

**Dr. Malcolm Yarnell**  
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Yarnell (D.Phil, Oxford University) is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Editor of the Southwestern Journal of Theology, Director of the Oxford Study Program, and Director of the Center for Theological Research at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Yarnell's interests are in Systematic Theology (Trinity, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology), Historical Theology (Reformation), Baptist and Free Church Studies (17th Century Origins, Southern Baptists), and Political Theology. He contributes to academic scholarship in all four areas. He is the author of *The Formation of Christian Doctrine*, and is under contract for the publication of his doctoral dissertation, *Royal Priesthood in the English Reformation*, as well as a new Baptist Heritage text. He also writes for denominational publications and generates several academic articles per year for peer reviewed and other academic journals. Although he has been offered major leadership positions over other academic institutions, Dr. Yarnell feels that he is called to disciple future leaders of the churches of Jesus Christ; therefore, his goal is to edify the local churches through Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is a frequent guest speaker to academic, denominational, and local church audiences.

**1. What do you see as the greatest strength of the Southern Baptist Convention right now?**

The greatest strength of the Southern Baptist Convention [SBC] has been, is now, and always will be the faithfulness of her local churches to Jesus Christ our Lord as revealed in His Word. It is only as the local churches surrender entirely to Jesus Christ as Lord that our churches may be considered healthy. Furthermore, it is only as these same churches set the agenda for the various church-authorized entities of the SBC that those entities have any possible reason to exist. If the SBC, her entities, or her leaders ever consider themselves independent or even partially independent of the local churches, they will one day discover that they have no real authority. Unless it recognizes and honors its entire dependence upon and assigned service role to the local churches established by Christ, the SBC will go the way of every usurping organization, whether such a supra-local denomination is based in Rome, Canterbury, Geneva, or Nashville.

**2. What do you see as the greatest weakness or problem in the Southern Baptist Convention right now?**

The greatest weakness in the Southern Baptist Convention of the last few years has been our forgetfulness of what it means to be New Testament churches devoted to following Christ. We have too often taken our eyes off of Christ and His Word, and put them upon the world and her words. Our motives have not been evil in themselves; indeed, usually, we have been driven by an appropriate evangelistic zeal. Unfortunately, zeal without knowledge is a recipe for spiritual disaster. When we forsake the biblical means or

methodology in a thoughtless rush to adopt a seemingly successful worldly means or methodology, we have forsaken what Christ established for His church.

As a pastor, I was constantly bombarded with appeals to listen to this or that organization promoting a new method, a new program, or a new theology. All of them boldly promised that they could make my church better, bigger, and/or more relevant. And these typically “evangelical” alternatives usually came well-packaged, appealing to the commercial and pop culture mindset of America. What I discovered was that these alien paradigms too often borrowed from worldly means, and that if followed, they inevitably weaken a church because worldly methods take a church’s eyes off of the Lord. If you try to reach the world with worldly means, you will subvert Christ’s plan for the churches to reach the world.

### **3. What do you think is the greatest threat or challenge to the Southern Baptist Convention right now?**

It is difficult to fold the multiple threats facing the Southern Baptist Convention into one concept. Several of our White Papers at BaptistTheology.org have detailed a number of such threats. However, if I could choose one word to describe the common nature of the many threats that we face, it is “forgetfulness.” We pastors, educators and missionaries, young and old alike, this preacher-professor included, are forgetting our former rootedness in biblical soteriology and biblical ecclesiology.

First, consider recent attempts to bury the biblical doctrine of salvation under the sometimes bizarre teachings that emanate from Minneapolis and southern California. Rather than being satisfied with a simple biblical soteriology, we are becoming attracted to the latest fads that repackage and propagate those old extrabiblical and needlessly complex systems known historically as Calvinism and Wesleyanism. When I have listeners who become offended because I have spoken the truth about the rationalistic excesses of Reformed theology and have pointed them to Scripture instead, that is a fairly good indication that some of us are more concerned to keep faithful to Presbyterian soteriology than to Scripture’s witness. When I have listeners become offended because I tell them that a private experience of “speaking in tongues” or some other personal experience has no spiritual validity if it is not based in the explicit witness of Scripture, that is a fairly good indication that some of us are more concerned to follow a modified Wesleyan experientialism than the salvation taught by Scripture. Finally, with regard to our forgetfulness of biblical soteriology, Southern Baptists have not yet fully considered the severe challenges posed by the implicitly pluralist or inclusivist soteriology of a missiological system that seeks to use authoritatively the Koran or the Bhagavad Gita in evangelism, even under the guise of using such only for “pre-evangelism.” The Word of God, the Bible of the Old and New Testaments, has sufficient power to convert the world—indeed, it alone possesses such saving power. It is that Word alone that we must proclaim, and it is that Word alone that we must teach our people, and it is that Word alone by which we must disciple the peoples of the world. Let us leave the Calvinists and the Wesleyans, Christians though they are, to teach their own extrabiblical systems. Let us leave the Muslims and the Hindus, and Christians they definitely are not, to teach their

