys promised anonymity and were coded only by the level of evangelistic growth of the church of the pastor surveyed. We asked only one question: "How many times in the past six months have you shared the gospel with someone or developed a relationship with an unchurched person with the intention of sharing your faith with him or her?" The results below provided a clear pattern.

We believe that this hypothesis has validity. Southern Baptist pastors today may not be as personally evangelistic as their predecessors. And the members of their churches may very well be following their poor example.

Hypothesis #4: The Southern Baptist Convention Fails to Recognize Adequately Churches with Significant Conversion Growth

My assessment of this issue is largely anecdotal, based upon my work and interaction with other denominations. The Southern Baptist Convention does as well as any entity of which I am aware in recognizing conversion growth. Many state conventions publish annual baptismal counts of churches. The SBC as a national entity does well in promoting evangelistic efforts. FAITH, the evangelistic program developed by LifeWay Christian Resources, has widespread denominational acceptance.

There is still a sense among many church leaders we interview that the denomination gives undue focus to larger churches at the expense of the midsize and smaller churches. Bigger is not necessarily better, unless the growth is the result of large numbers of conversions.

Hypothesis #5: The Churches of the SBC Are Not Evangelistic because They Have Many Unregenerate Members

An unregenerate person cannot share his or her experience of the redemptive power of Christ. Is it possible that we have significant numbers of non-Chris-

	None	1-5 Times	6+ Times
Pastors of Growing Churches	6%	18%	76%
Pastors of Declining Churches	54%	38%	8%

tians who have membership in our 43,000 churches?

We surveyed persons who had been members of churches prior to becoming Christians, and asked them why they were in a church as a non-believer. The overwhelming number responded that they thought they *were* Christians. Yet later they would discover that they were wrong.¹⁵

When we then asked them to share *why* they thought they had not become Christians as members, they gave us four common responses. First, over one-half of those we surveyed said they never heard a clear presentation of the gospel. One recent convert told me that sixty years of listening to sermons had not provided that clarity. Second, about four out of ten we surveyed indicated that they had confused other issues with salvation. For some, church membership held the same meaning as being a Christian. Others indicated that “walking an aisle” or making a public statement of belief in Christ

the question.

When we provide statistical evidence of Christian church members, we do so with much caution. Our research is fallible and our discernment is far from perfect.

Our methodology was simple. We asked 315 church members two “diagnostic” questions. The first asked, “If you were to die today, do you know for certain that you would go to heaven?” The second question was: “If God were to ask you why he should let you into heaven what would you say?”

Our researchers categorized the responses of the church members into three groups. In the first group were those who clearly seemed not to have a grasp of the gospel. In the third group were those who seemed to grasp the gospel well, and who had assurance that they had placed their faith in Christ. In between these two groups was a small number whom our researchers were unable to place in either of the other two groups. The results are shown in the following table:

Church Members Who <i>Are Not</i> Christians	31%
Church Members Who <i>May Not Be</i> Christians	14%
Church Members Who <i>Are</i> Christians	55%

was a means of salvation. Third, some viewed doing ministry in the church as sufficient to get them into heaven. In other words, they had a works concept of salvation. Finally, about ten percent of those we surveyed said that they joined the church originally understanding that they were *not* Christians. They were willing to be deceptive in order to gain the political or social capital that comes with being a member of a church.

How many members of churches are not Christians? The answer is elusive, but we made a modest attempt to answer

If our research approximates eternal realities, nearly one-half of all church members may not be Christians. This issue may very well be a major factor in the evangelistic apathy evident in many churches.

Hypothesis #6: Only a Small Number of Churches in the SBC Have Any Significant Evangelistic Efforts

Seven percent of Southern Baptist churches accounted for over one-half of the total baptisms in 2003. The evidence

is strong that most SBC churches are showing little evangelistic fruit. Note the significant number of churches with few or no baptisms in the table below.¹⁶

Does anyone really care? Is it an exercise in both futility and presumption for me to even begin to map possible alternatives? Though I have no grand illusion that

SBC Churches with 0 Baptisms in 2003	13,465 (31.3% of churches)
SBC Churches with 1 or Less Baptisms	16,723 (38.5%.)
SBC Churches with 6 or Less Baptisms	28,938 (66.5%)
SBC Churches with 12 or Less Baptisms	35,709 (82.0%)

Nearly one-third of the SBC churches are baptizing no persons in a year, and two-thirds of the churches are baptizing six or less. Frankly, most Southern Baptist churches today are evangelistically anemic. The bulk of baptisms in the denomination is taking place in relatively few churches.

