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COVER ILLUSTRATION: The cover features head and shoulder photos of the eight former or current Florida Baptist pastors who served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Pictured, top row, from left, are: Carl E. Bates; Adrian P. Rogers; Charles F. Stanley; and C. Jerry Vines. The bottom row, from left, are: James B. Henry; Jack N. Graham; Bobby H. Welch; and William E. “Willy” Rice.

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***The Legacy of Florida Baptist Pastors Who Served
as President of the Southern Baptist Convention***

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PREFACE

The Legacy of Florida Baptist Pastors who Served as Presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention

This issue of the 2026 *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage* features biographical profiles of eight Florida Baptist pastors who served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. These profiles, while highlighting each man's respective Florida church service, also briefly summarizes their election and year(s) of service as convention president. The featured profiles are: Carl E. Bates; Adrian P. Rogers; Charles F. Stanley; C. Jerry Vines; James B. Henry; Jack N. Graham; Bobby H. Welch; and William "Willy" E. Rice.

By designating these men as "Florida Baptist pastors" means that *at one time or another* each of these individuals served one or more Florida Baptist churches. Of these eight men, four went from their Florida church to serve a church(es) in other states. Three of these pastors had a lengthy tenure in a Florida Baptist church and retired from that congregation. The 2026 SBC President-elect Willy Rice continues to serve the Calvary Baptist Church, Clearwater.

An additional article in this *Journal* features a summary narrative on the 23 men and one woman Florida Baptists who served as a vice president of the national convention. Again, these individuals are designated as "Florida Baptists" because, *at one time or another*, they or a spouse served in a Florida Baptist church.

Since the Southern Baptist Convention was constituted in 1845, 64 men have served as an SBC president. During the first 100 years of the convention's existence, it was common for a person to be re-elected as president for as many as four to 10 consecutive years (i.e. Jonathan Haralson 1889 – 1898). The people elected to this office
—Continued next page—

PREFACE - *Continued*

have been pastors, denominational workers, laymen, educational institution heads and political leaders.

The president's official duties have not changed much since 1845. By practice and bylaw, the SBC president has more than a ceremonial role of representing Southern Baptists in the public arena. He casts the vision for the annual meeting program and its featured preachers. His real "power" has been in his appointment powers. The president, particularly in the twentieth- and twenty-first century, has the significant role of appointing persons who would serve on the Committee on Nominations. That key committee, on which the president and vice presidents also serve, identifies and selects all the individuals to be recommended to the annual convention messengers for approval to serve on the boards of trustees of the Convention's seminaries, agencies and commissions.

Prior to 1932, each SBC president was elected at the beginning of the annual meeting and would preside immediately. The 1932 SBC annual meeting was the last time a president presided the year of his election. At that same meeting, the bylaw change required the election of the person to preside over the following year's annual meeting, which is still the practice today.

D.S.H./editor

2026 Baptist Heritage Award



The Florida Baptist Historical Society, for the past 30 years, has recognized an individual for their effective preservation and promotion of Florida Baptist history. The Society's Board of Directors is pleased to announce that their selection as the recipient of the 2026 Baptist Heritage Award is Dr. Javier A. Sotolongo, of Hialeah, Florida.

The Baptist Heritage Award seeks to recognize and honor those Florida Baptists who have exhibited rare and unusual dedication to the cause of Florida Southern Baptist history by having made a significant impact through such means as researching and writing Baptist history, teaching Baptist history, preserving Baptist history, and/or promoting the importance of Florida Southern Baptist history.

In considering a potential candidate to be the 2026 Baptist Heritage Award recipient, there is one noteworthy individual who has produced a document that provides a major contribution to the history of the growth and development of the Hispanic Baptist movement within the Florida Baptist Convention. Dr. Javier Sotolongo wrote his 2023 dissertation, (short title), "Reverse Missions Among Southern Baptist Cuban Americans," that was initially submitted in fulfillment of the PhD degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Sotolongo's research provides an additional valuable resource on Florida's Cuban Southern Baptists. As a significant research document, it complements the research previously published under the title of "Southern Baptist Hispanic Mission in the State of Florida, 1960-2005," written by Dr. David Lema. Additionally, Dr. Sotolongo's research

2026 Baptist Heritage Award-continued

broadens and strengthens the body of knowledge about the Cuban Baptist missions' expansion among Florida Baptists.

Dr. Javier A. Sotolongo of Hialeah, Florida, has served as senior pastor of the Estrella De Belen (Star of Bethlehem) Baptist Church, Hialeah, since 1990. Under his leadership the church is committed to intentionally focusing on outreach and discipleship, which results in an increase in baptisms and renewed passion for sharing the gospel within the greater Hialeah community. The church's members have been trained in various evangelism techniques to equip them to take the gospel beyond the walls of the church building. Members regularly take to the streets, offering prayer and invitations to church services. This outreach had led to encounters with the homeless, immigrants and people from diverse backgrounds that have resulted in increased baptisms.

Dr. Sotolongo has earned three degrees, including the Bachelor of Arts in Theology from the Western Cuba Baptist Seminary. Subsequently, he attended and graduated with a Master of Theological Studies (with advance coursework in Missions and Evangelism) and the PhD degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. At various times, concurrent with his seminary studies, Brother Sotolongo served as a professor at Miami Bible College and as an adjunct professor at both Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Southwestern Seminary.

A native of Villa Clara, Cuba, Dr. Sotolongo (b. 1961) migrated to the United States at age 18. He served as a church planter in Buffalo, New York, under the auspices of The New York Baptist Convention. Then he re-located to Florida to begin service with the Estrella De Belen. In 2016 and 2017 he served as first vice president, Florida Baptist State Convention. He and his wife Barbara have been married since 1985 and have two adult daughters.

2026 Baptist Heritage Award-continued

Twenty-nine individuals, since 1997, have been conferred the Baptist Heritage Award by the Florida Baptist Historical Society. These persons represented a broad range of Florida Baptists including pastors, denominational workers, college and seminary professors, and laypersons, all of whom had an interest and commitment to researching and publishing Florida Baptist history.

The following individuals are former Heritage Award recipients:

1997 – Earl Joiner	2015 – No recipient
1998 – Adolph Bedsole	2016 – David Lema and Roger Richards
1999 – Joe Bamberg	2017 – Jerry M. Windsor
2000 – Ruth Bagwell	2018 – Sid Smith
2001 – John Hillhouse	2019 – Thomas A. Kinchen
2002 – Martha Trotter	2020 – L. David Cunningham
2003 – Wiley Richards	2021 – Donald S. Hepburn
2004 – E. B. Browning, Sr.	2022 – Carolyn L. Calhoun
2005 – E. H. Rennolds, Sr.	2023 – Linda Gramling Demott
2006 – Harry C. Garwood	2024 – Brenda “Penny” Baumgardner
2007 – Pope Duncan	2025 – Joel A. Breidenbaugh
2008 – John L. Rosser	
2009 – Doak Campbell	
2010 – Judith Jolly	
2011 – Jack Dalton	
2012 – James C. Bryant	
2013 – David Elder	
2014 – Mark A. Rathel	

Our Mission:



Serving Churches

In fulfilment of our Mission to research, preserve and promote the Legacy of Florida Baptists, the Society assists leadership of Florida Baptist churches and associations in a variety of ways:

- ◆ the research of local church and association histories;
- ◆ the research of pastoral leader biography;
- ◆ provide resources for publishing a history; and
- ◆ encourage and assist churches and associations to celebrate their respective heritage and anniversaries.

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The Society's endowment fund supports the future ministry of the Florida Baptist Historical Society.

You can create your own LEGACY by making a financial gift right now – E-check, credit card or debit card -- by using the Society's on-line giving portal: www.FloridaBaptistHistory.org.

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The Endowment fund underwrites the ministries of the Society that include the collection, preservation, and interpretation of Florida Southern Baptist historically significant materials.

The Society serves Florida Baptist churches by providing assistance in history-related research, writing and publication of local church documentaries and histories.

To fulfill that mission, the Society collects and maintains collections of biographies, church histories and Baptist history publications that serve as resources for research.

Gifts to the Endowment Fund are tax deductible inasmuch as the Society operates under the auspices of the Florida Baptist Convention, a not-for-profit corporation, as defined by the Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3).



Carl Elkanah Bates
Served as 36th SBC President:
1971 and 1972

Florida Pastorate:
First Baptist Church, Leesburg, 1943 – 1947

Introductory Overview

As a recent high school graduate, Carl E. Bates travelled from Liberty, Mississippi, to New Orleans, Louisiana, to seek his fortune. Unfortunately, it was the height of the Depression and Bates was hard pressed to even find work. “Hungry and depressed, he went to the back entrance of the old DeSoto Hotel on Baronne Street, asking for any kind of work that was available.”¹ He was offered a job as bus boy and washing dishes in exchange for a room and board in the hotel.

Bates, years later in retelling this story to a newspaper writer, said he found himself, “in deep spiritual need – even in the point of considering suicide as the only way out.” The youthful Bates recalled he, “began reading a Gideon Bible one night in his hotel room. He fell on his knees in prayer and committed his life to God. A little later, he went back home to Liberty, made his full commitment to Christ and responded to God’s call to enter the preaching ministry.”²

That call to the pastoral ministry led Carl Bates from Mississippi to Kentucky to Florida to Texas and finally to be called as pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in North Carolina, during which time Bates was elected to two consecutive years as the 36th president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

His Early Life

Carl Elkanah Bates (b. 1914; d. 1999) was born and reared as the son of a sharecropper near Liberty, Mississippi. Although raised in a Christian home, Bates “was not converted and baptized until he was in college, at age 19, in the First Baptist Church of Summit, Mississippi.”³ As previously noted that conversion occurred in New Orleans.

Decades later, in a sermon to messengers at the 1963 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bates told how he found clarity in his Christian conversion before the end of his college years.

During my college days a favorite verse among the BSU'ers was Luke 9:23. I was a new Christian, coming out of a background of skepticism. I suppose I listened to them in a critical, unsympathetic way. But when they stood and told what they had given up to become Christians, I thought deep within me, 'They are as proud as hell itself.' For you see, as far as I am concerned they had missed the total meaning of Chrisitan discipleship. Jesus said, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny his right to himself and take up day by day their cross that is involved in this kind of commitment and follow me.'⁴

Responding and Preparing for Ministry Service

After completing two years study at the Southwest Mississippi Junior College, Bates responded to the call of God to pursue the gospel ministry. He then enrolled in Mississippi College located in Clinton. After receiving a B.A. degree (1937), Bates enrolled in The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he earned the Bachelor of Divinity degree (1941), which was later re-issued as a master's in theology. During his seminary years, he served as a parttime pastor of rural Baptist churches in Kentucky.

While enrolled in seminary, Bates married Myra Mae Gray (b.1917; d. 2006) of Tupelo, Mississippi, September 15, 1939. In the ensuing years the couple had a daughter Judith (b. 1942).

Years later, Bates was honored at various times for his ministry and denominational service with four honorary doctorates from Mississippi College, Wake Forest University, Judson College of Illinois, and a Doctor of Divinity from Baylor University (1951).

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His first fulltime pastorate was at the Central Baptist Church, Winchester, Kentucky, (1941-1943). Although it was a short-lived ministry, Bates made a significant impact on the congregation. Following his resignation to accept a Florida pastorate, a church-authorized published resolution noted, “the church has lost a conscientious and inspiring leader who was unfailing in his efforts to promote harmony and unity among his people, and at all times exerted a spiritual influence over them.”⁵

Florida Ministry Years 1943 – 1947

On the first Sunday of February 1943, Carl Bates began service as pastor of the First Baptist Church, Leesburg, Florida, (org. 1872). At the time the church was engaged in a slow-moving special drive to pay off its bond indebtedness. With the country being in the throes of World War II, raising funds for non-war purposes was challenging. However, the arrival of a new pastor brought a new dynamic as the church members responded affirmatively by raising funds beyond the actual debt. The additional funds made it possible for the church to redecorate the entire sanctuary and made other long delayed repairs to the church facilities.⁶

Under Rev. Bates' leadership the church constructed a Mission Sunday School facility on the outskirts of Leesburg, as other mission starts were planned. The church also began a fund for a proposed educational building. In the first year of his leadership at Leesburg, the church received 61 new members, 30 coming for baptism.⁷

During the four years Bates served the Leesburg church, the membership grew over 20 percent to 1,186. During Bates' ministry the average annual baptisms were 43, reaching a single year high of 72 during Bates' final year of service. Rev. Bates also led the church to increase its commitment to the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists' unified missions' giving program, from \$1,320 (1942) to over \$8,552 in 1947.⁸

Although only being in the state less than a year, Bates' gained statewide prominence by his election to the Florida Baptist State Convention's State Board of Missions (1944 – 1947). When the state convention approved in 1946 the creation of an Education Commission, to monitor the development of its three educational institutions, Carl Bates was one of the 15 pastors and lay persons appointed to the body.⁹

Texas' Ministry Years 1947 – 1959

Subsequently, Bates accepted the pastoral call from the First Baptist Church of Texarkana to lead that church, which lasted from 1947 to 1950. That ministry service was summarized by Caner and Caner's in their book on former SBC presidents, which noted, "Bates' renown grew as his heartfelt preaching attracted the attention of Texas Baptists."¹⁰

Bates' effectiveness in Texarkana also drew the attention of the pastor search committee of the First Baptist Church, Amarillo, which in 1950 called

Carl Bates as pastor. “In his first year as pastor,” according to Caner and Caner, “Bates and the church saw a remarkable move of God. During his first year of ministry – from the summer of 1950 to the summer of 1951 – a net 962 people joined the church.” One third of those – 379 – came forward for baptism.¹¹ By the time Rev. Bates concluded his ministry service in the middle of 1959 the church’s membership had reached 6,600 members and had an annual average of 200 baptisms.

Bates and the church saw a remarkable move of God

During those years Bates was elected as one of the designed representatives of Texas Baptists on the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1950 to 1956. He also served as chairman of the Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Continuing Caner and Caner noted, “At the completion of his eight-years term of service at Amarillo, Bates was elected as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.”¹²

**First Baptist Church, Charlotte, N.C.
1959 – 1980**

However, in June 1959, Bates received and accepted a pastoral call to lead the First Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina. Preaching effectiveness, particularly as an evangelist, no doubt affected the growth of the two Texas congregations. And it was no different in Charlotte, where Bates’ preaching drew national attention. “At First Baptist Charlotte Bates would become a national voice for evangelicals. Almost immediately, Bates also was in demand as a leader in the SBC.”¹³ In a short time, Bates was a highly sought after evangelistic preacher for pastors’ conferences, state conventions and evangelism

conferences. By the end of Rev. Bates' 21-year ministry (retired Dec. 31, 1980) the church had grown to over 3,300 members.¹⁴

The historic and prominent First Baptist was organized in 1832 in the heart of downtown Charlotte. Its main sanctuary – with Byzantine domes and arched stained-glass windows – had served the congregation since 1909. Then on Easter Sunday, 1971, church leaders broke ground on a \$2 million nine-acre campus located on an urban renewal site in downtown Charlotte. Rev. Bates characterized the planned re-location as “the major challenge of the future for First Baptist.”¹⁵ A year later, the new campus referred to as Spirit Square, with a contemporary sanctuary and educational facilities, was completed.

As he approached his tenth anniversary serving the Charlotte church, Bates told a reporter that this church had “a higher incidence of committed Christians . . . than in any other church I’ve served.”¹⁶ That commitment also was reflected in its financial contributions of nearly \$100,000 annually through the Cooperative Program.¹⁷

The Bates Made Footnotes in Baptist History
Carl Bates and his spouse Myra Gray Bates achieved three unusual footnotes in Southern Baptist history. The first event occurred in 1963 during the annual meeting of Southern Baptists that had convened in Kansas City, Missouri. Rev. Bates, nominated by J. Norris Palmer of Louisiana, was one of an unprecedented 14 persons initially nominated for the office of convention president. Before the ballots were cast, five nominees withdrew their names for consideration and one nominee – Billy Graham – was declared to be ineligible because he was not a registered messenger. The first ballot of over 8,200

votes cast resulted in two persons receiving a combined 60 percent of the votes – Carl Bates received 3,829 and K. O. White of Texas received 1,131 votes. Immediately upon the ballot results announcement, Rev. Bates requested that his name be withdrawn. Initially the presiding officer ruled that Bates’ name could not be withdrawn. As the official proceedings recorded: “Dr. Bates stated respectfully and with appreciation that if elected he could not serve.” After several procedural votes by messengers, it was agreed to remove Bates’ name from the ballot and proceed with voting on the remaining eligible candidates.¹⁸

The sudden interest in and large support of Bates’ nomination may have been due to the positive impression Bates’ made upon messengers in his preaching of the Convention Sermon on the preceding Tuesday night’s opening session. Bates had been selected a year earlier to bring the annual sermon. His message from Acts 17:5-9, was titled, “Troublemakers in a Troubled World,” in which he stressed, “our most desperate need is to lay hold of the power, God has promised to those who set themselves in the earth to do His work.”¹⁹

Secondly, between 1962 and 1963, Carl Bates was one of the 23 state Baptist convention presidents who were assigned to serve alongside a convention-appointed study and review committee of the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement. The proposal was in response to a growing perception of “widespread concern that Southern Baptists were becoming more liberal doctrinally,” explained former SBC President Herschel Hobbs (b. 1907; d. 1995). At the time, the SBC Executive Committee agreed that an updated doctrinal statement would “serve as information to the churches, and which may serve as guidelines to the various agencies of the Southern

Baptist Convention. . .”²⁰ The culmination of the study committee’s work was the revised 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement presented to and adopted by messengers during the 1963 SBC annual meeting held in Kansas City, Missouri. Herschel Hobbs later wrote that the 1963 convention action “for the time being largely put to rest the doctrinal controversy. . .”²¹

The other historic event occurred during the 1976 annual meeting held in Norfolk, Virginia. Myra Bates was nominated by James Graves of St. Petersburg, Florida, to be elected as second vice president of the

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convention. Three others also were nominated.²² Upon her election, Mrs. Bates became one of only three women to ever serve as an officer of the Southern Baptist Convention. By that time, Carl Bates had

already served two terms as convention president (1971 and 1972), and with Mrs. Bates’ election, they reportedly became the only husband and wife couple ever to hold elective office in the convention.²³

Elected SBC President for 1971

When messengers convened in Denver for the 1970 Southern Baptist Convention it marked the 125th anniversary of the convention established in 1845. One of the several significant business items considered during the annual meeting was the election of a new president to replace term-limited W. A. Criswell of Texas, who had served the two previous years. Texas pastor Landrum P. Leavell II, of Wichita Falls, nominated Carl Bates, who as among five pastors recommended to serve as president from mid-

1970 to mid-1971. Bates received two-thirds majority of votes cast on the first ballot. There was no need for a run-off, which typically occurred with multiple candidates.²⁴ Bates became the 36th individual of the 125-year-old Southern Baptist Convention to serve as its president.

Following his election, Bates, who considered himself a moderate, told a news conference with secular reporters, that he believed a “diversity of views is characteristic of the Baptist tradition: ‘We’re not trying to get everybody under one creedal statement.’” His approach contrasted with that of the outgoing president, the W. A. Criswell of Dallas, Tex., “who had emphasized conformity with stated doctrine,” the Associated Press reported.²⁵

Responding to questions about Criswell’s view on the infallibility of the Scriptures, the North Carolina Baptist newspaper, the *Biblical Recorder*, reported, “Bates said he believed the Scriptures were inspired, but did not say how; asking a reporter what he meant by the words ‘verbal inspiration.’”²⁶

The *Biblical Recorder* in its own convention coverage, reported that Bates “cast himself in the role of healer and reconciler,” following his election as president. “It is my personal hope that Southern Baptists will tone down the attention given to extreme positions within the denomination,” Bates told reporters. “The Charlotte pastor added that he felt that most Southern Baptists are still where they have always been – in the broad middle ground between extreme conservative or liberal positions.”²⁷

Marse Grant, editor of the *Biblical Recorder*, told a Charlotte newspaper, that Bates’ election was because the pastor “is known as a ‘reconciler and unifier.’” He

likely will be tested severely on both counts as the denomination is pulled between fundamentalist beliefs and liberal scholarship, between social activists and stand-patters.”²⁸

Bates’ election was because the pastor “is known as a ‘reconciler and unifier.’”

Serving as SBC President in 1971

Carl Bates presided over the 1971 annual meeting held in St. Louis, Missouri. Again, one of the primary business items was the election of convention president, for the year 1972. Florida pastor James L. Pleitz of Pensacola nominated Carl E. Bates. No other nominations were made, and a motion was made and approved to elect Bates by acclamation.²⁹

Among the several significant actions taken by messengers in 1971, was the final approval of a plan to withdraw from the hospital ministry that affected Southern Baptist-operated hospitals in Jacksonville, Florida and New Orleans, Louisiana.³⁰ In another approved recommendation was an evangelistic plan called “Share the Word Now,” to be promoted in 1973-74, focused upon witnessing, involving people in Bible study and the starting of new missions and churches.³¹

In his president’s address to the messengers attending the 114th annual meeting (in its earliest years the convention did not meet annually), Bates decried the fact that, “for the first time in the history of our nation there is no Christian consensus. Christian influence is at an all-time low.” Bates shared with the messengers his desire, “to find a way to consider our mission in the spirit of Christ rather than in the spirit of the times.” He concluded his message by challenging those in attendance: “We can recognize the Lord’s ownership of the harvest; His option in sending

reapers; His orders for His disciples; or we can spend our time and energy in endless discussion on ‘how to get the show on the road again.’”³²

Serving as SBC President during 1972

The SBC 1972 annual meeting, held in Philadelphia, during which Bates presided, was not without heated debate on several issues. A motion – presented for the third year in a row – called for the re-writing of the 12-volume *Broadman Bible Commentary* was defeated. A separate recommendation from the convention’s Executive Committee proposed the dissolution of the Stewardship Commission. After extensive debate messengers voted down the Stewardship Commission proposal.³³

The *Broadman Commentary* issue, which originally had been considered during the 1970 Convention after the Baptist Sunday School Board’s Broadman book publishers released its first volume in a new series of Bible commentaries. The commentary on *Genesis-Exodus* presented a non-literal interpretation of the events recorded in *Genesis*. During the 1970 annual meeting messengers approved a motion directing the Sunday School Board to not only discontinue distribution of the current version of the commentary but “. . . that it be rewritten with due consideration of the conservative viewpoint.”³⁴

The following year (1971), when the Convention met in St. Louis, messengers considered a motion that noted the Convention’s 1970 vote on the *Broadman Bible Commentary* had been ignored by the Baptist Sunday School Board. The 1971 motion, subsequently approved by messengers, directed the Board to follow the Convention’s 1970 directive and find another writer with a “conservative viewpoint.”³⁵

Now, during the current 1972 annual meeting, a motion was presented by Gwin Turner of California, that called for the replacement of the commentary in its present form contending that “a large segment” of the *Broadman Bible Commentary* “is out of harmony with the spirit and letter of the *Baptist Faith and Message*.” It was requested that the Sunday School Board “withdraw from further sale the entire set, seek a new editor, and rewrite the commentary from the point of view that the Bible is truth without any mixture of error.”³⁶ During consideration of the

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motion, Herschel Hobbs, who had chaired the committee that developed the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*, rebutted that the confessional statement had specified a specific interpretation

of scripture.³⁷ Messengers agreed with Hobbs’ assessment and voted down the motion to replace the commentary.³⁸

In his president’s message, Bates decried the growing turmoil within the churches due to a growing theological divide. “Lest I be accused of laying the groundwork for compromising our convictions, let me remind every messenger of this convention, that if any member of this convention and its affiliated churches is determined to have theological sameness, let him know at the outset that he has one of two choices. He must either join another denomination or deny the basic democratic principles for which our people have been known across the years.”³⁹

Southern Baptist historian Jesse Fletcher commenting on the *Broadman Bible Commentary* controversy wrote, “The Convention defeated a motion to rewrite

the whole commentary, but as the years ahead would show, many Baptists were committed to the theological ‘sameness’ that Bates felt was incongruous with Baptist principles.”⁴⁰

Messengers attending the 1972 annual meeting approved a resolution of appreciation for Carl Bates’ service as convention president. Among other things, the resolution cited Bates’ “ceaseless efforts to unite us in one great missionary thrust at home and abroad . . . He has expressed earnestly our confidence in and commitment to the Word of God as the vital, relevant counsel of God for our day.”⁴¹

As his role on the denominational stage came to an end, “Bates returned to his pastorate in Charlotte and continued to speak to Baptists throughout the nation,”⁴² including speaking at national conferences, state evangelism events and local church revivals. He also was enlisted to deliver a series of sermons on the nationally syndicated radio program *The Baptist Hour*.

Retirement Ministry

Following a 21-year ministry in Charlotte in 1981, Bates and his spouse Myra moved to Hendersonville, North Carolina, to live out their retirement years. Almost immediately, Bates was invited to join the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as a senior professor of preaching. During the ensuing five years Bates mentored young ministers. In 1982 the Carl E. Bates Chair of Preaching was established there in his honor.⁴³

A non-smoker for 50 years, Bates was diagnosis with lung cancer two weeks before his December 21, 1999, death. He was 85.⁴⁴ Following his death, his spouse Myra, told reporters that Bates’ most fulfilling aspect of his life, “was working to give people the peace he

believed was in God's word. 'He was a teacher of the Scriptures and an instructor to people in their living,'" recalled Myra Bates.⁴⁵ Seven years later, then residing in a hospice facility, Myra Gray Bates died June 7, 2006, at age 89.⁴⁶

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of Carl E. Bates was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ Rita Simpson, "U.S. Baptist Leader Finds Key to Success," *The Charlotte (N.C.) News*, January 7, 1971, 2, [news stories on Carl Bates held in the files of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, and are hereinafter referred to as story held in Bates' bio file].

² *Ibid.*

³ Emir and Ergun Caner, *The Sacred Trust*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 141.

⁴ Proceedings, item 17, sermon by Carl E. Bates, Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1963, 51 [hereinafter referred to as *SBC Annual*].

⁵ "Resolutions," *The Winchester (KY) Sun*, February 12, 1943, 2, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁶ J. L. Shelfer, "First Church, Leesburg, Makes Progress," *Florida Baptist Witness*, April 6, 1944, 6, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lake County Baptist Association, "Statistical Reports" *Florida Baptist Annual*, 1944, 1945, 1946, and 1947.

⁹ Proceedings, item 12 (2); 21 and 120, *Florida Baptist Annual*, 1946.

¹⁰ Emir and Ergun Caner, 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Kathleen Galligher, "Charlotte's First Baptist Church Fills Pulpit After 1-Year Search," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, January 25, 1982, [story held in Bates' bio file].

¹⁵ Rita Simpson, "Key to Building: Committed Flock," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, July 28, 1969, [story held in Bates' bio file].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁷ Rita Simpson, "Bates Steering a Careful Course," *The Charlotte (N.C.) News*, June 10, 1970, 12B, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ¹⁸ Proceedings, items 53 – 69; 88 – 91; *SBC Annual*, 1963, 58 – 60. The original 14 fourteen nominees included: Carl Bates (NC); R. Paul Caudill (TN); Walter Pope Binns (VA); Monroe F. Swilley (GA); W. Ross Edwards (MO); D. L. Druien (KY); K. O. White (TX); H. Leo Eddleman (LA); W. O. Vaught, Jr. (AR); W. A. Criswell (TX); Kendell Berry (NC); Billy Graham (NC); Theodore F. Adams (VA); and E. Hermond Westmoreland (TX). Before ballots were cast, five men withdrew their names: W. A. Criswell; H. Leo Eddleman; Kendell Berry; Theodore F. Adams; and W. Ross Edwards.
- ¹⁹ Proceedings, item 17, *SBC Annual*, 1963, 51.
- ²⁰ Herschel H. Hobbs, "Southern Baptists and Confessionalism: A Comparison of the Origins and Contents of the 1925 and 1963 Confessions," *Review and Expositor*, Winter, 1979, 57-58.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ²² Proceedings, item 97 and 110, *SBC Annual*, 1976, 51, 52. The other three nominees were: Truett B. Thompson (AZ); Paul Jackson (GA); and Lawrence Bradley (GA).
- ²³ "Myra G. Bates, 89," *Hendersonville (N.C.) Times-News*, June 9, 2006, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁴ Proceedings, items 32-38; 74, *SBC Annual*, 1970, 58, 64. The other nominees were: Gerald Martin (TN); Lee Porter (TX), Charles A. Trentham (N) and Harold C. Abbott (LA).
- ²⁵ George W. Cornell, religion writer, *Associated Press*, "Charlotte Man Heads Baptist Group," *Asheville (N.C.) Times*, June 3, 1970, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁶ "Bates Assumes Role of Healer, Reconciler as SBC President," *Biblical Recorder*, June 13, 1970, 6, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ "Carl Bates, A Unifying Choice," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, June 5, 1970, np, [story held in Bates' bio file].
- ²⁹ Proceedings, item 39, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 61.
- ³⁰ Proceedings, item 20, recommendation 4, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 55; also see Proceedings, item 86, Recommendation 13, *SBC Annual*, 1970, 65-66.
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- ³² Proceedings, item 172, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 74; transcript of message, "Consider Our Mission," *Texas Baptist Standard*, June 9, 1971, 12-13.
- ³³ "SBC Votes to Keep Commentary, Retain Stewardship Commission, Establish a New Bylaw and Elects Layman as President," *Florida Baptist Witness*, June 15, 1972, 1 and 7,

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³⁴ Proceedings, item 64, *SBC Annual*, 1970, 63.

³⁵ Proceedings, items 153, 156, and 188, *SBC Annual*, 1971, 71 and 76.

³⁶ Proceedings, item 36, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 55.

³⁷ Proceedings, items 99 and 100, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 71

³⁸ Proceedings, items 99 and 11; *SBC Annual*, 1972, 71.

³⁹ Proceedings, item 13, presidential address, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 93.

⁴⁰ Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 239.

⁴¹ Proceedings, item 125, *SBC Annual*, 1972, 73.

⁴² Emir and Egun Caner, 143.

⁴³ "Dr. Carl E. Bates," *Asheville (N.C.) Citizen-Times*, December 23, 1999, 12, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁴⁴ "Former Baptist Convention Leader Carl E. Bates dies at 85," *Hendersonville (N.C.) Times-News*, December 22, 1999, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁴⁵ Ken Garfield, religion editor, "Rev. Carl Bates, 85, dies; led Baptist Convention," *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*, December 12, 1999, 1B; 3B, [story held in Bates' bio file].

⁴⁶ "Myra G. Bates, 89," *Hendersonville (N.C.) Times-News*, June 9, 2006, [story held in Bates' bio file].

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Adrian Pierce Rogers
Served as 41st SBC President:
1980, 1987, and 1988

Florida Pastorates:

Fellsmere Baptist Church, 1951 – 1954

Parkview Baptist Church, Fort Pierce, 1958 – 1964

First Baptist Church, Merritt Island, 1964 – 1972

Introductory Overview

Adrian Pierce Rogers, a native of West Palm Beach, Florida, was born in the midst of the Great Depression and was the third child of Arden and Rose Rogers.

“Adrian’s salvation experience at the age of fourteen while attending a revival crusade” held in West Palm Beach church, marked the beginning of his spiritual journey. In the two years that followed that initial spiritual decision, Rogers said he struggled “with a lack of assurance of his salvation.”¹

However, Rogers subsequently experienced a “positive affirmation” of his relationship with Christ, as well as other manifestation of God’s direction for his life that resulted in Rogers serving a variety of Baptist churches. Those ministry benchmarks included three Florida pastorates followed by 33-years’ service to the Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee. During those Memphis years Rogers was elected to three one-year terms as the 41st president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

An “Eternal Change” that Turned His Life Around

Adrian Rogers (b. 1931; d. 2005), described his family as “good, hard-working salt of the earth kind of people,” recalling his childhood. “As a family, we were not anti-God. We were just an average family that was without Christ. As a child, I never heard my father pray. We never had Bible reading in our home, and we did not attend church.”² Without any spiritual guidance, Adrian’s young life could be characterized as a rebel without a cause. By his own admission, Rogers “frequently skipped school, used foul language, cheated in class, made trouble for his teachers, and fought often.”³

Then came the “eternal change” experience in his life. At age 14 Rogers and his family were invited down the street from their home to a revival service being held

at West Palm Beach's Northwood Baptist Church. As the evangelist issued a public invitation to accept Jesus Christ, Adrian's father, to the surprise of his family, responded. Adrian recalled that night.

My father's going forward astounded me. . . To that point everything the preacher had said seemed to pertain to other people. But at the moment my father stepped forward, the message became personal. I was immediately smitten by God's Spirit and knew I needed to do the same thing as my father. . . [to make] a profession of my faith in Christ. . . I believe an eternal change took place in those moments, and I became a new creature in Christ.⁴

Unfortunately, as Rogers later recalled, "The night I went forward to profess Christ, I was not counseled, nor did they share any Scripture with me, I was not prayed with, nor was I disciplined in any way. I left there with all the proclivities of the flesh in me."

What followed were two years of spiritual struggle as he returned to his former lifestyle of cheating in class, fighting at school, bad language, and disobedience which continued to be his daily spiritual battlefield.⁵

Despite his personal struggle, Rogers was president of his senior class and captain of a championship football team.

Finally, when he was 16 years old, Rogers determined to settle the matter "once and for all" by seeking a positive affirmation of his salvation experience. While out walking one night he came to a "spiritual and literal crossroads" at a street intersection near his house. According to Rogers:

At 39th Street and Calvin Avenue, I stopped and prayed, 'Lord I don't know if I'm lost and you have me under conviction or I'm saved and the devil's trying to make me doubt it, but I need to get it settled.' Then I looked straight up into heaven – I didn't bow my head – and I said,

‘Lord, you told me in your Word that if I would trust you, you would save me. If I have been saved this won’t take it away. But if I have not been saved, I’m going to settle it right now. So, Lord Jesus, now and forever, I trust you to save me. I don’t look for a feeling. I don’t look for a sign. It is done. Praise your holy name.’⁶

**‘God I’m as low
as I know how
to get. I want
you to use me.’**

The following year, one of the most profound events, and self-described as a “defining moment” in Rogers’ spiritual journey,

occurred when he was a high school senior. Having recently committed himself to full-time Christian ministry, as was his practice, he would go out on the football field at night and spend time talking with God. What transpired on a particular summer night became an often-repeated testimony – with slight variation – Rogers told in churches and at pastor events, and recounted here:

God filled me with the Holy Spirit as a teenage boy. God called me to preach. And I said, ‘God I want you to use me.’ And I remember, out on the field where I used to practice football, I walked up and down, praying and crying and weeping and saying, ‘God I want you to use me.’ Then I stretched myself out on the ground, put my face in the dirt, and said, ‘God please use me.’ That didn’t seem good enough, so I made a hole for my nose down in the dirt until the nostrils were filled with dust, and said, ‘God I’m as low as I know how to get. I want you to use me.’ I didn’t speak in tongues, I didn’t shout, I didn’t see any visions. But God moved into my life.⁷

Rogers shared the testimony often as a means of encouragement to his listeners, by noting, “there is a

holy dimension” to being called by God, “I thank God for the fullness of the Holy Spirit.”

Marriage and Growing a Family

Adrian and his teenage sweetheart Joyce Gentry both graduated from high school in May 1950, and Rogers was licensed to preach on July 30, by the Northwood Baptist Church. By the Fall, both had enrolled at Stetson University in Deland, Florida.

