

SBC Decline in Baptisms

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Introduction

The collective, reported baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention have plateaued and moved toward decline for several decades. This is taking place in the midst of growing numbers of mega churches and new church plants. This has and should cause reflection and evaluation with alarm.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore possible reasons for the decline in baptisms reported to the SBC through the Annual Church Profile reports. This will involve exploring various contributing factors and to propose a few paths to consider.

No one book or even extended article can address the many tentacles which are contributing to the plateau and decline of the reported baptisms in the SBC. But, my hope is that you will see a clearer picture into the realities we as Southern Baptists are facing. A bonus would be that you may use whatever insights you gain to further expand God's Kingdom in North America and around the world.

Delimitations

In writing formal papers for my PhD seminars at NOBTS, I became quite familiar with the term "delimitations" and its value in bringing some order to research and to making seemingly unlimited options, a little more in focus. I need to delimitate several items as you begin moving through this paper. First, I will not be intentionally addressing the value, the role and/or the future of denominations generally or even the SBC. Second, I

will not be extensively covering whether or not counting the reported baptisms in the SBC is the best measuring tool as to the effectiveness of the SBC and in particular the evangelistic fruit of our collective ministry. Third, I will not seek to address the various ministries and ways the SBC is impacting the world through our denominational, church and individual ministries. Fourth, I recognize that while factors are involved at various levels, I will not seek to determine exact cause and effect, or even attempt to provide statistical correlations on the factors. I am hopeful that you will not take one isolated factor or suggested factor out of the context of the collective picture of the whole.

Research Methods

I did take several roads in exploring this significant matter with all of its facets. However, I certainly would not claim that this particular research is exhaustive in nature. The statistics and demographic trends do represent what is happening in the SBC and do so without much attention given to proposed solutions or future strategic implications. The surveys I conducted with individuals were wide enough in nature to get a cross-section of responses that provided a broad range of reasons why the baptisms are declining in the SBC. Three previous research papers were particularly helpful.

- “Reflections on Southern Baptist Baptisms” by J. Clifford Tharp, Jr, June 2005.
- “Reflections on Southern Baptist Membership” by J. Clifford Tharp, Jr, July 2005.
- “Strategic Planning Indicators” by Philip B. Jones, Summer 2000.

Current Status of Southern Baptist Baptisms in the US

The ways to look at baptisms in the SBC are not unlimited, but they are many. In the following sections I will seek to provide some statistical facts, provide a little commentary

on it for your consideration, and then allow you to determine which factors you believe are most significant.

- For the past 50 plus years, the numbers of reported baptisms on the ACP have basically been plateaued inside a 10% margin both up and down and overall trending down a little.
- For 4 of the last 5 years, baptisms have been declining.
- The ratio of baptisms per resident members has significantly declined in the last 60 years: from 1 baptism for every 14 resident members in 1950 to 1 baptism for every 29 resident members in 2004. This means that it takes more resident members to baptize someone today than it did years ago.

Selected Factors Influencing Baptism Totals

Many factors are influencing baptism numbers. Some are more readily observed through statistics and others are more difficult to see under the layers of factors.

Statistically Observable Factors

The most obvious positive correlation is the connection of baptisms to the birth rate. The baptism totals of the SBC track in a positive correlation with the birth rate of white, non-hispanic children from 7 years prior. God is certainly not limited by demographics or the birth rates, but for several decades, as birth rates go up and down among white people, so too baptisms typically follow several years later.

While Southern Baptists are growing more diverse, the denomination has historically been predominately white and non-hispanic. Compared to other segments of

the US population, white parents are having fewer children, which is impacting the baptism totals. Other people groups are having more children per family.

Compared to national averages, SB church members have an older average age, which means that fewer SB church members are having babies to be reared in homes of SB families. Compiling the numbers of boys connected to a church, the trend goes significantly downward...

- Age 6 – 100 boys
- Age 12 – 50 boys
- Age 18 – 25 young men
- Age 22 – 7 young men
- Age 30 – 13 men

These figures demonstrate that out of every 100 boys connected with our churches at age 6, only 13 will be connected at age 30. While every single child's soul matters, these numbers beg for some attention and focused efforts to reverse this very dramatic trend with boys. The ramifications of these short-comings in discipling children are many.