The lack of evangelistic growth in the Southern Baptist Convention since the conservative resurgence is disheartening. Is there hope? Certainly our hope always resides in a sovereign God. The concluding pages of this article provide a modest path for the denomination to recapture an evangelistic zeal that has been waning for over fifty years. To that issue we now turn.

Recapturing Our Evangelistic Heritage: A Modest Proposal

Evangelistic effectiveness is ultimately an issue of each local congregation. The polity of our denomination is such that no denominational initiative can be effective unless the leadership of each church decides to implement them. And at least on an anecdotal basis, there seems to be widespread doubt about the efficacy of denominations in twenty-first-century America.

Is there any point, therefore, in proposing any initiative from a denominational perspective? Is anyone really listening?

this article will be nailed to Southern Baptist church doors across America, I pray that God can use some portion of these suggestions for His glory and for an evangelistic denomination. The order of the proposals is random and does not reflect any particular priority.

Proposal #1: Seminaries Should Strive to Become Thoroughly Evangelistic

I can almost anticipate the response of some to this proposal. A seminary dean is proposing that denominational evangelistic effectiveness begin in the seminaries. And he is not only a seminary dean; he is a dean of a school of missions, evangelism, and church growth. The bias is clear and obvious.

First, I cannot argue against the presence of bias. I do hope that my bias does not cloud the stark picture of reality that has already been painted. The denomination is evangelistically sick, and some remedy is in order. Second, we must acknowledge that the majority of Southern Baptist pastors are not seminary trained. An evangelistic revolution in the seminaries may not directly impact all pastors and church staff.

Still, the influence of seminaries is vast. The graduates of these institutions still go to many of the influential churches in our denomination, and those churches, for

good or bad, become a model for others.

What does it mean for a seminary to be “thoroughly evangelistic”? I rejoiced when my seminary, under the leadership of the president and the academic deans, led the institution to require all students in masters-level degree programs to take a course in personal evangelism. Such a move was bold and unprecedented. But the thoroughly evangelistic vision of which I dream is more than a single course or even a single graduate school, such as the Billy Graham School where I serve as dean. The vision is that professors will be passionate about their respective fields of study *and* the Great Commission. Right theology should lead to evangelistic passion. Proper comprehension of the Old Testament should lead to a burning desire to see all people saved. A right grasp of church history should drive persons to desire church growth that is biblical evangelistic growth.

A former trustee chairman of Southern Seminary asked every prospective faculty member to articulate a recent testimony of sharing the gospel personally. His motives and methods were on track. The best scholar without an evangelistic fire could lead future pastors and church staff to have an orthodoxy that is cold and lifeless.

Evangelistically passionate professors inspire students to evangelistic passion. Those students become pastors and other church leaders who inspire their congregations to evangelistic passion. And the evangelistic revolution of the Southern Baptist Convention ignites one church at a time to reach millions with the gospel of Christ.

Proposal #2: Recognize Effective Evangelistic Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention

Our denomination has done a credible job of recognizing high-baptismal churches. Many state conventions publish a list of the churches with the highest number of baptisms.

This proposal would extend the recognition to include those churches that have the best (lowest) baptismal ratios as well. A few state conventions already publish this list, which allow even the smallest of churches to be recognized for their evangelistic efforts.

In 1996, with the publication of my book *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth of Southern Seminary began recognizing churches that met both criteria of number of baptisms and lower baptismal ratios. Named “the Spurgeon Awards” after the renowned nineteenth-century British Baptist pastor, this recognition includes both megachurches and smaller churches. A church must have at least twenty-six baptisms and a baptismal ratio of less than 20:1. In a typical year, less than five percent of Southern Baptist churches meet both criteria.

Proposal #3: Conduct More Research on Less Evangelistic Churches

Consider again the following revealing data from the 2003 statistics of the Southern Baptist Convention:

- Of the 43,529 churches in the convention, 13,645 had zero baptisms. Stated differently, nearly one third of all churches baptized no people.

- The total number of churches with six or less baptisms was 28,938, representing two-thirds of all SBC churches.
- The number of churches with twelve or less baptisms was 35,709, or 82 percent of the all SBC churches.¹⁷

The evidence is staggering, if not discouraging. One-third of the churches are baptizing no one. Two-thirds of the churches are baptizing less than one person every two months. And more than eight of ten churches are baptizing less than one person per month.

To my knowledge, little research is being done to determine why more than 80 percent of our churches are clearly non-evangelistic.¹⁸ How many of the “zero baptism” churches are churches that simply failed to report data? How many of the non-evangelistic churches were without a pastor during the reporting year? How many of the non-evangelistic churches have any type of evangelistic programs? The questions are endless, but the research could prove invaluable.