Soon after enrolling at Stetson University, on September 9, 1951, Rogers married Joyce Louise Gentry (b.1933) of West Palm Beach. The couple started their family in their junior year at the university, having their first child Stephen Michael (b. 1954). Later, while attending the seminary, the Rogers had a daughter Gayle Christine (b. 1956). A third child, Philip Gentry (b. 1958; d. 1958), died unexpectedly of sudden infant death syndrome soon after the family began their ministry at the Parkview Church. Several years later, while still at Parkview Church, Joyce Rogers had two other children born sixteen months apart, David (b. 1960) and Janice (b. 1961).⁸

Fellsmere Baptist Church, 1951 – 1954

At the end of his freshman year at Stetson, in 1951, Adrian was invited to become the pastor of the Fellsmere Baptist Church (org. 1947) of Fellsmere, Florida. [The town of Fellsmere is located in Indian River County, approximately 150 miles southeast of Deland, located between Sabastion and Vero Beach.] In his characteristic humorous observation, Rogers said the church was “the first, last and only Baptist church in that town of about 500 people.”⁹ Concurrent to his pastoral call to Fellsmere, Rogers was ordained to the gospel ministry May 8, 1951.

“The congregation numbered only several dozen people,” when Rogers was invited to serve as pastor.

“Adrian considered himself ‘utterly untrained’ but he also discovered that God honors the preaching of his Word. . . [despite] the worst sermons you’ve ever heard. . . God honored it and there would be tears and souls would be saved,” biographer Phil Kramer noted.¹⁰ In the first year of his pastorate the church held 51 baptisms. Those baptisms were “especially memorable” for Rogers because the church, having no running water nor a baptistry, had to use a nearby canal. Rogers, nearly 50 years later recalled, “Thank God we’ve seen multiplied thousands baptized since, but there will never be another baptism like the ones we had at Canal A in Fellsmere, Florida.”¹¹

“After three years of Adrian’s leadership, the church had added running water, a baptistry, wooden theater seats, upgraded lighting, and a finished ceiling. But more importantly, a photograph of a packed auditorium on Adrian’s final Sunday as pastor in June 1954 shows the real fruit of his ministry – namely the many who had been led to Christ, baptized and disciplined in the little church . . .” Kramer observed.¹²

Seminary and Mississippi Pastorate

Rogers graduated from Stetson in June 1954, and bidding goodbye to his Fellsmere Church family, the Rogers family moved to New Orleans where Adrian enrolled in the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. By January of the following year, Rogers preached and was soon called as pastor of the Waveland Baptist Church in Waveland, Mississippi. The Rogers decided to rent an apartment along the Gulf Coast to be close to the church and Adrian opted to make the 120-mile roundtrip between Waveland and New Orleans for classes Tuesday to Friday.

“Waveland was a difficult place in which to minister,” Joyce Rogers recalled. “It was predominantly Roman Catholic, which made it hard to establish an evangelical church. Yet there were still some who

received Christ . . .” As a result of Rogers’ commitment to his calling, he focused his efforts on reaching people with the gospel and led the church leadership to make improvements to the church facility. “The church grew from twenty-five to around seventy-five members. . . a new educational building was built and for the first time a small nursery was included.”¹³

**Parkview Baptist Church, Fort Pierce,
1958 – 1964**

As Rogers approached his January 1958 graduation from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary with a Bachelor of Divinity degree, he was prayerfully considering three ministry options: missions, evangelism and the pastorate. About that time Rogers received letters from two small Florida Baptist churches asking Rogers to be their pastor. “After prayer he wrote both churches and respectfully declined.” A response came back from the Parkview Baptist Church, Fort Pierce, Florida, which asked Rogers to reconsider. After a time of prayerful reconsideration by Adrian and Joyce, God’s Spirit provided the “inner nudge” to accept the church’s invitation.¹⁴

By mid-April the Rogers family had moved to Fort Pierce to begin Adrian’s ministry at the Parkview Church (org. 1925). Initially the “church had slightly more than 100 people in Sunday morning attendance and the annual budget was little more than \$15,000.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, after the Mother’s Day worship service, when Rogers returned to the parsonage, he found that baby Philip was not conscious. Rushing the child to the hospital the doctor determined the child had experienced sudden infant syndrome and died. The death had a profound spiritual impact on Rogers, as he later recalled in his memoirs:

The death of my son caused me to reflect and get things in sharper spiritual focus. My life and ministerial priorities were deepened through the death of our son . . . While I would not want to go through that pain again I would not take ten million dollars for the experience we had with the Lord through that season.¹⁶

During his six years at Parkview the membership grew as noted by the statistics: 1,338 additions to the church: 652 baptisms; 686 by transfer of membership letter; and 650 average Sunday morning attendance. The hallmark of Rogers' ministry was personal evangelism and dynamic preaching which resulted in many people making professions of faith in Christ. The finances of the church improved substantially under Rogers' leadership as the annual budget grew to \$90,000, with 22 percent earmarked to the Southern Baptist Convention's Cooperative Program.¹⁷

First Baptist Church, Merritt Island, 1964 – 1972

In late April 1964, Rogers received a letter from a pastor's search committee seeking his interest in accepting the pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Merritt Island, Florida. "Merritt Island is located in the fastest growing county in the country. . . The challenge of the area is second to none, and a man of vision and dedication is needed," the invitation letter stated.¹⁸ At first, Adrian and Joyce were not interested in leaving Parkview. But after a "secret visit" to the church during the week, and extended prayers, Rogers later said he and Joyce "felt that a nail-pierced hand" pointed them to Merritt Island.¹⁹

Rogers' preaching ministry at the Merritt Island Church (org. 1949) "highlighted the Spirit-filled life and the fulness of the Holy Spirit as often as he celebrated the inspiration of the Bible," biographer Phil Kramer observed.²⁰ Although Rogers' personal

experiences with the Holy Spirit affected his teaching emphasis, he made it clear to his congregation that being Spirit-filled, “simply means to be in a continual state of possession and control by the Spirit.”²¹ His preaching also stressed that, “The Spirit-filled life is not a matter of visions, tongues, and ecstasies; but the very practical living of the Christian life.”²²

“The Spirit-filled life is not a matter of visions, tongues, and ecstasies; but the very practical living of the Christian life.”

During his eight years at the Merritt Island Church the membership grew to over 4,000 from 1,150 members. Some of that growth was the result of over 3,400 persons making professions of faith, which produced a cumulative baptism total

of 2,470, for an annual average of over 308 baptisms.²³

A new pastoral call came from a Memphis, Tennessee, congregation which Rogers understood as being from God. Rogers read his resignation letter to an unusually large crowd attending the Wednesday night service and explained to the members present how God had called him to Memphis. His last Sunday was August 27, 1972.

Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee, 1972 – 2005

Rogers responded in 1972 to the call to serve as pastor of the Bellevue Baptist Church (org. 1908), Memphis. He was following in the footsteps of legendary former pastors R. G. Lee (served 1927 to 1960) and Ramsey Pollard (served 1960 to 1972). During the ensuing 33 years, Rogers helped build the church to a membership from a on paper count of 9,000 to more than 29,000.

“The ministry at Bellevue presented a challenge,” recalled Joyce Rogers. Describing the downtown location she wrote, “There had been a numerical decline for twenty years. Some of the buildings were stately but worn down. The parking was inadequate. . . . The auditorium that would seat almost 3,000 had only about 1,500 in attendance on a strong Sunday.”²⁴

In all the churches he served, Rogers brought a biblically-inspired preaching which continually focused on reaching people with the good news of Jesus Christ. Rogers often told young pastors that biblical preaching is “communicated through a two-fold medium – you and the Holy Spirit.”

He would go on to explain that the four purposes of biblical preaching include: to confront; to clarify; to convict; and to convert.²⁵ He also

**biblical preaching
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brought the same commitment to the leading the church members to embrace the Spirit-filled life he had stressed at Merritt Island. Those efforts resulted not only in growing the church with new believers, but also in establishing a host of local ministry and missionary projects that resulted in individuals responding to missionary service.

Subsequently, Rogers’ face and deep voice became known to millions of believers worldwide thanks to his *Love Worth Finding* radio and television ministries. Although established in 1987, the Bellevue ministry, to this day, re-packages and distributes Rogers’ sermons. Rogers’ use of broadcast ministries to share the gospel began while serving as pastor at the Ft. Pierce and Merritt Island churches. Bellevue’s *Love Worth Finding* “not only broadcasts Rogers’

sermons over radio and television stations around the world, it preserves his legacy” explained scholar Graham M. Weaver. “Those who had heard of Rogers said that he was an excellent preacher and that his sermons still speak to the current dilemmas that our culture faces and many did not realize Rogers has been dead since 2005. The messenger may be dead, but the message continues to be broadcast,” nearly two decades later, Graham wrote.²⁶

In the midst of growing the Bellevue congregation – both in reaching people and building a new campus discussed later – Rogers was enlisted to respond to the simmering controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention.

Lead-up to the 1979 SBC Annual Meeting

The period between 1979 and 1993 reflected a theological and leadership controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. “Conservative leaders focused the battle cry on a single word in the late seventies . . . The word was *inerrant*. Whereas the Bible had been called inspired and infallible by most Southern Baptist leaders and theologians, the word *inerrant* soon became a codeword for the conservative movement,” Southern Baptist Historian Jesse Fletcher explained.²⁷ By 1985, survey research among Southern Baptists by Emory University religion sociologist and researcher Nancy Ammerman confirmed the conclusion. “The word ‘inerrancy’ became, then, a synonym for Southern Baptist orthodoxy, and only the most determined non-traditionalist refused to use the word.”²⁸

Despite the growing acceptance of the concept of “inerrancy,” Grady C. Cothen (b. 1920; d.2017), former President of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board between 1975 – 1984, expressed concerns with the inerrancy movement by noting:

The nonscholar inerrantists generally claim absolute accuracy for the Bible in every statement that it makes. If it seems to contradict some known position of science or fact of history, or if the accounts of the same events do not coincide, explanation is sought in some ‘scribal inadvertency’ or miscopied text or the problem is attributed to the understanding of the era of the writer.²⁹

There was a pre-cursor action in 1964 before the “battle cry” over biblical inerrancy was amplified. Houston Appeals Court Judge Paul Pressler (b. 1930; d. 2024), at the time a deacon at Second Baptist Church, participated in a self-appointed fact-finding investigation into the perceived growing liberalism within the Southern Baptist Convention – based upon his assessments of the commentaries produced by the Baptist Sunday School Board and what was being taught in the seminaries. As a result of his findings, Pressler published a booklet entitled, “A Message to Southern Baptists,” that highlighted the liberal trends in the SBC,³⁰ that established the need for a response by traditionally conservative Southern Baptists.³¹ According to self-described conservative religion journalist James Hefley the then existent SBC conservative leadership agreed the need existed “that the movement must be broadened . . . Publicizing ‘liberalism’ in the SBC wasn’t enough. They had to start changing the organizational machinery.”³²

Subsequently, in the year leading up to the 1979 SBC annual meeting to be held in Houston, Texas, two men spearheaded the effort to bring about a renaissance of conservative values within the denomination. They were Paige Patterson (b. 1942), then president of the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas, and Houston Appeals Court Judge

Paul Pressler. The two men “literally crisscrossed America meeting with pastors one-on-one, small groups, large groups, and even rallies in their attempt to network and organize and motivate pastors” to go to Houston to attend the Pastors’ Conference and the SBC annual meeting. Self-described conservative theologian-pastor Jerry Sutton further explained that the Pastors’ Conference became “a platform to inform and motivate conservatives as to how to vote and how to access issues that would come before the Southern Baptist Convention.”³³ Additionally, Patterson and Pressler sent numerous letters to thousands of persons calling upon them “to help turn the Southern Baptist Convention to a conservative direction.”³⁴ The two stressed in news accounts “that they were pushing no particular person” to be elected as SBC president “committed to biblical inerrancy.”

However, Patterson had identified ten pastors who would be “acceptable” nominees. Three of those potential candidates, including Adrian Rogers, publicly ruled out their respective nomination, although Patterson insisted Rogers was “draftable.”³⁵ Meanwhile, Adrian Rogers, said publicly that he had no interest in being nominated and denied having participated in the Patterson-Pressler “get out the vote” effort. Although Rogers said, “he supported the goal of electing a conservative president who would set a new direction for the Convention.”³⁶

The 1979 Election for President to serve 1980

On the Sunday night prior to the convening of the 1979 SBC annual meeting, the pre-convention Pastors’ Conference featured Adrian Rogers bringing the opening message. The Memphis pastor “expressed fear that liberalism was taking over Baptist colleges, universities and seminaries.” Later as he continued his attack on the “liberalism in the SBC,” Rogers claimed that “if those liberals will ever come to the cross of Christ, all heaven will break loose.” In a

surprise move, at least to Rogers, Dallas pastor W.A. Criswell told the crowd, “We will have a great time here if for no other reason, than to elect Adrian Rogers as president of the Southern Baptist Convention.” The crowd of 8,000 stood and applauded.³⁷

Later that night, Adrian was approached by Paige Patterson and Jacksonville, Florida, pastor Jerry Vines who asked, “Are you going to allow your nomination?” Rogers responded, “It is not settled in my heart.” The three went to Rogers’ hotel room where they knelt in fervent prayer. Now well after midnight, and with the encouragement of his wife, Rogers agreed, “I will do it.”³⁸

The following Tuesday afternoon, when the appointed time for the nominations for president arrived, six persons were nominated. Included was Adrian Rogers who was nominated by Jacksonville, Florida, pastor Homer Lindsay, Jr.³⁹ Later in the session, Convention Registration Secretary Lee Porter reported the results of the ballot count for each president nominee. He said Rogers received 6,129 votes or 51.36 percent of the 11,933 ballots cast and was elected president of the Convention.⁴⁰

Years later reflecting upon Rogers’ election, Jerry Vines in his 2014 published memoirs observed, “And thus the Conservative Resurgence was officially underway. Dr. Rogers’ election was the first in a string of seven presidents known as Conservative Resurgence Presidents.”⁴¹

Following his election and during a press conference, Rogers denied he was a part of the so-called “conservative political machine” that supported his election. “I was not a part of this campaign. I never went to a single meeting. I don’t belong to Paige

Patterson and Judge Paul Pressler . . . I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.” In prepared remarks to the press corps Rogers highlighted his goals as convention president to emphasize missions, evangelism, faith in God’s word, and loving each other. Declaring he wanted to be positive in his approach, Rogers said, “I am not against anyone or anything except the devil and sin.” He continued his remarks by stressing, “I want to try to be a good conservative, soul-winning, Bible-believing, church-building pastor and convention president.”⁴²

“Dr. Rogers’ election was the first in a string of seven presidents known as Conservative Resurgence Presidents.”

Although Rogers contended that he was not a part of a “conservative political machine,” others like self-described conservative Southern Baptist journalist and historian James Hefley confirmed Rogers was a part of the conservative resurgence leadership. “In the forefront was Adrian Rogers. By his side were Paige Patterson, the theologian of the movement and Paul Pressler, the strategist.”⁴³ Another observer of Southern Baptist history – Walter B. Shurden – noted that “the Patterson-Pressler coalition would not have won without Rogers’ ability to communicate with the Southern Baptist masses and call them to action,” particularly by simply defining the theological perspective of the conservative movement.⁴⁴

Nearly a year later – May 6, 1980 – Rogers announced that he would not seek a second term as SBC president. “After much prayer and heart searching, I have decided not to allow my name to be placed in nomination for a second term” at the 1980 SBC annual meeting. In an interview with *Baptist*

Press, Rogers said, “As much as I love my denomination, my church is still my first responsibility.” He continued by stressing, “there are pressing duties and vast opportunities I face as pastor of Bellevue. Our church is in a period of growth unprecedented in his history. These are days therefore, that I want to maximize for my church.”⁴⁵

Rogers’ Confrontations With “Neo-Orthodoxy” Theology

Five-years later Rogers confirmed he attended an early December 1985 meeting in Atlanta with 18 conservative leaders who asked him to be a candidate for the presidency of the SBC in 1986, *Baptist Press* reported. “When these friends met, they seemed to have a spirit of unanimity and asked me if I would be willing to be nominated again,” Rogers said. “I certainly have not decided to run . . .” he explained to the media.⁴⁶

In a May 1986 interview with *Florida Baptist Witness* Associate Editor Greg Warner, Rogers confirmed that he was willing to be nominated again for the SBC presidency, “in order to continue the corrective action begun” by the SBC conservative resurgence. The corrective action would eliminate, what he called the “neo-orthodoxy,” being taught in the SBC seminaries. Rogers defined “neo-orthodoxy” as a theological position which “uses traditional words to describe biblical faith, but which means something quite different.” He cited the example of the person who teaches a biblical passage which is “not to be taken factually, historically or literally.”⁴⁷ Years later, Rogers wrote in one of his books on biblical authority, that the problem with neo-orthodoxy is that it “was a sort of a ‘halfway’ house between abject liberalism and Bible belief. It teaches that the *Bible is not the objective Word of God* [Rogers’ italic emphasis] because God cannot be known by mere human words.

Rather, the Bible is a channel through which men may encounter God.”⁴⁸

Rogers’ perspective on his “fear that liberalism was taking over Baptist colleges, universities and seminaries,” which he cited during a sermon preached at the 1979 SBC Pastors’ Conference,⁴⁹ likely was partially informed by his own negative educational experiences. While a student at Stetson University, Rogers encountered faculty who “did not share his basic convictions about the Bible and the Christian faith.” In his retelling, “I began to hear that there wasn’t someone named Matthew who wrote the *Gospel of Matthew* or Luke who wrote *Luke* or John who wrote *John*. I heard that Moses didn’t write *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers* or *Deuteronomy*. . .”⁵⁰ And again, several years later, while attending New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Rogers recalled in his memoirs, “I was taught to see the Bible as some sort of composite human instrument, it seemed to me, rather than the divine, holy, inspired, inerrant, infallible, Word of God.”⁵¹

To stem the growing liberalism in at least one Baptist school – his alma mater of Florida Baptist State Convention’s Stetson University – Joyce Rogers’ wrote about one defining moment in Adrian’s ministry. “When he returned to Florida after graduating from seminary, he discovered that the liberal, neo-orthodox teaching had gotten worse at Stetson and moral standards had dropped. As a result of his grieved spirit over these things” he took his concern to the Florida Baptist State Convention.⁵² During the 1966 annual meeting held in Pensacola, Rogers made a motion to delete the 1966-67 funding allocation of \$149,820 for Stetson University. After extended discussion that included “heated debate” and a pause for corporate prayer by messengers, a vote was taken and Rogers’ motion was defeated.⁵³

The Election to Serve as President for 1986-87

The 129th annual session of the 1986 Southern Baptist Convention was to convene in Atlanta, where Charles Stanley presided as president. The election of convention president was held on Tuesday morning with only two nominees presented. Nelson Price of Marietta, Georgia, nominated Adrian Rogers and Richard Jackson of Phoenix, Arizona, nominated Winfred Moore of Amarillo, Texas.⁵⁴ Soon thereafter Convention Registration Secretary Lee Porter reported the voting results for president with 39,099 ballots cast. He reported that Adrian Rogers received 21,201 votes or 54.22 percent and declared Rogers as the next SBC president.⁵⁵

As the annual meeting came to a close the next day, Rogers brought the convention sermon, an honor for which he had been selected the prior year. In his message, Rogers exhorted Southern Baptists to lay down their weapons of

**“It has always
been the devil’s
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to the people
of God”**

civil warfare and take up the battle against their common enemy – the devil. Rogers stressed that “our battle is not with flesh and blood” but against the “organized, mobilized, demonized forces of hell.” He added, “It has always been the devil’s purpose to bring disunity to the people of God and get them to battling one another rather than bombarding the gates of hell.”⁵⁶

During the three-day meeting, one of the most hotly debated items of business, messengers – by a vote of 12,001 to 9,556 – refused to withdraw the SBC from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. The agency operates from a Washington office that advocates religious liberty and separation of church

and state on behalf of eight U.S. Baptist denominations.⁵⁷

Re-elected SBC President for 1987-88

The 1987 SBC annual meeting was held in St. Louis, Missouri, and Rogers presided over the gathering. Rogers, during the opening session, delivered his presidential address in which he called for doctrinal unity and functional diversity. “We are a missionary convention,” Rogers said. “That is the reason that we come together to do business,” which he specified as being missions and evangelism. He went on to declare, “I want to say the basis of our unity is not missions and evangelism. The basis of our unity is spiritual and doctrinal.”⁵⁸

At the appointed time for the election of president for 1987-88, Rogers turned the presiding over to second Vice President Ray Roberts of North Carolina. Only two nominations were presented. Edwin Young of Houston, Texas, nominated Adrian Rogers to be re-elected to a third one-year term. Charles Redmond of Pasadena, Texas, nominated Richard Jackson of Phoenix, Arizona.⁵⁹ Later that afternoon Registration Secretary Lee Porter reported that 23,327 ballots had been cast for president with Adrian Rogers receiving 13,980 or 59.97 percent of the vote. Rogers was declared president and he resumed presiding.⁶⁰

Among the most significant actions that occurred during that annual meeting was the presentation of the Peace Committee’s report. The study and report – which had been authorized in 1985 – was undertaken by a 22-member group. The committee included Rogers and five other former and future SBC presidents: Herschel Hobbs (1962 and 1963); Charles Stanley (1985 and 1986); Jerry Vines (1989 and 1990); Edwin Young (1993 and 1994); and James B. “Jim” Henry (1995 and 1996). The five-part report document contained background and sources of the

controversy, the findings and conclusions, and ten recommendations. Upon its presentation by Committee Chairman Charles Fuller of Roanoke, Virginia, three messengers made motions to amend the document, but all were voted down. The report was approved as printed.⁶¹

Rogers, in his 2005 autobiography, said that the Peace Committee report, “concluded that the division in the convention was primarily over doctrinal issues, especially the nature of the Bible. The report came down firmly on the side of biblical inerrancy.”⁶² Earlier in 1993, retired Sunday School Board President Grady C. Cothen in a book on the denomination wrote a critique of the Peace Committee’s report and observed:

Several elements of the report were on target. The description of the theological controversy did not get to the heart of the matter . . . Subsequent events show that the movement was really aimed at a dramatic change in historic Baptist positions related not only to the nature of Scripture, but to the insistence on interpretations of Scripture and the promotion of various social and political programs. The statements of the leaders of the rightest movement support this analysis.⁶³

In his post-re-election presidential news conference, Rogers said, “We believe in the absolute, total freedom of conscience.” He went on to stress, “We believe in the priesthood of the believer. We believe in soul liberty. We would not force our views on anyone if we could.” Rogers was questioned about his appointment of people to committees and boards of trustees, which had been one aspect of the Peace Committee’s investigation. “The people that I have appointed are people that I believe represent who Southern Baptists are,” Rogers said. “I believe that Southern Baptists have a right to set parameters for

those who serve them on committees, those who serve them in places of responsibility for which salaries are paid. I'm talking about places of executive leadership and teaching."⁶⁴

Prior to Rogers' death, the *Florida Baptist Witness* did a profile of Rogers' life based upon an interview by Editor James A. Smith, Sr.

[The conservative resurgence] is part of church history.

Rogers humbly acknowledged the significance of his role in the Conservative Resurgence. "I look back on my life and there are a lot of things that have happened. I have written books, pastored churches, and preached on radio and television around the world. But I think the part that God allowed me to have in the turning of the SBC may have the longest-lasting effect and be the most significant," . . . [The conservative resurgence] is part of church history. We think of the ancient councils of the church in decisions and so forth, but this thing is not small; it is big."⁶⁵

Attention Returned to Bellevue

By and large, with the completion of his service as SBC president, Rogers returned to his first love of commitment, Bellevue Baptist Church. Now in the midst of 1987, the church was in the process of constructing a new church facility in the Cordova suburb of Memphis. The new facility, located on a 360-acre site, ultimately contained a worship center with seating for 7,000, an educational building, a 100,000 square feet children's center, a family life center, and a fellowship building.⁶⁶ The church held its first Sunday morning worship services in Cordova on November 19, 1989, at which 14,000 attended. By February the following year a second worship service was added to accommodate the growing attendance.⁶⁷

Southern Baptists again called upon Adrian Rogers to bring his leadership and doctrinal perspective to the 1999 appointed *Baptist Faith and Message* Committee assigned to review and revise the Convention's official doctrinal statement.⁶⁸ Then convention president Paige Patterson appointed a 15-member committee that represented the most diverse group of

representatives from Southern Baptist life than had ever been assembled up to that date. The multi-ethnic group included pastors, educators, laymen and women, who collectively represented four

“The only Jesus we know is the Jesus in the Bible and the Jesus in the Bible believed in the inerrancy of the Scripture.”

ethnicities – African Americans, Anglos, Asians and Hispanics.⁶⁹ Among the committee members were former SBC presidents Jerry Vines (1989 and 1990), and Adrian Rogers (1980; 1987; 1988) who was named chairman. The committee's report was presented and adopted as printed without amendments during the 2000 SBC meeting held in Orlando.⁷⁰

Moderates, such as Russell H. Dilday (b. 1930; d. 2023), former professor of homiletics at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary from 1994 to 2002, expressed concerns about the revised 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement, after its release. “Baptists say their only creed is the Bible, and until recently, they have defended tenaciously the privilege of every believer, with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to interpret Scripture according to his or her own conscience. This deeply engrained anti-creedal sentiment so characteristic of Baptists lies

behind the negative reactions to the newly revised document. Some have built-in suspicions of *Baptist Faith and Message* 2000 because it was crafted by the ‘party’ who succeeded in a two-decade effort to take control of the SBC.” He continued in his assessment to identify seven positive and 12 “troubling factors” in the revised doctrinal statement.⁷¹

Two decades later, Adrian Rogers, in an interview with the *Florida Baptist Witness*, stressed the importance of the revised 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement. “I think that a lot of the things in the *Baptist Faith and Message* that have been nuanced and changed are not as nearly significant as that one statement concerning how the Bible is to be interpreted. The only Jesus we know is the Jesus in the Bible and the Jesus in the Bible believed in the inerrancy of the Scripture.”⁷²

Rogers continued his service to Bellevue until early 2005, when he retired. By then he was struggling against cancer, which became complicated by double pneumonia. Roger died November 15, 2005. He was 74. At the time this 2026 *Journal* article was prepared, Joyce Rogers was still active in Bellevue Baptist Church and particularly the *Love Worth Finding* ministry.

Adrianisms

by Dr. Adrian Rogers

Adrian Rogers was a biblical preacher who used witty quips, anecdotes, alliterations and even a whimsical poem to complement his message of the gospel. These illustrations were a tool to effectively tell others of Jesus. These snippets of wit and wisdom are drawn from a collection called “Adrianisms:”

God is love, **Jesus** is wonderful.

Try to define the **Trinity** and you'll lose your mind.
Deny it and you'll lose your soul.

God only wants for us what we would want for ourselves
if we were smart *enough* to want it.

The **Bible** is: saving to the sinner; sweet to the saint;
sufficient to the sufferer; satisfying to the scholar.

The **Bible** is not the book of the week; it is not the book of
the month; nor is it the book of the year. *It is the book of
the ages!*

Satan can't keep God from answering our prayers,
but he will keep us from asking.

Sometimes we don't feel like **Praying**. But if there were
ever a time that we need to pray, it's when we don't feel like
it. We need to pray until we do feel like.

You deny yourself when you don't pray.
Prayer is the key that unlocks *heaven's treasury*.

Humility is knowing what I am, acknowledging that God
made me that way, and giving Him glory for it.

Joy is important in winning people to Christ.
Don't go around looking like an advance agent for the
undertaker.

What **Jesus** says is more *certain* than anything we can
feel.

We don't live by explanations. We live by **Promises**.

Too often, our **churches** are sacred societies for the
snubbing of sinners.

The **Mission of the Church**: make them; mark them;
and mature them.

[SOURCE: Adrian Rogers, *Adrianisms: The Collected Wit and
Wisdom of Adrian Rogers*, 2015.]

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of Adrian P. Rogers was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ Joyce Rogers, *Love Worth Finding: The Life of Adrian Rogers*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 12 – 14.

² Phil Kramer, *Moon Port Pastor*, (Memphis, TN: Love Worth Finding Ministries, Inc., 2024), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ Joyce Rogers, 13 – 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ Phil Kramer, 16 – 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 – 23.

⁸ Joyce Rogers cited her respective child's birthdate on the following pages of her book: Steve, 31; Gayle, 35; Philip Gentry, 37; David, 45; and Janice, 45.

⁹ Phil Kramer, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹³ Joyce Rogers, 37 – 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39 – 40.

¹⁵ Phil Kramer, 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷ Indian River Baptist Association "Statistical Reports," Florida Baptist *Annual*, 1958 to 1964; also see Phil Kramer, 46.

¹⁸ Phil Kramer, 46 – 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²² *Ibid.*, 247, citing Rogers own memoirs, "*The Merritt Island Years*."

²³ Brevard Baptist Association "Statistical Reports," Florida Baptist *Annual*, 1965 to 1973.

²⁴ Joyce Rogers, 68.

²⁵ James A. Smith, Sr., "Adrian Rogers: There is no substitute for preaching the Word of God," *Florida Baptist Witness*, November 17, 2005, 1, 12; [news stories on Adrian Rogers are held in the files of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, and are hereinafter referred to as story held in Rogers' bio file].

²⁶ Graham M. Weaver, "Give me that big time religion: Adrian Rogers as a builder in the Southern Baptist Convention, at Bellevue Baptist Church, and with his radio ministry Love Worth Finding, 1972-2005," (M.A. degree thesis, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 2017), 73; accessed May 30, 2026, through <https://krex.k-state.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/854be34e-5d91-43f8-83be-215fd6f5e8cf/content>.

²⁷ Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 251-252.

²⁸ Nancy T. Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 75.

²⁹ Grady C. Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention? A Memoir of the Controversy*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993), 127.

³⁰ Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 68 – 70.

³¹ Four books provide excellent overviews and the detailed history of the conflicts that occurred within the Southern Baptist Convention in the late twentieth century and which are cited within this article: Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation (2000)*; Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles (1995)*; James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence (1991)*; and Grady C. Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention? A Memoir of the Controversy 1993*).

³² James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Hannibal, Missouri: Hannibal Books, 1991), 36.

³³ Jerry Sutton, 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁵ Toby Druin, "Groups Meet in Fifteen States to Push SBC President," *Baptist Press*, May 9, 1979, 4; Druin reported in this May 9 issue of *Baptist Press* the six possible presidential candidates identified included Jerry Vines, Ala.; Bailey Smith, Okla.; Richard Jackson, Ariz.; Adrian Rogers, Tenn.; Homer Lindsey, Jr., Fla.; and John Bisagno, Tex.; Druin in a separate May 9, 1979 issue of the *Texas Baptist Standard* newspaper, four other possible candidates were identified: Abner McCall, Tex.; Douglas Watterson, Tenn.; William L. Self, Ga.; and Porter Routh, Tenn.; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

³⁶ Jerry Sutton, 100.

³⁷ Jim Newton and Charlie Warren, "Pastors Urged to Purge 'Liberals'," *Baptist Press*, June 12, 1979, 2; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

³⁸ Joyce Rogers, 101.

³⁹ Proceedings, item 78, *SBC Annual 1979*, 35. The other five persons nominated for president were: C. E. Price (PA); A. Douglas Watterson (TN); Robert E. Naylor (TX); William Self (GA); and Abner McCall (TX).

⁴⁰ Proceedings, item 99, *SBC Annual 1979*, 43.

⁴¹ Jerry Vines, "Vines: My Life and Ministry," (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), 114.

⁴² Jim Newton and Orville Scott, "Adrian Rogers Press Conference," *Baptist Press*, June 13, 1979, 1; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

⁴³ James C. Hefley, 40.

⁴⁴ Graham M. Weaver in his thesis "Introduction" quotes Walter B. Shurden, *The Struggle for the Soul of the SBC: Moderate Responses to the Fundamentalist Movement* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), xxix.

⁴⁵ Robert O'Brien, "Adrian Rogers Declines 2nd Term as SBC President," *Baptist Press*, May 7, 1980, 1; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

⁴⁶ Al Shackelford, "Rogers Confirms Candidacy Request," *Baptist Press*, December 10, 1985, 1; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

⁴⁷ Greg Warner, "Rogers says SBC needs correction, not status quo," *Florida Baptist Witness*, May 28, 1986, 7; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

⁴⁸ Adrian Rogers, *The Incredible Power of Kingdom Authority: Getting an Upper Hand on the Underworld*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 117-8.

⁴⁹ Jim Newton and Charlie Warren, "Pastors Urged to Purge 'Liberals'."

⁵⁰ Phil Kramer, 25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵² Joyce Rogers, 45.

⁵³ Proceedings, item 16(1), *Florida Baptist Annual 1966*, 29.

⁵⁴ Proceedings, item 78, *SBC Annual 1986*, 42.

⁵⁵ Proceedings, item 97, *SBC Annual 1986*, 61.

⁵⁶ David Wilkinson, "Rogers' Sermon," *Baptist Press*, June 12, 1986, 1; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

⁵⁷ Stan Hastey, "Group Consolidates Power Within SBC," *Baptist Press*, June 16, 1986, 2; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

⁵⁸ Stan Hastey, "Roger Presidential Address," *Baptist Press*, June 16, 1987, 1; [story held in Rogers' bio file].

⁵⁹ Proceedings, item 103, *SBC Annual 1987*, 47.

⁶⁰ Proceedings, item 111, *SBC Annual 1987*, 53.

⁶¹ Proceedings, item 153, *SBC Annual 1987*, 56 – 57; and “Special Report of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee,” 232 – 242.

⁶² Joyce Rogers, 110.

⁶³ Grady C. Cothen, 224.

⁶⁴ Stan Hastey, “Presidential News Conference.”

⁶⁵ James A. Smith, Sr., “Rogers on ministry, the SBC, and post-retirement,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, November 17, 2005, 12-13; [story held in Rogers’ bio file].

⁶⁶ Joyce Rogers, 81 – 83.

⁶⁷ Cyndi Richardson, *By His Grace and For His Glory: Celebrating a Century with Bellevue Baptist Church*, (Memphis, TN: Bellevue Baptist Church, 2004), 251.

⁶⁸ Proceedings, items 18, 52, 108 – 113, and 127, *SBC Annual*, 1999, 37, 79, 87, and 88.

⁶⁹ Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), ix.

⁷⁰ Proceedings, items 112 through 119, *SBC Annual*, 2000, 76. Also see two notable books that provide overviews and the detailed history on the development of the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* and served as resource for this article: Blount and Wooddell, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*; and William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought*.

⁷¹ Russell H. Dilday, “An Analysis of the Baptist Faith and Message, 2000,” posted on-line by The Center for Baptist Studies, April 2001, accessed May 30, 2026, through <https://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/hotissues/dildayfm2000.htm>.

⁷² James A. Smith, Sr., “Rogers on ministry, the SBC, and post-retirement.”



Charles Frazier Stanley
Served as 44th SBC President:
1985 and 1986

Florida Pastorates:
First Baptist Church, Miami, 1962 – 1968
First Baptist Church, Bartow, 1968 – 1969

Introductory Overview

There were two significant childhood influences – prayer and scripture study – that molded and guided Charles Stanley throughout his life. “My mother taught me to love God’s Word. She didn’t do this by creating a reading and memorization plan. Rather, she read the Bible to me and explained how important it is to obey the principles that the Father commanded us to live by,” Charles Stanley wrote about his early childhood.¹ “Second, mother taught me to pray,” he recalled. “She showed me how to get on my knees before the Father by praying with me beside my bed every night.” Continuing, Stanley explained, “sometimes we opened the Bible during our prayer times to receive His direction, which showed me that listening to God is crucial to our walk as believers.”² Those two influences caused Stanley to have “a desire to know God and to depend upon him for every aspect of life,” he declared years later. Those influences plus several revelations from God during his spiritual journey came to define who Charles Stanley became.

