

The Road Not Traveled
An Urgent Plea For A Brighter Future
By Charles S. (Chuck) Kelley, Jr.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

From *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost

The 2024 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention will take place June 11-12 in Indianapolis. Like Methodists before us, the SBC is firmly in the grip of decline. Circumstances have converged to give the SBC a narrow window of opportunity to avoid a Methodist Moment that could permanently alter our future. The Convention has never had this kind of opportunity to address a profound crisis, and a recurrence of these circumstances is unlikely in the foreseeable future. To take advantage of this narrow window will require messengers to choose a “road less traveled,” and go where other denominations are reluctant to go. They need to take two radical, unexpected steps (repentance and triage), to listen carefully to, accept, and respond to disappointing news, and to make a commitment to the primacy of the Great Commission through repentance, a recommitment to our founding missional identity, and a trust in each other unlike anything we have seen in a long time. The bottom line: This is an urgent plea for a truly radical commitment to the Great Commission. Let me explain.

The Background

America’s largest Protestant family of churches faces a long ignored-problem of epic proportions: **systemic decline**. Occasional statistical bright spots are not to be mistaken for progress. Pick any decade in the last 75 years and compare the statistics in the Annual Church Profile reports for those years with the years since the Great Commission Resurgence. You will see clearly the difference between our yesterdays and the broad-based decline gripping the SBC since the Great Commission Resurgence. Stunning is not too strong a word for the changes in the SBC past and present. That Southern Baptists are in decline does not come as a surprise for students of American Christianity. One could argue that decline is inevitable. The history of every major family of churches in our nation can be summed up in three words: Growth; Plateau; and Decline. Southern Baptists never expected to add that third word to their story, but our time has come. Keep one note of hope in mind. To say that decline is inevitable, is not to say it is irreversible. No denomination has reversed it yet, but there is hope.

In the mid-20th century, British pastor and author W. E. Sangster emerged as one of the more significant Methodist voices in the world. While researching the current state of the Southern Baptist Convention, I stumbled across a small book entitled *Methodism Can Be Born Again* which Sangster wrote to his fellow Methodists in 1938. At that time, Methodists were the largest evangelical denomination in the nation and the world. Like Baptists, they were known for their evangelistic and missionary zeal. They were preparing to celebrate the 200th anniversary of John Wesley's conversion at Aldersgate in London, the launching point for the Methodist movement and its explosive growth across England, America, and the world.

Surprisingly, Sangster expressed profound concern about the future bearing down on Methodism in spite of their "largest ever" status. As more attention went to non-core matters like social issues and world affairs, less attention went to the historic focus of Methodists on passionate engagement in evangelism and discipleship. Sangster took note of the effect of this shift on their churches. The statistics produced by Methodist churches (declining membership, attendance, etc.) were so dismal that he wrote, "A child can easily foresee the ultimate outcome of all this unless it is stopped" (p. 16). Unfortunately, Sangster's shocking warning went unheeded. As the years passed, Methodists turned further and further away from their historic identity. In time they suffered the largest loss of membership in the history of American Christianity. Evangelism and missionary efforts became mere shadows of past glories. Today's headlines on Methodism report large numbers of churches leaving the denomination in state after state amidst ongoing debates about homosexuality and other marginal issues. Sangster died before the changes he predicted fully emerged, but emerge they did.

The parallels of the Methodist story with Southern Baptists today are striking. Southern Baptists are known for their evangelistic and missionary zeal. They are now the largest Protestant body in the nation; but, like Methodists in 1938, the state of their churches tells a different story. What started as a loss of evangelistic momentum following the big splash of a Convention restructuring process called the "Covenant for a New Century" in 1995-96 broadened and deepened into comprehensive decline. **The Methodist past could very well be a preview of the Southern Baptist future.** Southern Baptists have become the new Methodists.