Theological Factors

Fewer Churches Requiring Rebaptisms by Immersion

For several decades, research has indicated that between 40 and 60 percent of adult baptisms were not first time saving conversions, but rebaptisms. This means that the church's ability to reach adults is more difficult than a surface level glance at the statistics would reveal. Southern Baptists churches are having trouble communicating their message to adults particularly toward first time conversion. This was not the case with Jesus and the early disciples.

Churches reaching out to adults who do come from denominations that do not require baptism by immersion have to wrestle with what they require for membership. Some churches have relaxed the traditional Landmark practice of requiring persons joining SBC churches from other denominations to be rebaptized by immersion. Historically this was a standard request and probably produced a few more baptisms each year.

A related factor is the decrease in the number of people migrating to the South from the Rust Belt and Snow Belts. Most of the migration to the South has already taken place, so there are fewer people to rebaptize should they seek to join a SBC church. While these factors may not be statistically significant, they are impacting the total baptisms reported.

Practical Universalism

Southern Baptists as a collective people say they believe in the Bible and follow the tenants of the Baptist Faith and Message in all of its major doctrinal positions. However, practically, I believe Southern Baptists have lost their edge toward evangelism because they operate as if there are many paths to God and that God will work it out in the end if a person is good or sincere. In his [Evangelism Handbook](#), Alvin Reid addresses practical universalism and its potential dangers to evangelism which in turn impacts baptism rates.

Spread of Calvinism

Strongly held beliefs and passions often accompany any discussion of Calvinism. It would be neglectful not to list this matter of theology in the discussion of baptisms because of the growing amount of conversations about it across the SBC, even though Calvinism seems to be a negligible factor for now. In 2007 LifeWay Research completed a study and reported their findings in “Calvinism and SBC Leadership: Key Findings and Evangelistic

Implications.” Four conclusions were drawn: (1) Calvinist led churches are a small minority of the total churches, (2) Calvinism is on the rise among SBC seminary graduates, (3) churches led by recent graduates who hold to Calvinism are generally smaller in worship attendance and baptisms, and (4) in annual baptisms, there is little difference between Calvinist and non-Calvinist led churches.

Social and Cultural Factors

Spiritual Options

While some parts of the country used to be so saturated with Southern Baptists, that if a person belonged to another denomination, people would almost ask, ‘how did that happen’. Today the religious and spiritual options available to people are almost uncountable. Additionally, people are taking bits and pieces from various religious groups and almost making their own religion and beliefs.

Impact of Media

The number of noticeable and hidden impacts of the media on the minds and hearts of Christians as potential gospel carriers and those we are trying to reach for Christ cannot be overstated or even adequately addressed in a paper of this nature. The messages of the media are making it more difficult for pastors to motivate their congregations to share the message of Christ. The prevailing media messages are also making it more difficult for those without Christ to be receptive to Christians and their message.

Several impacts worth noting.

1. The media has significantly contributed to how people process reality including matters of faith. There has been a major shift from primarily using logic, reason and

good judgment, to processing life through matters of emotions, feelings and relationships. This applies both to Christians as they process sermons, Bible teachings, and other forms of hearing the Christian message, and also to lost people that Christians are trying to communicate the life-giving message of Christ.

2. The media and those who construct its messages have increasingly undermined Christian doctrine and teachings as a basis for thought and practice of life.
3. The media has often projected all religious groups as the same in spite of the significant differences. This impacts evangelism in several ways, but it also has sped up the process of what has led people to not hold to their denominational ties.
4. The media has propagated that religious beliefs are a private matter and that someone who has a belief that they share with others is acting with ignorance, arrogance, or aggression, not acting as a person of conviction and love for others.

Breakdown of Cultural Supports (Schools & Government)

In past decades, the church has been able to count on the support systems of the schools and of government to make many decisions that were fairly consistent with Judeo-Christian teachings. These entities were providing either support for decisions to follow Christ or laying a foundation for the gospel to be received when it was spoken to them.

