

**Wade Burleson**  
**May 25, 2007**

Wade Burleson has served as Pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma since 1992. A graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Burleson served as President of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma from 2003-2005. Burleson has sometimes stirred controversy, however, as a trustee of the International Mission Board, and in issues he has raised on his "Grace and Truth to You" blog site. He was a signer of the Memphis Declaration, and is sometimes cited as a leader among younger pastors known as the Reformed Relevants.

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

The Southern Baptist Convention came into existence with a desire to take the gospel to the nations. Some are under the mistaken belief that Southern Baptists separated from Northern Baptists over the issue of slavery, but in reality, Baptists in the south did not like the mission boards excluding God-called missionaries who were slave owners. Missions and placing missionaries on the fields 'white unto harvest' drove the founders of our convention, and though our views of 'slavery' ultimately changed, our passion for missions has remained the same. Without a doubt, our evangelical zeal evidenced through a passion for the glory of God through missions is our greatest strength.

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

Similar to the early 1840's we are confronted by a desire in the hearts of some to exclude certain Southern Baptists from cooperative missions and ministry based upon opinions, beliefs and convictions that go far beyond the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. This has been called 'the narrowing of the parameters of cooperation' and though it may have been occurring for many years in the SBC, only recently has it come to my attention. The removal from missionary service those Southern Baptist missionary candidates who affirm the BFM 2000 but possess a private prayer language, the removal of highly educated and acclaimed Southern Baptist professors from our institutions of higher learning simply because they are women, and the attempt to make every Southern Baptist conform to a particular doctrinal interpretation on non-essential issues prior to trustee service at our agencies are just three examples of this narrowing. There will be Southern Baptists from now until Jesus comes who disagree on soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, church polity, and other areas of doctrine and theology not addressed by the BFM 2000. We are a convention built upon cooperation and the greatest weakness we have right now in the SBC is the quiet acquiescence of many to the demands of doctrinal conformity by a few leaders. In other words, too many Southern Baptists are not paying enough attention to what is going on in our convention. But that weakness is now being addressed and soon the participation level in the SBC by younger leaders and pastors will significantly increase.

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

The greatest threat we face as Southern Baptists is losing sight of the gospel. The gospel is the story about Christ, God's and David's Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. We as Southern Baptists must join together to proclaim the good news that God's Kingdom has come in the

life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord and Messiah, in fulfillment of the Word of God. When we become focused on demanding conformity from Southern Baptists on those doctrinal issues that are not essentials of our faith, we lose sight of the gospel and become a religious organization focused on ourselves, rather than the people of God who put our emphasis on others.

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

We have the opportunity to make several important decisions at our conventions in the next few years that will send a resounding message to the world that Southern Baptists are focused on spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, and we are united for that purpose. I think it will be refreshing to issue a statement reflecting that for which we stand together, rather than multiple pronouncements about those things we are against.

**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?**

The SBC will decline both numerically and financially in the future if we don't begin asking the question 'how do we keep the young men and women committed to the cooperative mission efforts of the SBC?' We are losing young people by hundreds to other non-denominational, evangelical conservative churches. Some are young, God-called pastors and missionaries who are writing to me and saying that they are not sure if they 'fit' in the SBC anymore. If Southern Baptist leaders don't get clued in to what it will take to reach a young generation of Southern Baptists we will wake up one day and ask ourselves where all the people have gone. This is the age of communication. The old method of doing business in the Southern Baptist Convention is gone. It's time we recognize that this new generation demands information, transparency and accountability. We are poised as a convention to meet all three demands, but it takes Southern Baptist leaders to push in this direction. I am personally optimistic about the future of the SBC. My life has been invested in Southern Baptist work and I believe we know how to adopt to meet the challenges we face. It is not always easy, but it can be done.

**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 have said it many, many times over the past year – “Don't leave! There is far too much good taking place, and with your help, the future will only be brighter for the SBC.” I have been to several regional headquarters of the International Mission Board this past year, and the excellent work that is being accomplished around the world is really hard to comprehend by a person who has never been on the field. Our church will be increasing our Cooperative Program percentage this year. We believe what is happening in the SBC, and we are excited to be a part. Though many think of us as a people who always fight, when I think of the SBC I think of people who always cooperate. In fact, even those issues which have thrust me, unwillingly, into the center of controversy this past year, each of them has been because of a desire on my part to narrow the parameters of cooperation. I say to anyone who is thinking of leaving the SBC – “Don't! – Our best days are ahead, and you can be a vital part of our cooperative ministry.”

**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?**

I am not nearly as concerned about Calvinism as I am legalism. Our church is full of one, two, three, four and five point Calvinists. We all get along, love each other, and work together in ministry. Our church is free of the curse of legalism and the fellowship is sweet, the cooperation is great, and the results are amazing. We have baptized over one hundred people each of the last four years. We are starting our third Sunday morning service and are now reaching close to seventeen hundred people each week in small groups. All this with what some might say ‘Calvinistic’ leadership. We never make this system of theology a matter of fellowship. Years ago Dr. Hershel Hobbs and I wrote editorials for the Baptist Messenger, the state Baptist paper of Oklahoma, regarding the resurgence of Calvinism. In my editorial made it very clear that I, unlike Charles Spurgeon, never wanted to be called a “Calvinist” simply because I think there are too many misperceptions of this system of doctrine, it puts an emphasis on a man rather than Christ, and it lessens the focus on the gospel. My emphasis in ministry is the gospel, and though I think it is difficult to clearly articulate the gospel without an understanding of the great doctrines of grace, I am convinced that you don’t have to be a systematic theologian to have an impact on a lost world. So, to answer your question, I’m not sure that the ‘resurgence’ of Calvinism has had any negative effects on the SBC, it certainly has not at our church.

**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?**

Our church is congregational for major decisions, but we are led by a group of pastors or shepherds, some who are full time paid pastors and some who are not. I definitely believe the Bible supports a plurality of pastoral leadership, but I am not convinced that what you must call them ‘elders’ or ‘bishops’ or even ‘pastors.’ Also, most would not consider us an ‘elder’ led church because we have congregational votes on major decisions and place all important documents in the hands of members for proper accountability. I would say we have a blended approach in this area of church polity.

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

I frankly am not familiar enough with the movement to make a comment regarding it.

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

Ecclesiology.

I personally believe there is an attempt by some to narrowly define ‘the church,’ far beyond the definition of the Bible and our confessions. When that happens there is always the danger of cooperative ministry suffering. Why? When somebody sets out to define what a ‘pure’ church is, and then tells you that you don’t have one, then there are attempts by those same people to separate from you. In other words, some will try to define who is, and who is not, a true Southern Baptist church, and then tell you -- you are not a part of one. I believe that the decision of what a church should look like, according to the great Baptist tradition of local church autonomy, must be made by the church herself – and not outside influences.