Southern Baptists and Decline

To put the situation plainly: The Southern Baptist Convention and a great many of its churches are in decline in every statistical category that matters. Yes, there are now and ever will be wonderful churches having their best days, and there are periodic statistical bright spots in SBC ministries. Still, as Sangster wrote to his Methodist critics, "God can do something with the faithful, beaten to their knees, but who can manage the man who denies that anything is wrong, and thinks that all is well with Methodism because things are not too bad in his corner?" (p. 17). Three statistical snapshots of the SBC from my book *The Best Intentions*, ([amazon link](#)) reveal the reality and scale of SBC decline. **Don't miss these three snapshots.**

First, in the year 2000, SBC churches baptized an average of 9.9 people per church. A decade later in 2010, SBC churches reported a decrease to 7.2 baptisms per church. In 2019, nearly a decade after the Great Commission Resurgence initiative and before the pandemic, that

number dropped to only 4.9 baptisms per church. In 2022, the average fell still further to 3.8 baptisms per church. There was some excitement when the recent release of the Annual Church Profile report indicated an increase in baptisms last year. However, putting that rare increase in historical context gives important perspective on the present. Even with the gains last year, Southern Baptist churches baptized fewer people than they did in 1932 or 1939 with far fewer churches than the Convention has now. This year's report about an increase in baptisms is a nice bright spot, but knowing that we still lag behind what half as many churches did 85 years ago is a sobering fact. **The SBC is falling behind its past as well as failing to meet expectations for its future.**

Second, the current approach of the Convention's North American Mission Board (NAMB) to church planting is being overwhelmed by the rising tide of lostness in the United States. In 1900, the SBC had one church for every 3,800 people. By 2011, the Convention had only one church for every 6,169 people. In its 2013 SBC report, NAMB told the Convention that closing the gap between the number of SBC churches and the expected growth of the U.S. population would require starting at least 15,000 new churches every decade. Remember that number. To reach that big goal, NAMB tripled the budget for church planting and reinvented its church planting process. **Conversation about what churches needed to do to reach the lost in their communities was replaced with continual conversation about what churches should do to reach people living somewhere else by starting new churches.**

After more than a decade of implementing NAMB's new strategy, the SBC fell even further behind the population growth of the United States. In 2022, the church-to-population ratio was only one church for every 7,000 plus people. Unfortunately, NAMB's "bright spot" announcement of starting 10,000 new churches over the last twelve years was thousands less than their announced goal of starting 18,000 new churches in that time period. Research from SBC entity Lifeway recently confirmed that the Convention loses more churches annually than it starts (*Baptist Press*, April 2, 2024). More concerning is the utter silence of NAMB about simple markers of progress. It no longer reports how many missionaries are assigned to church planting annually or how many of the new churches it started still survive and remain connected to the SBC five and ten years after their launch. The lack of transparency about such basic information likely indicates the news is not good. While NAMB and its Trustees celebrate occasional statistical "bright spots," Southern Baptists are steadily losing ground already gained.

Third, the financial engine driving the SBC Great Commission train is the Cooperative Program (CP). Financial support from SBC churches for the all-important goal of reaching the nation and world for Christ is eroding. Next year is the 100th anniversary of the Cooperative Program, but alarm for the future offsets a celebration of the CP past. Cooperative Program funds from the undesignated gifts received by SBC churches have declined in every decade from the 1980s until today. In the Eighties, 10.50% of undesignated gifts to SBC churches went to the Cooperative Program. By the end of the second decade of the 21st century, only 5.22% of undesignated gifts went to CP. For the last five years, the CP giving percentage slipped to 4.74%. **Even more concerning is a "red flag" warning: The number of SBC churches that give nothing to CP is steadily increasing.** According to a report from the SBC Executive Committee

in 2021, 13,897 SBC churches did not participate in CP giving in 2010. The non-participation number kept increasing, and by 2019 about 40% (19,645) of the total number of SBC churches did not participate in the Cooperative Program. The Executive Committee no longer reports this number in spite of its ominous implications for the future. **In the three critical areas of baptisms, church planting, and CP giving, all momentum for the SBC is downward.**