That desire and obedience to follow God’s direction for his life, resulted in Stanley serving a variety of churches, including two Florida pastorates, and being called to lead for 51 years the First Baptist Church, Atlanta, during which time he was elected to two consecutive years as the 44th president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Growing up in Rural Virginia

Charles Frazier Stanley (b. 1932; d. 2023) was born in the rural farming community of Dry Fork, Virginia, near the city of Danville. His parents, Charley and Rebecca Stanley were members of the local Emmanuel Pentecostal Holiness Church, a congregation co-founded by Charles’ grandfather George Washington Stanley.

However, while only nine months old, Charles' father died from a kidney condition. Now at the beginning of the Great Depression, Charles and his 24-year-old mother were destitute. As he later recalled, "There was no backup plan, no safety net, no insurance, and no hidden store of funds."³ Rebecca Stanley soon went to work at the Dan River Textile Mill – 16 miles from Dry Fork – which yielded a little over nine dollars a week.

While working at the Mill, Rebecca met and married a man named John Hall, a truck driver. Rebecca later told Charles that he "needed a father figure." Sadly, that was not the case for nine-year old Charles then or later, who recalled, "John brought a great deal of anger, conflict and hostility into our once peaceful home, and it was often over very petty issues."⁴

Maturing in Spirit and Faith

In June 1944 a life changing spiritual event occurred for the 12-year-old as "Jesus finally got a hold of me." Charles and his mother were in their regular pew at the Pentecostal Holiness Church of North Danville. Stanley in the hearing of the sermon realized "how far I was from the Father because of my sin." Upon the invitation being given, young Charles was "the first down the aisle and on my knees."⁵

One scholar has noted that the Danville Pentecostal Holiness Church provided Charles Stanley with the foundational understanding of the "cardinal doctrines of the [Pentecostal] church, which included salvation, sanctification as a second blessing, the baptism in the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues, divine healing and the imminent second coming of Christ. Stanley also saw the fervent altar calls where people loudly sought for the 'deeper experiences.'"⁶ Despite his active prayer life, Stanley later confessed, "I spent the early years of my Christian life struggling. Call it

carnal; call it fleshly; call it whatever you wish. It was anything but wonderful.”⁷

Stanley’s life through his late teenage years was affected by three significant people. As previously noted, Rebecca Stanley was the enduring role model of a godly mother who encouraged her son to follow her daily practice of scripture reading and committed prayer time. Another was Craig Stowe who was Stanley’s Sunday school teacher at the Pentecostal Holiness Church. According to Stanley, Mr. Stowe “was an incredible man of faith whom I loved dearly and who inspired me profoundly.” Stowe also, “was a great and steady source of encouragement” who “ended up being the closest I’ve ever had to an earthly father.”⁸

During his teenage years, Stanley felt the call of God to the preaching ministry. “There never was a time when I felt God say directly to me, ‘I want you to preach.’ But from the time I was saved, I never really thought about doing anything else . . . [something] I was destined to do.”⁹ In his biographical account Charles Stanley felt he carried a heavy load of emotional baggage – little self-esteem, lots of insecurities, and early life experiences of loneliness – which likely were motivators in his life-long spiritual pilgrimage to become more dependent upon God and the Holy Spirit, which are highlighted in this narrative.

After Stanley felt the call of God to enter the preaching ministry, he turned to his grandfather – the third significant person in his life – George Washington Stanley. Charles characterized his grandfather as “a Spirit-filled Pentecostal preacher.” He further described the preacher as being “absolutely on fire, bold, fervent and courageous for the Lord. . . God worked through him in an awesome way.”¹⁰ Stanley

spent several different summertime weeks visiting his grandfather on his North Carolina farm. “This is the most spiritual person I’ve ever talked too. He impacted my life profoundly.” Stanley later wrote that the time spent with Grandfather Stanley, “absolutely revolutionized the way I would live and serve the Lord.”¹¹

Preparing for Ministry Service

Charles Stanley came to understand that following God’s leadership in his life after high school graduation (1950) would require attending the university. But he also recognized he did not have, nor did he know anyone, who had the financial

**Grandfather
Stanley,
“absolutely
revolutionized
the way I would
live and serve
the Lord.”**

resources to underwrite Charles’ university education. But God had a plan. His first girlfriend – Barbara Ann Johnson – invited Charles to attend church at Danville’s Moffett Memorial Baptist Church. Given his Pentecostal rearing, Stanley was

hesitant and sought the advice of his mother. “If you can live as holy a life in the Baptist church as in the Pentecostal Holiness church, then it’s all right with me,” Rebecca Stanley told her son.¹²

In a short time, Stanley became involved in church activities and was given opportunities to preach. And as an affirmation that God was preparing for Stanley’s future needs, the Moffett Memorial Church Pastor David Hammock arranged for Stanley to receive a full four-year scholarship to enroll in Virginia Baptists’ University of Richmond.

While attending the university, Stanley met a co-ed named Anna Margaret Johnson [not related to his

earlier girlfriend Barbara Ann Johnson] while attending Richmond's Grove Avenue Baptist Church. He later wrote, "Annie was pretty, very bright, artistic, and best of all, she had a deep passion for God . . . It wasn't long before I thought that she was the most godly, purest, most committed, sold-out Christian gal I'd ever met."¹³

Upon graduating from the university in 1954, both enrolled at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. In a short time, Charles and Annie became daily prayer partners at which point Charles began to realize he was in love and "grateful to the Lord for knowing better than I did what I really wanted and needed."¹⁴ The following summer, the couple married August 6, 1955. Then a year later in August 1956 he returned to Danville to be ordained by the Moffett Memorial Baptist Church.

Fruitland Church and Bible Institute, 1957 – 1959

In their second year (1956) at Southwestern Seminary the couple were seeking God's will concerning possible service as home missionaries. They went to Lake Lure, in Hickory Nut Gorge, North Carolina, where Annie's family owned a cottage. There one day Stanley met a deacon from Fruitland Baptist Church, near Hendersonville. In their conversation the deacon told Stanley that the church's pastor was going on vacation, and asked Stanley if he would come and preach for two Sundays, which he did.

Subsequently after the couple returned to seminary classes, in December 1956, they received a letter from the church leadership indicating their long-time pastor was retiring. The members had voted unanimously to call Stanley as their pastor and the church was willing to wait for him to graduate the following spring. And in God's Providence, in April,

just a month before his seminary graduation, a letter was received from the president of the Fruitland Baptist Bible Institute. Stanley was invited to “teach some classes to pastors who did not have an opportunity to attend seminary.”¹⁵ Although the dual invitations became matters of focused prayer, the couple finally recognized God’s hand had arranged those opportunities. Stanley graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity degree in June 1957, and he and Annie moved to their first pastorate and teaching assignment.

The members of the Fruitland Church were what Stanley described as “salt-of-the-earth-mountain folks.” However, in short order Stanley recognized that these members “lacked passion for the truth of God’s Word and how it could shape their lives.” He cited as an example “they were very enthusiastic about the [corn liquor] stills they had hidden up in the highlands, so bootlegging was a big problem. Likewise, a number of families were embroiled in terrible conflicts, which certainly hindered fellowship in the church.”¹⁶ Although Stanley was steadfast in his commitment to follow God’s leadership, he said he “experienced a terrible spiritual attack.”¹⁷ Despite the doubts and lack of response by the members, Stanley noted, “the Lord has done vastly more on my behalf than I have ever dreamed.”¹⁸

Upon reflection of his two-years ministry at Fruitland, Stanley observed, “that the good far outweighed the bad.” He cited the many “firsts” the couple experienced: “our first ministry assignment, our first house together, and . . . our first child, Charles Andrew “Andy” Stanley was born” (b. 1958).¹⁹

However, it was at Fruitland that Stanley experienced his second life altering event in his spiritual pilgrimage. One day while involved in his daily

extended prayer time Stanley recalled he was talking with God, “frustrated and overwhelmed with this feeling of inadequacy,” because he believed he had not yet “experience[d] the power of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰ For the former practicing Pentecostal, this moment was unlike any he had ever experienced, he later wrote:

Immediately, I was overwhelmed with an amazing sense of confidence and assurance. It was a feeling. But it was in such stark contrast with what I had been feeling [in] the past . . . I didn’t see stars or hear a voice. I didn’t speak in tongues. In fact, that was the point. I didn’t *do* anything – except trust Him. Then it hit me. . . The Spirit-filled life is a life of faith.²¹

**First Baptist Church, Fairborn, Ohio,
1959 – 1962**

Stanley believed he was content with the ministry situations at Fruitland, although, “I recall not feeling as if it was a permanent assignment.”²² One Sunday, in the summer of 1959, following a morning service, he was approached by a pulpit committee from First Baptist Church, Fairborn, Ohio. Within weeks the informal discussion became a formal offer. At the time, Stanley believed,

“their offer couldn’t have been less appealing to me,” in part because of the cold winters and the

town’s location between Cincinnati and Columbus.

However, on the plus side, the church was in a missions’ pioneer area for Southern Baptists, and the church was primarily comprised of military families, both of which he viewed as mission outreach and evangelistic opportunities.²³

**Then it hit me. . .
The Spirit-filled life
is a life of faith.**

As was his practice Stanley committed himself to a time of extended and consecrated prayer to seek God's will. "And the more I sought God about it, the more convinced I was that my time in Fruitland was over."²⁴ By November, Stanley understood God's leading him to accept the Ohio pastorate. In a short time after arriving on the church field, Stanley soon realized that the Fairborn church was in financial debt and "the spiritual state of some in the congregation was a great deal like its finances." He characterized that "some members were trying to achieve God-sized results on their meager human budget of abilities and appeared not to know how to tap into His treasure of power and wisdom." Stanley also had to contend with deacons "desperate to be in control."²⁵ It was during their ministry at Fairborn, that the couple's daughter Rebecca Louise Stanley was born June 9, 1961.²⁶

Again, this ministry assignment became an opportunity for Stanley to share from his own spiritual pilgrimage to help the congregation to see what God desired of them individually and corporately. Also, it was at Fairborn that Stanley experienced his third life-altering event in his spiritual pilgrimage. It came while studying for a preaching series in the *Book of Galatians*. Stanley recalled that he "struggled with the fact that my life did not always show the outgrowth that a relationship with Christ should be producing: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.'"²⁷ In a strong desire to merge "the resurrection life and the fruit of the Spirit," Stanley went to his literal prayer closet that resulted in "one of the greatest breakthroughs in my spiritual walk."²⁸

In God's Providence, Stanley was invited to participate in a 1961 evangelistic mission trip to Haiti. As a part of a planned flight layover in Miami, he was invited to preach at the First Baptist Church, Miami.

That pulpit supply soon resulted in an invitation to become pastor of the church.

First Baptist Church, Miami, 1962 – 1968

For the next six years, Charles Stanley served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Miami “and loved it.” [The church had been organized in 1896 as the Lemon City Baptist Church and in 1937 was renamed.] “The church flourished and the ministry grew” particularly with the starting of a Christian school, which Stanley saw as a means to reach children for Christ.²⁹ The church membership grew and held steady under Stanley’s leadership with about 1300 members. The church averaged 53 baptisms per year during those six years.³⁰

During those years Stanley began additional graduate education studies via long-distance – subsequently earning both the Master of Theology (1968) and Doctor of Theology (1971) degrees – through Luther Rice Seminary, then located in Jacksonville, Florida. “Miami was a great place to raise a family,” Stanley recalled.³¹

First Baptist Church, Bartow, 1968 – 1969

In early 1968 Stanley felt the call of the Lord to move again. On a Sunday morning, following a service in Miami, a committee from First Baptist Church (org. 1875), Bartow, Florida, showed up. They wanted to discuss the possibilities of the young and energetic Stanley going to the central Florida community of Bartow. By May of that year, after several months of prayer and responding to God’s leadership, Stanley accepted the call of the church.

“There we had some of the more senior members of the church that were not too thrilled with a pastor who paced back and forth across the platform,” as he preached, recalled member Barbara Johnson who was

a teenager at the time.³² Another longtime member Wilma Martin said of Stanley's preaching, "It was wonderful. You felt the Holy Spirit was there, and the Lord knew that was what First Baptist needed. And that was something that Dr. Stanley could provide."³³

"Sadly, the worst part of Bartow was that many of the church members were dry spiritually," Stanley recalled in his memoirs. "They seemed to have little interest in winning anyone to Jesus," which he said, "was incredibly frustrating."³⁴

"you could just sense that God was going to do special things in his life"

After only 18 months at Bartow, Stanley was invited to go to Atlanta to serve as the associate pastor of the historical First Baptist Church. As with all decisions faced by Stanley,

it became a matter of concentrated prayer. But for many of the Bartow church members losing Stanley was considered a loss. However, Stanley's departure had a positive aspect according to Wilma Martin who observed, "you could just sense that God was going to do special things in his life and he was going to be open to it whatever it was."³⁵

The 51 Years at Atlanta's First Baptist Church, 1969 – 2020

The very idea of God leading Stanley to the historic Atlanta church (org. 1848) was perplexing at first. According to Stanley, "I knew enough about the pastor of First Baptist Atlanta, Dr. Roy McClain, to know that there was a 180-degree difference in our theological views. In my opinion, he was too liberal in his preaching and in his practices – I would never be comfortable serving with him."³⁶ But as a result of his concerted prayers, Stanley realized God was directing him to go to Atlanta, which he did by September 1969.

As associate pastor, Stanley was assigned to preach on Sunday and Wednesday nights. His evangelistic preaching made quite an impact upon the church and community. A member who was present for Stanley's very first sermon to the congregation, Mary Gellerstedt recalled, "He was a fiery little evangelist."³⁷ Another longtime member John Glover said, "Almost every service was like a revival, and a lot of people were coming to know Jesus Christ as their savior."³⁸

Hardly one year had passed since Stanley joined the church staff when an unprecedented event occurred that set into motion events that would thrust Stanley into the senior pastor role of First Baptist. It was September 1970 and the church had just completed a weeklong revival during which no one responded to make a profession of faith. Stanley recalled the events that followed:

At the end of the week, McClain preached a message, and still no one responded to the invitation. He looked out at the congregation in disgust and shouted, 'This is so sickening, I can't stand it! I'm through!' He threw the microphone down on the platform, walked out, and resigned soon thereafter.³⁹

The church leadership soon asked Stanley to fill the pulpit on Sunday mornings while the church began the protracted process of searching for a new pastor. During the interim Stanley set about participating in the church's regular business meetings. At his first business meeting, while the congregation was discussing a particular item, Stanley suggested, "We need to ask God about this." According to Stanley, "One of the men immediately replied, 'This is business. Leave God out of it.' Those men absolutely refused to pray about it."⁴⁰

That event turned out to be the beginning of a power struggle led by a group of seven who served as the church's executive committee, who were in control and were not going to let the acting pastor interfere. To underscore their future control of the church, the leadership group hand-picked a 40-member pulpit committee comprised of the church's most influential and wealthy members who would support the decision of the leadership control group. Then the leadership group identified four candidates – not including Stanley – for the position of senior pastor to be evaluated by the pulpit committee.

The group of seven set about to undermine and disparage Stanley, even suggesting to him, “Just go on vacation and don't come back.” In response to the continuing pressure campaign Stanley told them and others that he came to the church, “because God called me to come here. And I'll be happy to leave the minute God tells me to do so.”⁴¹ During the intervening weeks and months, Stanley continued his daily meeting with God seeking His assurance and guidance.

What followed were three months of a behind-the-scenes negativity campaign and public pronouncements made against Stanley and the subsequent resignation of 300-plus church leaders protesting Stanley's leadership. The details of those events are too extensive to detail within this article, but published sources exist and are cited in the endnotes of this article.⁴²

Finally, during a September 22, 1971, regularly scheduled business meeting, the deacons introduced a motion to remove Stanley as acting pastor. After a protracted discussion by the congregation, a member sidestepped the parliamentary maneuvering and

made a substitute motion “to call Charles Stanley as senior pastor.” The immediate vote resulted in a majority 65 percent of the congregation voted to confirm Charles F. Stanley as the senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Atlanta.⁴³

Despite the initial departure of literally hundreds of members from the church, nearly 2,000 members remained. By 1985, under Stanley’s leadership, the church membership grew to over 15,000 members and its ministries expanded into 13 buildings over 17 acres in downtown Atlanta. Contributing to that growth, Stanley’s mission outreach included the expanded use of broadcast media. “In 1972, Stanley launched a half-hour religious television program called *The Chapel Hour*. In 1977, he founded *In Touch Ministries* with the mission to lead people worldwide into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and to strengthen the local church,” according to a published report.⁴⁴

Elected SBC President for 1985

Despite having elected in 1979 Adrian Rogers as their own conservative president of the Southern Baptist Convention, conservative leaders renewed their complaints that seminary and college professors “continue[d] to teach views other than inerrancy.”⁴⁵ Neither the focus of this article, nor space, will permit an in-depth review of the Convention’s controversies over biblical interpretation, the “conservative resurgence” (1979-1993), the battle lines drawn between moderates’ and conservatives’ viewpoints, and the need for a Peace Committee (1985-1988), among other actions. Those topics have been well-documented in various publications cited in the endnotes of this article.⁴⁶

After six years of the growing controversy within the denomination, self-described conservative theologian-

writer Jerry Sutton assessed the situation: “The 1984 Southern Baptist Convention in Kansas City marked a distinct turnaround in the struggle between the conservative and moderates for leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention.” Sutton continued by noting, “The other critical decision at the 1984 Southern Baptist Convention was the presidential election of Charles Stanley . . . [who] was considered not only an outsider but a non-cooperating antagonist” towards the moderate leadership.⁴⁷

In the election for president to serve in 1985, three persons were nominated: James Pleitz of Texas nominated T. G. “John” Sullivan of Louisiana; Bo Baker of Texas nominated Grady C. Cothen of Mississippi; and Jerry Vines of Florida nominated Charles Stanley of Georgia.⁴⁸ Subsequently it was reported that of the 14,822 ballots cast (by 91 percent of registered messengers), Charles Stanley received 7,692 or 52 percent of the votes.⁴⁹

According to authors Emir and Ergun Caner, “Stanley’s notoriety among Southern Baptists nationwide offered conservatives a candidate, admired by thousands for his integrity, who could continue the theological resurgence.”⁵⁰

Stanley recalled the circumstances leading up to his 1984 election as the SBC president. A group of his friends had invited him to a meeting and prayer time prior to the opening of the convention meeting. He said, “I was 100 percent convinced in my heart that I would not be chosen as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. It was not something I wanted. I didn’t believe it was God’s plan for my life.” Following the group meeting, Stanley returned to his hotel room for the night. He subsequently “began to pray, and the Lord confirmed to me that I needed to be willing to be nominated, even if I lost and was humiliated in

the process. After more than a little soul-searching and struggle, I finally said, ‘Okay God.’”⁵¹

No sooner had the dust settled from the 1984 SBC annual meeting, than the SBC controversy was characterized as a “Holy War.” During the August 28 Convocation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, President

Roy Honeycutt, Jr., stated, “That I should be either so bold or so presumptuous as to suggest ‘holy war’ as an

‘holy war’ as an analogy for our current struggle

analogy for our current struggle grows out of my conviction that ‘unholy forces’ are now at work – which, if left unchecked, will destroy essential qualities, both of our Convention and seminary.”⁵²

Later that Fall, Amarillo, Texas, Pastor Winfred Moore, president of the 2.3-million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas, told a news conference that Charles Stanley should not be reelected as SBC president in June 1985. He went on to point out that, “Stanley has been too involved in the denominational controversy . . . to be a unifying factor.” Moore repeated the claims that Stanley, “often has been criticized for the low percentage his church gives to the Cooperative Program, the unified giving plan which supports SBC agencies and institutions.”⁵³ Several months later Stanley told *Baptist Press* that his church “has doubled Cooperative Program giving to \$250,000 for 1985, and has ‘made no provision to do anything, whether I win or lose.’”⁵⁴

Reflecting upon his 1984 convention service, Stanley said, “after all the hurt, turmoil, and tribulations that arose from the convention, I may well have asked myself, ‘Was I wrong?’ One thing I know for sure is

that when I face God, I will have done what I really believed with all of my heart was the right thing.”⁵⁵

The 1985 annual meeting of Southern Baptists was convened during June 11-13, in Dallas, Texas. More than 45,000 messengers registered, which some claimed was “the largest religious meeting in history.”⁵⁶ The Tuesday morning session featured President Charles Stanley’s message titled “Healing Hearts in the Family of God.”⁵⁷ In the message, Stanley called upon Southern Baptists, “to put denominational strife behind them and show a watching world that the message of love and forgiveness they proclaim is an authentic one.”⁵⁸

Later that Tuesday afternoon the election for convention president to serve in 1986, featured only two candidates: Morris H. Chapman of Texas nominated Charles Stanley for re-election and Milton Cunningham of Texas nominated Winfred Moore of Texas.⁵⁹ Registration Secretary Lee Porter subsequently announced that Charles Stanley was re-elected as president, having received 24,453 votes or 55.3 percent of the 44,248 total ballots cast.⁶⁰

In a subsequent news conference, Stanley pledged “to follow the letter of the SBC constitution to ‘consult’ with the vice presidents in making choices for the powerful committee on committees.” His pledge was a response to a “pointed criticism” made by outgoing Vice President Donald V. Wideman of Kansas City, Mo., who complained that “all but three of his suggestions” were rejected by Stanley.⁶¹ [The context of this concern was the recognition by conservatives that the SBC president “who appointed the Committee on Committees, which nominated the Committee on Boards (now Nominations) . . . nominated new trustees” who were the controlling factor in the

employment of agency administrators and who set policy.^{62]}

Questioned about the “on-going theological conflict that has helped fuel the six-year war between conservatives and moderates in the denomination, Stanley replied: ‘I think two people can hold very different convictions and still be respectful and accepting . . . I don’t have to agree with a person’s theology,’” Stanley told the news media.⁶³

Also noteworthy, during the Dallas convention, two pastors – Bill G. Hickem of Jacksonville, Florida and H. Franklin Paschall of Nashville, Tennessee – jointly presented what became a historically significant motion. They proposed and messengers subsequently approved the creation of a special committee – “that shall seek to determine the sources of the controversies in our Convention” – that became known as the Peace Committee.⁶⁴

Serving as SBC President for 1986

News accounts of the 1986 annual meeting at which Stanley presided, were characterized as a gathering at which “fundamental-conservatives consolidated their power within the Southern Baptist Convention . . . winning nearly every vote in a show of strength that left many moderate-conservatives demoralized, if not defeated.” Despite that news report assessment, the meeting was considered “relatively calm” when compared to the prior year’s meeting held in Dallas.⁶⁵

As his second year of service as SBC president came to an end, Stanley “used his presidential address to urge messengers against changing their philosophy of leader ‘at a very crucial moment in the life of Southern Baptists.’”⁶⁶ Critics of Stanley complained the sermon was used to “tout the fundamentalist agenda – and indirectly Adrian Rogers’ candidacy” – who was to be

nominated as convention president in the ensuing business.⁶⁷

Perhaps in response to the complaints raised following the 1985 convention that President Stanley had used “parliamentary heavy-handedness” in presiding over the tumultuous business sessions, the Atlanta convention was the first in SBC history to use a certified professional parliamentarian – C. Barry McCarty, an ordained Church of Christ minister – to advise Stanley.⁶⁸

In a hotly debated proposal messengers refused on a ballot vote to consider withdrawing the SBC from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. Among the 64 motions presented, messengers extended the life of the Peace Committee – to study the controversy within the denomination – for another year.

Three decades after first being elected SBC president, Stanley reflected upon his 1984

election which he wrote in his 2016 memoirs, “infuriated the opposition and ultimately revealed many of the underlying problems that existed in the convention for a long

“All the liberal and moderate political forces of the Southern Baptist Convention were against me”

time but had either been ignored or denied.” He went on to contend that, “All the liberal and moderate political forces of the Southern Baptist Convention were against me, which included seminary presidents and state convention newspapers.”⁶⁹

Returning Attention to the Pastoral Ministry

Returning to giving full-time attention to the pastorate, Stanley devoted his efforts to lead the Atlanta church – responding to unprecedented

growth in membership and worship attendance – to a move out of downtown Atlanta. Having purchased in 1988 a property site in Dunwoody, the church finally began in 1992 a relocation process that was fully realized in April 1997. The church moved into a former warehouse now renovated to provide larger worship and educational space.

Concurrent with the church facilities issue, Stanley also devoted his efforts to expand his extensive broadcast outreach called *In Touch Ministries*, which shared the gospel in more than 100 languages across 150 countries. By the early 1990s, the ministry “received \$35 million in sales and had offices in Brazil, the Philippines, and Russia. By 2013, *In Touch*’s total revenue was over 90 million dollars, a jump of 300 percent. Stanley spent the majority of his time overseeing *In Touch* and rarely spent time at the First Baptist Church, . . . or with his wife,” scholar Graham Weaver noted. “Still, Stanley’s success in broadcasting demonstrated that the broadcasts of a local church could propel a pastor onto national radio and television outlets.”⁷⁰

More than any other SBC president, Stanley’s personal life was on public display, beginning when his wife Anna Johnson Stanley filed for divorce in 1993 claiming their marriage was “irretrievably broken.” After a period of attempted reconciliation with his wife Anna, the Stanley’s divorce was finalized in 2000, after 44 years of marriage.⁷¹ According to a year 2000 *Baptist Press* story, “The Stanleys troubled marriage was made public in the 1990s and caused some struggles in the church because of an unwritten policy that First Baptist did not allow divorced men to serve as ministers or deacons.” In a May 21, 2000, report and recommendation from the deacons to the Atlanta church, the congregation was advised Stanley

would remain as senior pastor. “The congregation rose in applause,” the *Baptist Press* reported.⁷²

Meanwhile Andy Stanley, who was serving on the church staff, went to family counseling with his father. Finally, after two years, Andy could no longer support his father’s perspective on the divorce and vision for the church. Andy resigned August 3, 1995, and went on to establish North Point Community Church which subsequently expanded to six campuses throughout Atlanta. In his memoirs, Stanley confirmed, “I am grateful that throughout the years, Andy and I have experienced reconciliation.”⁷³ Anna Stanley died in 2014 of pneumonia and other health issues at age 83.⁷⁴

The concentrated effort to expand the *In Touch Ministries*, the on-going unresolved divorce, the relocation of the church, and the resignation from the staff by Andy Stanley, created tensions for Charles Stanley which he characterized as a “perfect storm.” The pressure caused Stanley to remark, that even his “fitness as a pastor became a debate in Christian circles, with longtime opponents and national news outlets rehearsing my every failing.”⁷⁵ Upon reflection of those events, Stanley wrote in his memoirs, “I may not comprehend everything that went on during that period. . . . Because God hasn’t called to me understand, but to obey him, forgive others, and seek forgiveness.”⁷⁶

After 51-years serving the Atlanta church since 1969, Stanley transitioned to pastor-emeritus in September 2020 at age 87. Former Winter Park, Florida, Pastor Anthony George, who had served the Atlanta church as senior associate pastor since 2012, succeeded Stanley.⁷⁷

Charles Stanley passed away peacefully at his home on April 18, 2023, at age 90.

30 Life Principles

by Dr. Charles Stanley

God's Word is full of promises and guidance for our everyday lives. The following principles expand upon those Dr. Stanley learned from his grandfather while visiting him as a young man. Grounded in Scripture, but written in his own words, these easy-to-remember sayings help a Christian to apply God's truth to their life as they did for Dr. Stanley. They serve as practical guidelines for spiritual growth, decision-making, and living a life aligned with God's purpose. Applying them consistently can help cultivate faith, resilience, and meaningful relationships.

1. **Intimacy with God is the highest priority** – Your relationship with God determines the impact of your life.
2. **Obey God and leave the consequences to Him** – Trust in God's plan even when it seems unclear.
3. **God's Word is an immovable anchor** – Scripture provides stability in times of trouble.
4. **Awareness of God's presence energizes your work** – Recognize God's guidance in daily tasks.
5. **Obey God even without understanding** – Faithful obedience is more important than comprehension.
6. **You reap what you sow** – Actions have consequences, often greater and later than expected.
7. **Dark moments serve God's purpose** – Trials are temporary and refine character.
8. **Fight battles on your knees** – Prayer is the ultimate source of victory.
9. **Trust God beyond what you see** – Faith requires looking at God's perspective.
10. **God will reveal His will if necessary** – He can move heaven and earth to guide you.
11. **God assumes responsibility when you obey** – Obedience invites divine provision.
12. **Brokenness is required for usefulness** – Humility and surrender enable God's work.
13. **Acquisitions outside God's will turn to ashes** – True success aligns with God's plan.
14. **We are never victims of circumstances** – God's sovereignty ensures purpose in all situations.
15. **Disappointments are inevitable; discouragement is a choice** – Perspective shapes response.

16. **Walking in the Spirit means obeying promptings** – Follow God's guidance in daily life.
17. **Living the Christian life is allowing Jesus to live through you** – Spiritual growth comes from surrender.
18. **Adversity deepens your relationship with God** – Challenges strengthen faith.
19. **Faithfulness in small things leads to greater responsibility** – God rewards diligence.
20. **God's timing is perfect** – Patience is essential in waiting for His plan.
21. **Forgiveness frees the heart** – Letting go of resentment aligns with God's will.
22. **Humility precedes honor** – True greatness comes from serving others.
23. **Generosity reflects God's character** – Giving blesses both giver and receiver.
24. **Integrity is non-negotiable** – Honesty and moral uprightness are foundational.
25. **Faith over fear** – Trust God in uncertainty.
26. **Seek wisdom continually** – Godly insight guides decisions.
27. **Perseverance produces maturity** – Endurance strengthens character.
28. **Gratitude transforms perspective** – Thankfulness fosters contentment.
29. **Love is the greatest commandment** – Prioritize love in all relationships.
30. **Share your faith actively** – Influence others by living and proclaiming God's truth.

[SOURCE: Developed and copyright held by Charles Stanley, *In Touch Ministries*, accessed at <https://www.charlesstanley.com/life-and-ministry/30-life-principles/>]

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of Charles F. Stanley was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ Charles F. Stanley, *Courageous Faith: My Story from a Life of Obedience*, (New York: Howard Books/Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2016), 5.

² Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

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- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁶ Vinson Synan, "Charles Stanley's Pentecostal Roots," *Spiritus Magazine*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2020, 275 – 286.
- ⁷ Charles Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1992), xi.
- ⁸ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 48 – 49.
- ⁹ Charles Stanley, *The Source of My Strength*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994), 129.
- ¹⁰ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 50.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 70.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ²⁰ Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life*, 37.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ²² Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 109.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 120 – 123.
- ³⁰ Miami Baptist Association "Statistical Reports," Florida Baptist *Annual*, 1962 through 1968.
- ³¹ Video biography titled, "His Way Mine: A Tribute to Dr. Charles Stanley," accessed April 2026, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8vpLY4R8sw>; [hereinafter referred to as Stanley's video biography].
- ³² Barbara Johnson of Bartow, interview segment, Stanley's video biography.
- ³³ Wilma Martin of Bartow, interview segment, Stanley's video biography.
- ³⁴ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 124.
- ³⁵ Wilma Martin of Bartow, interview segment, Stanley's video biography.
- ³⁶ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 127.
- ³⁷ Mary Gellerstedt of Atlanta, interview segment, Stanley video biography.
- ³⁸ John Glover of Atlanta, interview segment, Stanley video biography.
- ³⁹ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 155-156.
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⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴² The details of the conflict over the calling of Charles Stanley as senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Atlanta, are summarized in two primary sources providing opposing viewpoints of the issues: (1) Stanley's perspective is recorded in his autobiography, *Courageous Faith* (previously cited), pp.156 – 173; and (2) a non-titled, 22-page mimeographed document, dated January 23, 1972, developed and issued by the group opposed to Stanley who called themselves, "The Southern Baptist Mission Congregation of Atlanta, Ga.," a copy of which is held in the biographical file of Charles Stanley maintained by the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, [hereinafter referred to as resources and/or stories held Stanley's bio file].

⁴³ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 166.

⁴⁴ Emily McFarlan Miller, "Influential pastor Charles Stanley steps down at First Baptist Church Atlanta after 50 years," accessed May 2, 2026, on-line at

<https://religionnews.com/2020/09/14/Influential-pastor-Charles-Stanley-steps-down-at-First-Baptist-Church-Atlanta-after-50-years>, Religionnews.com/US, September 14, 2020.

⁴⁵ Nancy T. Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 65.

⁴⁶ Four books provide excellent overviews and the detailed history of the conflicts that occurred within the Southern Baptist Convention in the late twentieth century and which are partially cited within this article: Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation* (2000); Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles* (1995); James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence* (1991); and Grady C. Cothen, *What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention? A Memoir of the Controversy*.

⁴⁷ Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 137-138.

⁴⁸ Proceedings, item 73, Southern Baptist Convention *Annual* 1984, 34, [hereinafter referred to as *SBC Annual*].

⁴⁹ Proceedings, item 93, *SBC Annual* 1984, 44.

⁵⁰ Emir and Ergun Caner, *The Sacred Trust: Sketches of the Southern Baptist Convention Presidents*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 175.

⁵¹ Charles Stanley, *The Source of My Strength*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994), 122.

⁵² Sutton, 144.

⁵³ Karen Benson, "Moore Says Stanley Should be Replaced," *Baptist Press*, November 1, 1984; [story held in Stanley's bio file].

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- ⁵⁴ Dan Martin, “Cooperative Program Becomes Battleground,” *Baptist Press*, April 4, 1985; [story held in Stanley’s bio file].
- ⁵⁵ Stanley, *The Source of My Strength*, 124.
- ⁵⁶ Emir and Ergun Caner, 176.
- ⁵⁷ Proceedings, item 99, President Charles Stanley’s annual sermon, *SBC Annual*, 1985, 69.
- ⁵⁸ Robert O’Brien, “SBC Presidential Address,” *Baptist Press*, June 11, 1985; [story held in Stanley’s bio file].
- ⁵⁹ Proceedings, item 108, *SBC Annual*, 1985, 69.
- ⁶⁰ Proceedings, item 151, *SBC Annual*, 1985, 73.
- ⁶¹ Stan Hastey, “Stanley News Conference,” *Baptist Press*, June 11, 1985; [story held in Stanley’s bio file].
- ⁶² James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Hannibal, Mo.: Hannibal Books, 1991), 28.
- ⁶³ Hastey, “Stanley News Conference.”
- ⁶⁴ Proceedings, items 57, 111, and 197, *SBC Annual*, 1985, 64-65, 69, and 77-78.
- ⁶⁵ Stan Hastey, “Group Consolidates Power Within SBC,” *Baptist Press*, June 16, 1986, 1; [story held in Stanley’s bio file].
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁶⁷ Ammerman, 122.
- ⁶⁸ Hastey, “Group Consolidates Power Within SBC,” 1, 4.
- ⁶⁹ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 188.
- ⁷⁰ Graham M. Weaver, “Give me that big time religion: Adrian Rogers as a builder in the Southern Baptist Convention, at Bellevue Baptist Church, and with his radio ministry Love Worth Finding, 1972-2005,” (M.A. thesis degree, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 2017), 79 – 80; accessed May 30, 2026, through <https://krex.k-state.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/854be34e-5d91-43f8-83be-215fd6f5e8cf/content>.
- ⁷¹ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 204.
- ⁷² BP Staff, “Charles Stanley, wife divorce; Atlanta church affirms pastor,” *Baptist Press*, May 23, 2000; accessed June 13, 2026, through <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/charles-stanley-wife-divorce-atlanta-church-affirms-pastor/>
- ⁷³ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 208 – 209, 211.
- ⁷⁴ Art Toalston, “Charles Stanley, Pivotal SBC President, TV Preacher, Dies,” *SBC News*, April 18, 2023; [story held in Stanley’s bio file].
- ⁷⁵ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 204 – 208.
- ⁷⁶ Stanley, *Courageous Faith*, 211.
- ⁷⁷ Jonathan Howe, “Charles Stanley transitions to pastor emeritus at First Baptist Atlanta, Anthony George named senior pastor,” *SBC News*, September 13, 2020; [story held in Stanley’s bio file].



