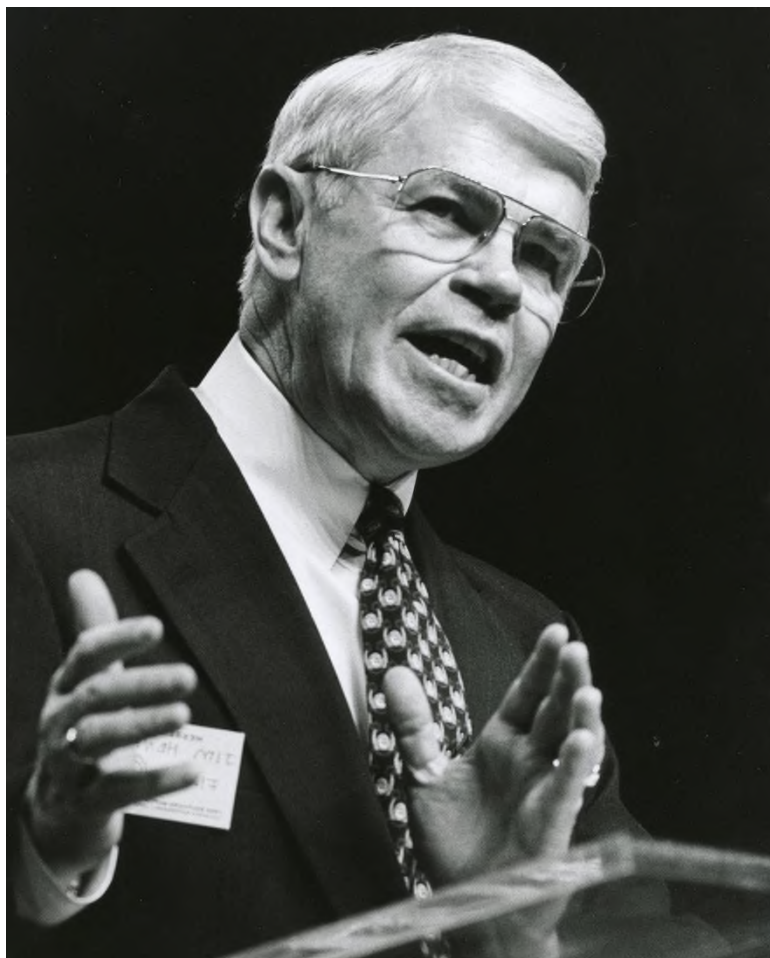




**James Bascom Henry
Served as 48th SBC President:
1995 and 1996**

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

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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

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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

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].)

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