Consider the following exercise. If the non-evangelistic churches in the SBC (defined as those with twelve or less baptisms) increased their number of baptisms to a modest thirteen per year, the total baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention would double (from 377,357 to 718,540).¹⁹ If research on these less-evangelistic churches could lead to new insights for more effective evangelism, the results could prove highly beneficial.

Proposal #4: Focus Evangelistic Training Resources on Pastors

The largest doctor of ministry program at Southern Seminary is the D.Min. in evangelism and church growth. The students are typically full-time pastors

and staff in local SBC churches with two or more years post-master of divinity experience.

We require the students to take doctoral seminars as a cohort group. This approach engenders greater collegiality and accountability. The cohort approach also allows those of us who lead the program to see a “before and after” snapshot of the progress of the students in a group setting.

One of the key emphases in the first doctoral seminar is that the pastor must take personal responsibility for the evangelistic growth of the church God has called him to lead. We are aware that numerous non-leadership factors are at work in evangelistic growth, but we also are keenly aware of the issue of pastoral leadership.

In 2003 I looked at the number of baptisms in the churches of the fourteen men who were finishing their seminar work in the doctor of ministry program. I compared that to the number of baptisms in their churches two years earlier.²⁰ Note the results:

Number of baptisms in 14 churches, 2001: <i>241 (17.2 baptisms per church)</i>
Number of baptisms in 14 churches, 2003: <i>520 (37.1 baptisms per church)</i>

In just two years the number of baptisms had more than doubled in these fourteen churches. How did the pastors explain the incredible increases? They all began to assume personal responsibility for evangelism in their local churches. Many of them developed accountability relationships with other persons in the

area of personal evangelism. Some set goals for the number of persons with whom they would share the gospel each week. Still others brought evangelism training programs into the church where none had existed previously.

Once these pastors accepted the responsibility for leading their churches in evangelism, and once they began to model personal evangelism, the churches began to prosper evangelistically. On a larger scale, many of our denominational entities could focus significant resources on leading pastors to become more evangelistically accountable. If just one of five pastors would accept such training and accountability, the evangelistic results in our convention could prove significant.

Proposal #5: Encourage Pastors and Other Local Church Leaders to Lead Their Churches to a Time of Corporate Confession and Repentance for Their Lack of Evangelistic Zeal

Ultimately, evangelistic apathy is not a methodological failure—it is spiritual disobedience. The Bible is replete with commands and admonitions to communicate passionately the gospel with others. Our failure to do so is nothing less than sinful disobedience to the God who gave us unmerited favor through His Son Jesus Christ.

In 1986 I served in my first pastorate, a church with only seven in attendance the first Sunday I preached. I was a student at Southern Seminary, and I would make the journey across the Ohio River into Indiana at least three or four times a week to the church. The church was evangelistically dead. There had been no baptisms in the recent memories of the few who remained in the church. I felt like a hospice worker,

ministering to the people while waiting for a certain death.

My early actions were to confront the few members with their stark disobedience to God. My hard-hitting sermons, however, were not accompanied with the love of a shepherd for his flock. The members endured my preaching and anticipated the next seminary pastor who would do more of the same.

It was my custom to go to the 150-year-old sanctuary on Saturday evenings to pray for the service of the next day. And the subject of my prayers was usually a plea to God to change the hearts of the stubborn and spiritually-anemic members of the church. But my prayers took a different turn one Saturday evening.

Somehow God got through my spiritual pride and attitude of superiority and confronted me with my own selfishness and disobedience. The church had not baptized anyone since I came as pastor six months earlier, but what had I done in obedience? I was good at sermonizing to others about their shortcomings, but I had become blind to my own. I left that small sanctuary a broken man.

I can only imagine the confusion of the church members the next Sunday morning as I preached. Gone was the self-sufficient and condescending pastor. The man they saw in the pulpit that Sunday was broken and totally dependent on God for everything.

I began to visit neighbors in the community and share the love of Christ. Some members would soon accompany me on these visits. People who had not been in a church in decades started visiting. Several accepted Christ. The church of seven grew to an attendance of seventy. And I learned an important lesson.

Evangelism and church growth does

benefit from innovative programs. Research is helpful to grasp possible future paths of evangelistic strategy. But ultimately evangelism is a matter of the heart between the believer and a sovereign God. It is truly a spiritual matter. And if we are not personally and corporately evangelistic, the first response must be confession and repentance toward the God whose grace is sufficient to give us yet another opportunity.

Closing Thoughts: A Resurgence Not Yet Realized

The purpose of this article has been to examine the evangelistic effectiveness of the Southern Baptist Convention since 1979, the beginning of the conservative resurgence in the denomination. The conclusion is not encouraging. Evangelistic effectiveness is no better today than it was prior to 1979. Indeed the denomination is baptizing the same number as the totals of 1950, when the convention was less than half its size today.