Charles Jerry Vines
Served as 45th SBC President:
1989 and 1990

Florida Pastorate:

First Baptist Church, Jacksonville

Co-pastor – 1982 – 2000

Pastor – 2000 – 2006

Introductory Overview

“In my mind I would be the pastor of a country church in Carroll County (Georgia). Or, if my ministry really took off, I might even get to one of the town churches,” Jerry Vines recalled in his autobiography.¹ As a hallmark of this evolving country preacher, Vines had a uniquely personal commitment to soul winning by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with anyone who would listen.

God blessed Jerry Vines’ commitment that included service as pastor in several Baptist churches in towns and cities in Georgia and Alabama. These were preparatory to his calling, initially as co-pastor of a big city mega-church, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, where he served for 24-years. During those Florida years Vines was elected to two one-year terms as the 45th president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Growing Up in Rural Georgia

Charles Jerry Vines (b. 1937), a native of Carrollton, Georgia, was the son of Charles C. “Totsi” and Ruby Vines. The couple, married September 19, 1936, had two children, Jerry and a daughter Brenda (1949).² Charles and Ruby were involved in the Tabernacle Baptist Church and ensured that Jerry was involved in all the church’s children’s programs ranging from Sunday school to choir to Royal Ambassadors, a boys’ missions organization.³

One Sunday afternoon in 1947 Jerry’s good friend Ray Riggs told Vines of his plan to make a profession of faith in Christ. He asked Vines to accompany him to visit with the then Tabernacle Baptist Church pastor Ebb Kilpatrick. The two went to the pastor’s study and shared their desire to join the church. The pastor explained the plan of salvation. Later during the Sunday evening service Vines said he did not recall

the songs sung or even the content of the sermon preached. But he realized, at the tender age of nine, “I was a great sinner; Jesus is a great savior; I could receive a great salvation.” When the altar call was given Vines went forward. “I repented of my sins and trusted Christ as my personal savior. I was born again! I was converted! I was justified! I was redeemed! I was saved!”⁴

Growing into his teenage years, Jerry Vines found himself caught up in school studies and activities, particularly working on the school newspaper, playing trumpet in the school band and later joining the football team. Additionally, Vines was always involved in various mischief and pranks. By now the Vines’ family were only marginally involved in the Tabernacle church. Vines recalled that although he “had received Christ as my Savior, but I was growing little in my Christian life.”⁵

**“Yes, I want you
to preach,” God
revealed to Vines**

However, by the time he reached age 16 Vines felt what he called “the moment of crisis” in his spiritual journey. One

night during his pre-bedtime prayer, “I asked the Lord if I was not saved, I wanted to be. His answer was clear as a bell. I didn’t hear an audible voice. He was louder than that!” Vines went on to describe what he heard in his heart from the Lord: “You don’t need to be saved. You already are. I want you to totally yield your life to My lordship and surrender My plan for your life.” As that encounter continued, Vines came to understand that God was calling him to the preaching ministry. “Yes, I want you to preach,” God revealed to Vines.⁶

Soon thereafter Vines told his parents of his spiritual decision and during a church service went forward to

declare to the church that God had called him to be a preacher. To further his commitment to be a preacher, Vines began a self-education process to prepare for ministry service. “I read every study course book published by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board’s Convention Press. They were books on Baptist doctrine, building a Sunday school, alcohol, personal soul winning . . .” among other resources. He wrote in his memoirs, that he had “totally immersed myself in the life of the church. I was learning what church was all about.”⁷

Preparing for Ministry Service

For Jerry Vines there were several significant people who were strong influences upon his spiritual growth and development as he prepared for Christian ministry. One of those was his grandfather W. O. “Poppa” Johnson, to whom Vines credited, “taught me to stand for my convictions without compromise, regardless of consequences.”⁸ Other influencers were a fiery young television evangelist named Billy Graham whose sermons began with the declaration, “The Bible says . . .” and Vines’ high school Sunday school teacher Mr. Thomas whose lifestyle modeled biblical values.

Vines, who was involved in high school football as an offensive and defensive end, had hopes of securing an athletic scholarship to underwrite his “study for the ministry at Baylor University, considered the Mecca for preacher boys in those years.”⁹ Unfortunately, no college football scouts came knocking at his door.

A Crisis of Faith Experienced at Mercer

As Vines considered his options for finding a college or university he could afford as well as help him realize his calling to the pastoral ministry. He visited Howard College (now Samford University) where Vines said he “met some really neat people. And there

was even an opportunity to play football” to say nothing of the young people from his home church that were attending Howard.¹⁰

When his pastor John P. Tippet learned of Vines developing plans to apply to Howard, he asked Vines to come to his office for a visit. Being a Mercer graduate, Tippet made the case for the 17-year-old Vines to re-consider his school choice, particularly inasmuch as Vines’ envisioned himself being a “pastor of a country church in Carroll County” or a Georgia Baptist city church. Tippet told Vines that being a “Mercer graduate was a distinct advantage for a Georgia Baptist pastor.”¹¹ Vines agreed and by the fall of 1956, had enrolled in the Macon, Georgia, institution.

“I thought I was headed for a four-year revival,” Vines recalled. “I was going to study the Bible, learn how to preach, and have a glorious time with the godly, scholarly professors who would teach me. And I would be there with other young men totally dedicated to the Lord Jesus and preparing for the ministry.” Unfortunately, neither the student life nor the academic setting was religiously uplifting.

His first disturbing encounter with student life was the excessive use of alcohol by some students even in his dorm residence. Despite Mercer being a Baptist school, “I had never heard such carousing and carrying on in my life.”

And as a Christianity academic major, Vines’ first class was taught by a professor who announced in a class, “Any man who says the New Testament is not filled with contradictions is a fool.”¹² Despite having been reared

**“That day I arose
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and nurtured in a Bible-believing church, Vines said he was “totally unprepared for what I experienced” at Mercer.¹³ Such experiences, particularly those in the classroom, caused Vines to have a “crisis in my faith.” Fortunately, an afternoon in an isolated part of a Macon city park provided Vines with a spiritual encounter with God. “That day I arose from my knees with a new faith and confidence deep within.”¹⁴ Despite the on-going negative experiences, Vines completed his degree program and graduated in 1959.

Early Pastoral Service Led to the Spirit’s-Indwelling

While attending Mercer, God opened a ministry opportunity for Vines. The first church he served part-time was First Baptist Church, Eatonton, Georgia. The assignments in the small congregation involved preaching, leading the music and doing visitation. But that was a short-lived assignment.

Through the influence of the associational missionary in Heard County – located adjacent to Vines’ home county of Carroll – Vines was invited to serve as part-time pastor of the Centralhatchee Baptist Church. In accepting that assignment, Vines arranged for his home church – Tabernacle – to ordain him. But again within 12 months Vines service had run its course – out of sermons, encountering some problems with leadership, and he “didn’t know what to do.”¹⁵

In God’s Providence Bethesda Baptist Church in Carroll County – a small church of about 80 members – needed a pastor and Jerry Vines was open to God’s leadership. “I became an instant hit,” Vines wrote, “I was barely twenty.” And yet, the “boy preacher,” as Vines was called, drew large numbers of young people. This ministry lasted three-and one-half years (1957 – 1960).¹⁶

It was at Bethesda that Vines had a spiritual revelation about having a Spirit-filled life. Neighboring rural church Pastor Irvine Phillips of the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church “pointed me to the filling of the Spirit as the source of preaching and witnessing power.” Claiming the promise of Ephesians 5:18, Vines said he knelt in prayer and “asked the Holy Spirit to fill me. I didn’t speak in a tongue. There was no emotional outburst. There was a difference in my preaching from that day on,” he wrote in his memoirs.¹⁷

Marriage and Growing a Family

Soon after graduating from Mercer University, Vines planned to continue his ministerial education by attending New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. But he realized he did not have the financial resources to move and enroll. He decided to become a temporary public-school teacher with specialties in algebra and history. At the last minute he also was assigned to teach eighth grade science – a subject he “knew nothing about.”¹⁸

“I was single. I had been praying for a wife. There were no prospects in sight.”

In addition to his teaching assignment, Vines continued his pastoral responsibilities at the Bethesda Church. All the while Vines was searching for a life mate.

“I made it a policy not to date members of my church. Actually, I dated little in those years. I was busy studying at Mercer, preparing my sermons, commuting back and both to Bethesda, visiting on Saturdays and preaching on Sundays.”¹⁹ He went on explain that “time was drawing near for me to head to seminary. I was single. I had been praying for a wife. There were no prospects in sight.”²⁰

In May of 1960, Vines led the homecoming services for the Bethesda congregation. As he was preaching he could not help but notice an unfamiliar face, a visiting young lady whom he said was “the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. . .[and] I totally lost my train of thought.”²¹ That young woman— Janet Denney of nearby College Park — soon became the object of Jerry’s desire. After a whirlwind romance of four-and-one-half months since their first date the couple set a December 17, 1960 wedding. During the ensuing seven years, the couple had four children that included: Elizabeth Joy (b. 1961); twins Jim and Jodi (b. 1963); and Jon (b. 1967).²² During a 1988 interview with *Baptist Press*, Janet Vines (born abt. 1938) said her life choice “is to be a wife and a mother. That’s my highest calling. I think you can achieve other goals and certainly, be fulfilled. I am fulfilled in life being his [Jerry’s] wife and especially mother.”²³

Georgia-Alabama Ministry Years – 1961 – 1982

Finally, the Vines family was able to move to New Orleans to enroll in the seminary. While enrolled in the seminary, Vines was able to undertake his first fulltime pastoral ministry position at the Second Baptist Church in Cedartown, Ga., where he served from 1961 – 1964 and again from 1965 – 1966. The one-year diversion from Second Baptist was to accept the pastorate of the Eureka Baptist Church in Carrollton, Ga. Vines quickly realized his decision was ill-advised because the Eureka Church members had “little interest in growing” and there “were many difficulties and challenges.”²⁴ Returning to serve Second Baptist lasted long enough for Vines to complete the Bachelor of Divinity degree (1966) at New Orleans Seminary. He later enrolled in the distance learning doctoral program through Luther Rice Seminary of Jacksonville, Florida, where he received a ThD degree in 1974.²⁵

His subsequent ministry assignments were country or town churches: First Baptist Church, Ft. Oglethorpe, Ga., (1966 – 1968); West Rome Baptist Church, Rome, Ga., where he had two separate tenures (1968 – 1974 and 1979 – 1982); and Dauphin Way Baptist Church, Mobile, Alabama (1974 – 1979). Upon reflection of his service at Dauphin Way Church, Vines confessed, “I learned many important lessons . . . I learned to preach when it was not easy and when I caught flack for preaching the truth.”²⁶ In contrast to his return to West Rome for his “second tenure were years of healing and peace. God gave us souls and growth.”²⁷

First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida – 1982 – 2006

The background to the invitation for Jerry Vines to serve as co-pastor of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, had its origins nine-years earlier. In 1973 Vines invited Homer G. Lindsay, Jr., to preach a revival at the West Rome Baptist Church. At the time Vines was in the first of two separate terms (1968 – 1974 and 1979 – 1982) as pastor of the Georgia congregation. “Lindsay was impressed by the commitment, sincerity and dedication of the young preacher of 35 years of age,” reported Belton Wall in his history of the Jacksonville church. “Vines was a dedicated soulwinner who was greatly admired by Lindsay. The two became fast friends, an on occasion the two families vacationed together.”²⁸

A decade passed and by 1982, Lindsay, Jr. (b. 1927; d. 2000) expressed “the need for help in administering the affairs of a 12,000-member church,” according to Belton Wall’s history book. The addition of a co-pastor, among other things, made it possible for the church to expand to two Sunday morning worship services to accommodate the growing attendance. Within a short time, the invitation was made to Vines to come to Jacksonville and on July 4, 1982, Vines

assumed the co-pastor role.²⁹ Lindsay, Jr., had served as co-pastor alongside his father Dr. Homer Lindsay, Sr., (b. 1903; d. 1981) between 1969 and 1972 when Lindsay, Sr., retired.

Vines was called with the understanding that as co-pastor upon the retirement of Lindsay, Jr., Vines would assume the singular pastoral role.

Unfortunately, Lindsay, Jr., experienced a near fatal heart attack in late 1983. During the next several years Lindsay never fully recovered and in 1987 had open heart surgery. All the while Vines continued to lead the church. Lindsay, Jr, retired in 1999 and died the following year. The Jacksonville *Florida Times Union* noted that by the time of Lindsay's retirement in 1999, the church had a Sunday morning attendance of about 7,000, eighteen ordained ministers, an annual budget of over \$9 million, full-time staff of 142, and land and other assets valued at about \$6 million.³⁰

Vines assumed full leadership of the congregation in 2000 and continued until his retirement in 2006. During the two-plus decades of Vines leadership, “First Baptist Church became one of the largest churches in America and was among the annual leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention for baptisms,” chronicled James A. Smith, Sr., in an article in the *Florida Baptist Witness*. “The church with more than 25,000 members and an annual budget of almost \$13 million, operates facilities occupying 11 city blocks in the heart of downtown Jacksonville including a 10,000-seat sanctuary.”³¹ In the early 2000s, Vines wrote a book titled, *Miracle of Downtown Jacksonville: First Baptist Church*, which provided a detailed “how to” blueprint of the church’s diverse and aggressive evangelistic outreach, missions and ministry programs.

Entering the National Stage of Recognition

Before the Jacksonville ministry – during the mid-1970's – Vines' ministry at the Dauphin Way Baptist Church began to gain statewide recognition. "The church grew and grew. The Sunday School was doing well. We led the state of Alabama in baptisms year after year. The services were packed," Vines explained in his memoirs.³² Additionally, the high visibility of the church caused book publishers to encourage Vines to write about his ministry and sermons. Thus began a fifty-year career as an author of over three dozen books ranging from commentaries to spiritual guidance to preaching expositions.

In January 1976, Dauphin Way Church hosted the annual Alabama Baptist Evangelism Conference. In addition to Vines, two other notable pastor-preachers – John Bisagno of Houston and Adrian Rogers of Memphis – were assigned preaching slots. However, it was Vines' message titled "Our Ascended Lord" in which "God came down upon me in a mighty Holy Spirit anointing," that sent the conference attendees "into the heavenlies," Vines later recalled.³³ The positive word-of-mouth comments on the "Spirit-filled" message brought by this dynamic pastor in Mobile, Ala., began to spread across Alabama. Later in the year, during the 1976 Alabama Baptist Pastors' Conference, attendees elected Vines as the conference president.

Adrian Rogers, as president of the 1976 SBC Pastors' Conference held in Norfolk, Va., invited Vines to preach the "Our Ascended Lord" message. Vines recalled the SBC Pastors' Conference "response was similar" to what followed the Alabama Baptist Evangelism Conference. Before the Pastors' Conference concluded, and without Vines' permission, he was nominated and elected as president of the 1977 SBC Pastors' Conference.³⁴

Vines's visibility as the president of the SBC Pastors' Conference set the stage for his potential ascension to the SBC presidency during the 1977 SBC annual meeting held in Kansas City, Missouri. Then current SBC President James L. Sullivan of Tennessee announced that he would not seek re-election to the typical second one-year term. As a result, by the time of the Tuesday (June 14)

afternoon session when the nominations for convention president were scheduled, six candidates had been identified. Among those were Jerry Vines of Mobile, Alabama, nominated by Adrian

Vines is widely known for his commitment to expository preaching and his defense of biblical inerrancy

Rogers of Tennessee, and Jimmy R. Allen of San Antonio, Texas, nominated by H. E. Young of South Carolina.³⁵ Subsequently Registration Secretary W. Fred Kendall announced the need for a run-off between Jerry Vines and Jimmy Allen. Ballots were cast.³⁶ The final vote count, as reported by the presiding officer, affirmed that Jimmy R. Allen had received 5,136 votes while Jerry Vines received 3,329 votes. Allen was declared president for the year 1977-78.³⁷

According to Southern Baptist journalist James A. Smith, Sr., Vines was one of the "most respected preachers in the Southern Baptist Convention. Vines is widely known for his commitment to expository preaching and his defense of biblical inerrancy," Smith reported. "Considered one of his most famous sermons, Vines preached 'A Baptist and His Bible,' at the 1987 annual meeting" of the SBC.³⁸ Later in the year the sermon was printed and distributed as a booklet by the same title by the First Baptist Church, Jacksonville.

Elected as SBC President for 1989

Eleven years later, after the 1977 failed election as SBC president, Homer Lindsay, Jr., announced during the First Baptist Church, Jacksonville's annual Pastors' School and Bible Conference, that Jerry Vines would be a candidate for president of the Southern Baptist Convention for 1988-89. The announcement reportedly was greeted with applause and cheering by the mostly pastors in attendance.³⁹

As a follow-up to the announcement, Lindsay, Jr., told Vines they should plan and conduct "a series of conservative meetings in Florida to rally conservative pastors and laypeople. They needed to be aware of the issues and encouraged to attend the annual SBC meeting," Vines wrote.⁴⁰ The Jacksonville Pastors' School and Bible Conference from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s became a platform to showcase potential SBC presidential candidates similarly to the SBC Pastors' Conference. According to conservative theologian-pastor Jerry Sutton who explained that the SBC Pastors' Conference, at least between 1979 and 1993, became "a platform to inform and motivate conservatives as to how to vote and how to access issues that would come before the Southern Baptist Convention."⁴¹

Meanwhile across the country competing information and "rally the troops" meetings were being held separately by the leadership of the conservatives' and moderates' groups to encourage attendance at the SBC meeting set for San Antonio, Texas. Vines said he did not enjoy campaigning, contending "The politics of the entire matter was unpleasant to me."⁴²

As the "Conservative Resurgence" was coming to the end of its nine-year control of the Southern Baptist Convention with the conclusion (1988) of the third one-year term of service by SBC president Adrian

Rogers, the convention messengers looked to elect a new leader. “It was now virtually certain that Jerry Vines and Richard Jackson would be the presidential candidates . . . both were inerrantists with outstanding records in evangelism,” observed self-described conservative religion writer James Hefley.⁴³

“The politics of the entire matter was unpleasant to me.”

During the 1988 San Antonio convention, the presidential nomination featured four candidates being presented including Jerry Vines of Jacksonville, Fla., nominated by Ralph Smith of Texas, and Richard Jackson of Phoenix, Arizona, who was nominated by George Harris of Texas.⁴⁴ Registration Secretary Lee Porter later reported the results, noting among the 31,291 ballots cast, Jerry Vines had received 15,804 or 50.53 percent of the votes, while Richard Jackson received 15,112 or 48.32 percent of the votes. The presiding officer declared Jerry Vines as president for 1988-89.⁴⁵

Conservative historian-observer Jerry Sutton wrote that Vines would lead the conservative movement into a new phase. He said Vines would be “faithful to Scripture” and would encourage support of the Cooperative Program. “His heartbeat, however, was in winning souls – a theme that heretofore had been dormant among Southern Baptists.”⁴⁶

During his post-election press conference, Vines declared that “neo-orthodoxy, not classical liberalism, is the problem in the Southern Baptist Convention.” Vines went on to define the neo-orthodox as those who “use our vocabulary but not our dictionary.” In response to another question, Vines said he did not expect all Baptists to label themselves as “inerrantists” which he defined as “those who believe the Bible is without error.” To that end, Vines vowed not to

appoint anyone to a convention committee or board “who believe there are errors in the Bible.”⁴⁷

As president, Vines initiated the issuance of a series of presidential “statements of commitment” that sought to address several topics and include “proposals of reconciliation.” He expressed the belief “that the time has come to begin to heal some of the hurts of the SBC, which had been torn by strife for nearly a decade.”⁴⁸ Subsequent statements addressed the Cooperative Program, personal witnessing and the priesthood of believers.

Although the 1989 annual meeting was to be held in Las Vegas, Vines focused his public statements and preaching “on personal soul winning in appearances around the Convention.” He also continued to promote the Home Mission Board-planned door-to-door pre-convention gospel witnessing effort to be held in Las Vegas.⁴⁹

However, a growing controversy within the denomination centered on an SBC Executive Committee proposal to withdraw SBC participation with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. In its stead it also was to be proposed the establishment of a new agency, the Religious Liberty Commission. The argument had been made that “there is the perception that the Baptist Joint Committee speaks for the liberal element” and did not fairly represent Southern Baptists’ concerns in Washington, D. C.⁵⁰ Vines wrote Charles Sullivan, chairman of the Executive Committee, to delay the recommendation for one year. “I felt it would take away from the emphasis on missions and evangelism so needed in Las Vegas.” The Executive Committee approved the Vines’ request.⁵¹

The gospel witnessing effort in Las Vegas yielded a number of positive outcomes: revivals were held in 90 of Nevada's 120 SBC churches; 2,025 Southern Baptists – including Vines – contacted 120,000 households; at which 5000 church prospects were identified with over 470 persons making professions of faith.⁵²

The 132nd session of the Southern Baptist Convention was called to order by President Jerry Vines on Tuesday morning, June 13. After a session filled with recommendations, motions made and resolutions proposed, Jerry Vines brought the president's address to conclude the morning session. Vines declared, "Southern Baptists have settled the issue of the Bible. Southern Baptists believe the Bible is the incorruptible word of God." He went on to observe, "Some may doubt the word of God; Southern Baptists will sow the precious seed." In keeping with his life-long gospel sharing commitment, Vines said emphasis upon personal evangelism will "put the joy back in the Southern Baptist Convention."⁵³

Re-elected SBC President for 1990

On the following day nominations for convention president were scheduled. Only one person challenged Vines' re-election. Daniel Vestal of Dunwoody, Georgia, was nominated by David Sapp of Georgia and Jerry Vines of Jacksonville, Florida, was nominated by Thomas Elliff of Oklahoma.⁵⁴ Later, Registration Secretary Lee Porter reported on the 19,007 ballots cast which had yielded 10,764 or 56.58 percent of ballots cast for Jerry Vines. Daniel Vestal received 8,248 or 43.39 percent of the votes. Jerry Vines was declared president for 1989–90.⁵⁵

At a post-election press conference, Vines repeated the central theme of his presidential address. However, in the questions from the reporters'

segment, Vines was asked about his “fundamentalist faction.” Vines responded, “I have always asked that I not be referred to as a fundamentalist. If you mean by fundamentalist that I’m one of those who believe in the fundamentals of the faith, yes. But if you mean that I would fall in the category of a legalist, an unloving person, an Ayatollah Khomeini or a Jim Jones, then the answer is no. I would like to be known as a Bible-believing Christian.” Vines stressed that he intended to be the same person in his second term as he was in his first. However, he said he would extend his emphasis on personal evangelism to promote “building great soul-winning churches.”⁵⁶

In his official president’s address to the over 38,400 messengers in attendance at the 1990 annual meeting held in New Orleans, Vines offered a stark warning. He said that the Southern Baptist Convention must be alert to the tendency toward “organizational overload and doctrinal error” or be destined for the “garbage dump of denominations.” His sermon theme was “the glory of the church.”⁵⁷

“Those denominations that affirm the inspiration, inerrancy and infallibility of scripture have a bright future. But those that do not are destined for the garbage dump of denominations,” Vines said. “It is better for Southern Baptists to debate and settle the issue of scriptural inerrancy today than to someday debate whether homosexuals are suitable in our pulpits.” He went on to stress, “Unless churches remain vigilant in protecting doctrinal integrity and local identity,” he said the denomination could become a “mustard tree monstrosity with bureaucratic branches infested with blasphemous birds.”⁵⁸

Among actions taken by messengers was the approval of a recommendation of the convention's Executive

Committee, to transfer the primary religious liberty function from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs to the Christian Life Commission (CLC), allowing the social action agency to address religious liberty issues as well as Christian social

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ethics. At the same time, messengers approved a Cooperative Program budget which reduced the allocation to the Baptist Joint Committee by 87 percent and increased the allocation to the CLC by 40 percent.⁵⁹

**Vines’ 2002 Sermon on Islam
Garnered Worldwide Media**

Twelve years later, during the 2002 SBC Pastors’ Conference, a watershed event occurred in Vines’ life and ministry. The summer gathering was held just ten months after the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The following summer Jerry Vines was scheduled to speak at the Pastors’ Conference. He sought to make his message to his fellow pastors as Biblically contemporary and applicable as possible. Recalling the context of his sermon, Vines wrote years later, “in my message I was trying to contrast the differences between Christianity and Islam, by observing, ‘Allah is not Jehovah. . .’ Then I contrasted the founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ, and the founder of Islam, Muhammad. I said, ‘Christianity was founded by the virgin-born Jesus Christ, while ‘Islam was founded by Muhammad, a demon-possessed pedophile who had twelve wives, and his last one was a nine-year-old girl.’” The pastors’ response was a resounding standing ovation. Later that evening Vines learned “my statement was all over the news. That was when I became aware of the furor my statement had caused.”⁶⁰

That comment to a group of pastors soon became the lead story on network and cable news programs as well as “front-page news” on major newspapers across the country. Vines initially did not consent to speak to the news media until he had an opportunity to address his Jacksonville congregation. That was preceded by consultation with his mentors. He arranged “a conference call with Paige Patterson, Al Mohler, and Jerry Falwell,” Vines later recalled. “They gave me good, wise counsel. I prepared a statement for my church.”⁶¹

“I made my statement at the beginning of the service. I did not back down. I stood by my comments. I told the people where I got my information,” which he said was drawn from the book *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs* (2002) by Emir and Ergun Caner. [The brothers claimed they were raised as devout Muslim terrorists until their teenage years when they converted to Christianity.] Vines went on to tell the congregation, “If I have misread this information, I would be glad for Muslim scholars to explain their own documents to us all.” Vines reported the congregation gave him “several standing ovations.”⁶²

In the ensuing seven months, the media news cycle seemed to have forgotten the story until a February 25, 2003, “NBC Nightly News” report. The broadcast “portrayed Vines ‘preaching hate’ against Muslims but failed to include a portion of the NBC interview in which Vines endorsed religious freedom for all persons,” the *Florida Baptist Witness* reported. The NBC report noted national political and religious leaders’ efforts to not blame the 9/11 “attacks on Islam itself, or Muslims generally” as contrasted against the “bold” comments by Vines.⁶³ The NBC broadcast report did not include any interviews with anyone who supported Vines’ perspective. The Southern

Baptist Convention's *Baptist Press* subsequently reported several stories quoting SBC leaders' negative reaction to the NBC story and their positive support of Vines. "I have been preaching the loving gospel of Jesus Christ for 49 years. I challenge NBC Nightly News, or anyone, to find one single sentence, word or syllable of hate in any message I have delivered during those years," Vines told the *Witness*.⁶⁴

Southern Baptists Sought Vines' Doctrinal Perspective

Although Vines had returned to his first love of serving as a pastor, Southern Baptists again called upon Jerry Vines to share his doctrinal perspective. The assignment was to assist the 1999 appointed *Baptist Faith and Message* (BF&M) Committee tasked to review and revise the Convention's official doctrinal statement.⁶⁵ Then convention president Paige Patterson appointed a 15-member committee that represented the most diverse group of representatives from Southern Baptist life than had ever been assembled up to that date. The multi-ethnic group included pastors, educators, laymen and

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women, who collectively represented four ethnicities – African Americans, Anglos, Asians and Hispanics.⁶⁶ Among the committee members were former SBC presidents Jerry Vines (1989 and 1990), and Adrian Rogers (1980; 1987; 1988). The

committee's report was presented and adopted as printed without amendments during the 2000 SBC meeting held in Orlando.⁶⁷

In his memoirs, Vines admitted, “I was not an effective member of the committee.” Although he did take credit for at least one significant contribution to the BF&M doctrinal statement. “I was able to have a revision made in the BF&M that clarified what Southern Baptists believed about the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁸

Upon retirement from the First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, in 2006, Vines established the Jerry Vines Ministries in Canton, Georgia, which is also Jerry’s and Janet’s retirement home city. The ministry organization – which continued to function in 2026 – specializes in providing books and digital resources, as well as training conferences, for pastor enrichment.

ENDNOTES:

Editor’s Note: This profile of C. Jerry Vines was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ Jerry Vines, “VINES: My Life and Ministry,” (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), 35.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48 – 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² Jerry Vines in his autobiography cited his marriage date on p. 55; and his children's birthdates on the following pages: Elizabeth Joy, 70; twins Jim and Jodi, 73; and Jon, 83.

²² Jerry Vines, 197.

²³ Stan Hastey, "Janet Vines Interview," *Baptist Press*, June 15, 1988, 1; [news stories on Jerry and Janet Vines are held in the files of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, and are hereinafter referred to as story held in Vines' bio file].

²⁴ Jerry Vines, 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁸ Belton S. Wall, *A Tale to be Told: The History of the First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida*, (Jacksonville: First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, 1999), 70-71.

²⁹ Belton Wall, 71.

³⁰ Bruce Bryant-Friedland, "First Baptist's Quiet Crusader," *Florida Times-Union*, July 11, 1999; [story held in Vines' bio file].

³¹ James A. Smith, Sr., "Vines ends 23-year pastorate in Jacksonville," *Florida Baptist Witness*, February 16, 2006, 1, 6 – 7; [story held in Vines' bio file]. *Editor's note:* The 10,000-seats sanctuary was constructed in 1992 and by 2021, amid a declining church membership, the worship center was sold to generate cash for the church. The building was used by a third party until it was closed and demolished in 2026 for use in a downtown revitalization project.

³² Jerry Vines, 103.

³³ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁵ Proceedings, item 43, *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 1977, 32 (hereinafter referred to as *SBC Annual*).

³⁶ Proceedings, item 58, *SBC Annual*, 1977, 37. The six persons nominated for president were: Jimmy R. Allen (TX); Jerry Vines (FL); Clifton W. Brannon (TX); Dotson M. Nelson (AL); Warren C. Hultgren (OK); and Richard Jackson (AZ).

³⁷ Proceedings, item 76, *SBC Annual*, 1977, 39.

³⁸ James A. Smith, Sr., "Jerry Vines to retire in '06; FBC Orlando announces transition," *Florida Baptist Witness*, May 2, 2005, 1; re-issued by *Baptist Press*, May 3, 2005; [story held in Vines' bio file].

³⁹ Greg Warner, "Vines Will Be SBC Candidate, Lindsay Says," *Baptist Press*, February 17, 1988, 1; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁴⁰ Jerry Vines, 136.

⁴¹ Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 85.

⁴² Jerry Vines, 161.

⁴³ James C. Hefley, *The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention*, (Hannibal, MO.: Hannibal Books, 1999), 66.

⁴⁴ Proceedings, item 99, *SBC Annual*, 1988, 42. The two other persons nominated for president were James Craig (OK) and Anis Shorosh (AL).

⁴⁵ Proceedings, item 118, *SBC Annual*, 1988, 61.

⁴⁶ Jerry Sutton, 190.

⁴⁷ Mark Wingfield, "Jerry Vines News Conference," *Baptist Press*, June 15, 1988, 1; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁴⁸ Jerry Sutton, 192 –193; also see Dan Martin, "President Vines Issues Statement of Commitment," *Baptist Press*, June 24, 1988, 1; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁴⁹ James Hefley, 78.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵¹ Jerry Vines, 169 – 170.

⁵² James Hefley, 79 – 80; also see Roy Jennings, "SBC Wrap-up," *Baptist Press*, June 15, 1989, 1; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁵³ Mark Wingfield, "President's Address," *Baptist Press*, June 13, 1989, 1; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁵⁴ Proceedings, item 92, *SBC Annual*, 1989, 43.

⁵⁵ Proceedings, item 107, *SBC Annual*, 1989, 44 – 45.

⁵⁶ Mark Wingfield and Kathy Palen, "Presidential News Conference," *Baptist Press*, June 13, 1989, 1; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁵⁷ Ken Camp, "President's Address," *Baptist Press*, June 12, 1990, 1; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Dan Martin, "SBC Wrap-up," *Baptist Press*, June 13, 1990, 2; [story held in Vines' bio file].

⁶⁰ Jerry Vines, 196.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 198.

⁶³ Joni B. Hannigan, "Vines Speaks Out Against NBC News Report," *Florida Baptist Witness*, March 6, 2003, 1, 5; [story held in Vines' bio file].

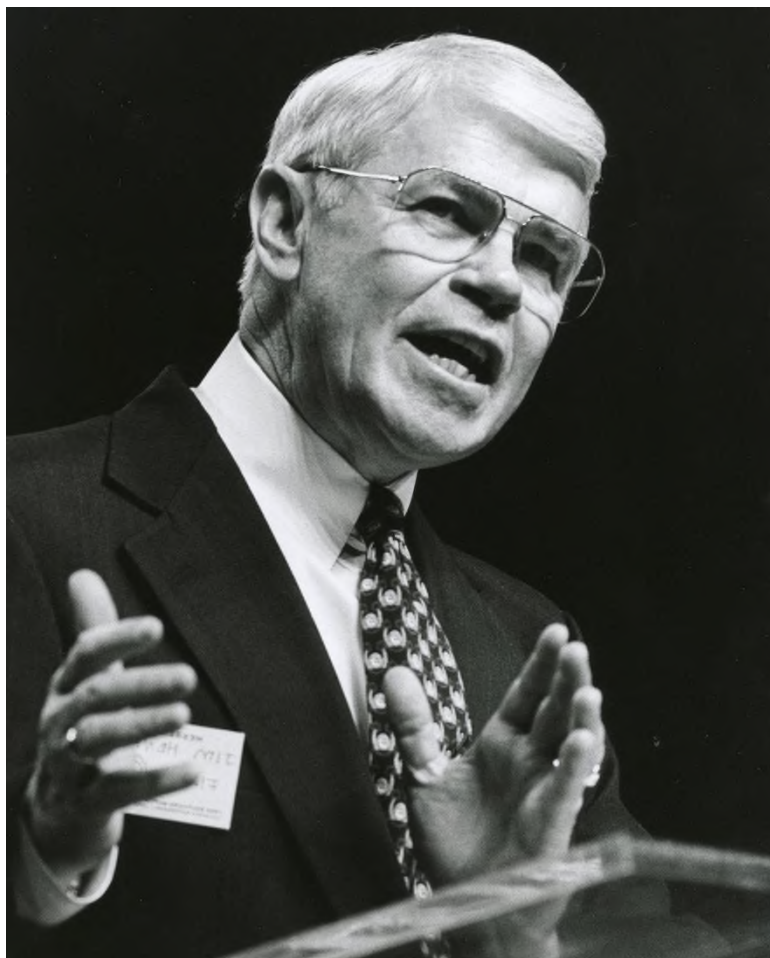
⁶⁴ Art Toalston, "NBC Targets Southern Baptist Pastor about 2002 Remarks on Islam's Muhammad," *Baptist Press*, February 26, 2003, 1; and Art Toalston, "Reaction Mounts to NBC News Over Segment on Pastor's View of Muhammad," *Baptist Press*, February 27, 2003, 1; [stories held in Vines' bio file].

⁶⁵ Proceedings, items 18, 52, 108 – 113, and 127, *SBC Annual*, 1999, 37, 79, 87, and 88.