Like the media, these institutions have been promoting that all religions are the same and promoting new forms and definitions of tolerance of both beliefs and practices of life. So, in many ways these entities have eroded the foundation on which the gospel was laid in the minds and hearts of those who are significantly impacted by them.

Communication Challenges

Postmodernism

Christianity neither follows the thinking of Modernity or Postmodernity. However, the approaches to communicating the gospel with a person who is more influenced by modernity is significantly different than communicating with a person who's culturalized and naturally bent is toward processing reality through the lenses of postmodernity.

People process a proposed truth/idea (including the gospel) through three filters: (1) reason, (2) pragmatics, and (3) feelings. For most of the history of the SBC, our evangelism tools have been designed to speak clear truth of the gospel to the person processing reality through the filters in the order shown above of 1, then 2, and then 3. An example to illustrate this would be Bill Bright's 4 Spiritual Laws gospel tract. However, today growing numbers of people are processing new proposed truths in a reverse order (3, then 2, and then 1). The implications for sermons and for personal witnessing are many. In my book, *The Art of Personal Evangelism: Sharing Christ in a Changing Culture*, I addressed this topic more extensively.

Starting Point is Farther Away

While more people are considering themselves spiritual people, they are often spiritually confused regarding the true gospel as revealed in the Bible, even if they are using the same words. There is less common ground from which to start a conversation about Christ. People have widely different views on what it means to sin, who is God or god, the truthfulness of the Bible, what it means to be a Christian, and several other matters which are involved in a person surrendering their life to Christ. Most gospel tracts assume

much more than meets the eye of those who also hold those beliefs. For a culture where people are often determining their own truth and almost making God into their image, the starting point for spiritual conversations and/or our gospel tracts are much more toward Genesis 1, than John 3. A factor in the decline in baptisms involves our inability or our limitations to connect people to the one true living God and Jesus in our communications with them when they have such diverse starting points. Even when churches are successfully reaching people who are postmodern in their thinking, baptisms may lag behind.

Spiritual Factors

A factor in the decline of baptisms is the lack of recognition that we as Christians are in a spiritual battle with a living and active enemy who seeks to destroy. Satan and the demonic beings which follow him are seeking to thwart the work of God and those who follow Him in Jesus Christ. We are not in a spiritually neutral environment. With the world becoming smaller in many ways and as the religions of the world spread in the US, the lies and the author of those lies spread in their influence.

Other Possible Factors

Some churches have disconnected from the SBC

For a variety of reasons, some churches are no longer tied to the SBC. There is less negative stigma in America toward churches that are independent or inter-denominational. Individualism was a mark of modernity, and has now grown additional roots into the systems of our churches. While Baptists have always practiced the local autonomy of the

local church, it seems in recent years to have been taken to new heights as churches are less connected to their denomination.

Some pastors who grew up in SB churches and/or the children of SB pastors are no longer connected to the SBC

There are churches, some with high profiles and certainly those with lower profiles, that are being led by pastors who grew up in homes of SB families and pastors, but are no longer connecting to the SBC. This would reduce the numbers of baptisms reported by SBC churches.

Churches Not Submitting ACPs

For several different reasons, increasing numbers of churches are not completing their Annual Church Profiles, which contain all types of information, including baptisms. This does not automatically mean that there are fewer actual baptisms, but fewer churches reporting baptisms. Currently about 10,000 churches are not reporting baptisms, but that does not mean that all of those 10,000 churches are not baptizing even one person.

Heavy emphasis on individualism

Many people believe they can determine absolute truth for themselves in an individual way. In some ways, postmodernity is just an extreme form of modernity, where the value of the individual is placed on steroids. As such, people are often creating what they think about God from a wide variety of sources and the collective whole may actually have no basis and similarities to God who reveals Himself through the Bible and ultimately through Christ.

Some of our evangelistic efforts and subsequent baptisms are being negatively impacted by sharing our message with more and more people who believe they can determine their own truth in their own minds and that they are not subject to the standards and revelation of God in the Bible. This is also in keeping with the growing and prevalent belief that all religion is now in the area of opinion, not truth, so the views they hold are equally valid as anyone else, which is why a young man said with a straight face, “I am a Catholic Atheist”.

