

Let's Change the Name of the Southern Baptist Convention

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I was in a northern state last week. I asked a pastor if the name of the Southern Baptist Convention was a hindrance to his work. He replied emphatically that it is. He told how one person had asked him why Southern Baptists would build churches in the north. He replied that not all Roman Catholics live in Rome. It was a great answer, but why did he have to waste his time discussing the name of his denomination? That night, we were together with some other pastors and their families and it came up again. The same feelings were expressed there. Why do we Southern Baptists do this to these guys? Why do we insist on having a name which throws up an emotional barrier? We don't even get them in the door before we turn them off; it's on the sign out front. When many people outside our region, especially those who have never lived in the south, hear the words, "south" or "southern," they don't picture friendly folks speaking to strangers on the street or neighbors who bring you a casserole when a loved one dies. They don't hear gracious accents or men with genteel politeness. They don't remember good food or sweet women. Unfortunately, they picture the turbulence of the sixties and the fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham. They picture the Ku Klux Klan and Pettus Bridge in Selma. When they hear the words Southern and Baptist together, they have the media driven image of "narrow-minded fundamentalists." That's a lot of baggage to overcome—and why should anyone have to overcome all that just to talk about Jesus? That is a great disservice to those on the field in churches outside the southeast.

I am for changing the name because southern pride is not our priority, the Great Commission is. Something inside of me makes me respect Robert E. Lee, and swell at the sound of Dixie (and it has nothing to do with racism or longing for the days of slavery). I am tempted to be resentful when some northerner moves down here and starts telling us how backward we are (usually because they are upset that we don't sell liquor on Sunday or support state sponsored gambling). I get tired of seeing PBS showing something every-other-night on the sins of the sixties and those same tired pictures from Birmingham. I am tired of having our noses rubbed in something that happened over four decades ago. Race relations have come light years. We are not all rednecks. The New South really is new. For example, Birmingham has some of the best medical care in the world. The prejudice against the south can be offensive. And it is a temptation to be defiant in the face of the slander. But our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. We are Americans by birth, but citizens of heaven by the grace of God.

We should change the name because the word Southern describes where we have come from, but it does not describe where we are. Admittedly, the Southern Baptist Convention was founded because northern Baptists would not agree to send southern slave owners as missionaries. But that was then. Southern Baptists have confessed the sins of our fathers in this area. Now, we are an increasingly multi-cultural denomination. Even in the south you will find congregations affiliated with our denomination from every race and ethnic background.

We should change the name because the word Southern does not describe where we are going – which, of course, is into all the world. While most of our churches are still in the south, we start churches everywhere we can. Southern is no longer an accurate geographical description of the region where we start churches. That is not the limit of our

work. So, it would not be "cloaking" our identity. Instead, it would mean improved truth in advertising, more truth in labeling.

We should change the name because the word Southern is not a doctrinal term. There is no Biblical truth we would betray by changing that word. The two words together (Southern and Baptist) have come to be linked, in the minds of some, with certain beliefs and practices. But Southern Baptists believe what we believe as Baptists. We believe those truths because they are what the Bible teaches, not because we are Southerners. We are not the only ones who believe them. We believe the same things other Baptists believe (or at least, have confessed historically). Every single belief we hold is also held by other Christian denominations and organizations in various parts of our nation and around the world. There are others who believe in baptism by immersion, there are a lot of other groups who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, there are others who embrace the priesthood of all believers, and belief in the final perseverance of the saints is not exclusive to us! There is nothing "southern" about our beliefs! Thus, changing the word "Southern" is not a step toward theological liberalism.

Some have objected to changing the name on the grounds that it would be expensive and, thus, poor stewardship. The charter of every entity of the convention would have to be changed (involving legal costs), much material reprinted, information on web sites revised, etc. Well, let me ask you: is it good stewardship to have a name that keeps people away? If the sign prevents people from walking in the door and giving us a try, how many dollars in Cooperative Program receipts have we lost? I believe the name change would easily pay for itself. Seeing the eternal destiny of one person be changed would be worth every dime!

Would the liberal media continue to give us grief, regardless of our name? You can be confident they would! A biblical worldview and a secular worldview are antithetical. But at least the issues would involve our religious beliefs and not the Southern heritage of most of our members. The sign in front of our churches in South Dakota wouldn't be a stumbling block. Our pastors in the northern states would, in this one small way, be helped.

Some have objected to changing the name because there is doubt as to what we could change it to. Look, if our name is a hindrance to our work, then almost anything would be better. We can find something. Continental Baptist Convention... North American... Global... Joe's Grill and Baptist Convention... Sure, keep the Baptist part; that's what we are, but if we want to be effective in our times, almost anything is better than the word, "Southern."

Just because we are used to the name and we would have to go to some trouble to change it, is no reason to keep it. We should say with Paul: "We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed" (2nd Corinthians 6:3). Let's change the name!