⁶⁶ Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), ix.

⁶⁷ Proceedings, items 112 through 119, *SBC Annual*, 2000, 76. Also see two notable books that provide overviews and the detailed history on the development of the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* and served as resource for this article: Blount and Wooddell, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*; and William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought*.

⁶⁸ Jerry Vines, 193.



**James Bascom Henry
Served as 48th SBC President:
1995 and 1996**

Florida Pastorate:
First Baptist Church, Orlando,
1977 – 2006

Introductory Overview

James Henry's spiritual conversion helped shape his future evangelistic focus. During a tent-revival meeting in 1946, the nine-year-old "Henry remembered vividly the 'sawdust churning all around me' as the 'fiery evangelist' preached about the reality of hell. In that revival service, Henry sensed a strong conviction of his own sinfulness and of his need for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ," he told a researcher.¹

In his own memoirs, Henry wrote that following the revival, during a hot August Sunday at the Hopewell Baptist Church, in Springfield, Tennessee, "on the first verse of the closing hymn of invitation" he stepped in the aisle and went forward. "I did not pray the 'The Sinner's Prayer,' or comprehend the Trinity or the virgin birth. Yet, I made a great exchange that morning. My heart was filled with joy. It seemed a heavy load had been lifted off my young heart and mind."²

Because Henry had been touched by a passionate evangelist, it was an impression that would inspire him to be evangelistically passionate in his future ministry. Jim Henry's spiritual journey and commitment to serve God started with several student pastorates in Alabama and Mississippi. Those ministries, combined with his leadership of a fledgling Tennessee church, which became a regional church of influence, were foundational experiences. These became preparatory to his calling as pastor of one of Florida's mega-churches – First Baptist Church, Orlando – where Henry served for 29-years. During those Florida years Henry was elected to two one-year terms as the 48th president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Responding to the Invitation to Accept Christ

James Bascom Henry was born October 1, 1937, in Nashville, Tennessee's Baptist Hospital. Although his home was in the state's capitol city, the coming of World War II changed that. His dad was drafted and was assigned to an Allentown, Pennsylvania, plant that built war planes. This required the Henry family to temporarily relocate to Allentown. While there Jim "was put in the 'slow class' at my new school . . . because I was from the South." After the war was over the family returned to Tennessee. But due to a post-war-caused housing shortage, the family had to live for a while with the senior Henry's parents near Orlinda/Springfield, Tennessee.³

"I enjoyed living with my grandparents," Jim Henry wrote in his memoirs. "Yet all too soon a duplex in Nashville opened up in a neighborhood near Vanderbilt University. It consisted of a kitchen, one bedroom and a living room. There was one bathroom between us and the apartment dwellers on the other side."⁴ In that new setting, "Life became a mixture of work and play," Henry recalled. To raise spending money, Henry had a newspaper route, sold Christmas cards, and delivered milk. Later he got a job at the university's stadium concession stand selling programs, popcorn, and Cokes during the university's athletics' home games.⁵

Henry's spiritual foundations at home were minimal at best, although his mother had made a childhood profession of faith in Springfield's Hopewell Baptist Church. Henry later referred to her as a spiritual "rock." His dad, as a young man, who had made a profession of faith in a Methodist church, was not a practicing Christian. "My father had his demons to fight, especially alcohol. He stayed sober for weeks, then went on a binge." Fortunately, years later, while Jim Henry was serving the Two Rivers Baptist Church

in 1974, he was able to lead his father to make a life-changing profession of faith in Jesus Christ.⁶

Henry and his mother, and occasionally his dad, attended the First Baptist Church, Nashville. When the family was visiting the grandparents in the country, they attended either the Hopewell or the Orlinda Baptist churches.⁷ It was during a summer visit to the country that his grandparents took young Jim to the tent revival that changed his life. After making his public profession of faith at the Hopewell Church, Henry expected to be baptized in the church's outdoor baptistry church during that summer. However, his mother insisted that the baptism take place in First Baptist Church, Nashville. Five months passed, and on a Sunday night in February 1947, Pastor W. F. Powell conducted the immersion service in the historic downtown church. "Dr. Powell gave me my first big Bible," which the pastor autographed, Henry fondly recalled.⁸ The years at First Baptist provided Henry "with a wealth of godly teachers and examples of those living sold-out to Christ." In addition to being involved in the age-group missions and education programs of the church, he was given an opportunity to volunteer at the nearby Nashville Rescue Mission. "There I saw the brokenness of humanity, hunger and homelessness – all of which deeply touched me."⁹

Education and Spiritual Experiences

As Jim Henry was planning his post-high school education, he thought that Vanderbilt University was a viable hometown

option. That was until he figured out that he could neither qualify for a scholarship nor afford the tuition. However, in God's Providence he and

"My own life was deeply affected with a fresh sense of the presence and love of God."

his mother went to an area church that featured preaching by visiting scholar Dr. H. Leo Eddleman (b. 1911; d. 1995), president of Georgetown College, and former SBC missionary to Israel. Following the service, Jim and his mother met with Eddleman. “On the spot, he offered me a scholarship to help defray the cost if I decided on Georgetown,” Henry recalled. “That was the tipping point.” Off to Georgetown, Kentucky, he went.¹⁰

At Georgetown, Jim Henry “participated in intramural sports, worked on the college newspaper staff, . . . and was active in a fraternity.” But more importantly, “Three events occurred that altered my heart and mind and became life-changing experiences,” he wrote. The first was a Wednesday night service at the Georgetown Baptist Church, sponsored by his fraternity. “That night was one of most spiritually moving services I have ever experienced,” Henry recalled. “The Holy Spirit moved across students and congregation. . . My own life was deeply affected with a fresh sense of the presence and love of God.”¹¹ The second event occurred as the Georgetown Church voted one summer to restrict student church members – particularly Nigerian students who made professions of faith in the church – from participating in church business meetings. “This less-than-Christlike action jolted me. . . but this event was used by the Holy Spirit to erase much of my bias and widen my heart to see the world through the eyes of God.”¹²

The third life-changing event occurred during Henry’s junior year. He spotted a “black-headed beauty” on campus who was a freshman co-ed from Cave City, Kentucky. Henry determined that young lady would be the future “Mrs. Henry” in his life.

Responding to the Call of Ministry and Marriage

The attractive co-ed was named Jeanette Sue Sturgeon (b. 1939; d. 2019). Henry later learned her father, Samuel Sturgeon, a tobacco farmer, had “sent her to school with the instructions to find a rich son of a Bluegrass farmer . . . As it turned out, she fell for a Tennessee city dude who hitchhiked home and back. . .” Henry jokingly recalled.¹³ Courtship ensued as Henry pursued his coursework that resulted in him achieving placement on the academic dean’s list.

In the Spring, 1959 Henry graduated with a degree in history and certified in secondary education. As he considered several teaching opportunities Henry accepted his first fulltime job as a sixth-grade elementary school teacher in Panama City, Florida. Additionally, he joined the First Baptist Church and volunteered in the upper school students’ department.

Although Henry had political aspirations of being the governor of Tennessee, “During this time in my life, I struggled with a call to ministry. I regularly pushed it down inside of me, and it kept bobbing up like a floating cork,” Henry recalled. “I prayed, read my Bible and spent much time in thought. I examined my motives. . . And what about Jeanette? We had talked about the possibility of ministry.”¹⁴ Finally, “on a Saturday night, alone in my room, I committed my life to serve God in full-time ministry,” Henry wrote in his memoirs. “I determined that I would make it public the next morning at First Baptist, Panama City, and ask the church for their prayers and confirmation.” In addition to their positive support, the church licensed Henry to preach and provided him opportunities to preach during the two Sunday morning services.¹⁵

Up to this point in his spiritual journey, Henry had not yet shared with Jeanette Sturgeon the specifics of his surrender to ministry. He called Jeanette to tell her what was happening in his life. Before Henry could tell of his decision, Jeanette said she had something to say. That morning while attending the Georgetown Church she said, “I made a public commitment to follow Jesus wherever He wants me to go, with or without Jim Henry.” For Henry, Jeanette’s spiritual decision, “sealed the deal for me.” He asked her to marry him. She agreed.¹⁶

For two years – while Jim taught school and Jeanette completed her college degree – they dated long-distance. Jeanette finally insisted on a firm commitment of marriage by demanding that Jim either “make up my mind or hit the road!” Jim sealed the commitment by giving Jeanette his fraternity pin.¹⁷ As Jeanette was completing her college degree, the couple got married on December 27, 1959. He was 22 and Jeanette was 20. Henry returned to his teaching position in Panama City and secured housing to be ready following her graduation. A year later – November 1960 – Henry was ordained by the Dalewood Baptist Church, Nashville. During the ensuing seven years, the couple had three children that included: Jamae Kathryn (b. 1961); Jane Elizabeth (b. 1963); and James Bascom II, (b. 1966).¹⁸ Jim Henry turned out to be an attentive family man, Jeanette Henry said in a 1994 interview. To ensure time was spent with the family, the Henrys’ regularly set aside Friday as family nights. Jeanette Henry recalled, “His ministry may have kept him away from home, but Jim always made every effort to be at any event in their lives.”¹⁹

Recognizing his need for formal theological training, Henry selected New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Apart from the leading of God’s Spirit,

Henry said he was drawn to the school's strong program in missions, evangelism and preaching. Also, his former college president H. Leo Eddleman was now serving as president of the seminary. In addition to his theological classwork, Henry embarked upon his first pastoral experience.

Ministry Years in the Deep South

Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church, Melvin, Alabama – 1960 – 1963: One day on the seminary campus Dr. Eddleman asked Henry if he wanted to preach “this Sunday.” The opportunity was a supply preaching engagement at the Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church located in the rural sawmill and logging community of Melvin, Alabama. It was approximately 210 miles from the seminary campus. He and Jeanette drove to the church on Saturday and readied to preach his first two sermons. That following Sunday night, after the evening service, the church members discussed calling Henry as their pastor. The terms of the call were for Henry to come to the church each weekend – visit on Saturday and preach twice on Sunday.²⁰ In the course of his three-years ministry at Mt. Pisgah, Henry preached revivals, visited church members and others, hauled children in his Volkswagen Beetle to vacation Bible school and performed baptisms in the nearby river.

Unfortunately, racial bigotry reared its head one Wednesday night as the monthly business meeting was nearing completion. A church member stood and said, “I move we fire the preacher.” He proceeded to call Henry “a ni----lover.” The member proceeded to cite statements Henry had made from the pulpit and in public. “Taking minute conversations and messages out of context, he proceeded to attempt to justify his recommendation,” Henry recounted. Acting as meeting moderator – and being as shocked as the church members – Henry asked to table the motion for consideration until the next business

meeting. Later Henry and Jeanette “prayed about this disturbing state of affairs.” Henry explained in his memoirs that “God gave me a game plan.” The next Saturday when he was to return to the church field, he planned to visit every church family. He would secure privately their simple “yes” or “no” vote directly, whether or not Henry should stay as pastor. The plan included Henry reporting the survey results to the congregation the following Sunday morning. Before Henry could return to the church field the following week, he received a telephone call from a deacon who confirmed that Henry need not make the family visits, noting, “You are our pastor.”²¹

By the time of the next Wednesday night business meeting, at which members were encouraged to attend, two deacons had been working drafting a statement for the church members to consider and vote on. That statement, among other things,

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affirmed that, “our church continues to be a free pulpit, where the pastor can preach in freedom the Word of God.” The motion was made, seconded, and approved overwhelmingly.²²

As he was completing the requirements to receive the Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1963²³ from New Orleans Seminary, Henry received an invitation to present a “trial sermon” in Sledge, Mississippi. The folks of the Hollywood Baptist Church, who had arranged the sermon presentation, liked Henry sufficiently to call him as pastor.

Hollywood Baptist Church, Sledge, Mississippi, 1963–1965: The rural Hollywood church was an island

surrounded by cotton fields and approximately five miles from Sledge. The church provided a house and sixty dollars week – which was slightly more than the fifty dollars a week he had received from the Mt. Pisgah Church. Soon Henry's pastoral responsibilities were "immersed in revivals, home visits, and steady congregation growth."²⁴ The effectiveness of Henry's preaching and evangelistic outreach resulted in the membership doubling to over 200 members during his two-years tenure.²⁵ The attendance growth placed a strain on the church's "dilapidated" church building. Soon Henry led the church to raise sufficient funds to construct a new education building and fellowship hall.²⁶

The church, being in the heart of the South with its historic traditions, by the early 1960s, found itself in the midst of racial tensions. Those tensions ran the gamut of "marches, murders, cross burning and confrontations happening often," Henry recalled in his autobiography. In that context, "freedom riders" – civil rights' activists – came into Mississippi to test Negro access to public places including churches. Henry decided to be "proactive" in response to the "freedom riders" by meeting with the church's deacons. Following a "healthy" discussion, the deacons unanimously agreed that "anyone who came to worship our Lord Jesus with us was to be welcomed as a fellow worshipper. If anyone came to disturb the worship experience, they would be asked to leave."²⁷

"The Lord surrounded me with godly men and their spouses," Henry recalled. "They modeled so much of Christ for me," Jeanette and the two girls. His successful ministry was being recognized to the point, "Invitations came for me to pastor at other churches that were more attractive in location, opportunity and salary. . . Jeanette and I would pray, listen and wait on

each invitation to move, but no green light came” he wrote.²⁸

One Sunday morning five strangers arrived in a rental vehicle and saying nothing, the group sat through the worship service and then left. During the evening service Pastor Henry inquired of the church members why no one had spoken to the visitors. Finally, a dear older member spoke up. “We thought they were a dad-blamed pulpit committee,” recalled Henry. The congregation broke out in laughter. As it turned out, it was a committee from the Two Rivers Baptist Church of Nashville.²⁹

Two Rivers Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, 1965 – 1977

The Nashville church was a fledgling congregation re-organized in 1962 in the home basement of Harold and Phyllis Bennett. Mr. Bennett, at the time, was superintendent of new work for the Sunday School department, Baptist Sunday School Board.³⁰ When the church called Jim Henry as pastor, the church “was located on a road that ended at the Cumberland River, where an eight-car ferry transported passengers back and forth,” Henry explained. Within a few years access to this Nashville Eastside midtown neighborhood church was enhanced by a bridge built across the Cumberland and the interstate system connected the church site to the north side and east side of Nashville. Adding to midtown’s growth was the development of Gaylord’s Opryland Resort directly across Briley Parkway from the church.³¹

“Two Rivers was a young church, primarily made up of young adults with young children. Many in the church were college-educated, mid- to upper-class and upwardly mobile,” Henry recalled.³² In addition to his dynamic evangelistic preaching, Henry led the church to program – intergenerational religious

education and missionary activities – tailored to young people. Those youth activities also proved to be major attractions to families and seniors. The ensuing rapid membership growth using multiplication evangelism – numbering several thousand – created the need for additional church staff, land and buildings. In a matter of a few years the church expanded over 37 acres and constructed an architecturally significant worship center and spacious educational spaces. Additionally, opportunities opened up to permit the church to secure airtime on two network affiliated television stations to carry the weekly broadcast of the Sunday service. Henry later recalled, “I was having the time of my life. God’s blessings were showered on us. There was love and unity in the church. Our family was a joy to me.”³³

The Two Rivers Church’s growth story and its dynamic pastor became well-known across the Southern Baptist Convention. Henry received numerous invitations to preach at conferences, conventions and churches. Pulpit committees occasionally called or visited. One of those calls was from First Baptist Church, Orlando, Florida. As in other instances, Jim and Jeanette earnestly prayed over the invitation, only to conclude that this was not in God’s timing. Yet following this latest Orlando church opportunity,

Henry went to his regular Wednesday night service expecting it to be “business as usual.” As Henry looked over the faces in the packed sanctuary, “It was as if

**Henry knew he
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to lead a smaller
downtown
church.**

I was no longer there – like I was having some strange out-of-body experience. My Lord had changed my

heart!,” he recalled.³⁴ Although “Two Rivers was a kind of spiritual Camelot to us,” Henry knew he had to leave it all to lead a smaller downtown church.

**First Baptist Church, Orlando, Florida,
1977 – 2006**

The historic church (org. 1871) had been established in downtown Orlando at the corner of Pine and Magnolia Streets. Jim Henry followed the 21-years pastoral tenure of Henry Allen Parker (b. 1913; d. 1994) who had served since 1956. To his consternation, Henry’s initial enthusiastic desire to make program and ministry changes quickly encountered a resistant committee-dominated system that “fostered a situation where we were spending a lot of time doing church work, instead of the work of the church,” Henry lamented.³⁵ In response to the situation, Henry conducted two deacon meetings at which Henry shared his vision for the church. Teaching from the Scriptures and the church’s own history, he explained the difference between the “church father’s vision” versus the “biblical pattern of church function” for First Baptist. The group of nearly ninety deacons participating in the meetings voted for a “biblical pattern” church. Henry noted this new “freedom” to lead the church brought “innovation, excitement, and most importantly, tremendous blessings from God.”³⁶

Henry’s dynamic preaching, in time, began to draw attendance that necessitated the church to add up to “three morning worship services, three Sunday School class hours and two evening worship services.”³⁷ But the church-owned parking lot only had 50 spaces. In

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response to the growth, a special committee was appointed to identify at least a 100-acre property site outside the downtown area that could accommodate, not only a worship center seating 5,000 and educational space, but a potential Christian school, senior retirement center and other ministry facilities.³⁸ Like so many other churches that employed media ministries to share the gospel outside the four walls of the church, so had First Baptist. In 1962 the church initiated its broadcast of the Sunday worship service on a local television station.³⁹ Today that media ministry has expanded to include special television programming, radio broadcasts, and a cassette tape and digital ministry that distributes as many as 70,000 sermon copies per year.⁴⁰

However, resistance began to grow among some members over the proposed plan to re-locate. A business meeting was held to discuss the purchase of an initial 25-acre site along Interstate-4. Henry recalled “substantial opposition showed up” and the discussion lasted until late in the evening. Only by a narrow margin was the vote for the property site approved.⁴¹ However, within a short time the church leaders identified a 156-acre site that offered greater flexibility than the earlier approved site. The deacons, after extended prayer and discussions, nearly unanimously approved the purchase of the larger site. Subsequently, despite continued resistance from some, the proposed plan to relocate received a sixty-six percent approval vote by the church membership.

Subsequently between 1981 and 1985, the church acquired 156-acre site west of downtown near Interstate-4 and John Young Parkway; undertook a \$13 million capital fund campaign; began construction; and in 1985 moved to the new campus.⁴² By the early 1990s the church added to the new campus a pro-life pregnancy counseling center and a

Christian school that eventually offered classes from kindergarten to grade-12. After two decades on the John Parkway campus, Henry's continued emphasis upon evangelistic preaching and outreach, as well as a variety of intergenerational ministries, have drawn together a multi-ethnically diverse congregation of over 13,000 members.

Earlier, with the departure of the Henry-led group of nearly 5,000 church members to the new campus, the remaining congregation was required to purchase the downtown sanctuary and education building from First Baptist Church. This requirement caused much consternation among many of the older church members who in earlier years contributed the funds to acquire the original property and building construction. Despite the frustration, the new church members became the charter membership of 841 voted who to change their designation to the Downtown Baptist Church. Over time, the church evolved from a bustling downtown campus to a smaller, community-focused congregation.⁴³ Ironically, in 2014, Henry was invited to serve as interim pastor or as the so-called "preaching pastor" as the church was searching for a new pastor.⁴⁴ That assignment lasted nearly three years.

Peace Committee Appointment

While Jim Henry was in the midst of the major relocation of his church in 1985, Henry was appointed to the SBC Peace Committee. During the 1985 Dallas convention, two pastors – Bill G. Hickem of Jacksonville, Florida, and H. Franklin Paschall of Nashville, Tennessee, – jointly proposed and messengers subsequently approved the creation of a special committee – "that shall seek to determine the sources of the controversies in our Convention" – that became known as the Peace Committee.⁴⁵

In recalling his active participation in the study group, Henry observed, “It had been a tough and demanding two years for all of us; however, in the long run, I believe it succeeded in preventing a major split in the denomination.”⁴⁶ The five-part report document contained background and sources of the controversy, the findings and conclusions, and ten recommendations. Upon its presentation by Committee Chairman Charles Fuller of Roanoke, Virginia, three messengers made motions to amend the document, but all were voted down. The report was approved as printed.⁴⁷

Elected SBC President in 1994

Leading up to the 1994 SBC annual meeting to be held in Orlando, Florida, several possible candidates for president were announced. Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church, Orlando, told his congregation on March 27 that he would be a candidate for president. Instead of a “structured campaign effort,” Henry told the church he would “trust the Holy Spirit to speak to the hearts and minds of my brothers and sisters in Christ as they choose their leadership for the near future. In that process and in the sovereignty of God I have complete trust.”⁴⁸

Two months later Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, announced he planned to nominate Jim Henry for the SBC president’s post. Graham formerly served as pastor of the First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach, Florida, (1981 – 1989). “I believe,” Graham said, Jim Henry “brings the leadership skills, the temperament, the winsomeness, and the substance that we need at this particular time in the denomination.” Graham, a leading conservative pastor, had earlier called for a “fresh agenda” for SBC conservatives and a broader approach to selecting leaders.⁴⁹

When the 1994 annual meeting convened, the appointed time for election of convention president was announced by presiding officer Edwin Young. Charles Stanley of Atlanta, Georgia, nominated Fred H. Wolfe of Alabama. Next Jack Graham of Texas nominated James B. Henry of Florida. There were no other nominations and ballots were ordered to be cast.⁵⁰ That evening, Registration Secretary Lee Porter announced that 90.09 percent of the 19,868 messengers voted. The results were Fred H. Wolfe received 8,023 or 44.83 percent of the votes and James Henry received 9,876 or 55.18 percent of the votes. James Henry was declared as president-elect for 1994 – 1995.⁵¹ Notably the 1994 annual meeting was held in Orlando, where Jim Henry served as pastor. Although both nominees were self-avowed conservatives, Wolfe was seen as the choice of leaders of the SBC's conservative movement – Adrian Rogers, Jerry Vines, Charles Stanley and Bailey Smith – who publicly endorsed his candidacy.

“In tapping Henry, messengers also made a strong statement about the SBC's Cooperative Program funding channel for national and international missions and ministries,” *Baptist Press* reported. “Henry's church led the SBC's 38,000-plus churches in CP giving the last three years, dispatching 14 percent of undesignated receipts last year to its state Baptist convention and the SBC.”⁵² By the late 1990's and early 2000, First, Orlando, was leading the Southern Baptist Convention by contributing nearly one million dollars annually to the Cooperative Program.

During a post-election press conference, Henry said he wanted “to bring reconciliation to the Southern Baptist Convention.” The president-elect went on to confirm “his intention to work with any conservative

group and to refuse compromise on ‘timeless, absolute truths’ reflecting the SBC's position on biblical and moral issues.” He also indicated, “Some in the SBC ‘want to move on,’” from the

“There are some more important things for us to do now, and we need to get on with that job.”

denominational controversy. He noted that “there are some more important things for us to do now, and we need to get on with that job. That’s the sense of the correspondence and phone calls that have been

coming to me ever since I announced” the candidacy for president. Henry went on to confirm he would appoint people to convention committees who “affirm the *Baptist Faith and Message* Statement and the Peace Committee report.” He stressed he would “appoint inerrantists and expect those appointees to do the same.”⁵³

Serving as SBC President in 1995

James B. Henry presided over the 1995 annual meeting held in Atlanta, Georgia, which marked the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention, organized in 1845.

In his 1995 president’s address, referring to historical figures and biblical examples, Henry described three perils confronting Southern Baptists: inertia; incompatibility; and the influence of culture. He reminded messengers that, some Baptists – both past and present – have had a “tendency to be biblically correct but reflect a spirit that is not of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Henry remarked, “The great mainstream of our people are biblically conservative and committed to the SBC. We must steadfastly resist the tendency to pit conservative against conservative but foster a spirit

of trust built on the unifying work of the Holy Spirit who binds our hearts in mutual love.”⁵⁴

Before the convention got down to the reports of its agencies and seminaries, the Executive Committee’s 13 recommendations, and the processing of 45 motions and eight resolutions, messengers re-elected Henry to a second one-year term as president. Johnny Hunt of Woodstock, Georgia, nominated Henry. There were no other nominations, and James Henry was declared president-elect for 1995 – 1996.⁵⁵ In their report on the election, *Baptist Press* characterized “Jim Henry, the SBC’s peace-making, new-style conservative president unopposed for a second one-year term, was welcomed by a standing ovation following his election. ‘I’m overcome, humbled and honored that you would trust me again,’” he told the convention messengers.⁵⁶

Serving as SBC President in 1996

The 1996 annual SBC meeting was held in New Orleans, Louisiana. As Jim Henry presided, messengers made several significant decisions, highlighted by the overwhelming approval of resolutions concerning: the abandonment of traditional values by the Walt Disney Company and responding to the arson of African American churches. Formal actions were taken to begin implementation of a major restructuring of the program and mission agencies of the Convention. Several of those issues also were addressed in Henry’s presidential address.

Disney Boycott Resolution: Expressing “deep disappointment” at the erosion of moral leadership within Walt Disney Company’s leadership, Southern Baptists threatened to boycott Disney theme parks and stores unless the entertainment giant turned from its “anti-family, anti-Christian trend.” Messengers

overwhelmingly passed the resolution which condemned Disney's policy of providing benefits to the partners of its homosexual employees and production of "objectional material" through its subsidiaries. The resolution encouraged "the Southern Baptist family to support this resolution with (their) purchasing power, letters and influence."⁵⁷ The Disney resolution proposed by the Resolutions Committee did not call for a boycott but instead urged messengers to give "serious and prayerful reconsideration (of) their purchase and support of Disney products."⁵⁸

Disney responded to the SBC proposed boycott action with a short statement reported in the *Los Angeles Times*: "We find it curious that a group that claims to espouse family values would vote to boycott the world's largest producer of wholesome family entertainment." The *Times* report also noted, "Previous religious boycotts of Disney have had little impact on the entertainment giant. Few noticed when the Florida Baptist [State] Convention last year called upon that state's one-million Baptists to boycott Disney products following the company's decision on same-sex partner benefits."⁵⁹

The threatened boycott had "raised a firestorm in Orlando," given that Orlando was the home of both Henry's congregation and Walt Disney World theme park. Henry recalled in his memoirs, "The threat of a boycott lingered for the next year. Rumors flew. I met with some of our godly laymen for input. All were against the boycott."⁶⁰ Although Henry had kept his congregation aware of the on-going situation, he sought a pro-active resolution to the public conflict. Finally, Henry and Paige Patterson (b. 1942) arranged an April 2000 face-to-face meeting with Disney executives. Although the meeting was cordial, there

was no concrete resolution. “Eventually the issue drifted off the radar for most people,” Henry said.⁶¹

Black Church Arson Fires: A second resolution brought by the Resolution Committee addressed “Arson of African American Churches.” It noted that in the “past 18 months there have been at least 30 arson-blamed fires at African American churches.” In addition to deploring “these despicable and abominable acts of lawlessness and racism” the resolution called upon Southern Baptists “to pray for, support, encourage, stand with, and assist our sister churches and fellow believers in the African American community.”⁶²

Later during Henry’s presidential address on the topic of revitalization, “the crowd stopped him with a standing ovation when, speaking about effective participation within the denomination, he condemned the burning of

African American churches. ‘We deplore these acts of blind hatred,’

said Henry. As applause ended,

he added, ‘May the

world hear that as the heartbeat of Southern Baptists.’

Challenging Baptists to ‘back up our words with

actions,’ Henry said the convention will ‘pass the

bucket’ the following Wednesday night, to collect an

offering for the black churches that have been

destroyed or damaged by fire.”⁶³ He subsequently

hosted a “Summit Against Racism” at First Baptist. In

a 2015 report by the North American Mission Board,

as a result of Jim Henry’s continuing promotion of the

arson fund, Southern Baptists had contributed at least

\$724,000. The monies helped 98 African American

**The monies helped 98
African American
congregations in 17
states rebuild after
arson attacks**

congregations in 17 states rebuild after arson attacks.⁶⁴

Covenant for a New Century: Messengers approved the beginning of the implementation process for “The Covenant for a New Century” with the final approval of a bylaw proposed at the SBC’s 150th anniversary meeting (1995). The restructuring plan reduced to 12 from 19 the number of SBC agencies. In his final presidential address Henry addressed the implementation of “The Covenant for A New Century.” He said it “is a step forward in our denomination’s looking to the future. It is a change from horses – for more effective transportation – but it is not the ultimate solution for revitalization. Revitalization is of the heart. It occurs in the prayer closet, in seasons of fasting, in experiencing God in our personal walk.”⁶⁵

Ministry in “Redeployment”

Following the 1996 annual meeting, Henry still had years of service left with First Baptist. Unfortunately, the limited focus of this article will have to leave to others to extoll Henry’s First Baptist Church’s ministry legacy. However, during the week of March 19 – 26, 2006, a celebration of the 29-years ministry of Jim Henry as pastor of the 13,000-members of First Baptist Church was conducted. His pastorate, which concluded on March 31, led to a “redeployment” as how Henry characterized his retirement in an interview with the *Florida Baptist Witness*. Henry expected to “focus on mentoring young pastors and assisting churches.”⁶⁶ He served as interim pastor of numerous churches in Central Florida, North Carolina and Tennessee. At the time this 2026 *Journal* article was prepared Henry was still active in ministry.

Henry's wife of 59 years died January 31, 2019, from complications due to Alzheimer's disease. Jeanette Sturgeon Henry, age 79, had been diagnosed with the disease in 2012, and her husband had been the primary caregiver.⁶⁷ In 2019 Henry co-authored with Deb Terry a book on Alzheimer and dementia, *Now What: Help and Hope for Caregivers, Family and Friends*.

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of James B. Henry was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ David Wayne Bailey, "A Critical Examination of the Preaching of James B. Henry" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994), 26. The quotation marks reference words from Bailey's interview with Henry on March 18, 1994 in Orlando.

Henry's personal account is less descriptive in Henry's autobiography, *Son of a Gunn*, subsequently cited.

² Jim Henry, *Son of a Gunn: Where a Journey of Faith Can Lead*, (Oviedo, FL.: Higher Life Development Services, 2016), 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 – 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 – 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁸ Jim Henry in his autobiography cited significant dates including his marriage date on p. 59; and his children's birthdates on the following pages: Jamae Kathryn, 70; Jane Elizabeth, 75; and James Bascom, II, 89. He cited his ordination place and date on page 73. Clarifying name and birth details on

Jeanette Sue Sturgeon were confirmed and accessed May 2026, through <https://www.Ancestry.com>.

¹⁹ Barbara Denman, "Jeanette Henry embarks on new adventure with Jim," *Baptist Press*, June 16, 1994, 17; the story held in the James B. Henry file of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, [hereinafter similar news publication stories to be identified as: story held in Henry's bio file].

²⁰ Jim Henry, 67.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 70 – 71.

²² *Ibid.*, 72. Henry did not have an actual copy of the statement at the time he wrote his autobiography, but said, "it went something like."

²³ In 1975 New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary upgraded Henry's B.D. to a Master of Divinity degree. In subsequent decades, four different institutions of higher learning conferred separately honorary doctoral degrees upon Jim Henry.

²⁴ Jim Henry, 79.

²⁵ Patricia J. Birkhead, *We've a Story To Tell: A History of First Baptist Church, Orlando, Florida, 1871 – 1996*, (Franklin, Tenn.: Providence House Publishers, 1996) 167.

²⁶ Jim Henry, 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80 – 81.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁰ Harold C. Bennett (b. 1924; d. 2003) served as a Navy pilot during World War II from 1942 to 1945 before responding to the call of the pastorate which lasted from 1948 – 1953. He had an extensive career in Southern Baptist life, including service as: superintendent of new work of the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay Christian Resources) Sunday School department, 1960-62; secretary of the Home Mission Board (now North American Mission Board) metropolitan missions department, 1962-65; director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas' missions division, 1965-67; executive director-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, 1967 – 1979; and finally as president-treasurer, SBC Executive Committee, 1979 – 1992.

³¹ Jim Henry, 85 – 89.

³² *Ibid.*, 85.

³³ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 111 – 112.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁸ Patricia J. Birkhead, 174.

³⁹ Steve Smith, "FBC, Orlando marks 40 years of TV ministry," *Florida Baptist Witness*, April 18, 2002, 12; [story held in Henry's bio file].

- ⁴⁰ Patricia J. Birkhead, 186 – 187.
- ⁴¹ Jim Henry, 115.
- ⁴² Patricia J. Birkhead, 177 – 179.
- ⁴³ Jessica Pigg, “Orlando’s Downtown Church set to Reclaim Glory Days,” Florida Baptist Convention, October 6, 2021, accessed May 2026, at <https://flbaptist.org/orlando-downtown-church-set-to-reclaim-glory-days/> [story held in Henry’s bio file].
- ⁴⁴ Jim Henry, 122.
- ⁴⁵ Proceedings, items 57, 111, and 197, *SBC Annual*, 1985, 64-65, 69, and 77-78.
- ⁴⁶ Jim Henry, 134.
- ⁴⁷ Proceedings, item 153, *SBC Annual* 1987, 56 – 57; and “Special Report of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee,” 232 – 242.
- ⁴⁸ Herb Hollinger, “Orlando’s Jim Henry enters race for SBC presidency,” *Baptist Press*, March 28, 1995, 1; [story held in Henry bio file.]
- ⁴⁹ Greg Warner, “Graham to nominate Henry for Southern Baptist president,” *Associated Baptist Press*, May 26, 1994, 1; story held in Henry’s bio file].
- ⁵⁰ Proceedings, item 62, *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 1994, 76, [hereinafter referred as *SBC Annual*].
- ⁵¹ Proceedings, item 95, *SBC Annual*, 1994, 96.
- ⁵² Art Toalston, “SBC taking aim at 21st century, with Jim Henry, without CBF,” *Baptist Press*, June 16, 1994, 2; story held in Henry’s bio file].
- ⁵³ Norman Miller, “Henry affirms reconciliation, inerrancy, missions for SBC,” *Baptist Press*, June 15, 1994, 3; story held in Henry’s bio file].
- ⁵⁴ Proceedings, item 36, President’s Address, *SBC Annual*, 1995, 47; [copy of message held in Henry’s bio file].
- ⁵⁵ Proceedings, item 61, *SBC Annual*, 1995, 64.
- ⁵⁶ Art Toalston, “Repentance, restructuring make SBC’s 150th historic,” *Baptist Press*, June 22, 1995, 1; [story held in Henry’s bio file].
- ⁵⁷ Proceedings, item 134, *SBC Annual*, 1996, 84 – 86.
- ⁵⁸ Dwayne Hastings, “Resolutions Wrap-up: SBC resolutions speak strongly on numerous moral issues,” *Baptist Press*, June 14, 1996, 2; [story held in Henry’s bio file].
- ⁵⁹ Marla Dickerson, “Baptists Urge Disney Boycott Over Values,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1996, accessed May 2026 at [Newspaper.com](https://www.newspaper.com). Criticism of Disney practices had been previously voiced by messengers during the November 1995, annual meeting of the Florida Baptist State Convention held in Tampa; [story held in Henry’s bio file].

⁶⁰ Jim Henry, 220.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 222 – 223.

⁶² Proceedings, item 133, *SBC Annual*, 1996, 83 – 84.

⁶³ Jon Walker, “SBC restructuring must include revitalization of hearts: Henry,” *Baptist Press*, June 12, 1996, 6; [story held in Henry’s bio file].

