

## Denominationalism & the SBC Hot Summer Nights

### Intro – Last week the SBC gathered in New Orleans.

- Every year during the month of June, Southern Baptists gather for their **annual meeting** in various cities across the US. This year, it just so happened that the annual meeting was in **N.O.**
  - The weather was hot, the humidity was high, and the food was good. Most importantly, messengers to the SBC made some **important decisions** regarding women in pastoral ministry.
  - Maybe you saw the headlines:
    - Time Magazine – “The SBC’s Long War for the Patriarchy”
    - CNN – “Pastor speaks out after her church was expelled because it’s led by a woman”
    - Nashville Scene – “Southern Baptists Continue Long Tradition of Silencing Women”
    - Open Democracy – “Southern Baptist Convention: theological misogyny wins again in US”
  - If our wicked, dishonest media criticizes you, it could be an indication that you’re **doing something right**. In this case, I applaud Southern Baptists not only for taking a strong position on women in pastoral ministry, but for affirming the truth of the Word of God.
  - Southern Baptists disfellowshipped three churches – two of them for employing **women as pastors**.
- Messengers also passed a **constitutional amendment** that states only those churches who employ men as pastors are in friendly cooperation with the SBC. It requires a second vote next year.
  - And while it appears Southern Baptists made some good decisions at this year’s annual meeting, **there’s still some work that needs to be done** to address what appears to be an unbiblical drift by some of our leaders.
  - The SBC raises a larger question about denominationalism in general. What is the role of Christian denominations in America, what is their current status, and what is their future?

### 1. What is a denomination?

- Wikipedia says that a denomination is “*a subgroup within a religion that operates under a common name and tradition among other activities.*”
- A Christian denomination is a **generic term** for a distinct religious body identified by traits such as a common name, structure, leadership and doctrine.
- Theological issues such as biblical interpretation, the authority of apostolic succession, eschatology, and ecclesiology often separate one denomination from another.
- The secular world counts Catholics & Orthodox religions as Christians denominations, but **evangelical Christians** would not count either of those groups as Christian denominations. When we talk about denominations, we’re talking about groups that would be considered **Protestant**.

## 2. How many Protestant denominations are there?

- The World Christian Encyclopedia says there are approximately **9,000 Protestant denominations** in the world. The **largest groups** in America are:
  - Southern Baptists – 13.2 million
  - Episcopal Church in the US – 1.7 million
  - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – 3 million
  - Presbyterian Church (USA) – 1.1 million
  - United Methodist Church – 6.2 million
  - Seventh-Day Adventists – 1.2 million
  - Churches of Christ – 1 million
- It is broadly expected that a Christian denomination believes in the **sovereignty** of God, the **sinfulness** of man, and the **substitutionary** atonement of Christ.
- And yet, classifying a denomination as “Christian” is difficult, because there is often **a broad range of doctrine** among the churches of any denomination. Southern Baptist doctrine is summarized in the *Baptist Faith & Message 2000*.

## 3. What are denominations designed to do?

- Most denominationalism can be traced back to the **Protestant Reformation**. In fact, our Baptist forefathers were part of a “**radical reformation**,” especially because of their views concerning the Lord’s Supper and baptism.
- From their inception, denominations have been designed to **provide fellowship** for like-minded believers.

- Denominations also exist to help their churches **communicate their doctrinal positions**. As mentioned, Southern Baptists have the *BF&M 2000*, but other denominations have also identified their own doctrinal parameters:
  - Episcopalians have their *Book of Common Prayer*
  - Lutherans have *The Book of Concord*
  - Presbyterians have *The Book of Confessions*
  - Methodists have *The Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith*
- Denominations have also joined together for the purpose of **missions**. All mainline denominations either have or partner with a missions-sending agency. Southern Baptists have the IMB & NAMB.
- Some denominations also provide **special ministries** in collaboration with their churches, such as Children’s Homes, Adult Homes, seminaries, camps, schools, etc.
- Denominations have also historically sought to **influence government** and government leaders – local, state, national, and international – while affirming separation of church and state.
- The main focus of any Christian denomination should be **to assist its cooperating churches in fulfilling the Great Commission**. Sadly, that is no longer the focus of many denominations.

## 4. What is the current status of mainline denominations in America?

- Every mainline denomination in America is **in decline**. That's especially sad, because the population of America has gone up while the membership of denominations has gone down.
- In other words, there's **more people** in America than there's ever been, but churches affiliated with America's largest denominations **aren't doing nearly enough** to reach them with the Gospel.
- The decline is obvious:
  - Episcopalians – 3 million in 1970, 1.7 million today
  - ELCA – 5 million in 1988, 3 million today
  - PCUSA – 3 million in 1990, 1.1 million today
  - UMC – 10.6 million in 1970, 6.2 million today
  - SBC – 16 million in 2005, 13.2 million today
- Part of the reason denominations are in decline is because **religion and belief in God** are also in decline. Fewer and fewer people attend church, and atheism/agnosticism is on the rise.
- In the wake of WW2, 76% of Americans said they were members of a local church. By 2018, that number was down to 50%. Today, that number is down to about 47%.
- COVID did nothing to help the decline of denominations. About 20% of members who attended pre-COVID have never come back to in-person worship and most totally disconnected.
- But, many denominations have experienced a loss of members due to their position on moral issues.

- Women in pastoral ministry has proven to be a watershed issue for many denominations:
  - The American Baptist Churches USA allowed female pastors in 1985 and failed to uphold discipline for churches with homosexual members in 1999.
  - The ELCA ordained women in 1970 and practicing homosexual pastors in 2009.
  - The Episcopal Church USA allowed female pastors in 1976 and homosexual bishops in 2003.
  - The PCUSA allowed female pastors in 1956 and then openly homosexual pastors in 2011.
  - The United Methodist Church allowed female pastors in 1956, allowed for homosexual unions by failure to discipline in 2014, and there is currently a conservative exodus from the denomination that is expected to change their policy to allow homosexual ordination in 2024.
- Simply stated, most mainline denominations no longer believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, and thus they feel the freedom “reimagine Scripture” by departing from the faith (Jude 3).

## 5. What about the SBC?

- Beginning in 1979, something unprecedented happened in the SBC. With every mainline denomination drifting left, Southern Baptists experienced a conservative resurgence.

- The resurgence was led by pastors such as Adrian Rogers, Jerry Vines, Jim Henry, and Charles Stanley. BOHBC sent a full slate of messengers to vote for Stanley in Dallas in 1985.
- Sensing their defeat, many of the moderates & liberals among us departed the SBC to form in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1992. The resurgence won “the battle for the Bible.”
- But about 15 years ago, Southern Baptists affirmed what was called a “Great Commission Resurgence.” It drastically changed the way that state conventions dealt with NAMB. It also impacted Cooperative Program giving.
- GCR has turned out to be a major failure. Southern Baptists currently allocate about \$77 million to church planting through NAMB (3 times the 2008 amount), but sadly we are planting fewer churches than we did 15 years ago.
- Baptisms are down, membership is down, and CP giving is down. A member of the Executive Committee recently said that our current trajectory is “unsustainable.” In just one year, EC operating reserves went from \$12 million to \$6 million.
- Moving forward:
  - Will Southern Baptists begin to elect Presidents who believe the Bible and stand by the whole counsel of Scripture?
  - Will former leaders continue to encourage a left-leaning drift?
  - Will we cave to culture or remain faithful to God and His Word? Time will tell!