The research has also attempted to show where we might be today if the conservative resurgence had not taken place. If we had taken the path of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches in our large sample, we would be baptizing less than half our present number. In that perspective the resurgence has been vital.

The article concluded with possible reasons for the anemic evangelistic growth in our denomination, and with five modest proposals for reigniting evangelistic fires in our leaders and churches. But, as the article concludes, evangelistic apathy is first and foremost a spiritual problem. The first resolution must come from the disobedient Christian and his failure to obey the God who gave him eternal life.

The subtitle of this article is not insignificant. It could have read "A Resurgence Not Realized." Certainly the quantitative evidence is sufficient, if not overwhelming, to support the thesis that evangelistic health in the denomination has not improved since the conservative resurgence began in 1979. But the subtitle includes the little but hopeful word "yet." If we as a denomination had not pursued a path of biblical fidelity, we would have no hope for an evangelistic reformation. In the history of the church, God has not blessed those groups who have strayed from biblical truth.

The conservative resurgence brought back to our seminaries and agencies the demand that all leaders hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. God's Word is now held high in its total truthfulness. But total biblical fidelity requires more than a cognitive agreement on the parts and the sum of the Bible. True fidelity requires obedience as well. When we are passionately obedient about Christ's commission to share the gospel in all that we do, then the resurgence will have taken its full course.

When Peter and John were facing certain imprisonment and possible death for sharing Christ, they were given a simple mandate by the Sanhedrin: "Speak no longer to any man in this name" (Acts 4:17). The response of the two disciples was equally straightforward: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

The conservative resurgence means that we affirm the historical and spiritual truthfulness of the words above. But a true resurgence means more. We must embody those same words for our own

personal evangelistic obedience. Then, and only then, will the revolution be complete.

ENDNOTES

¹The nationally-syndicated show is called “The Albert Mohler Program,” and is syndicated by Salem Communications. The show airs five days a week, Monday through Friday.

²The commentary is popularly called “Mohler Crosswalk Commentary” and can be found online at <http://www.crosswalk.com/news/weblogs/mohler>.

³See for example, “The Morals and Values Crowd,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 15 November 2004, 42.

⁴“Winner: Richard Land. A Spiritual Influence,” *Time*, 15 November 2004, 84.

⁵“Fast Facts,” The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, [cited 16 November 2004]. Online: <http://www.imb.org/core/fastfacts.asp>.

⁶Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1986).

⁷All of our data for the Southern Baptist Convention came from the Annual Church Profiles (previously called the Uniform Church Letter). The information was made available to us by LifeWay Christian Resources, which is the denominational agency of the Southern Baptist Convention responsible for gathering and publishing the data. We specifically looked at total baptisms, total membership, and the resulting baptismal ratios.

⁸The use of the baptismal ratio as a measurement of evangelistic effectiveness dates back to at least the 1970s. The first book-length treatment of this measurement was Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996).

⁹“Who We Are,” The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, [cited 21 February 2005]. Online: <http://www.thefellowship.info/Inside%20CBF/Who%20we%20are.icm>.

¹⁰“ChurchLink,” The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, [cited 21 February 2005]. Online: <http://www.thefellowship.info/churchlink.aspx>.

¹¹“Who We Are,” The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, [cited 21 February 2005]. Online: <http://www.thefellowship.info/Inside%20CBF/Who%20we%20are.icm>.

¹²Our researchers took the 2003 baptismal ratio of the aggregate of the 683 CBF churches sampled. We then drew a linear trend from 1979 to 2003, applying the CBF ratio to all SBC churches.

¹³This complete research project is published in Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

¹⁴This research is published in Thom S. Rainer, “The X Factor in Growing Churches,” *Outreach*, January/February 2005, 16.

¹⁵This research is published in Thom S. Rainer, “Sharing the Gospel with Church Members,” *Outreach*, May/June 2005, 17.

¹⁶Annual Church Profiles, Southern Baptist Convention, 2003. LifeWay Christian Resources.

¹⁷Percentages calculated from data

from the Annual Church Profiles, Southern Baptist Convention, 2003. LifeWay Christian Resources.

¹⁸We use the term “non-evangelistic” to refer to those churches that baptize twelve or less in a year. In other words, the non-evangelistic churches are baptizing one or less per month.

¹⁹A value of thirteen baptisms was assigned to the churches with twelve or less baptisms. The churches with thirteen or more baptisms were not changed.

²⁰This doctor of ministry program at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary includes two years of on-campus seminars followed by the writing of a major ministry project. Students in this program must have a master of divinity degree or its equivalent and ministry experience.