⁶⁴ Mike Ebert and Diana Chandler, “Henry Helps Raise funds for Arson Fund to Aid Black Churches,” *Baptist Press*, July 2, 2015, under “Racial Reconciliation: The Persecuted Church;” [story held in Henry’s bio file].

⁶⁵ Proceedings, items 46 – 48, President’s Address, *SBC Annual*, 1996, 57; [copy of message held in Henry’s bio file].

⁶⁶ James A. Smith, Sr., “Henry ends 28-year tenure at FBC Orlando,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, March 30, 2006, 1, 5; [story held in Henry’s bio file].

⁶⁷ Martin E. Comas, “Former Southern Baptist Convention president Jim Henry’s mother, wife die within four days,” *Orlando (FL) Sentinel*, February 14, 2019, accessed February 2026, [https://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/religion-world;\[story held in Henry’s bio file\].](https://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/religion-world;[story held in Henry’s bio file].)



**Jack Norman Graham
Served as 52nd SBC President:
2003 and 2004**

Florida Pastorate:
First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach,
1981 – 1989

Introductory Overview

Jack Graham (b. 1950), grew up in Conway, Arkansas, in a home of godly parents, Thomas B. and Emogene Graham. At the age of six-years old, Jack Graham began his spiritual journey in a tent revival led by evangelist J. Harold Smith. Graham professed faith in Christ at the revival meeting and was discipled at First Baptist Church of Conway, Ark. “I cut my teeth on the backside of a Baptist pew,” he said. “Through the years that faith has grown as I’ve studied God’s Word and determined that Southern Baptists are vitally connected to the Word of God and the scriptural mission to reach the world for Christ.”¹

The tragic death of his father caused Graham to re-evaluate his life and his commitment to the call of God. That commitment to the cause of Christ nearly six decades later has resulted in his 37-years of service as pastor of a Plano, Texas, church that Graham led to become a mega-church – Prestonwood Baptist Church – with over 60,000 members involved in multiple campuses and which catapulted Graham to be elected to two consecutive years’ service as the 52nd president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Responding and Preparing for Ministry Service

By his self-description, Jack Graham benefitted from a “wonderful family Christian heritage. A grandfather who was a dynamic believer and follower of Christ who had a huge influence on my life and birth of my faith.” Jack recalled his earliest recollections of “spending time in his [grandfather’s] lap, reading stories of the Bible and hearing how my faith can change my life, how Christ can change my life.”²

Graham credits his family members, in particular, who were significant influences and mentors in his life. “My grandfather probably didn’t know what the

word ‘mentor’ meant, but every evening he would set me on his lap and read the Scriptures to me and talk with me about the things of God or whatever else I wanted to talk about,” Graham wrote in one of his many books. He went on to tell that his father “gave of himself to me in many life-shaping ways.”³ Likely Graham’s brother, who was 13-years Jack’s senior, who had responded to the call of ministry, likely had significant influence upon the younger Graham, who said at age 16 he preached his first sermon.

During his childhood the family moved to Fort Worth, Texas. “When Jack was in the ninth grade, he became enthralled with the youth ministry at Sagamore Hills Baptist Church.”⁴ And because the church was very family oriented, this became the church home for Graham not only during his teenage years, but later while a student at Southwestern Seminary. There Jack Graham encountered a man of God who became not only a mentoring influence but a “father in the ministry” to Graham. That influential man was Dr. Fred Swank, who for 43-years served as pastor of the Sagamore Hills Baptist Church.⁵ “When I was a teenager, Dr. Swank saw something in me and was willing to give himself to me. So many of the important decisions I have made in life are a direct result of his influence on my life.”⁶ The discipleship training Jack received at the church prepared him for his high school and college years, particularly as a baseball-player athlete. The discipling encouraged in him the boldness and tools to share his Christian faith with his fellow athletes and others.

God Encountering Events

Graham had a particular encounter with God during a week-long summer camp at the Latham Springs Baptist Camp, near Austin, Texas, attended by his youth group, and led by Dr. Swank. Emir and Ergun Caner, in their published profile of Jack Graham,

retold Graham's testimony of the life-altering spiritual event: "One morning at the worship service, he struggled with his surrender to the gospel ministry. He left the service still laboring over God's perfect will. He walked to the prayer garden and continued to pray until he realized that he was late" for the camp's softball game championship. "Meeting Brother Swank on the way to the field, Graham was near tears as he shared with his pastor about his struggle and his call. Swank looked at the high school sophomore and said, 'That is fine son, and if you are called to preach, you will still be called after the game. Let's play ball.'" ⁷ As the Caners' summarized: "The point was made. If God was calling Graham, his call was for the long term and would take a lifetime of commitment."⁸

Within a few years, Jack Graham's definitive response to God's call to ministry grew out of the tragic death of his father, Thomas Graham. "My father and I were very close. On

August 28, 1970, a shoplifter came into the hardware store he was running, and he was bludgeoned. He lived for ten days and then died. It

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was a devastating blow to our family. To this day it grieves me," Graham told reporter Sam Hailes in 2003. "I was a 20-year-old, newly married college student and young preacher at the time. I went to a chapel inside the hospital after my father died, got on my knees and cried out to God. I can't describe what happened in that room, but I walked out of there different. I didn't see visions, I didn't speak in tongues, I didn't hear angels singing. But the Spirit of God moved in my life, and I believe God used that experience, that brokenness. Men throw away broken

things, but God uses broken things – especially broken people.”⁹

Following his father’s death Graham publicly surrendered to the ministry at the Sagamore Hills Church. Rev. Swank arranged preaching opportunities for Graham during his final years in high school. In 1968 Graham enrolled in Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas, on a baseball scholarship and began his undergraduate degree in biblical studies. A year after enrolling in the university, Graham was given the opportunity to serve in his first pastorate, East Side Baptist Church in Cross Plains, Texas. This was a small mission church – with only 13 people in attendance – which he served on the weekends. He drove to the church on Saturdays, visited the community and then preached two services on Sunday. As he completed his university degree, he concluded his service at the East Side Church where the Sunday school attendance now topped forty.¹⁰ Graham’s church growth strategy, which he started in Cross Plains, became his standard practice throughout his ministry in later years: exhibiting servant leadership, biblical preaching and small group Bible studies.¹¹

Marriage and Starting a Family

Graham met his first girlfriend – Deborah Sue Peters (b. 1951) – in his teenage days when Deb never thought she would marry a pastor. The unofficial couple had a dating relationship while both were students at Hardin-Simmons University. Deb is reported to be the first and only girlfriend to be in Jack’s life. Graham recalled that Deb “made better grades in school than I did. My grades went up when I married her. Most of us men would readily admit that we married way over our heads,” he wrote years later in a book – *Courageous Parenting* – that the two co-authored.¹² While only partially through their

respective degree programs, they married May 22, 1970. He was 20 and she was 19. During the ensuing years the couple had three children – two sons – Jason Matthew (b. 1976) and Joshua Grant (b. 1983) – and one daughter Kelly Susanne (b. 1977).¹³

Ministry Years Started

Graduating from Hardin-Simmons in 1972, Graham was invited to become assistant pastor of Sagamore Hills Baptist Church, his home church. Working and

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learning what it means to be a pastor under Fred Swank's tutelage "was the highest form of ministerial training," Graham told the Caners in a 2002 interview. Parallel

to working with the Ft. Worth church, Graham pursued graduate training at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. By 1976 he earned the Master of Divinity, and in 1980 he earned the Doctor of Ministry degree.¹⁴

While working through the MDiv degree program in 1975, the Graham family moved to Oklahoma where he first served as pastor of First Baptist Church, Hobart (1975 – 1978) and then the First Baptist Church, Duncan (1978 – 1981). He commuted between the Ft. Worth seminary and the church fields in Oklahoma. "These were pivotal years for Graham," according to the Caners' interview. "First Baptist Church of Duncan was running around five hundred and fifty in Sunday school when Graham arrived in 1978, and the church was primed for growth. Graham believed deeply in training the laity for evangelism." Similarly, "at Duncan, the devotion to that biblical principle bore fruit. In a town of approximately 25,000, the church baptized 240 in one year. He had similar experiences during his entire tenure."¹⁵

First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach – 1981 – 1989

Jack Graham was called to the First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach, in October 1981.¹⁶ At age 31 Graham was the youngest man ever called to lead the church. During Graham's tenure of the church, membership nearly doubled in size, to an estimated 8,700 from about 4,000, a local newspaper reported in 1989.¹⁷

Graham recalled when he went to the West Palm Beach church, in 1981, he considered it to be "a significant strategic church in South Florida." As Graham explained, he "found a congregation that had been in some decline by the time he was called as pastor. However, God began to move in an incredible way . . . as we began reaching people in the community." At the time Palm Beach County had a population of approximately one million people. "Most never went to church," he recalled. "It was a huge opportunity, as I saw it, to evangelize, to reach people with the message" of Jesus Christ. Graham said he led the church members to become "very aggressive in its outreach, and the church grew and grew and grew." He also noted that those years at West Palm Beach became "the formative years of my ministry and the style that ultimately has served me well these last thirty-plus years now at Prestonwood Baptist Church," Graham said in a 2026 podcast interview.¹⁸

Additionally, First Baptist Church by the mid-1980s had to adjust in the type of music featured in the worship service. To more effectively reach "Baby Boomers" Graham told the *Miami Herald* that, "Drum sets, horns and guitars are in nearly every church today." Continuing he said, "It was unheard of 20 years" earlier. Graham said the church's music

program tried to maintain a balance between “the great hymns of the faith and the new praise songs.”¹⁹

Within the first 21 months of his ministry, “Graham – characterized as the spiritual and driving force – has led in the growth by 800 new members at First Baptist. . . Additionally, a second Sunday morning service was added to accommodate the crowds while the Sunday School membership tripled to 1,500 children, young people and adults. . . Already the largest Southern Baptist congregation in Palm Beach County, Graham had unveiled in 1983 a \$20 million building plan to construct a 3,500-seat sanctuary, a three-story educational building, a Christian life center and a parking garage.” At the time Graham said the emphasis was “to make the church a central part of people’s lives . . . Of course, the Lord is first.”²⁰

In addition to providing more space to accommodate increased attendance, Graham focused on using the church’s television

ministry to reach even more people with the gospel message. By 1987 the church not only broadcast on a single channel throughout

“TV is a seed, a steppingstone, a way into people’s lives.”

Palm Beach County, but the recorded Sunday services were delayed broadcast on the Liberty Broadcast Network to 35 other states. “I don’t feel like I’m a television evangelist,” Graham told the *Fort Lauderdale News*. “That is not our goal. TV is a seed, a steppingstone, a way into people’s lives.”²¹

Prestonwood Baptist Church, Plano, Texas, 1989 to present

Ninety-nine percent of the voting membership at Dallas’ Prestonwood Baptist Church voted May 7, 1989, to call Jack Graham of Florida as their pastor

effective June 1. He succeeded the church's founding (1977) pastor Billy Weber who resigned after "admitting to an adulterous affair."²² Newt Hamlin, a Prestonwood Church spokesman, said that Graham is "probably the outstanding young pulpiteer and pastor in the country, and most of the ministers I've talked to have said the same thing."²³

When Dr. Graham went to Prestonwood in 1989, the 8,000-member congregation responded enthusiastically to his straightforward message and powerful preaching style. Between 1989 and 2002, under Graham's leadership, the Prestonwood Church reportedly recorded more than 4,500 baptisms and 10,000 additions to the membership. Currently thriving with more than 60,000 members, Prestonwood continues to grow, reaching people throughout the North Texas region. In 2006, the church launched a second location, the North campus, in a burgeoning area 20 miles north of the Plano campus. Prestonwood has a flourishing Spanish-language ministry, Prestonwood en Español, which includes members from more than 20 nations. Also Prestonwood.Live, the online community, draws worshippers from all over the world.²⁴ To expand the church's evangelistic outreach, Graham led in the establishment of *PowerPoint Ministries* that utilizes TV and radio broadcasts, postings of sermons online, and sending Emails across the country and around the world. Additionally, Graham has written dozens of books addressing the everyday and spiritual concerns of believers and non-believers.

Elected SBC President in 2002

Jerry Vines during the 2002 annual Pastors' Conference at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, told the gathering of pastors that Jack Graham "very likely" would be nominated for president of the Southern Baptist Convention that year. "And if he is, I

plan to vote for him. . . He would make us a wonderful, wonderful president,” Vines told the pastors. Referring to the Prestonwood Church’s growth, Vines said, “it’s absolutely phenomenal what’s taking place at the church, how the Lord is blessing. . .”²⁵

Soon after the 2002 Southern Baptist Convention was convened in St. Louis, Missouri, the election of convention president was held. The presiding officer recognized Johnny Hunt of Woodstock, Georgia, who nominated Jack Graham of Dallas, Texas. There were no other nominations. Registration Secretary Lee Porter cast the Convention ballot, and Jack Graham was declared as president-elect for 2002 – 2003.²⁶

During his inaugural press conference Graham promised to continue the SBC’s emphasis on reaching the world for Christ. “Being a Texan, I’m confident in thinking big — that the world and the opportunities of the world are bigger and greater than ever before for Southern Baptists,” Graham said. “There has never been a better time, a better opportunity than right now for us to get the message of the gospel around the world.” Citing Romans 1:16 as a “life verse,” Graham said he is not ashamed of the gospel message and hopes to reflect that conviction as SBC president.²⁷

In response to motions made during the 2002 meeting, Graham affirmed his belief that Southern Baptist missionaries should affirm the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message*, a decision that drew fire from moderate and liberal Baptists and some state Baptist newspaper editors. The new president described the BF&M as an instrument of accountability. “Our doctrinal accountability is vital. It’s a good idea that all who serve Southern Baptist churches respond to the will of the people, that all who serve us will share our faith and do it in a way that is conscientious.”²⁸

Serving as SBC President in 2003

Graham and first vice president Paul Pressler (b. 1930; d. 2024) presided over the 2003 annual meeting held in Phoenix, Arizona. At the time for election of officers for 2003-2004, Bobby Welch of Daytona Beach, Florida, nominated Jack Graham to be elected for a second one-year term as president. There were no other nominations. Registration Secretary James H. Wells cast the convention ballot, and Jack Graham was declared as president-elect for 2003 – 2004.²⁹

One of the significant actions taken by convention messengers in Phoenix was the approval of a resolution to “lament and renounce statements and actions by previous Conventions and previous denominational leadership that offered support to the abortion culture” on the 30th anniversary of the U. S. Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision. The 2003 resolution on abortion rights further expressed regret that “1970s-era Southern Baptist Convention resolutions and statements” furthered the “‘pro-choice’ abortion rights agenda outlined in *Roe v. Wade*” and that some of the nation’s political leaders referenced the comments and views of former SBC leaders “to oppose legislative efforts to protect women and children from abortion.”³⁰ Richard

**“If we are going to
make a difference,
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be different”**

Land, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the SBC’s moral concerns arm supported the resolution by observing, “It’s never too late to say you’re sorry.”³¹

Messengers also overwhelming passed a resolution condemning same-sex marriage. The statement

affirmed “that legal and biblical marriage can only occur between one man and one woman.” Noting efforts are underway to repeal state and federal Defense of Marriage Act, the resolution called upon Southern Baptists to “continue to oppose steadfastly” all efforts to legalize same-sex marriage.”³²

Delivering his presidential address, Graham charged Southern Baptists to be salt and light in a lost world. “If we are going to make a difference, we of course must be different,” he said.

Serving as SBC President in 2004

Jack Graham presided as the 2004 annual meeting convened in Indianapolis, Indiana. The gathering marked the 25th anniversary of the movement now known as the conservative resurgence. An approved resolution commended the movement that returned the convention to its biblical, historical roots.³³ At the earlier 1979 annual meeting, Adrian Rogers was elected president, launching a still unbroken string of conservative presidents. A “Conservative Resurgence Reunion” was held during the convention. “The heroes of the conservative resurgence are not those people whose names you know, but those who have come sacrificially to the conventions and voted their convictions and said the Word of God is going to be glorified among Southern Baptists,” said retired Houston Texas Appeals Court Judge Paul Pressler, (b. 1930; d. 2024) a leader in the resurgence.³⁴

President George W. Bush, in his third message to SBC messengers via satellite from the White House, reaffirmed his pro-life stance and his support for a Federal Marriage Amendment. Touching on the embryonic stem cell debate without mentioning it by name, Bush said that life “is a creation of God, not a commodity to be exploited by man.” Bush received one of the loudest ovations for his statement of

support for a Federal Marriage Amendment. “The union of a man and woman is the most enduring human institution, honored and encouraged in all cultures and by every religious faith,” he said. “And government, by strengthening and protecting marriage, serves the interests of all.”³⁵ Bush previously addressed the Convention in 2002, when he spoke via satellite, and in 2003 when he sent a taped message.

In other noteworthy matters: (1) Messengers defeated a motion that would have formed a committee to study the possible change of the SBC’s name. After extended discussion, the resolution was voted by ballot with a final tally of 55.4 percent voted against the proposal and 44.6 percent voted for the proposed study.³⁶ (2) By a show of ballots messengers overwhelmingly voted to withdraw from the Baptist World Alliance. Theological issues formed the heart of the concerns cited by a BWA study committee appointed by the SBC Executive Committee.³⁷

In his second term president’s address Jack Graham encouraged Southern Baptists to ready for the challenges of evangelism responding to the growing cultural and social issues, such as homosexuality and same-sex “marriage.” “I simply ask you a question: As Southern Baptists and other evangelical Christians, if we don’t stand up, wise up and speak up on these issues, who will be left to deal with the issues of our times?” he asked. “If not us, Southern Baptists, then who? If not now, when?”³⁸

In an interview with the *Southern Baptist Texan* just prior to the 2004 annual meeting, Graham said he “had grown as a person and pastor as a result of numerous service opportunities stemming from the SBC presidency.” He went on to say it was like “gaining a lifetime of experience in just two years.”

“When you get around the country and see Southern Baptists at work, it expands your vision; it enlarges your heart for what we’re doing together in cooperative evangelism,” he told the *Texan*. Graham explained he had entered the presidency at a time of heightened turmoil in America involving global terrorism, human cloning, same-sex “marriage” and the Federal Marriage Amendment, and the ongoing tide of abortion. “This has been a difficult time in America and around the world. . . with the post-9/11 generation,” Graham said.³⁹

SBC President Jack Graham, speaking to the Executive Committee June 14, 2004 said Southern Baptists are not looking to endorse candidates, but instead to have candidates endorse Southern Baptist values. “One of the reasons we loved Ronald Reagan so much is because he endorsed so many of our values and helped us in our country and our culture,” Graham said. “That’s the way I feel about any candidate, whether it’s this president or any other president. We’re seeking that candidate to endorse us. . . We’re thankful that George W. Bush has endorsed many of the values that we hold dear.”⁴⁰

The Anxiety of Cancer

In May 2009, Pastor Graham was diagnosed with prostate cancer and took a two-month sabbatical. But as Graham later reported on his website, awaking from surgery, his doctor told him they couldn’t be sure they got all the cancer and Graham would need more treatment. The uncertainty of that news left Graham feeling nervous and afraid, which he said, “soon escalated into anxiety.” And as his treatment and recovery became drawn out, “Anxiety gave way to depression and at its worst,” Graham describing himself, “as a dead man walking.” He went on to explain that he “felt hopelessness, sadness, helplessness, despair, numbness, despondency, and

struggled with insomnia and loss of appetite.” But over the course of the next year Graham found resources “to slowly climb out of this pit as strands of a rope: time, the touch of family and friends, thanksgiving, therapy, and most important, God’s Word.” Graham stressed, “the Scriptures reminded me that regardless of how isolated I felt, I was anything but alone. Second, the Scriptures provided me with the power I so desperately sought while stuck in my powerless state. And third, as I prioritized engaging with the God’s Word, even when I didn’t feel like doing so, I felt myself coming back to life.”⁴¹ From that medical experience, Graham wrote a book, titled *Reignite*, that chronicled his physical, medical and spiritual recovery.

**“Anxiety gave
way to
depression . . .”**

Continuing Concerns Over ERLC

In 2025 Graham announced on his social media X-account that the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) should be defunded. In his post, Graham said that he “believe[d] the organization has been the single most divisive entity of the SBC since the days of Russell Moore. I believe it should be defunded. . . I’ve been clear on this for a decade.” Eight years earlier in 2017, Graham led his church to conduct “an internal study to evaluate Cooperative Program giving. In February of that year, the church said they would escrow Cooperative Program funds during the study citing ‘various significant positions taken by the leadership of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.’” A few months later, the church released the escrowed funds and continued full support of the Cooperative Program. The rationale for the decision to escrow the funds, likely resided in a 2016 *Wall Street Journal* story in which the Texas pastor explained: “There was a disrespectfulness

towards Southern Baptists and other evangelical leaders, past and present.” Graham was specifically referring to ERLC President Russell Moore’s denunciations of presidential candidate Donald Trump and some of his evangelical supporters. “It’s disheartening that this election has created this kind of divisiveness,” Graham said at the time.⁴² In March 2017, Moore and the ERLC executive committee released an extended statement “seeking unity in the Southern Baptist Convention.” Soon thereafter, Graham tweeted, “This is a gracious and unifying statement from [Moore].”⁴³

Reflections Upon His Legacy

In 2014, as Graham approached his 25th anniversary of pastoral service to the Prestonwood Church, he was interviewed by *Baptist Press*, the Southern Baptist Convention’s news agency. One of the questions addressed his desire for his legacy. Graham response, reflecting what he had long believed, likely still holds true this year as Graham marks 57-years in the pastoral ministry:

I’ve always said that it’s not about leaving a legacy but living a legacy. I want to be faithful with the resources God has given us – ‘to whom much is given, much is required.’ I want my family and my children’s children to carry on the message of faith. . . I want to finish my course with joy. Unfortunately, you see too many ministers who end up joyless in life. I want to be joyful in the ministry that I’ve been given and that I’m ready to pass the baton to someone else when the time comes.⁴⁴

At the time this 2026 *Journal* article was prepared Deb and Jack Graham were still serving the Prestonwood Baptist Church.

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of Jack N. Graham was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ Tammi Reed Ledbetter, "SBC nominee Jack Graham rooted in evangelism," *Baptist Press*, June 8, 2002, 1; the story held in the Jack Graham's file of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, [hereinafter similar news publication stories to be identified as: story held in Graham's bio file].

² Steve Gatena interview with Jack Graham on podcast "Relentless Hope," aired June 2, 2023, transcript accessed June 6, 2026, on-line at <https://omny.fm/shows/relentless-hope/jack-graham-main>; [transcript held in Graham's bio file].

³ Jack Graham, *A Man of God*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2007), 170.

⁴ Emir and Ergun Caner, *The Sacred Trust*, (Nashville: Broadman-Holman Publishers, 2003), 208.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶ Jack Graham, *A Man of God*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2007), 170.

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⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹ Sam Hailes, "Megachurch leader Jack Graham: Being a pastor is the world's worst profession . . .but the greatest calling," PremierChristianity.com, January 2023, posted at <https://www.premierechristianity.com/interviews/medgachurch-leader-Jack-Graham-being-a-pastor-is-the-world's-worst-profession-but-the-greatest-calling>, accessed May 15, 2026; [story held in Graham's bio file].

¹⁰ Caner, 209.

¹¹ Ledbetter, 1.

¹² Jack and Deb Graham, *Courageous Parenting*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2006), 36.

¹³ Caner, 210.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Florida Features," *Florida Baptist Witness*, November 12, 1981, 6; [story held in Graham's bio file].

¹⁷ Ken Pellis, "First Baptist Church's pastor resigns," *The Palm Beach Post*, May 13, 1989, 97; [story held in Graham's bio file]; also see statistical reports for the First Baptist Church in the Palm-Lake Baptist Association *Annals*, 1981 through 1990.

¹⁸ Steve Gatena podcast interview with Jack Graham.

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- ²⁰ David Marcus, “Baptist Praise Lord, preacher as church becomes area’s largest,” *The Miami Herald*, July 17, 1983, 719; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ²¹ “Churches,” *Fort Lauderdale News*, February 8, 1987, 437; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ²² “Jack Graham headed for Prestonwood,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, May 11, 1989, 3; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ²³ Ken Pellis, “First Baptist’s Jack Graham expected to leave Florida,” *The Palm Beach Post*, May 6, 1989, 118; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ²⁴ “Dr. Jack Graham,” Prestonwood Baptist Church website accessed May 23, 2026, at <https://www.prestonwood.org/about/ourstaff/dr-jack-graham/>
- ²⁵ James A. Smith, Sr., “Jack Graham to be nominated SBC president,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, February 7, 2002, 1; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ²⁶ Proceedings, item 63, Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 2002, 69; [hereinafter referred to as *SBC Annual*].
- ²⁷ Todd Starnes, “Wrap-up: Southern Baptists hear from Bush, elect new president,” *Baptist Press*, June 13, 2002, 1; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ²⁸ Todd Starnes, 2
- ²⁹ Proceedings, item 53, *SBC Annual*, 2003, 63.
- ³⁰ Proceedings, item 110, *SBC Annual*, 2003, 71 – 73.
- ³¹ Dwayne Hastings, “Analysis: SBC sets the record straight on convention’s abortion stance,” *Baptist Press*, June 19, 2003, 1; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ³² Proceedings, item 112, *SBC Annual*, 2003, 74.
- ³³ Proceedings, item 156, *SBC Annual*, 2004, 85 – 86.
- ³⁴ Michael Foust, “Wrap-up: Messengers stick with the SBC name, hear from President Bush during Indy meeting,” *Baptist Press*, June 18, 2004, 1; [story held in Graham’s bio file].
- ³⁵ Proceedings, item 87, *SBC Annual*, 2004, 76.
- ³⁶ Proceedings, items 15, 62, and 120 –132, *SBC Annual*, 2004, 46; 64; and 79 – 80.
- ³⁷ Proceedings, item 34, Executive Committee recommendation #6, *SBC Annual*, 2004, 49.
- ³⁸ Proceedings, item 57, President’s address, *SBC Annual*, 2004, 64; 95 – 103.
- ³⁹ Kaylan Christopher, “Jack Graham: SBC president amid cultural upheaval across the U.S.,” *Southern Baptist Texan*, June 10, 2004; [story held in Graham’s bio file].

⁴⁰ Erin Curry, “Bush speaks to Southern Baptists, reiterates stances on life issues, same sex ‘marriage,’” *Baptist Press*, June 15, 2004, 1; [story held in Graham’s bio file].

⁴¹ Jack Graham, “Dr. Jack Graham on *Reignite: Fresh Focus for an Enduring Faith*,” accessed May 23, 2026, at <https://cbn.com/article/wisdom/dr-jack-graham-reignite-fresh-focus-enduring-faith>; [story held in Graham’s bio file].

⁴² Brandon Porter, “Texas pastor, Jack Graham former SBC president wants to defund ERLC,” *Baptist Press*, May 23, 2025, 1; [story held in Graham’s bio file].

⁴³ David Roach, “Prestonwood to resume CP giving ‘without designation,’” *Baptist Press*, April 26, 2017, 2; [story held in Graham’s bio file].

⁴⁴ Berta Delgado-Young, “Jack Graham marks 25-years at Prestonwood,” *Baptist Press*, June 4, 2014, 2; [story held in Graham’s bio file].

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**Bobby Hayward Welch
Served as 53rd SBC President:
2005 and 2006**

Florida Pastorate:
First Baptist Church, Daytona Beach
1974 – 2006

Introductory Overview

Bobby Welch grew up “on the other side of the tracks” in the mill village of Fort Payne, Alabama. He did not have the benefit of a Christian family home life, but thanks to a budding romance in a girlfriend he was introduced to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Unfortunately, Welch became a backslidden Christian as he pursued a college degree and was enrolled in the R.O.T.C. program. Upon his college graduation he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army to pursue a military career.

By September 1966 Welch found himself in Bon Son, South Vietnam, as a combat platoon leader guiding men through the dense jungle. Before he knew what had happened, Welch was on the ground in an expanding pool of blood which was literally gushing from his mouth. The young officer quickly thought he was at the end of his life. By a miracle of God’s mercy, Bobby Welch survived the injury and later transitioned from being an Army soldier to a soldier of the Cross.

Less than a decade later, the former Green Beret, now an ordained pastor, began leading one of Florida Baptist’s largest congregations – First Baptist Church, Daytona Beach – as he was the leading advocate for a Sunday school evangelism strategy called F.A.I.T.H. It was during those years that Welch was elected to serve two consecutive one-year terms as the 53rd president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Life in Rural Alabama

Bobby Hayward Welch (b. 1943) was born and raised in the mill village of Fort Payne, Alabama. The village was literally and figuratively divided by two sets of Great Southern railroad tracks. Welch in his semi-autobiography described the tough boys who grew up

on the other side of the tracks, “as my grandma declared, ‘were as mean as a snake and full of devilment,’ It was our survival technique, and it made you tough.”¹

His parents were Mary Eloise and Robert Hayward Welch. Robert Welch at one time had been employed in the Davison Hosiery Mill, the sole employer in the village. But his dad moved on to being a heavy equipment operator in highway construction projects, “that kept him away from home until the weekends.” In describing his parents, Welch recalled, “My mother and father loved me and my brother, and there was never a day we did not know that. My dad was a good provider . . .” Yet his dad was a “two-fisted drinking, smoking, pool-shooting, guitar-playing, gambling, cussing construction worker who killed himself at work five or six days a week and lived for some relief on the weekend.” In contrast, Welch’s mother “did not drink, shoot pool or play an instrument, but she smoked, could cuss, and would mix it up with my dad when he was ‘three sheets to the wind and on his high horse.’”² Reflecting upon his parents and their relationship, which at times, rose to violent actions toward each other, Welch observed, “That kind of stuff will make you tough in your life.”³

Following a Girl Led Him to Christ

While going to high school Welch “fell in love” with Maudellen Bell whom he admired from afar. However, she was a positive influence upon Welch who “not only urged me toward college; she also led me to Christ. . . She went to church every time the doors opened. In fact, she was there so much I wondered if she didn’t open the door,” Welch recalled in his semi-autobiography.⁴ At 16-years old, Bobby often followed Maudellen to church, but “would not go inside. I waited for her outside.” Finally, one Sunday night in 1959, Welch decided to slip into the

church and sat beside Maudellen, but “I was not interested in anything the preacher said.” Although later Welch realized, “I was experiencing the truth of God’s Word.”⁵

“One Thursday afternoon, after several services of hearing the Word of God, and after football practice, I went to the office in back of the church. Reverend Bob Mowrey was

the pastor I had been listening to, and he took the time to talk to me.

Not knowing the church jargon, I

“The reality is that Jesus did come into me, and He changed me and my life.”

struggled a bit to know how to tell him why I had come. Then I questioned him, ‘Do you think my life could become like that girl’s – Maudellen?’ The pastor opened a small red *Gideon New Testament* and shared the “Roman Road” experience of Saul, reading from Romans 3:23 and Revelations 3:20. Then the two men “knelt on our knees and he led me to prayer what’s affectionately called ‘the Sinner’s Prayer.’”

Welch went on to describe the event, “The reality is that Jesus did come into me, and He changed me and my life.” Mowrey gave Welch the *Gideon New*

Testament. Years later Mowrey recalled the influence of Maudellen upon Bobby Welch. “He saw Christ in her,” the pastor said. “That’s where it all began.”⁶

Welch said initially, “In the years that followed, I grew spiritually as a new Christian. Then I left for college.”⁷

“Playing sports was one of the escape routes some used to break out into an open field with more possibilities. Coaches had an eye out for boys in that part of town,” he recalled. For Bobby Welch, “Baseball was my starting place.” However, as he described, “A bat in the face knocked out three teeth and gave me 132 stitches inside my mouth and a

distinctive scar in the upper left corner of my mouth.” Fortunately, Welch had another option, given his size and high school football linebacker experience. “The only way I had a dog’s chance of getting to college was on a football scholarship.” Although scouts didn’t draft him, when he got to Jacksonville State College (now University), he tried out for the football team as a walk-on. He was impressive enough for the coach to offer him an athletic scholarship.⁸ His linebacker skills led him to be elected team captain for three consecutive years.

College and Marriage

Football did prove to be his ticket to Alabama’s Jacksonville State College. While Welch pursued a degree in business administration, he also joined the R.O.T.C. program with a plan to make the military a career. During those college years, Welch admitted “I got off course. I lost my way in following Christ.” He explained, “While I did not do a lot of things most people associate with being away from the Lord. I still was way off course.”⁹

By June 1965, Welch graduated from college with a Bachelor of Science degree and left for a one-month of summer camp at Fort Bragg, N.C. to complete his R.O.T.C. training. At the end of July, Welch was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army.¹⁰ He was scheduled for deployment to the United States’ growing war effort in South Vietnam.

However, before his first deployment, Welch married Maudellen Bell (b. 1941), the young woman who was most influential in Welch’s Christian conversion. The Fort Payne natives were married August 21, 1965, in the First Baptist Church.¹¹ He was 22 and she was 24. Soon after their marriage, Maudellen continued a career in teaching, while Bobby pursued military service. Once the couple were later re-united, and

during the ensuing years, they had two children that included: a daughter, Haylee (b. 1968) and a son, Matthew (b. 1973).¹²

Redemption Comes from Battlefield Wound

By September 1966, Lieutenant Bobby Welch found himself in Bon Son, South Vietnam, as a combat platoon leader guiding men through the dense jungle. Before he knew what was happening, Welch was confronted by a Viet Cong guerrilla who fired his weapon point blank at Welch. The bullet hit Welch's chest, ricocheted through his body, missing his heart by centimeters, piercing his lung, before exiting his body. Welch fell to the ground in an expanding pool of blood which was literally gushing from his mouth. Welch's lead sergeant rushed to Welch's aid and as he made a quick assessment of the wound, Welch recalled, "He moved his head from side to side in a disparaging way." Although his fellow soldiers tried to help, "I was bleeding to death and fighting to stay conscious. But I was losing my fight to stay alive."¹³

"As a result of that wound I would lie there on the battlefield dying. For me there was no out-of-body experience, no brightly lit tunnel, nor did all of my life flash before me. None of those things happened, but what did occur was just as miraculous. . . Everything became silent and there was nothing before me except two forms, side by side, which were shaped like men. . . My sense was that these figures were God and Christ. I thought they had come for me . . ."¹⁴ Continuing his description of the experience, Welch remembered breathing the three-word prayer, "God, help me."

"That is when the miracle happened," he recalled. Welch saw a light waving over him, which he initially thought was an angel, "dressed in an Army camouflage green outfit!" Fortunately, the light was not from a delayed medic-vac helicopter, "but a

command chopper of our battalion commander.” Welch was tossed on top of three dead soldiers as the helicopter headed straight for a field hospital.¹⁵ Upon arrival at the hospital Welch was moved into the surgical bay, where extensive surgery was performed. “I regained consciousness, but I was still battling for my life.” After a week in a recovery tent, “I awoke and discovered that I was not paralyzed and that I could speak again.” Welch asked for a drink of water and a Bible, and then holding the New Testament to his chest, said the following prayer:

*Dear Lord, I do not know if I will live through this. I may die here like the soldier who died the other night. But, Lord, if and when that time comes, I want to promise You that you will not find me in the spiritual shape that I was in before. Lord, I intend to live for You from this day on.*¹⁶

Welch returned to Alabama for a brief reunion with his young bride and to recuperate from his wounds.