own profane texts. Let us not just give lip-service to the Bible by glibly chanting “inerrancy” in order to prove an increasingly incredible claim to be a conservative Southern Baptist; let us treat the Bible as the inerrant and all-sufficient text that it truly is. I was saved because somebody gave me God’s Word, and I know of no other way anybody can be saved, other than by God’s Word inscripturated, the Holy Bible.

Second, consider recent innovations and lapses of memory among our churches with regard to a biblical understanding of the church. If I were to point out seven truths that every church must embrace and keep central as a coherent whole in order to consider itself faithful to the New Testament, it would be these: the Word, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, prayer, the Great Commission, and congregational governance. First, It is the Word of God that the church must proclaim, and it is the Word of God that is the Christian community’s guide for discipleship. If one cannot find a church practice commanded by Christ and exemplified by the apostles, it is simply not that important. We must put our emphasis upon Scripture and what it teaches. Second, baptism is commanded by Christ and exemplified by the apostles.

According to the Scriptures, baptism is for believers only, by immersion alone, the first means of personal confession of Christ, a symbol of death and resurrection, a means of identification with the Triune God, and the form of entrance into the church. Third, the Lord’s Supper was established as a meaningful celebration of the atonement that Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross for all humanity, and the Lord’s Supper was to be celebrated only among those who are Christ’s disciples. The Lord’s Supper must not be flippantly demoted to become a periodic addendum to worship, nor may it be elevated beyond a meaningful symbol into a sacrament that magically introduces the fleshly presence of Christ. Fourth, church discipline is simply not an option for the church; it is a command. At one time, Southern Baptists were adamant about regenerate church membership; now, we coddle and provide a disservice to the morally or theologically lapsed in our midst by neglecting to practice redemptive church discipline. We thereby treat Christ’s commands as merely options. Fifth, the church must be about prayer. When the church leaves off praise in order to engage in spectacle, it undermines biblical worship. Sixth, the church must be obedient to the Great Commission, and it must be noted that the Great Commission is more than going and evangelizing. The Great Commission is fundamental to the existence of a biblical church, and any church that neglects to send preachers, disciple the nations, baptize new disciples, and teach all things that Christ commanded is disobeying their Lord. Seventh, New Testament ecclesiology is without a doubt congregational in form. Papalism, Episcopalianism, Presbyterianism, and the way of the independent mystic are not biblical forms of the church.

**4. What do you believe is the greatest opportunity for the Southern Baptist Convention right now?**

The greatest opportunity for Southern Baptists is to embrace the Bible as God's inerrant and sufficient Word and the Great Commission as God's sufficient will for our churches. It is by returning to the basics of our faith that we will bring glory to God and prosper our witness to Him. He doesn't want our burnt offerings; He wants our obedience; and He will honor our obedience.

**5. Some have suggested that the Southern Baptist Convention is likely to decline in the near future. What is your assessment of the future of the Southern Baptist Convention?**

I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, it should surely go without saying. However, if Southern Baptists neglect to preach God's Word and obey God's Word, we will be a failure. Ultimately, we will not be measured by the world's measures of success—and this is why we should be less concerned with sociological research than we currently are. Ultimately, we will be measured by how faithful we were to hear and obey His Word. Therefore, let us turn our hearts and minds again to reading the Bible and proclaiming the Bible we read.

**6. What would you say to a young (or old) pastor who is considering leaving the SBC? Why should they stay a Southern Baptist?**

I would say, "Let us sit down, my friend, and talk and see why you want to leave." Now, if a pastor is not comfortable with traditional Southern Baptist worship patterns, I would encourage him to make sure his proposed alternative is truly biblical. We should humbly recognize that worship styles do change over time and with changes in culture, and we should allow room for various styles among biblically faithful churches. However, there is no room for churches that intentionally neglect or subvert the ordinances of Jesus Christ. Now, after a period of time and conversation, I would encourage that pastor to be true to his principles, whatever they are, and to allow his church to be true to its principles, whatever they are. If a pastor wanted to leave the SBC because he has forsaken the revealed ways of God for the church as we have discerned them and described them in our confession, I would try to persuade him to see the truth as we see it. If he finally remains adamant, for instance, by saying that baptism is an indifferent thing, or by saying that he can practice a form of church government incompatible with the New Testament, or by importing a non-Baptist soteriology, then I would encourage him to find a different communion of churches with which he is comfortable. After all, Southern Baptists are open to many things, but unbiblical beliefs and practices historically have not been countenanced.