A Neglected Conversation

The three areas mentioned above are representative samples of a broader reality. The Southern Baptist Convention and a great many of its churches are clearly in the grip of decline. Still, the problem of decline has yet to become a Convention-wide conversation among Southern Baptists or a concerned emphasis from SBC leaders. In fact, issues receiving the most attention in and around the SBC annual meetings in recent years are far removed from those discussed above. Most of the attention and conversations in Southern Baptist life are issues splintering the SBC family, like critical race theory, sexual abuse, and the use of the term “pastor” in church staff job titles for ministers who are not the senior pastor of a congregation. **The Southern Baptist Convention is moving ever closer to its Methodist moment by moving further away from its historic focus on evangelism and missions.**

Ironically, all three issues noted above have two things in common. First, Southern Baptists are in general agreement on the central core of each issue. Most Southern Baptists recognize the need for continual work on racial issues in the SBC and the nation but reject the approach of critical race theory. Also, Southern Baptists overwhelmingly condemn any form of sexual abuse. Finally, the typical Southern Baptist firmly believes that the pastor of a church must be male. The problem is that each of these issues has been handled by Southern Baptist social media voices, by the platform leaders at the annual meeting, and by the most vocal messengers on the Convention floor in a way that maximizes their potential splintering effect. Worse still, these issues took all the oxygen out of the room for serious discussions about the historic decline of the SBC, the inattention to or inability of Southern Baptist churches to reach the lost in their communities and, of far greater significance than most Southern Baptists realize, the looming financial crisis facing the SBC.

Historians attempting to understand how the Methodists of yesteryear became the Methodists of today find clues in the unheeded warnings of W. E. Sangster in his 1938 book. Methodists failed to make necessary adjustments as their churches began to decline. **Should Southern Baptists continue on their present path inattentive to decline and its corrosive effects, historians looking back on what happened to the SBC may settle on the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention meeting as a critical turning point, when Southern Baptists had an opportunity to avoid a Methodist moment but ignored it.**

A Rare Opportunity

This summer a new and widely respected President for the SBC Executive Committee begins his tenure. Dr. Jeff Iorg has been a church planter, a pastor, a state convention executive and most recently beloved President of Gateway Seminary. He has succeeded at every level. He carries no political baggage and embodies traditional Baptist theology and polity, with a bent

toward thinking outside the box and a passion for evangelism. Also, a new SBC President will be elected with the possibility of serving for two years. With the presidential office will come the powers of the bully pulpit, agenda setting, and making significant appointments. Finally, an SBC Task Force assigned to evaluate the impact of the Great Commission Resurgence on the Convention will report its findings to the messengers. That report will certainly include a disappointing description of the present health and circumstances of the Convention. **This convergence of circumstances is as perfect a scenario as the SBC will ever have for turning the full attention of entity heads, messengers in the Convention Hall, pastors, and Baptists in the pew to the complex, difficult problem of breaking the grip of decline on the SBC.**

To take full advantage of this opportunity for the Convention to understand and attack the problem of crippling decline looming large over the future of the SBC will require Southern Baptists to embrace two radical steps. First, we must repent. We must publicly acknowledge that all is not well with the Southern Baptist Convention. We must embrace the reality that many of our churches and ministries are having results that fall below expectations, ours and the Lord's. We must refuse to blame anyone but ourselves. We do not need to identify a scapegoat or persons responsible for this. We are all responsible and we must all repent. **We became a people whom God stopped blessing as He had in days past, and we rarely wondered why.** We kept searching for any shred of good news so that we would not have to acknowledge the bad news, ignoring the onset of decline and allowing it to grow and spread across our work. There are actions to take, but doing anything will be unfruitful if we do not first repent of the relentless optimism that blinded us to the changing realities in front of us and kept us from noticing God's hand no longer on us. Public and private repentance before God is not typical among the families of churches in our nation, but Southern Baptists must do this in order to exit the road we are on and find another road to a more hopeful future.