Age of Congregation

Not only does the age of the members of the church appear to correlate to baptisms, the actual length of time that a church is in existence impacts evangelism as well. As churches age, the membership to baptisms ratios grow wider. Newer churches baptize more based on their membership than older churches. However, based on research I did for the North American Mission Board in 2002, the best figures to use for a more representative comparison are either baptisms to average worship attendance ratios or baptisms to average Sunday School attendance.

Single System & Evangelism Approaches in Isolation from Disciplemaking

There is much to say for having a simple faith that moves a person through life in a Christ-honoring manner by living with consistent patterns of obedience in thousands of little ways. However, for too, too long we have isolated and segmented evangelism from helping people become the type of disciples that imitate the life, values and priorities of Christ and honor God with their relationships and little acts of obedience that grows in depth over time.

Without going too deep in discussing modernity, Christians could, not should, say to a lost person, “it does not matter how I live or about your experiences with Christian churches, what matters is that the gospel is true and you must believe it.” This context for proclaiming, evangelizing others, no longer exists as the majority view. It is absolutely essential for churches, in the midst of the cultural collapse of Judeo-Christian teachings and values, to produce/assist people in looking more like Jesus than they do other people who do not say they follow Christ. Chuck Kelley stated in a presentation to the NOBTS seminary family, “Aggressive evangelism without aggressive discipleship will eventually undo itself.”

Too often Christians seek to do evangelism that results in baptisms as if it were a single system matter or at most a dual system: evangelism training and conducting harvesting events. Church evangelism is more like the systems of a body or a car, they are many and it only takes one being down to keep the body or the car from running. So, in spite of efforts to do evangelism through personal evangelism training and through harvesting efforts, as vital as they are to the evangelism system, churches struggle many times because another part of the system is either unseen or neglected.

Possible Implications – Responses

I recognize that facing the varied and many factors which are impacting our baptism totals and more importantly our fruitfulness in expanding God’s fame and glory around the US does not lead us to a simple solution. In the following section I will seek to offer some items for your consideration. I know the list is not exhaustive, but maybe it will be a starter for future conversations, thinking, and hopefully promoting of the Holy Spirit who sustains life and gives us direction.

In no particular order and only with limited explanation, I offer you some ideas for your consideration as we collectively address the decline in baptisms we are experiencing...

Give attention to follow-through

Whether children or adult conversions, I would propose that churches pay significantly more attention to the new babes in Christ and see the absolutely imperative role of doing God-pleasing follow-through in helping new believers in Christ live in such a way that others would accuse them of being Christians. We seem to put the vast majority of our energies in getting to conversion and extraordinarily low thought and energy to helping those new believers grow in the faith as a part of the local expression of the bride of Christ, the church. With more and more Americans processing truth through whether or not it is working practically in someone's life, our individual and corporate testimony will have significant ramifications on our ability to evangelize and baptize.

Plant additional churches, particularly among those cultural peoples who have higher birth rates and are growing in population in the US

Newer church plants and younger churches tend to, not automatically, be somewhat more effective in their baptism to attender ratios. Every single person is God created and as such, is precious in the sight of God, which means we should try to get Christ to them. However, planting new churches among segments of society who are having higher birth rates and/or better church-per-person ratios seems to have the potential to help expand the gospel to future generations of Americans.

Give attention to what it takes for a child, particularly boys, to follow Christ into adulthood

The statistics regarding the percentages of boys who drop out of the church and probably from following Christ closely is alarming. It is not enough for churches to baptize children, we must assume greater responsibility to understand how children develop in their faith in today's challenging culture. The answer is not to baptize them at younger and younger ages because we cannot reach and/or keep them if we don't get them while they are young and naïve. We absolutely must build on our VBS and other evangelism efforts and expand our limited Sunday School type efforts to grow them. The future will demand that churches through their human, financial, and spiritual resources moves, toward assisting parents in discipling their children in the face of the contrary messages of the media and the challenges created by the forms of education they are receiving. Churches will have to care more about what is happening in the home more than what is happening in the 1 to 2 hours the children are doing church stuff.