**Welch remembering
his battlefield
promise to God,
transitioned from
being an Army
soldier to a soldier of
the Cross.**

He subsequently returned to active duty that included service as an instructor at the U.S. Army Infantry School and was a Green Beret. In the next two years,

Bobby Welch completed his tour of duty, had been promoted to the rank of captain and was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism and a Purple Heart for his injuries, among other decorations.¹⁷

But more importantly, Welch remembering his battlefield promise to God, transitioned from being an Army soldier to a soldier of the Cross. Not only did he surrender to the gospel ministry, Welch’s battlefield

experience and promise to God became an often-told testimony in sermons, evangelism gatherings, patriotic observances, and in a book, titled *You the Warrior Leader*.

Responding and Preparing for Ministry Service

Returning from military service in 1969, Bobby Welch went to his home church in Fort Payne where he publicly announced his call of God to the pastoral ministry. The First Baptist Church agreed to license and ordain him to the gospel ministry. Then with the help of the church's pastor Dan Ireland, Welch enrolled in New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.¹⁸ He relocated to Louisiana with Maudellen and their baby daughter Haylee. While a student Welch was called as the pastor of the First Baptist Church, Norco, Louisiana – located about a 30-minute drive west of the seminary campus. In 1972 he graduated with a Master of Divinity degree. In recognition of his contributions to the pastoral ministry and Southern Baptists the New Orleans Seminary selected Welch for their 1998 Distinguished Alumni Award.

Park Avenue Baptist Church Nashville, Tennessee, 1972 – 1974

Bob Mowery was the pastor of the Park Avenue Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, since 1960, having come from Fort Payne. He would continue leading the congregation until he retired in 1995. However, in 1972, the church leadership determined they needed a minister of youth and associate pastor. "Someone told me of a young graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary who said I had led him to the Lord," Mowery recalled in 2005. "That young graduate was [Bobby] Welch," he told *Baptist Press*.¹⁹

“I barely remembered him,” Mowery recalled, but “I asked Bobby to come and talk to me, and the church later called him to serve.” Mowery remembered the sharing of the gospel with the young man years earlier. “After Welch joined the staff at Park Avenue, he and Mowery ‘caught up’ on what had transpired in Welch’s life,” Mowery explained.

“Our people fell in love with Bobby. He was one of the hardest workers we ever had.” Mowery went on to stress that “during Welch’s two years on staff, the church’s bus ministry ‘blossomed.’” However, First Baptist Church in Daytona Beach’s leadership learned about Welch’s effective ministry and visitation program that contributed to record-breaking Sunday school attendance in the church. In God’s Plan the Welches had taken a vacation to Florida. Bobby had been invited to preach at Ormond Beach where the unannounced Pulpit Committee of First Church, Daytona Beach, was

present and heard his sermon. That encounter settled it for the committee that recommended First Baptist Church extend a call to Welch to

**less than five
months after
Welch’s
introductory
sermon the church
began to grow**

serve as pastor.²⁰ “I felt like he probably needed more experience, but God knew what He was doing,” Mowery said.²¹

**First Baptist Church, Daytona Beach,
1974 – 2006**

Bobby Welch’s first Sunday in the pulpit of First Baptist Church (org. 1898) was August 11, 1974, when he preached a sermon titled, “Medicine, Mud, Miracles,” that highlighted his life and the spiritual encounter on the battlefield.²² The church’s published

history noted that less than five months after Welch's introductory sermon the church began to grow: "Sunday school attendance doubled to 1,264; each Sunday had professions of faith, rededications, baptisms; mission-giving goals were met before deadline; visitation teams were larger than ever; and the bus ministry experienced explosive growth."²³

During the decade between 1974 and 1983, the church under Welch's leadership broadened its mission and outreach ministries. In 1974, a 30-minute television program called "Sunshine" was inaugurated. The Friday morning, weekly program featured preaching, music and interviews. The program served as a springboard for the church to expand its broadcast ministry to provide a Sunday morning live telecast of the worship service.²⁴

By 1980, increased attendance necessitated the expansion of the Sunday school to two sessions and the scheduling of two Sunday morning worship services. In July of that year, Doug Williams of Marietta, Georgia, was called as minister of evangelism. "Doug's passion was to build a soul-winning church," the church's history book declared. Initially 34 members committed to participating in the launch of Evangelism Explosion.²⁵ This was not a one-time event. For the next several decades, the annual Evangelism Explosion training was conducted, resulting in the evangelism ministry "exploding and changing hearts and lives."²⁶

In the decade between 1975 and 1985, the church grew to nearly 5,200 from 2,834 members and the Sunday school had reached 2,935 enrolled from a previous high of 1,482.²⁷ To accommodate that growth and attendance the church raised \$4 million and constructed a new worship center designed to seat 2,400 that was completed in 1983.²⁸ Given the

multiple emphases upon evangelism and outreach – including 50 quarterly training sessions of Evangelism Explosion held from 1982 to 1997 – the church’s growth continued through the year 2000 when membership settled down to 3,724 and Sunday school enrollment stood at 3,656. By the time of Welch’s retirement in 2006, the church’s membership had grown to 4,095 and Sunday school enrolment stood at 3,705. The annual baptisms averaged between 150 and 175. And contributions through the Cooperative Program grew to \$494,755 in 2005 from \$25,624 during Welch’s first year as pastor.²⁹

President, Florida Baptist State Convention – 1988

While serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Daytona Beach, Welch was active in the Florida Baptist State Convention. In 1987 he was elected to serve as the president of the Florida Baptist State Convention and presided over the 1988 annual meeting held in Lakeland. One of the highlights of the 1988 annual meeting was the retirement recognition of Executive Director-Treasurer Dan Stringer (b. 1927; d. 2007) who had served since 1979. In other action, the State Board of Missions proposed, and messengers approved, a 1989 Cooperative Program budget which reduced the percentage allocation to the Southern Baptist Convention – to 47.35 percent from 50 percent – and increased the Florida Baptist ministry causes allocation to 52.35 percent. This followed several years in which the Florida Baptist Convention had been the first state Baptist convention to achieve the 50-50 percentage distribution. However, reduced contributions from churches and increased fixed operating costs necessitated the re-allocation of the percentages distribution. The other significant action by messengers was the approval to transfer operating responsibility of the Florida Baptist Retirement Center to the Florida Baptist Children’s

Homes from the Convention's Business Services office.³⁰

F.A.I.T.H. Evangelism Training Launched

The Wednesday night of April 30, 1997, marked the unveiling of F.A.I.T.H., an evangelism outreach ministry designed by Pastor Welch and Minister of Evangelism Doug Williams. In F.A.I.T.H., teams of three people visit prospects and share their Christian faith with them. The word F.A.I.T.H. is an acronym that represents the key elements of the Sunday school-based plan of salvation comprised of: Forgiveness; Available; Impossible; Turn (repentance); Heaven. Initially, "28 originator training churches and pastors from across the nation were brought to Daytona Beach to observe, study and commit to the 16-week strategy in their own locations. . . Within five years, 60,000 members in 3,800 churches had been trained in F.A.I.T.H."³¹

"F.A.I.T.H. is far broader than just evangelism," Welch told a group of college students decades later, "it is a strategy and process wherein a local church can crystallize the ministry task."³² In a separate

"F.A.I.T.H. is far broader than just evangelism"

interview, Welch explained the history of F.A.I.T.H.'s development to *Baptist Press* by noting, "We

started with pure EE [Evangelism Explosion] for several years, then said this won't get it." Continuing, Welch said, "Then we started cannibalizing that and baptizing it and got to what we called ES, which is the essence of F.A.I.T.H. That was when we changed the complete outline and started over."³³ In 1998 the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board adopted the program and provided nationwide promotion, resources and training support. During the ensuing years Welch flew – on average one million miles

annually – across the country leading clinics and encouraging pastors to embrace the evangelistic visitation effort.

Elected SBC President for 2005

During the 2004 SBC annual meeting held in Indianapolis, Bobby Welch was overwhelming elected president for the year 2005. A year earlier, John Sullivan, executive director-treasurer, Florida Baptist Convention, confirmed to the *Florida Baptist Witness* that Welch had been asked to consider being nominated in 2004. “In conversations with Bobby I have encouraged him to do this and I support him,” Sullivan said. Contacted by the *Witness*, Welch said he was praying about the possible nomination. “If the convention were to want me to do that I would always try to do everything I could do to help the Kingdom’s cause,” Welch said.³⁴

During the 2004 convention’s proceedings, President Jack Graham announced the time for nominations for the election of president. Johnny Hunt of Georgia nominated Bobby Welch of Florida. Dennis Connor of North Carolina nominated Al Jerrell of North Carolina. President Graham called on Registration Secretary James H. Wells who gave balloting instructions to messengers and ballots were cast. Subsequently, Wells reported that among the registered 8,307 messengers, 5,038 ballots were cast with 3,997 (79.6 percent) for Bobby Welch and 1,020 (20.4 percent) for Al Jerrell. President Graham declared Bobby Welch as president elect for 2004 – 2005.³⁵

Bus Tour across America 2004: As the SBC president-elect and co-creator of the popular F.A.I.T.H. evangelism strategy, Welch soon announced that he would embark on a 50-state, 25-day bus tour in August and September 2004. He travelled to every

state, including Alaska and Hawaii, just not by bus. Welch said he conceived of a national bus tour rally as a means of generating a sense of urgency about

In the prior five years (1999 – 2003) Southern Baptists’ total annual baptism averaged 400,723

evangelism among Southern Baptists. The bus tour was a kickoff for "The Everyone Can Kingdom Challenge for Evangelism" campaign, which was Welch’s theme emphasis for Southern Baptists in

2004 – 2005 to achieve the goal of one million baptisms in one year.³⁶ In the prior five years (1999 – 2003) Southern Baptists’ total annual baptism averaged 400,723. According to the Annual Church Profile (ACP), information gathered by the Southern Baptist Convention’s LifeWay Christian Resources, baptisms in 2005 dropped 4.15 percent to 371,850 from 387,947 reported in 2004. The statistics indicated that baptisms — which rebounded in 2004 after a four-year decline — slumped again in 2005, according to a story by *Baptist Press*.³⁷

Reflecting upon the recently completed bus tour, Welch told the *Christian Post* that he had developed the F.A.I.T.H. evangelism strategy because he felt Southern Baptists were not sufficiently focused on evangelism and baptisms. “So, when it became obvious that I might be a likely president for the [SBC] convention, I began to pray and the Lord placed this approach in my heart. I also talked to a lot of people, and that’s where the 50-state bus tour came in. I relocated to Nashville for two months, and that was all part of that plan for this convention.”³⁸

Serving as SBC President for 2005

The nearly week-long gathering in 2005 for the annual SBC meeting held in Nashville, Tennessee,

began with a record 10,000-plus volunteers doing door-to-door evangelism as part of Crossover Nashville on Saturday. The emphasis continued through a Wednesday evening finale to the convention meeting, complete with fireworks, confetti, a balloon drop, and a performance from the contemporary Christian music group Casting Crowns. Over the course of the weekend and week, there were more than 2,500 recorded professions of faith in Christ.³⁹

Bobby Welch presided over a convention he dubbed as the one-year emphasis on evangelism through the *Everyone Can Kingdom Challenge*. Welch's emphasis on evangelism was nearly endless. Throughout the three days he prompted messengers to shout in unison, "Everyone can, and I'm it!" — a reference to the fact that every believer is gifted to share the gospel. In one impromptu moment he even grabbed a microphone and went into the audience, asking messengers to talk about their Crossover witnessing experiences.⁴⁰

Among the early items of business was the election of president to serve in 2006. First Vice President Gerald Davidson presided and recognized Evangelist Junior Hill of Decatur, Georgia, who nominated Bobby Welch. "A prophet has been among us," Hill said in nominating Welch. "Seldom has any man risen . . . more fitted to the task at hand." He commended Welch for his passionate leadership and for "focusing on the main task: winning the lost to Jesus Christ." There were no other nominations. Davidson declared Bobby Welch president for 2005 – 2006.⁴¹

The election was immediately followed by Welch's presidential speech, in which Welch clarified the message as a "passionate, personal appeal" to Southern Baptists "to try harder" in the great

challenge of “a unity of purpose for evangelism.” He went on to stress, “We can go further. We can go deeper,” noting, “We can do more for the glory of God and the sake of souls . . .”⁴²

He went on to stress, “We can go further. We can go deeper”

Other highlights of the annual meeting included:⁴³

- President George W. Bush addressed messengers via satellite, restating his support for a constitutional marriage amendment and his desire to build a “culture of life” in America;
- Messengers gave final approval to allow the Annuity Board to change its name to GuideStone Financial Resources;
- Messengers passed a resolution ending an eight-year boycott of The Disney Company begun in 1997; and
- Ken Whitten, pastor of Idlewild Baptist Church in Tampa, Florida, delivered the convention sermon, blending conservative resurgence history, a text out of Acts 27, and a line from the hymn *Rescue the Perishing*.

Serving as SBC President in 2006

Bobby Welch presided over the 2006 annual meeting held in Greensboro, North Carolina, which marked Welch’s second year as president. He set the tone of the meeting with his “*Everyone Can*” emphasis which promoted a goal of baptizing one million in one year. The twelve-month push began the prior October and ran through the final week of September 2006. To further underscore the “Everyone Can” theme, a series of video evangelism testimonies were presented during each session. It was reported that the pre-convention Crossover event had 3,189 volunteers who reported 823 people prayed to receive Christ.

“We will baptize a million in a year. I don't know if it will be this year. [But] we could baptize a million this year if you'd get up and get out of here and go to work,” an optimistic Welch said to loud applause on the final night. The evening showcased a musical finale featuring the Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tenn., choir and the “*Everyone Can*” People's Mass Choir. Seventy-five large Scripture-themed banners were displayed throughout the Greensboro Coliseum.⁴⁴

Welch said during his president's address. “With the Cooperative Program, everyone can. Your dollar works seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, all around the world, non-stop — even when you're snoring, asleep, it's still working.”⁴⁵

Among the many other business highlights:

- Messengers approved moving the responsibility for stewardship education to the SBC Executive Committee from LifeWay Christian Resources. The move consolidated stewardship with SBC Cooperative Program promotion; and
- President George W. Bush spoke via video message, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke in person to messengers.

Concluding Service at First Baptist

For most men, having served two years as SBC president would have been the pinnacle of a ministry career. However, Bobby Welch had some unfinished business. In the mid-1990s Welch and the church leadership recognized that their four-acre downtown site was landlocked and could not accommodate any expansion of facilities. A long-range plan was undertaken to identify another land site for the church closer to the prominent Interstate-4 and Interstate-95 corridors located west of downtown. Subsequently a 226-acre site was located between I-95

and U. S.-1, along Tomoka Farm Road. Although the site was officially consecrated with a special prayer ceremony in 2004, it would be years before construction of the planned \$50 million campus was undertaken. Finally, construction began in 2018 and by Fall 2019, the worship center, the first of several planned buildings, was completed.⁴⁶

Bobby Welch, at age 63, announced May 28, 2006, to the congregation that he would retire August 27, after serving for 32 years as the church's senior pastor. The announcement followed "a brief Memorial Day observance when he recognized veterans of the Armed Services and their family members and offered a prayer for survivors of those killed while on military duty," the *Florida Baptist Witness* reported.⁴⁷ David Cox, Welch's co-pastor since 2003 became senior pastor.

Reading from his prepared statement to the congregation, Welch said he and his wife, Maudellen, will remain in the church, as would his son and son-in-law – both of whom were deacons – and his grandchildren. He also expressed confidence in the leadership of David

"I've got plenty to do and I intend to go do it"

Cox who became senior pastor. Welch said he "will be available to assist the younger man, but only at his request." In an interview with the *Witness* after the worship service Welch explained, "I've got plenty to do and I intend to go do it" noting that his preference is to serve within the Southern Baptist Convention in order to "make a difference for the Kingdom of God over the next 10 to 15 years."⁴⁸

Post Retirement Ministry

Following his retirement from First Baptist, Welch continued his promotion of the "Everyone Can"

evangelism and baptism emphasis. He also continued preaching through pulpit supply. And within short order, Southern Baptists reached out to Bobby Welch for several special ministry opportunities.

SBC strategist for Global Evangelical Relations: A motion approved by messengers during the 2004 SBC annual meeting directed the SBC Executive Committee to establish a position for Global Evangelical Relations. The creation of the position was done in tandem with the SBC's withdrawal from cooperation with and financial support of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). Paige Patterson (b. 1942), who had chaired the SBC Executive Committee study group, told messengers, "We can no longer afford in this particular day, when the press for 'gay marriage' is on, to be in an alliance of any kind with denominations which support 'gay marriage' in any form or fashion." Patterson continued, "Nor is it possible for us to be any longer in affiliation with some of the denominations of the BWA who do not believe in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture and regularly call it into question."⁴⁹

In seeking the right leader, the SBC Executive Committee tapped Southern Baptist statesman and evangelism specialist Bobby Welch. In the assignment Welch served as the Southern Baptist liaison with existing Baptist groups worldwide, particularly in Europe. Between 2007 and 2011 the focus of the Welch-led cooperative ministry was evangelism, church planting and theological education.⁵⁰

Serving the Tennessee Baptist Convention: Beginning in 2011, Welch requested a reduced role as the Global Evangelical Relations liaison to six weeks a year. This permitted Welch to accept an additional assignment as the associate executive director/church growth for

the Tennessee Baptist Convention. The position established in 2011 had administrative oversight of the convention's programs involved in evangelism and church planting.⁵¹ Welch concluded his service in 2015.

History Artist: In 2017, in a stark contrast to his life of ministry service, Bobby Welch returned to his hometown of Fort Payne, Ala. There he developed papier-mâché style artwork representations of the village in which he grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. "This is a heritage tribute, a tribute to the ordinary," Welch told persons attending the annual meeting of

**"This is a heritage
tribute, a tribute
to the ordinary"**

Landmarks Historic Association of DeKalb County. The finished artwork featured eight characters from the

town's "boom" era, whom Welch said were people who will see themselves, but they are not obvious to everyone.⁵²

At the time this 2026 *Journal* article was prepared, Bobby and Maudellen Welch were living in Daytona Beach and supporting First Baptist Church as they promised at Welch's retirement.

Clarifying Thoughts

by Dr. Bobby Welch

“Large churches cannot win North America, but the church-at-large cannot only win North America, it can win the entire world.”

“Facility-based evangelism is faulty.”

“There is an eternity of difference between church growth and growing the church.”

“The church is God’s ‘forward operational base’ for the soldiers of Christ in the foreign countries of the world.”

“You must always favor evangelism in order to have a balanced ministry because natural inclination favors discipleship.”

“If you teach people to love fishing, not just catching, they will keep fishing until they are catching. Otherwise, they will stop fishing because they only love catching.”

[SOURCE: *First Faith: The Bobby Welch Story at First Baptist Church, Daytona Beach, Florida*, (Clearwater, FL: Paracomm Press, 2004), 65.]

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of Bobby H. Welch was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ Bobby Welch, *You the Warrior Leader*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 203.

² *Ibid.*, 203.

³ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶ Lonnie Wilkey, "One pastor, especially, remembers Welch's profession of faith," *Baptist Press*, June 17, 2005, 1; the story held in the Bobby H. Welch file of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, [hereinafter similar news publication stories to be identified as: story held in Welch's bio file].

⁷ Welch, 211.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 205 – 206.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰ "Cadets Begin Summer Camp," *The (Jacksonville, Ala.) Collegian*, June 28, 1965, 3; [story held in Welch's bio file].

¹¹ "Miss Maudellen Bell Marries Bobby Welch," *The Huntsville (Ala.) Times*, August 22, 1965, 56; [story held in Welch's bio file]. Maudellen Bell Welch's birth year was confirmed in www.Ancestry.com, accessed May 30, 2026.

¹² The dates of birth of the Welches children are noted in the official "Biographical Sketch of Bobby H. Welch" prepared by Welch and held in the FBHS' Welch's bio file.

¹³ Welch, 224 – 225.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁷ The summary of Welch's military service is recorded in the official "Biographical Sketch of Bobby H. Welch" prepared by Welch and held in the FBHS' Welch's bio file.

¹⁸ Jennifer Davis Rash, "Bobby Welch's art honors hometown's heritage," *Alabama Baptist*, November 14, 2017; [story held in Welch's bio file].

¹⁹ Lonnie Wilkey, "One pastor, especially, remembers Welch's profession of faith;" [story held in Welch's bio file].

²⁰ Editorial Committee, "His Name Kept Coming Back," *First Faith: The Bobby Welch Story at First Baptist Church, Daytona Beach, Florida*, (Clearwater, FL: Paracomm Press, 2004), 39.

²¹ Lonnie Wilkey.

- ²² Editorial Committee, *First Faith*, 39.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.
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- ²⁸ Editorial Committee, *First Faith*, 46.
- ²⁹ Halifax Baptist Association, "Statistical Reports," Florida Baptist *Annual*, 1985, 2000, and 2005.
- ³⁰ Proceedings, Florida Baptist *Annual*, 1988.
- ³¹ David Cunningham, *A History of Florida Baptist's Sunday School*, (Irving, Texas: Xulon Press/Salem Media Group, 2005), 140 – 141.
- ³² Heather Stewart, "Vision for FAITH goes beyond ministry model," *Baptist Press*, March 20, 2002, 1; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ³³ Polly House, "Bobby Welch flies a million miles to spread the word about FAITH," *Baptist Press*, February 6, 2003, 1; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ³⁴ Joni B. Hannigan and Michael Foust, "Welch 'praying' about 2004 presidency," *Florida Baptist Witness*, July 3, 2003, 1 and 3; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ³⁵ Proceedings, items 84 and 95, Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 2004, 76; 77; [hereinafter referred to as *SBC Annual*].
- ³⁶ Allen Palmeri, "Bobby Welch begins effort to rally Southern Baptists to baptize one million in one year," *Baptist Press*, August 30, 2004, 1; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ³⁷ Russ Rankin, "Fiscal Year 2005 stats: Southern Baptists experience drop in baptisms," *Baptist Press*, April 19, 2006, 1; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ³⁸ Pauline J. Chang, "Interview: Dr. Bobby Welch, President of SBC," *Christian Post*, June 20, 2005, accessed May 30, 2026, at <https://www.christianpost.com/news/interview-dr-bobby-welch-president-of-the-sbc.html>; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ³⁹ Michael Foust, "Southern Baptist Convention [2005] Wrap Up," *Baptist Press*, August 1, 2005, 1; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Proceedings, item 86, *SBC Annual*, 2005, 97; also see Don Beehler, "Bobby Welch re-elected to SBC presidency," *Baptist Press*, June 21, 2005, 1; [story held in Welch's bio file].
- ⁴² Proceedings, item 87, president's address, *SBC Annual*, 2005, 97; also see 120 – 127.
- ⁴³ Michael Foust, "Southern Baptist Convention [2005] Wrap Up,"
- ⁴⁴ Michael Foust, "Southern Baptist Convention [2006] Wrap Up," *Baptist Press*, August 1, 2006, 1; [story held in Welch's bio file].

⁴⁵ Proceedings, items 274 – 276, president’s address, SBC *Annual*, 2006, 122; also see 126 – 130.

⁴⁶ Eileen Zaffiro-Kean, “Daytona Beach's historic First Baptist Church celebrates its last Easter downtown,” *Daytona Beach (FL) Journal*, April 19, 2019, B-1; [story held in Welch’s bio file].

⁴⁷ Joni B. Hannigan, “Bobby Welch to Retire August 27,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, June 1, 2006, 1;

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Don Hinkle, “SBC severs ties with BWA as theological concerns remain,” *Baptist Press*, June 15, 2004, 1; accessed May 30, 2026, at <https://baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/sbc-severs-ties-eith-BWA-as-theological-concerns-remain/>

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⁵¹ Baptist Press staff, “Welch Joins TBC, will have limited GER role,” *Baptist Press*, May 10, 2011, 1; [story held in Welch’s bio file].

⁵² Jennifer Davis Rash, 1.



**William Earnest “Willy” Rice
Serving as 64th SBC President:
2026 to 2027**

Florida Pastorates:

Cypress Lake Baptist Church, Tampa, 1987 – 1992
Hillcrest Baptist Church, Pensacola, 1997 – 2004
Calvary Baptist Church, Clearwater,
2004 to present

Introductory Overview

“Willy” Rice is a Florida native whose spiritual journey included learning and being mentored under the ministry of William Anderson, pastor of Clearwater’s Calvary Baptist Church. And in God’s timing, Rice came to follow in Anderson’s footsteps to fill the pulpit and lead the Calvary Baptist Church, Clearwater, Florida, beginning in 2004. While at Calvary, Rice was elected to two one-year consecutive terms as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention.

His pastoral service included tenures as pastor in several Baptist churches in the towns and small cities of Alabama and Florida. These were preparatory to his calling, to serve as pastor of a church characterized by *Outreach* magazine as one of 100 fastest growing churches in America – Calvary Baptist Church, Clearwater, Florida – where he has served the past 22 years. In 2026 Rice was elected to his first one-year term as the 64th president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Responding and Preparing for Ministry Service

William Earnest “Willy” Rice (b. 1964), a native of Tampa, Florida, is a fourth-generation Floridian. On the first day of his birth, Rice said his parents – Earnest and Judith Rice – enrolled him in Sunday school at the Jackson Heights Baptist Church (org. 1917), Tampa.¹ Willy had two siblings, a sister Sharon and a brother David.

At the age of nine, Rice’s maternal grandparents took him to a revival service held in Tampa’s East Chelsea Baptist Church. Although Rice was the only person who made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ that night, it was said of Willy Rice, “it was a significant one as he showed a keen interest in the spiritual

things of life that point on.” Subsequently the Rice family moved across Tampa Bay and settled in Pinellas County where the Rice family joined First Baptist Church, Indian Rocks, in Largo. It was at that church where Willy Rice was baptized.² The family moved their membership to Clearwater’s Calvary Baptist Church. At the time, Rice was 12-years old and William E. Anderson was the pastor (served from 1975 to 2001). Willy Rice attended Seminole High School and became a leader in Calvary’s youth group, which served as preparation “to be used of God.” A church history book said of the young Willy Rice, “He rose to leadership positions in the youth group, memorized vast passages of scripture, sang in the youth choir and eventually surrendered to the call to pastoral ministry that God placed on him . . .”³ Eventually, it was at the Calvary Church that Rice was licensed and ordained to the gospel ministry.⁴ In the summer after his ninth grade year of school, Rice’s youth group went to a summer youth week held at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center. It was during worship services there that Willy Rice felt God’s call to the pastoral ministry.⁵ During the ensuing years Rice was mentored and encouraged by the church’s longtime pastor William Anderson. While involved in Calvary’s youth ministry Rice became acquainted with Cheryl Lynn Baker (b. 1964), also a Tampa native. Her family also had moved across Tampa Bay from MacDill Air Force Base and settled in Seminole, a community in mid-Pinellas County. The Baker family was invited to attend the Calvary Baptist Church (org. 1866) – then located in downtown Clearwater – where they visited for several months. However, when Cheryl was 16 years old, the family attended a Jay Strack evangelistic crusade. During that revival Cheryl Baker was convicted of her sins and stepped forward to make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. After graduating from high school, Cheryl decided to attend Samford University, perhaps

influenced by other young people in the Calvary youth group, including one Willy Rice.⁶

University, Marriage and Growing a Family

At the age of 17 years old (1981), Willy Rice enrolled in Samford University located in Birmingham, Alabama. Meanwhile Willy and Cheryl, who had become a boyfriend-girlfriend couple while at Calvary Church, continued a long-distance relationship during the next two years while Rice was attending Samford. Two years passed and Cheryl Baker, having graduated from Osceola High School in 1983, also enrolled in Samford. Rice completed his studies and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1985. Subsequently Cheryl Baker graduated cum laude from Samford University in 1987.

While Willy and Cheryl were still enrolled at Samford they agreed to get married. The wedding was held December 29, 1984, in Calvary Baptist Church's historic downtown chapel rotunda. They were both aged 20. During the ensuing ten years, the couple had three children that included: Amanda Leigh (b. 1988); Anna Ruth (b. 1990); and Stephen Benjamin (b. 1993).⁷

Willy Rice was a youth revival speaker for the Alabama Baptist State Convention

Preparing for Ministry Service

During his university years, Willy Rice was a youth revival speaker for the Alabama Baptist State Convention preaching across the state. At age 20, while still enrolled in Samford, Rice was called as pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church, located in the rural community of Dora, Ala. Located approximately 40 miles north of Samford, the travel to and from the church field was

convenient in fulfilling the weekend responsibilities of visitation and leading worship services. He began serving the congregation in 1984, subsequently graduated from Samford the following year, and continued serving the congregation until 1987.

**Cypress Lake Baptist Church,
Tampa, Florida, 1987 – 1992**

Meanwhile back in Clearwater, the leadership of Calvary Church decided to establish a satellite campus north of Oldsmar (midway north between Clearwater and Tampa). This was designated as the Cypress Lake Baptist Mission. In seeking someone to serve as pastor of the new church, the Calvary leadership turned to one of their homegrown boys. They called Willy Rice, who recently graduated from Samford and had gained pastoral experience at the Bethel Baptist Church to enhance his preparation for the pastoral ministry.⁸ In taking lead of the new church, Rice started with a nucleus of approximately 30 Calvary members and local residents who lived in the Oldsmar area. “They were trained and sent out as a core group,” Rice said at the time. “These are fantastic people, ambitious, energetic. They are highly successful, I think.”⁹ While serving the mission Rice started academic work through New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. By 1990 Rice completed academic requirements and received the Master of Divinity degree. By 1992 the church had grown to over 120 members.

**Gladeview Baptist Church,
Anniston, Alabama, 1992 – 1997**

In an interview with the *Anniston (Ala.) Star* Rice spoke about his days at Gladeview Baptist Church with nostalgic fondness. “Gladeview was a vibrant church,” Rice recalled, “and I made so many friends there and have such good memories in Calhoun County.” The interview with the *Anniston Star*

followed soon after his June 2026 election as SBC president. Rice was 28 years old when he was called as pastor of Gladeview. Under his five-year tenure as pastor, Rice said the church grew to over 250 members from about 180 members. To accommodate the church's growth Rice led the congregation in 1993 to 1994 to raise the funds to construct a worship center that could seat about 500 people. Reflecting upon that endeavor Rice said, "We thought we'd built the biggest thing in the world." The church's membership and visitor attendance growth was enhanced by Jacksonville State University students, who were attracted by the dynamic young preacher. "It was a wonderful time, a great time with that huge college group."¹⁰ The church was located about a six-hour drive southwest to the New Orleans Seminary campus. The distance made it reasonable for Rice to travel back and forth for a day or two to attend doctoral seminars. In 1996 he completed his dissertation to earn the Doctor of Ministry degree.

Hillcrest Baptist Church, Pensacola, Florida, 1997 – 2004

In 1997, Rice was contacted by the pulpit committee of the Hillcrest Baptist Church, Pensacola, Florida, that extended a call to Rice to serve as their pastor. When Rice went to the church it recorded an average Sunday school attendance of 550, while an average 600 persons participated in the worship services. During the next seven years, under Rice's leadership, the average Sunday school attendance grew to 1,200 and the several worship services had reached an average of 1,600 people in attendance.¹¹ Statistics reflected significant membership growth during Dr. Rice's tenure. Membership in 2004 stood at 3,181 having grown from 2,005 in 1997. Additionally, Sunday school enrolment grew to 2,767 enrollees from 1,133 in 1997. By 2004 the church contributed

\$243,663 annually through the Cooperative Program having grown from \$73,897 in 1997.¹²

To better serve the needs of the congregation, Rice demonstrated the ministry possibilities with additional ministerial staff. Soon five additional ministry staff were enlisted to serve in the areas of: children’s ministry; preschool ministries; evangelism and missions; collegiate and single ministries; and leadership and adult discipleship.¹³

To accommodate the attendance growth, the church membership agreed to proceed with a fund-solicitation effort to underwrite the planned construction of a new worship center that would seat 2,000 persons. After two years, the new sanctuary was completed and dedicated in 2002. In the Spring 2004, the church undertook a fund-solicitation drive to underwrite the planned construction of a children’s ministry building.¹⁴ That project was subsequently placed on hold.

**“For me, Hillcrest
represents a
Camelot of sorts”**

In August 2004, Dr. Rice announced to the congregation that God was leading him to return to his home

church in Clearwater. Rice told the congregation, “For me, Hillcrest represents a Camelot of sorts, a time when every hope and aspiration for ministry came true. We had big dreams and because of the support of the Hillcrest family and the blessings of God we got to take an incredible journey together.”¹⁵

Reflecting upon Rice’s service at Hillcrest, one member observed, “He’s probably one of the best pastors I’ve ever been under.” At the time of Rice’s departure to Clearwater, Ron Sherrell, chairman of the deacons at Hillcrest Church said, “He doesn’t

apologize for anything. We are all brokenhearted he's leaving, but we understand God moves his people around."¹⁶

**Calvary Baptist Church,
Clearwater, Florida, 2004 to present**

"In a landslide vote of 1,068 to 14, Calvary Baptist Church selected Dr. William 'Willy' Rice to be its new senior minister, replacing interim pastor, Dr. Ken Alford," reported the *Tampa Bay Times* newspaper. The 2004 newspaper account went on to contend, "Rice's hiring signals a move by church members to get past more than two years of stress that began after the retirement of longtime senior pastor Rev. Dr. Bill Anderson in 2001." Those years were filled by two different interim pastors.¹⁷

Dr. Rice told the newspaper that, "My hopes for this church are that it can be healthy and strong again." Continuing, Rice stressed his goal that the church would be to "speak the message of the Gospel so that it's clear and compelling."¹⁸ He assumed leadership of the congregation September 12, 2004.

Rice took the reins of leadership at a critical time in the history of the 138-year-old church as it was in the midst of constructing a \$22 million church campus on 11 acres, six miles north of downtown Clearwater. The new complex was officially opened in mid-December 2004. The church's former downtown majestic sanctuary, with a domed ceiling constructed in 1926, on top of six acres on a 40-foot limestone bluff that overlooked Clearwater harbor, was sold in 2004 to a developer.¹⁹

Calvary Baptist Church experienced statistical growth, under Dr. Rice's leadership. In 2004 the church was reporting 5,611 members with 2,909 enrolled in the Sunday school/Bible study groups. Although actual

attendance did not reflect the membership counts. However, Dr. Rice led the church to fulfil its commitment to reach the world for Jesus Christ. As a result of the church’s effort to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and follow-through discipleship, the church regularly conducts beachside baptisms. Those efforts have recorded in excess of 400 to 500 baptisms annually. Cooperative Program giving – based upon recent giving trends – reflect the church earmarking 7.5 percent of its undesignated budget through the Cooperative Program (which in a recent year amounted to over \$532,000). Additionally, the church members financially support the Annie Armstrong Easter and Lottie Moon Christmas offerings.

On its 150th anniversary (2016) the church launched a commitment to start 150 new churches – including 100 international congregations – within a decade. By 2026 the church had reached and surpassed its goal with 171 church starts. The effort was in support of the Southern Baptist’s International Mission Board’s “Vision 2025.”²⁰ Locally, Calvary Church started and maintain five mission campuses: Crystal Beach; East Lake; Seminole; Safety Harbor; and Calvary Espanol. In addition, as a part of its evangelism emphasis to prepare generations of young people who can impact the world for Jesus Christ, the church started a Christian high school and a Christian college. To support these outreach efforts the church enlisted and trained 159 persons in its 150-goal for mission volunteers.