Second, the SBC must take the unprecedented action of applying the principles of triage to the Convention agenda for Indianapolis. "Triage" is the process used by medical professionals to assess quickly multiple people having a variety of problems and identify the level of urgency in each problem. This allows a medical team to focus first on the most urgent needs while ensuring that every need is addressed at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way. **The messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention must focus on the most urgent issue of systemic decline and find different ways to advance other important issues, like the Sexual Abuse Task Force and the Law Amendment to change the SBC constitution, without disrupting an urgent focus on SBC decline. We must do what Methodists refused to do when they still had a chance to turn things around.** In other words, messengers attending the 2024 Convention must "rally to the flag" and reset the attention of the SBC on actual Great Commission progress. The Great Commission is the core issue that brought the Southern Baptist Convention into existence and energized its growth and impact. The Convention exists to facilitate churches working together to better fulfill the Great Commission. **Primary attention in Indianapolis must be given to the report of the Great Commission Resurgence Impact Task Force while non-Great Commission issues are advanced, at least temporarily, by the creative use of other means than attention and discussion on the Convention floor.**

A Road Less Traveled

The business of this Convention must highlight our identity as a Great Commission people. How can this be done? By taking a road less traveled. More accurately, Southern Baptists must choose a narrow path no other American family of churches was willing to take. We must interrupt the current Convention conversation and stop the path we are on. We must use the pause to give full attention to the problem of the decline now gripping the SBC and confront it head on. Methodists ignored the warnings of Sangster about decline in order to continue their present conversations and worry about decline later. “Later” never came, and Methodists lost forever who they were and what they had accomplished.

- 1) Messengers to the 2024 Convention should receive the report of the Sexual Abuse Task Force and immediately refer it, without further discussion, to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) for discussions about where to go from here. This issue naturally connects with the ERLC more than any other SBC entity. The ERLC has staff, a Trustee body representing the SBC, and a budget giving them the ingredients for a more thorough discussion than the Convention could ever have in its business sessions about how to proceed on the complex issue. The ERLC has guaranteed access to the SBC Executive Committee at least twice a year, guaranteed participation in the CP budget process, and guaranteed access to the messengers at every meeting of the SBC. This move does not sweep the sexual abuse issue under the carpet or give it a blank check. Far from it. It gives the issue a track to run on in SBC life without taking attention away from the Great Commission crisis facing Southern Baptists. The ERLC could bring the issue back to messengers at any future Convention. This is an advance by a more appropriate means than the limited, highly structured time for discussion on the Convention floor.
- 2) Controversy about the Law amendment to the SBC Constitution appears to be driven as much by confusion as by conviction. Most Southern Baptists believe the Bible teaches that every pastor leading a church should be male. Less clear are opinions about the inclusion of the term “pastor” in the title or job description of other church staff members who are obviously not the leader of the church. The gender of the pastor of a church and the use of the word “pastor” in a job description for other members of the church staff may be related issues, but in the eyes of many Southern Baptists they are not identical. Should staff titles and job descriptions of ministers not leading the church be a factor in qualifying as an SBC church? More clarification and careful explanation of the theological and practical issues involved is absolutely essential to maintaining the unity Southern Baptists have always had about gender and the office of pastor. This kind of discussion is not possible on the Convention floor. The *White Paper* is an available tool that can provide such clarification and explanation. Ronnie Floyd and the Executive Committee used this tool when dealing with tensions between NAMB and several state conventions in 2020. A *White Paper* is a thorough analysis of an issue prior to a decision about that issue. It is a common tool in the academic and professional worlds for organizations facing critical decisions. The Convention should ask the Council of Seminary Presidents to prepare

a *White Paper* on “The Use of the Term *Pastor* in Church Staff Job Descriptions.” The Seminary presidents are eminently qualified with the necessary knowledge, skills, experience and trust to do expert analysis, and they can do so with little expense beyond what is in their respective budgets. Southern Baptists should use that expertise and pause any action on this issue for the sake of clarification and understanding. This would give all Southern Baptists an opportunity to be on the same page about this issue and its implications before a decision is made. The presentation and discussion of the *White Paper* in a future Convention will provide a natural opportunity for messengers to make a motion and vote again on the issue. If parliamentary rules do not allow a delay on the second-year constitutional vote to clarify the issues involved, the process can easily be restarted and approved at that time. To frame the issue more carefully and clearly before making a constitutional decision advances it by means other than the Convention floor.