Reposition Evangelism as a Loving Act

The media and other religions have convinced followers of Christ that to share their faith is to act with ignorance, arrogance, or aggression. The love of Christ compelled the early church. The love of Christ today demands that we love people in the highest possible ways, including sharing the life-giver with them, Christ. Love is not complete without sharing Christ.

There are 6 Expressions (maybe systems) of evangelism and love. Those 6 essential systems are (1) prayer for the lost, (2) enjoying and serving lost people, (3) evangelism

training, (4) friendly up the church both internally and externally, (5) bridging and harvesting efforts, and (6) celebrating, connecting and deploying disciples. These six systems can be reduced by putting the above systems in pairs to get: (1) Engagement – God & People, (2) Preparation – Personal & Church, (3) Connecting – Christians, Church, Christ and their Mission. More information can be found through the ministry of the Florida Baptist Convention and the website www.flbaptist.org/loveyourneighbor. Jesus said you will know my disciples by their love.

Adapt our methods of communicating to give people the best opportunity to hear and respond to Christ

The objective in communication at its simplest form is to accurately relay a message in the best possible form so that the person receiving it can understand what the sender is trying to communicate. Churches collectively and Christians individually are carriers of the message of Christ and we need to sharpen our skills in communicating and give attention to both the verbal and non-verbal messages we are sending. The peoples of the US, with their great, great diversity, are dependent upon us to be clear in our communications of the greatest story ever lived and told. How we communicate personally and publically really matters. They cannot respond if they do not understand our message in the midst of the all the confusing messages around them.

Continue to ...

Place a significant value on church planting

Newer church plants and younger churches tend to, not automatically, be somewhat more effective in their baptism to attender ratios. Every single person is God created and

as such, is precious in the sight of God, which means we should try to get Christ to them. However, planting new churches among segments of society who are having higher birth rates and/or lower church per person ratios seems to have the potential to help expand the gospel to future generations of Americans.

Diversify our congregations, both existing churches and new church plants

The certainty is undeniable, America is becoming more and more diverse, with many different ethnic groups outpacing the growth of Anglo Americans. If the SBC is to be vital in the future, it will do so because those who exist today made sacrifices and preparations for people who they would never see and for those who are radically different from them. Baptisms will be stronger as we plant healthy churches to minister to all people groups in our country.

Love by serving one another and lost people to both validate our message and to open the hearts of lost people to us and more importantly to Christ

It is painfully apparent that (1) increasing numbers of Americans are either choosing no religion or are becoming increasingly closed to Christians and our churches, and (2) increasing numbers of Christians and churches are leaning away from the mission of Christ to reach and disciple those who could care less that He exists. The most apparent way to open the heart of a lost person is to do acts of love in the name of Christ toward them. The most apparent way to get the church to move toward lost people is to ask them to do acts of love toward the people around them and bathe that in prayer for them and ourselves. As the church moves in obedience in this way, hearts of the lost are opened and the capacity for compassion for the lost expands in the life of the follower of Christ.

See church evangelism and personal evangelism as a process that involves several key parts and a system, not just as a finishing touch of facts

Isolated acts of love by individuals and churches will probably go more and more unheard by the peoples of the US. They will need a consistent and steady flow of Christians and churches both living and telling the message of Christ to them as they wrestle with the increasing religious confusion all around them. It will take a church to both reach a lost person and raise a spiritual baby into maturity and spiritual reproduction. Evangelism cannot continue to be a segmented part of the life of the church. All aspects of the church have to support the message of Christ by how we relate to one another and how we relate to those who are spiritually searching.

Conclusion

The factors impacting the collective total baptisms are diverse and complicated. It is comforting to realize that while God has used the Southern Baptist Convention to impact many parts of U.S. and the world, He is not dependent upon the SBC as the sole carriers of His message. God is at work, both where we can see Him and where we cannot. He is working out His plan for His universe. The question is how do we position ourselves in such a manner to both please God and be used by God to expand His Kingdom.

May the SBC collectively serve God and His purposes above all others. And, may God raise up others individuals, groups of followers, and denominations to serve Him and His purposes above all others.