Pastor Rice does more than promote missions and enlist volunteers, he leads by example. A case in point, in 2022, Willy and Cheryl Rice traveled to Indonesia to lead training and encouragement sessions with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board missionaries and local pastors. “They

were consistently authentic, humble and gracious,” wrote missionary/seminary professor Christopher Cole. “The conditions weren’t great. Even for Indonesia, this was largely a backwater group of Baptist leaders that had been gathered.” Despite the less than perfect conditions, Rice persevered, going anywhere he was needed. “The little mountain churches Willy preached in often didn’t have finished walls let alone fans or air-conditioning. . . Cheryl was by Willy’s side through the large public events and met with pastor’s wives in smaller groups to teach and encourage them,” Cole wrote. “They treated us missionaries like we were their heroes even when we didn’t have solutions to the challenges they were facing.”²¹

Service in 2007 and 2008 as President, Florida Baptist State Convention

The 2006 annual meeting of the Florida Baptist State Convention convened in Fort Myers in the McGregor Baptist Church. Messengers voted to elect a new president who would serve the following year. There was only one nomination – William E. Rice – and it was made by Ken Whitten, pastor of the Idlewild Baptist Church, Tampa. Rice was elected by acclamation.²² While serving as convention president in 2007, Dr. Rice was nominated to serve a second one-year term as president in 2008. Bob Greene, director of missions, Pensacola Bay Baptist Association, made the nomination for William Rice. And again, there was no other nomination, and Dr. Rice was elected by acclamation.²³

In his service as state convention president for 2007 – 2008, Rice told the *Florida Baptist Witness* that in his official capacity he traveled the state and spoke in churches and at associational events. “A highlight,” he said was traveling to Haiti, where Florida Baptists have ongoing partnership missions work. “I am the

first sitting president that had ever come,” Rice told the *Witness*. “I enjoyed that opportunity and was [emotionally] moved by what people face and what the struggle is down there.” Dr. Rice went on to say that it was “heartening” to see the church planting efforts and ministries that Florida Baptists support. Another enlightening aspect of his around the state tours was to witness what he called “the incredible ethnic diversity,” ranging from Anglo to Haitian to Hispanic to Brazilian churches.²⁴

**“God’s people
have no business
being afraid, no
business being
anxious.”**

During the 2008 state convention annual meeting held in Lakeland, Rice preached his swansong message as out-going president. He reportedly “struck a

triumphant note” that messengers responded to with applause and shouts of “Amen.” “God’s people have no business being afraid, no business being anxious. We know who holds the future in his hands.” Rice went on to stress, “God’s kingdom is going to prevail. These are tough days, but opportunity is knocking at the door.” He observed that, “Many of our churches are struggling with a crisis of purpose. We’ve forgotten why we’re here. We’ve got too much activity and too little productivity.”²⁵

Willy Rice’s popularity was reflected in his being tapped as a speaker during several of the future annual meetings of the state convention. He was selected to bring the official convention sermons in the years of 2016, 2021, 2022 and 2024.

Involvement in Southern Baptist Convention

Beginning as a student observer, Willy Rice has been an active participant in Southern Baptist life since he was a teenager. “I attended my first Florida Baptist

[State] Convention as a college freshman,” he recalled in 2016. At that time, “I sat on the platform representing the youth speaker’s tournament from those days while my pastor, Dr. Bill Anderson, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church . . . presented the convention sermon. I thought it was one of the greatest messages I have ever heard, and I remember it still,” he said.²⁶ Since the early 1980s, Rice said he has attended nearly every – except two or three – annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Highlights of his involvement in SBC life came to the forefront when he was appointed to serve as chair of the 2010 SBC Committee on Committees and chaired the 2016 Committee on Nominations. In 2015 Rice served as president of the SBC Pastor’s Conference. He also was later selected to bring the convention sermon during the 2021 SBC annual meeting.

Then in early March 2022, Clint Pressley of Charlotte, North Carolina, announced that he intended to nominate Willy Rice for the SBC presidency to serve in 2023. Pressley told *Baptist Press*, the Southern Baptist Convention’s news service, that “Willy Rice represents who Southern Baptists are at their best.” He went on to explain that Rice has a “Great Commission passion” and a “fierce dedication to Scripture.”²⁷ A month later, Rice issued a statement citing “sensitive information” in which, as a result, he would not seek the nomination of the 2023 SBC presidency. A video released April 1 by Dr. Rice noted “. . . a member of our deacon body had committed sexual sin that could also be described abusive.” He stated, “It did not involve criminal charges, and he had never been identified by law as a sexual offender.” In light of that developing situation, Dr. Rice said, “My calling is to my local church, my family and to the mission field God has given me. I wish to return my time and attention to those things.”²⁸

In 2025, when the Southern Baptist Convention met in Dallas, Texas, Willy Rice presented a motion to abolish the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC). “Many have been stunned to learn that outside progressive advocacy groups have financially supported our ERLC, and there’s been no public repentance, no rejection of those alliances,” Rice said. He further admitted, “My head has to admit what my heart didn’t want to believe. Facts are stubborn things, and the evidence is clear and the trust is broken.” Rice went on to emphasize that his goal was “to abolish the ERLC,” but he clarified it was “not to erase it, but to restore it” and “reforge it into a voice unincumbered by outside interests.” When messengers voted with 6,581 ballots cast, a majority of 3,744 (56.89 percent) were opposed to the motion to abolish.²⁹

Elected SBC President for 2026

At the end of October 2025, Willy Rice issued an on-line video announcing his plan to be nominated for SBC president to serve in 2026-2027. Rice said by his being nominated, he hoped to bring spiritual renewal to the SBC. “In this hour of apostasy and idolatry, we need to reaffirm and restate our convictions. Such a time calls, not for fuzzy lines in a mushy middle, it calls for clarity and courage. We don’t need to look for something new. We need to stand on what we know is true,” he said.³⁰

When the 2026 SBC annual meeting convened in Orlando, Florida, the Tuesday election of convention president revealed two candidates. The first was Willy Rice, who was nominated by Adrian Taylor, pastor of Spring Hill Baptist Church in Gainesville. The other nominee was Josh Powell of South Carolina. When the 9,063 ballots were cast, the final tally revealed Rice received 5,271 votes (58.15 percent) while Josh

Powell received 3,821 votes (42.16 percent) and 25 votes were disallowed.

The day following Rice' election, Adrian Taylor said, "Dr. Willy Rice's election is good for Florida because it reminds the entire SBC that faithful Baptist leadership is alive and well in the Sunshine State. What excites me most is that Dr. Rice brings a pastor's heart, a preacher's conviction, and a renewed call to keep our eyes on Scripture, cooperation, evangelism, and the Great Commission." ³¹

In a post-election news conference, newly elected president Willy Rice addressed several topics. First, he confessed, "I'm very humbled and honored, obviously, to be elected to this position and I think it's been a good two days for Southern Baptists." He went on to observe, "I think that anyone who may be concerned about a leftward undertow, a woke riptide in the SBC, I think we leave Orlando with that firmly dispelled." He further stressed, "The Southern Baptist Convention is not eroding [or] equivocating. The Southern Baptist Convention is enduring. . ." ³²

The new SBC president noted, "The Southern Baptist Convention is best when it is led by local churches and pastors." He continued by stating, "I think everyone says that, but over time, institutions drift toward maintenance and preservation. It's important that pastors and churches lead." Summarizing, Rice said, "Baptists are a local church people. We are not top-down. We're not run out of Nashville, Louisville, Wake Forest, Atlanta or anywhere else. We're independent, autonomous churches." ³³

"The Southern Baptist Convention is best when it is led by local churches and pastors."

Dr. Rice briefly spoke to the prophetic role of Southern Baptists. “You don’t want the challenging issues of the day to keep you from seeing the mission, but you don’t want to focus on the mission so that you ignore the challenges that you need to address, because ultimately the mission will be imperiled if the institution suffers. As president, there will be no greater joy for me than to talk about the Great Commission.”³⁴

Dr. Willy Rice will preside over the 2027 SBC annual meeting to be held June 15-16, in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The Seven Pillars

by Dr. William “Willy” Rice

I believe the Southern Baptist Convention is at its best when it is rooted in biblical conviction, gospel mission, and spiritual dependence. This is a call to **choose obedience over observance, faithfulness over ambition, and biblical conviction over compromise**, so that future generations will say, “*They kept the faith.*” To achieve these aspirations, will require practicing these biblically foundational seven pillars:

The Seven Pillars*

1. **Convictional Clarity** – Standing firmly on Scripture and historic Baptist convictions, resisting cultural drift, and maintaining doctrinal integrity;
2. **Denominational Accountability** – Ensuring that Baptist institutions serve churches, not the other way around, with greater transparency and trustee oversight;
3. **Missional Integrity** – Advancing God’s Kingdom through faithful disciples, healthy congregations, and gospel multiplication;

4. **Cultural Responsibility** – Speaking truth courageously into moral and cultural issues of every generation;
5. **Biblical Unity** – True unity rooted in the gospel, not politics, ethnicity, or social theories;
6. **Global Intentionality** – Keeping the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) as the central mission until Christ returns; and
7. **Spiritual Vitality** – Renewal through prayer, repentance, humility, and wholehearted dependence on God.

*[SOURCE: Dr. Willy Rice at <https://baptistrenewal.us/>]

ENDNOTES:

Editor's Note: This profile of William E. “Willy” Rice was written by Donald S. Hepburn, managing director, Florida Baptist Historical Society, using the following resources:

¹ *Hillcrest Heritage A Lasting Legacy: 1955 – 2005*, (Pensacola, FL: Hillcrest Baptist Church, 2005), 56.

² Joni B. Hannigan, “Daytona Beach nominations declared: FBSC president Rice to run for 2nd term,” *Florida Baptist Witness*,¹; the story is held in the William E. Rice file of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida, [hereinafter similar news publication stories to be identified as: story held in Rice’s bio file].

³ *150 Year Celebration: 1866 – 2016*, (Clearwater, FL: Calvary Baptist Church, 2016), np.

⁴ Hannigan.

⁵ *Hillcrest Heritage A Lasting Legacy*, 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sharon Kirby, “Minister Chosen to Head New Mission,” *Tampa Bay Times*, September 5, 1987, 4-5; [story held in the Rice’s bio file].

⁹ Sharon, Kirby, 5.

¹⁰ Sherry Kughn, “Former Gladeview pastor elected Southern Baptist president,” *The Anniston (Ala.) Star*, June 17, 2026, accessed June 20, 2026, at

<https://www.annistonstar.com/news/calhoun/former-gladeview-pastor-elected-southern-baptist-president/>; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

¹¹ *Hillcrest Heritage A Lasting Legacy*, 58.

¹² Pensacola Bay Baptist Association, “Statistical Reports,” *Florida Baptist Annuals*, 1997 through 2004.

¹³ *Hillcrest Heritage A Lasting Legacy*, 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶ Eileen Schulte, “Favorite Son to Lead Calvary Baptist,” *Tampa Bay Times*, August 22, 2004, 123; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Aaron Sharockman, “Church finds buyer for downtown sites,” *Clearwater (Fla.) Times*, November 1, 2004, 1; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

²⁰ David Roach, “International mobilization at heart of SBC’s Vision 2025,” *Baptist Press*, April 12, 2021, 1; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

²¹ Christopher Cole, “SBC Voices: One California Pastor’s Experience with Willy Rice,” March 4, 2022, accessed June 30, 2026, at <https://sbcvoices.com/author/guest-blogger/>; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

²² Proceedings, item 26, *Florida Baptist Annual*, 2006, 40.

²³ Proceedings, item 24, *Florida Baptist Annual*, 2007, 40.

²⁴ Hannigan.

²⁵ Proceedings, item 12, president’s address, *Florida Baptist Annual*, 2008, 38; also see “Southern Baptists Focus on Optimism,” *The (Lakeland, FL) Ledger*, November 12, 2008, 14; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

²⁶ Florida Baptist Convention staff, “Willy Rice to bring Convention sermon at FBSC,” November 4, 2016, accessed April 25, 2026, at <https://flbaptist.org/news/willy-rice-to-bring-convention-sermon-at-fbsc/>; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

²⁷ Jonathan Howe, “Florida pastor Willy Rice to be nominated for SBC president,” *Baptist Press*, March 2, 2022; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

²⁸ Brndon Porter, “Rice withdraws as SBC president candidate,” *Baptist Press*, April 6, 2022; 1; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

²⁹ Proceedings, items 15, 65, 148, and 154, *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 2025, 52, 59, 82, and 84; hereinafter referred to as *SBC Annual*; also see “SBC Rejects Willy Rice’s Motion to Abolish the ERLC,” *Christianity Daily*, June 12, 2025, 1; accessed June 30, 2026, at <https://christianitytoday.com/news/sbc-rejects-willy-rice-motion-to-abolish-erlc/>; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

³⁰ Brandon Porter, “Florida pastor Willy Rice to be nominated for SBC president in Orlando,” *Baptist Press*, November 1, 2025; 1; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

³¹ Tanner Cade, “Florida Pastors and Leaders respond to Rice winning SBC President,” accessed June 22, 2026, at <https://flbaptist.org/florida-pastors-leaders-respond-to-Rice-winning-SBC-president/>; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

³² Scott Barkley, “Rice speaks on Southern Baptists’ past, present, future at press conference,” *Baptist Press*, June 10, 2025, 1; [story held in Rice’s bio file].

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Florida Baptists Who Served As SBC Vice Presidents

by Penny Baumgardner
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A small number of Florida Baptists have achieved the unique distinction of being elected as a vice president for the Southern Baptist Convention. Those 24 persons came from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from pastor to laity. Yet interestingly, there also have been those who were educators, university presidents, Sunday school teachers, and even state newspaper editors.

It should be noted that not all of these Florida Baptists were living or working within Florida at the time of their election or year of service as SBC leaders. Rather the intent of this article is to include those men and women who had a ministry service connection to a Florida Baptist church at some time before or after their Southern Baptist Convention service.

The role and number of convention vice presidents have gone through an interesting odyssey over the last 181 years. During its organization in 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention's newly drafted constitution defined its officers to be comprised of a president, four vice presidents, a treasurer, and two secretaries. According to Southern Baptist Historian Jesse C. Fletcher the geographically diverse officers were "tapped to ensure the broadest possible support for the Convention." Basically, they were to be promoters of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Role of Vice Presidents

Surprisingly it was not until the 1900 annual meeting that the first bylaws were added that defined a job description for the office of vice president.

However, this job description was only retained in the bylaws up to 1913 when messengers approved its removal. The exhaustive specifics of tasks, which assumed to be assigned only to men (given the verbiage used), who would serve as an officer, included:

These should be men known to be identified with the interests of the Convention, and of their own State Boards, . . . men who make efforts to attend the sessions of the Convention. These vice-presidents shall be expected to co-operate with the Boards, both giving and receiving suggestions as to work to be done, and they also shall be expected to present at the next session of the Convention a brief report in writing of what they had been requested to do, and of the way in which they have complied with these requests, with any suggestions they may have to offer as to the conditions and needs of their respective fields.

Additionally, those elected officials also were expected “to prepare a roll of the associations, churches, and Sunday schools in that State, to be used for the distribution of information, and to ascertain . . . [what] churches and Sunday schools are contributing to the funds of the Board and the annual amounts, and to make systematic effort each year to increase the number and amount of such contributions.”

However, by 1931, the number of vice president officers was reduced. The bylaws were changed to provide for a president, a first and second vice-president, and two secretaries, who were to be elected at each annual

meeting. And the respective task assignments were revised.

The current *SBC FAQs: A Ready Reference*, reflecting the current SBC bylaws, presents the role of the vice presidents as “assisting the president in various ways. They consult with the president on appointments to the Committee on Committees, the Credentials Committee, and the Committee on Resolutions, as well as Convention parliamentarians.” The reference guide continues by noting, “In the event that the president cannot serve a full term, the first vice president would take over those responsibilities, and the second vice president would take the position of the first vice president. Often during the annual meeting, one or both vice presidents may preside during a session.”

The following 24 persons with a Florida Baptist connection served as a Southern Baptist Convention vice president at one time or another between 1911 (the first year a Floridian was elected) and 2024. The following profiles about the respective Florida Baptists begin with the year and location of the annual SBC meeting followed by the Floridian’s name and then current state of residence upon their election.

1911 Jacksonville, FL/C. A. Carson, FL

Charles Averette Carson (b. 1862; d. 1920) was a Kissimmee businessman who was serving as the Florida Baptist State Convention president (1910 - 1914) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born in Macon, Georgia. Carson also served 24 years as a member of the State Board of Missions of the Florida Baptist State Convention and ten years as chairman of the Columbia College, Lake City, Florida, board of trustees. He was a member and deacon of the First Baptist Church, Kissimmee, Florida.

1922 Jacksonville, FL/W. D. Nowlin, KY

William Dudley Nowlin (b. 1864; d. 1950) was serving as pastor of the First Baptist Church, Greenville, Kentucky, (1919 - 1924) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was born in Weakly County, Tennessee. Nowlin also served as pastor of churches in Tennessee and Florida including: First Baptist Church, Lakeland, Florida (1911 - 1914); First Baptist Church, Arcadia, Florida, (1924 - 1934); and Hopewell Baptist Church, Plant City, Florida, (1934 - 1939). During his lifetime, Nowlin served as editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* and for the Baptist state paper of Kentucky, the *Western Recorder*. During his years in Florida, he also served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1930 - 1931).

1924 Atlanta, GA/A. A. Murphree, FL

Albert Alexander Murphree (b. 1870; d. 1927) was serving as the president of the University of Florida, Gainesville, (1909 - 1927) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born near Chepultepec, Alabama. Murphree, as a former college professor, had the distinction of serving as the president of two Florida universities. The other was Florida State College (now Florida State University), Tallahassee, (1897 - 1907). He served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1922 - 1923) and was a member of First Baptist Church, Gainesville, at the time of his death in 1927.

1925 Memphis, TN/J. L. White, FL

Jacob Lee White (b. 1862; d. 1948) was serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Miami, Florida, (1916 - 1936) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. During his pastorate in 1935, First Baptist Church, Miami, and Temple Baptist Church, Miami, merged to become Central Baptist Church. White also served as pastor of churches in North Carolina, Georgia, Texas

and Tennessee. He served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1924 - 1925). White delivered the annual sermon during the Southern Baptist Convention's 1934 meeting held in Washington, D.C., as his four minister sons sat on the platform.

1926 Houston, TX/A. M. Bennett, FL

Arthur Marriott "A. M." Bennett (b. 1872; d. 1936) was serving as pastor of Palm Avenue Baptist Church, Tampa, Florida, (1922 - 1933) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born in Front Royal, Virginia. Bennett also served as pastor of churches in West Virginia, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. His Florida pastorates included: First Baptist Church, Fort Myers, (1915 - 1917); First Baptist Church, Lake City, (1917 - 1919); Palm Avenue Baptist Church, Tampa, (1922 - 1933) and Baptist Tabernacle, Tampa, (1933 - 1936), [later named the A. M. Bennett Memorial Baptist Church in his honor]. During his pastorate at Lake City, Florida, Bennett also served as chaplain for the Florida Baptist State Convention's Columbia College.

1932 St. Petersburg, FL/R. L. Daniel, FL

Robert L. Daniel (b. 1878; d. 1940) was serving as a Sunday School teacher for the Men's Bible Class, First Baptist Church, St. Petersburg, Florida, (1926 - 1940) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was a native of Fayetteville, Alabama. Daniel served on various committees of both the Pinellas (now Suncoast) Baptist Association and the State Board of Missions of the Florida Baptist State Convention. As a layman he served as an attorney in Ensley, Alabama, and as credit manager of the Willson-Chase Company, St. Petersburg, Florida. At the time of his death there were 250 members in his Sunday School class.

1942 San Antonio, TX/Edward D. Solomon, FL

Edward Davis Solomon (b. 1875; d. 1957) was serving as editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* (1931 - 1949) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born in Coldwater, Mississippi. Solomon also served as pastor of churches in Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana. Before relocating to Florida, he served as corresponding [executive] secretary of the Louisiana Baptist Convention (1924 - 1930). As a young man, Solomon served as chaplain in the Spanish American War and World War I. He was a member of the SBC committee that drew up the proposed Cooperative Program recommendation in 1925.

1947 St. Louis, MO/C. Roy Angell, FL

Charles Roy Angell (b. 1889; d. 1971) was serving as pastor of Central Baptist Church, Miami, Florida, (1936 - 1962) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was born in Boone Mill, Virginia. Angell also served as pastor of churches in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and Louisiana. Angell was the author of several sermon illustration books. He delivered the annual sermon at the 1951 Southern Baptist Convention meeting held in San Francisco, CA. In his preaching, he was considered one of the best sermon illustrators in the Southern Baptist pulpit. Angell served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1949).

1948 Memphis, TN/Thomas V. McCaul, FL

Thomas Vaden McCaul (b. 1878; d. 1972) was serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Gainesville, Florida, (1922 - 1949) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born in Charles City, Virginia. McCaul also served as pastor of churches in Kentucky, Virginia and South Carolina. After his retirement, First Baptist Church, Gainesville, elected him pastor-emeritus. One of McCaul's special ministries late in his retirement years was writing letters to the military

personnel deployed to the Vietnam War. He served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1938 - 1939).

1955 Miami, FL/Homer G. Lindsey, Sr., FL
Homer Gentry Lindsey, Sr. (b. 1903; d. 1981) was serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, (1940 - 1973) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was a native of Lake City, Tennessee. Lindsey served as pastor in Texas and Tennessee before coming to Florida. When the Florida Baptist State Convention was in executive leadership transition in 1945, Lindsey served as acting executive secretary-treasurer until the election of Dr. John Maguire. He also served as president of trustees of the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign (now International) Mission Board from 1962 until 1966. Lindsey served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1964).

1956 Kansas City, MO/John H. Halderman, FL
John Henry "Jack" Halderman (b. 1915; d. 1990) was serving as pastor of Allapattah Baptist Church, Miami, Florida, (1945 - 1965) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born in Texarkana, Texas. When he retired in 1965, the Allapattah Church had 3,900 members, and the largest Sunday school in Florida with an average attendance of 2,000. Halderman also served as pastor of churches in Louisiana and Georgia. He was chairman of the first Florida Baptist Convention-appointed Cuban refugee committee established in 1960. A well-known collector of unique Bibles, Halderman donated 230 items, among them rare Bibles and ancient manuscript to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

1957 Chicago, IL/Conrad R. Willard, MO
Conrad Raymond Willard (b. 1918; d. 2004) was serving as pastor of Central Baptist Church, Miami,

Florida, (1962 - 1983) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was born in Lebanon, Missouri. Willard also served as pastor of churches in Missouri and Kentucky. He served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1967 - 1968). Following his retirement from the local church pastorate, he was sent by the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board on many preaching assignments. The countries included Ghana, Nigeria, Jamaica, Thailand, Malaysia, Peru, Columbia and Chile.

1962 San Francisco, CA/Roland Q. Leavell, MS

Roland Quinche Leavell (b. 1892; d. 1963) was president-emeritus of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (1946 - 1958) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born in Oxford, Mississippi. Leavell also served as pastor of churches in Georgia, Mississippi and Florida, including First Baptist Church, Tampa, Florida, (1942 - 1946). Prior to his service as seminary president, the institution was known as the Baptist Bible Institute, until the name was changed in 1946. Leavell wrote numerous books for Bible studies published by the Baptist Sunday School Board. Before going to the seminary to serve as president, he was the director of evangelism of the Southern Baptist Convention's Home (now North American) Mission Board (1936 - 1944).

1976 Norfolk, VA/James L. Monroe, FL

James Lester Monroe (b. 1920; d. 1999) was serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Fort Walton Beach, Florida, (1968 - 1986) at the time of his election to the SBC post. A native of Gadsden, Alabama, Monroe served as pastor of churches in Alabama, Kentucky and Indiana. His Florida pastorates included: Warrington Baptist Church, Pensacola, (1957 - 1960); Riverside Baptist Church, Miami, (1960 - 1968) and First Baptist Church, Fort Walton Beach, (1968 -

1986). He filled many leadership positions in the state conventions of Florida and Alabama, including serving as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention in 1966. Monroe delivered the annual sermon at the 1981 Southern Baptist Convention meeting held at Los Angeles, CA. Upon retirement James and Laura Monroe were appointed as Partnership Evangelism coordinators jointly sponsored by the Southern Baptist Foreign (now International) Mission Board and the Florida Baptist Convention.

**1977 Kansas City, MO/Mrs. Myra
(Carl E.) Bates, NC**

Myra Mae (Gray) Bates (b. 1917; d. 2006) was serving with her husband Carl E. Bates (b. 1914; d. 1999) (m. 1939) who was pastor of First Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, (1959 - 1980) at the time of her election to the SBC office. She was a native of Tupelo, Mississippi. Myra Bates was a graduate of the Memphis Conservatory of Music and also studied piano and organ with Silvio Scionti at the Chicago Music College. She served with her husband in pastorates in North Carolina, Texas and Florida, including First Baptist Church, Bartow, Florida, (1943 - 1947). Bates was one of only three women to serve as an officer of the Southern Baptist Convention. She and her husband were the only couple ever to hold elective office in the national convention; he having served previously as president (1971 - 1972) (see article in this *Journal*). Mrs. Bates served on a number of boards and agencies, including the Southern Baptist Foreign (now International) Mission Board. She was a noted speaker and addressed many state conventions and pastors' wives' conferences.

1980 St. Louis, MO/Don Touchton, FL

Alfred Donald Touchton (b. 1938; d. 2023) was serving as pastor of Central Baptist Church (formerly

Maranatha), Brandon, Florida (1976 - 1981) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was a native of Largo, Florida. Before going into the ministry, Touchton was a computer specialist who worked at Cape Kennedy on the Apollo Space Program. He also served as pastor of churches in Ohio and Florida including First Baptist Church, Baldwin, Florida, (1971 - 1974). He preached the gospel all over the world and at the time of his death Touchton operated an evangelistic mission in India.

1983 Pittsburgh, PA/John Sullivan, LA

1984 Kansas City, MO/John Sullivan, LA

T. G. “John” Sullivan (b. 1936) was serving as pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church, Shreveport, Louisiana, (1975 - 1989) at the time of his two consecutive years’ election to the SBC office. Born in Ansted, West Virginia, Sullivan also served as pastor of churches in Arizona and Texas. Sullivan served as the Executive Director-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention (1989 - 2015). Later in 2016, Sullivan was employed as the Pastor to Senior Adults, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, where he served until November 2023. In January 2024, he returned to Shreveport, Louisiana, to serve as the Pastor to Senior Adults at the Broadmoor Baptist Church.

1991 Atlanta, GA/Douglas Knapp, FL

Douglas Meriwether Knapp (b. 1927; d. 2026) was serving as director of missions for the New River Baptist Association, Keystone Heights, Florida, (1991 - 1993) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was a native of Lakeland, Florida. Knapp and his wife, Evelyn served as missionaries for the Southern Baptist Convention’s Foreign (now International) Mission Board assigned to Tanzania for 26 years (1964 - 1990). He was an agriculturalist and taught local pastors gardening to help provide food for their families and started a music ministry that led to many

new hymns written in the native language used by local musicians. Evelyn (b. 1930; d. 2012) (m. 1948) worked with youth and local women as leaders of Bible memorization and drills ministries and taught pastors in a local Bible school.

1993 Houston, TX/Jay Strack, TX

1994, Orlando, FL/Jay Strack, TX

James Henry “Jay” Strack (b. 1953) was the lead evangelist for the Jay Strack Evangelistic Association, a Dallas-based ministry which he founded in 1975. He was a member of Prestonwood Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, at the time of his two consecutive years’ election to the SBC office. He is a native of Fort Myers, Florida. His Florida ministry included serving as pastor of Friendship Baptist Church, Immokalee, Florida, (1972-1973) and the Riverside Baptist Church, Fort Myers, Florida, (1981-1984). While serving as pastor in Fort Myers the church name was changed to Exciting Riverside Baptist Church and the membership nearly doubled in size. In 2000, Strack co-founded Student Leadership University, to serve youth pastors and train students in leadership principles. Strack as an effective communicator, author and minister, now resides in Orlando, Florida.

1994 Orlando, FL/Bobby Welch, FL

Bobby Hayward Welch (b. 1943) was serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Daytona Beach, Florida, (1974-2006) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was born in Fort Payne, Alabama. Welch also served as pastor of churches in Louisiana and Tennessee. Along with First Baptist’s Minister of Evangelism Doug Williams, Welch created the F.A.I.T.H. evangelism strategy that is used widely across the Southern Baptist Convention. He served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1988) and as President of the Southern Baptist Convention (2004 - 2005) (see article in this

Journal). Welch worked for the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee as strategist for Global Evangelical Relations (2007 – 2011). In 2011 he joined the staff of the Tennessee Baptist Convention as associate executive director/church growth and served until 2015.

2001 New Orleans, LA/Ted H. Traylor, FL
Ted H. Traylor (b. 1953) was serving as pastor of Olive Baptist Church, Pensacola, Florida, (1990 - present) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He is a native of Pisgah, Alabama. Traylor also served as pastor of churches in Alabama and Texas. He served on the executive mission boards of the Texas and the Florida Baptist state conventions. Traylor currently has a weekly local television and radio ministry *At the Heart of Things*. He has served on various committees of the Southern Baptist Convention. Traylor served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (1995 - 1996).

2010 Orlando, FL/Stephen N. Rummage, FL
Stephen Nelson Rummage (b. 1968) was serving as pastor of Bell Shoals Baptist Church, Brandon, Florida, (2009 – 2019) at the time of his election to the SBC post. He was born in Greensboro, North Carolina. Rummage also served as pastor of churches in North Carolina, Louisiana and Oklahoma. He served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention (2016 to 2018). Rummage was elected by the Florida Baptist State Convention's State Board of Missions to serve as the eleventh executive director-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention effective August 2024.

2018 Dallas, TX/Jose Abella, FL
José Abella was serving as the pastor of Providence Road Church (PRC), Miami, Florida, (2010 – present) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was

born in Miami, Florida. PRC is a church which he established in 2010, whose focus has been to raise leaders to plant churches. Under his leadership, PRC has planted five churches, has come alongside to assist another 16 church plants and also hosts a Send Network Español church planting residency program. In 2024, Abella began serving as the Vice President of SEND Network Español at the North American Mission Board, where he leads initiatives to take church planting efforts to the Spanish speaking communities in North America.

2024 Indianapolis, IN/Brad Graves, OK

Brad Graves (b. 1973) was serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Ada, Oklahoma (2016-2025) at the time of his election to the SBC office. He was born in Springdale, Arkansas. Graves served as a church planter and pastor for the North American Mission (1999-2011). He planted churches and/or served in churches in Arkansas, Virginia, New Hampshire, Ohio, California, and Missouri. In November, 2025 Graves began serving as pastor of First Baptist Church, Dover, Florida.

The year 2024 was the last time a Florida Baptist served as an elected officer of the Southern Baptist Convention. However, in 2026, William E. “Willy” Rice was elected president-elect of the convention. He joined seven other Florida Baptists who previously served as SBC president (see their stories in this issue of the *Journal*).

[**Resources:** Southern Baptist Convention *Annuals*, Constitution and By-Laws; 1845, 1900, 1931, 1955, and Historical Table, 2025; Fletcher, Jesse C., *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* (1994); Harper, Keith, and Amy Whitfield, *SBC FAQs: A Ready Reference*, (2018); Hepburn, Donald S. and E. Earl Joiner, *Favored Florida: A History of Florida Baptists*, Vol. One, 1784 – 1939, (2013); newspapers.com; Florida Baptist Historical Society files; Findagrave.com; wikipedia.org; <https://www.imb.org>; and *BaptistPress.com*; First Baptist Church, Dover]

Florida Baptists Who Have Served as President of the Florida Baptist State Convention

Between 1854 and 2026 a total of ninety-seven persons served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention. These have included 81 ordained men, 15 laymen and one woman. Although the State Convention has functioned for 172 years, some earlier leaders were re-elected to multiple year terms of service. The Convention Bylaws provision permitting multi-year service as president was ended in the early twentieth century and then re-instated in 2003. It is notable that the State Convention did not meet every year during the nineteenth century, which reflects the few numbers of presidents.

Among those listed persons who served as State Convention president, only 12 served as an officer of the Southern Baptist Convention: two served as president (Bobby H. Welch and William E. “Willy” Rice) and ten served as a vice president. Notably, only one married couple each served a one-year term as president: Henry Parker (1963) and Virginia Parker (1974). [See related stories in this issue of the 2026 *Journal*.]

*Denotes layperson

Richard Johnson Mays	William N. Chaudoin
1854	1880-1885, 1889-1903
Robert Fleming	Henry Monroe King
1856-1857	1886, 1888
William B. Cooper, Sr.	Stuart Beggs Rogers
1866, 1872, 1876	1904-1909
Kinsey Chambers	C. A. Carson*
1867	1910-1913
B. S. Fuller	N. A. Blitch*
1868	1914, 1916
H. Z. Ardis	Frank Bentley*
1869	1917-1918
P. P. Bishop	O. K. Reaves*
1870-1871	1919-1920
John Henry Tomkies	Claude Walker Duke
1873, 1875-1876	1920-1921

A. A. Murphree*	J. E. Stallings
1922-1923	1957
Jacob Lee White	Julius Hillier Avery
1924-1925	1958
W. L. C. Mahon	Carl A. Howell
1926-1927	1959
Lincoln Hulley	William Hal Hunter
1928-1929	1960
William Dudley Nowlin	J. Ollie Edmunds*
1930-1931	1961
E. C. Collins*	M. B. Knight
1932-1933	1962
J. Dean Adcock	Henry A. Parker
1935-1937	1963
Thomas V. McCaul	Homer G. Lindsay, Sr.
1938-1939	1964
Charles Houston Bolton	Thomas Maxwell Johns*
1940, 1946	1965
J. Harrison Griffin	James L. Monroe
1941	1966
William Sims Allen*	Edgar R. Cooper
1942	1967 (2 sessions)
J. E. Martin	Conrad R. Willard
1943-1944	1968
Thomas Hansen	Doyle I. Carlton*
1945-1946	1969
Wallace Roland Rogers	A. Douglas Watterson
1947	1970
Doak S. Campbell*	W. G. Stracener
1948	1971
C. Roy Angell	James L. Pleitz
1949	1972
Millard J. Berquist	Joe Maurice Bamberg
1950	1973
Earl B. Edington	Virginia R. Parker*
1951	1974
Albert L. Carnett	James F. Graves
1952	1975
James W. Parrish	John L. Pelham
1953	1976
Harold Glen Sanders	Barney B. Burks, Jr.*
1954	1977
Cecil B. Carroll*	Cornelius B. Davis
1955	1978
Preston Brooks Sellers	N. B. Langford, Jr.
1956	1979

Edwin L. Mason*	M. Keith Thomas
1980	1997
Alton Butler	Jerry B. Garrard
1981	1998
William E. Anderson	Elroy Barber
1982	1999
Babb H. Adams	Ken Alford
1983	2000
Jerry A. Passmore	Jay Dennis
1984	2001
Bill G. Hickem	Dwayne E. Mercer
1985	2002
Max E. Cadenhead	J. Thomas Green
1986	2003-2004
Bill W. Coffman	Hayes P. Wicker
1987	2005-2006
Bobby H. Welch	William E. "Willy" Rice
1988	2007-2008
Bill F. Billingsley	John L. Cross
1989 (2 sessions)	2009-2010
John C. Mitchell	David Uth
1990	2011-2012
Guy S. Sanders	Timothy D. Maynard
1991	2013-2014
Edward D. Johnson	James Peoples
1992	2015-2016
O. G. "Tim" Locher	Stephen N. Rummage
1993	2017-2018
George Thomasson	Erik Cummings
1994	2019 -2020
Kenneth C. Whitten	Paul Purvis
1995	2021-2022
Ted H. Traylor	Michael Orr
1996	2023-2025
	Brian Stowe
	2025-2026

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