- 3) By taking the radical steps above, the messengers attending the Indianapolis Convention would position themselves for a rare and unusual opportunity. The stage would be set for messengers to listen carefully and consider a formal analysis of the state of the Great Commission in Southern Baptist life from the Great Commission Resurgence Impact Task Force. I strongly believe this report could finally focus the attention of the Convention and its leaders on the reality of decline and how to address it. The willingness to hear disappointing news is the necessary prelude to turning things around. I pray that it will lead the Convention to repentance both public and personal. Southern Baptists do not need to find anyone to blame. Southern Baptists do not need to get angry with one another. The people in our pews, the pastors in our pulpits, and the leaders in our ministries need to be brokenhearted about the state of the Convention and its churches, realistic about the difficulty of attempting to break the grip of decline, and absolutely determined that whatever else Southern Baptists may do, they will attack the challenge of implementing the Great Commission together as the Prime Directive, the task that must always be done first. **Messengers need to leave Indianapolis talking about the problem of decline, a profound repentance, a Great Commission reset, and a realistic hope that together we can do what has never been done before in the annals of American Christianity. We can learn to grow again.**

A Radical Commitment to the Great Commission

The time is now for Southern Baptists to avoid having a Methodist Moment and risking the loss of the very essence of our identity. The Southern Baptist Convention is out of runaway. The problem of decline cannot be ignored any longer if it is to be reversed. Will Southern Baptists seek fresh fire, or will they scatter the embers and let the fire fade away? Will they settle for occasional statistical “bright spots” until even the bright spots are gone, or will they insist on genuine Great Commission progress? The messengers who came to the 1979 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Houston launched what became an unprecedented return to their historic theological identity. No large family of churches in American history had ever moved so far to the theological left and returned to its traditional theological heritage. Now the Convention

finds itself once again facing the need to do something unprecedented. **The Southern Baptist Convention needs to repent, reset, and recommit to its founding missional identity.** I admit that calling this “the road less traveled” is actually an understatement. Choosing to undertake the reversal of decline will require the creation of an unknown road never traveled before in the annals of American Christianity. In the words of Kay Lyons Stockholm: *Yesterday is a cancelled check; tomorrow is a promissory note; today is the only cash you have—so spend it wisely.*

This writer has not found any large family of American churches once in the grip of significant decline to break that grip and return to growth and missional progress. Certainly, the Methodist church has not done so. There was always another big issue to be resolved before they could go back to evangelism and discipleship. They never found the will or discipline to stop going down the road of decline and change directions. Evangelism and discipleship eventually faded away from the focus of the heirs of John Wesley. Lost people never have and never will lobby for attention. The secular world never wants to be addressed by the church and would be happy for the SBC to retreat into background religious noise easily ignored. Even the evangelical world will not entreat Southern Baptists to return to their missional priorities. Other evangelical groups have their own fish to fry. Southern Baptists must find in themselves the will, the discipline, and the passion to refocus on reaching the lost for Christ, baptizing them, and discipling them.

Why is overcoming decline so difficult? A return to past priorities steadily becomes less attractive to those who remain in a declining denomination. Past greatness has diminishing appeal to those who get accustomed to growing smaller. Many pastors will decide that participation in the SBC is not worth the effort if it is not going to enhance their engagement with the Great Commission. They will increasingly turn their attention solely to the local church they serve and what it can do to reach the community and the world. As decline took root and spread permanently in other families of churches in our nation, so it will among Southern Baptists if we ignore it or make only token responses to it. Can God’s transforming lightning strike twice in one family of churches? Will the Southern Baptists who go to the Indianapolis 2024 SBC launch an unprecedented movement to break the grip of decline and restore the SBC to its status as a Great Commission juggernaut? Time will inevitably tell.

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