**7. The resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC has been a controversial issue in some ways. What is your perspective on the resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC?**

As you know, I am not considered part of the Calvinist party in the SBC. However, I gladly participated in the “Building Bridges” conference on Calvinism at the Southern Baptist Convention, both to recognize that there is a place for Baptist Calvinists in the SBC and to express concerns about the speculative and distracting system of Calvinism. A number of sermons and articles have also relayed my views of the issue. I will refer your readers to those publications:

<http://blogs.lifeway.com/blog/edstetzer/Yarnell%20-%20Calvinism.pdf>

(Note: a problem seems to exist with Safari displaying the above pdf. Use Firefox or Chrome to see this document).

<http://www.baptistpress.com/bpnews.asp?id=22971>

<http://www.baptisttheology.org/documents/TheHeartofaBaptist.pdf>

**8. The issue of elder rule has been controversial in many churches. What is your perspective on ruling elders as an expression of Baptist church polity and ecclesiology?**

Well, you do ask the easy questions, don't you?! Please allow me to summarize my position thematically, for there have been different castings of the idea of “elder rule”: First, let us remind ourselves that “elder” is one translation of presbyteros, and that Scripture equates presbyteros with episcopos in order to describe the office of the one that, today, we typically call “pastor.” If a person means by “elder rule” the denial of congregational governance under the direct Lordship of Jesus Christ, then I would say that elder rule forsakes the New Testament pattern of the church. Moreover, I seriously wonder how long a church that adopts this understanding of elder rule can remain Baptist. Second, if a person adopts a distinction between ruling elders and teaching elder, then I would disagree with his exegesis of 1 Tim. 5:17. Third, if a person argues that churches must appoint multiple elders in every church because elder is used in the New Testament in the plural, then I would say that he is forcing a corporate meaning upon what might merely be, and most likely is, a collective plural. Fourth, if a person argues that some churches may have multiple elders while others may have single elders, then I would identify this as a minor issue that should not disrupt fellowship among Baptists. Finally, if a person argues that “elder rule” means the leadership of a pastor in a congregation that governs itself under Christ, then I would just encourage him to use different language, for we actually agree with one another.

**9. What is your perspective on the emergent church movement?**

Technically, “emergent church” is a misnomer. First, the so-called emergent church is not a “church,” biblically defined, for the modern term typically refers to a supra-local movement and not to a particular local church. The Bible knows only of two uses of

“church:” the local churches that gather now and the universal church that gathers at the end of days. Christian movements, regional entities, national entities, curias, synods, presbyteries, invisibilities, and other such human inventions are not biblical churches. Second, the so-called emergent church is not all that “emergent,” for we used to call some of the teachings associated with the emergent movement, “liberal.” Most emergents refer to their movement as “postmodern,” which is arguably only a radical form of philosophical modernism or liberalism. Historically, old errors may adopt new names under which to hide. Third, there are several branches in this movement, and we must be careful not to paint all of them with the same conceptual brush. Some proponents are closer to the Baptist faith and message than others, as some claim with regard to Mark Driscoll and Acts 29. However, when I hear Driscoll treat our Lord’s command regarding baptism flippantly, or when I hear him repeatedly refer to our Lord’s mother as a “lying whore,” even if while ostensibly defending the virgin birth, I do wonder whether his branch of the movement can find a permanent home in the SBC pace repentance. My hope is that Driscoll will repent of his foul mouth and flippant attitudes regarding dominical institutions.

I do appreciate the emergent movement’s desire to reach people who live in various radical sub-cultures, but I worry about some of the ways that have been adopted. Let it be remembered that every culture has its sin, for cultures are composed of sinful human beings. Because culture is not neutral, we should be careful before adopting new ways in the name of “building bridges,” for human ways inevitably involve sin. The Great Commission does not excuse one from obeying Christ’s call to personal and corporate holiness. Emergent movement proponents have, of course, adopted some very troubling practices, from a traditional biblical perspective. The use of recreational alcohol or sexually-suggestive themes in church or outreach events, much less personally, strikes me as inappropriate and dishonoring of the holy Lord we seek to proclaim.

#### **10. What would you say is the most significant theological issue confronting Southern Baptists in this generation?**

Let me end with one question, in answer to your last question: Are Southern Baptist churches and institutions going to become more faithful to Jesus Christ as revealed in His Word, or will we surrender our New Testament distinctives in the emotive and tempestuous rush to declare ourselves emergent, evangelical, and ecumenical?