

The causes of a ten-year decline in Southern Baptist membership.

A CHURCH HAS GONE TO HELL - Southern Baptists: A Denomination in a Decade of Decline

by John V. Rutledge

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JOHN V. RUTLEDGE

Church

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SOUTHERN
BAPTISTS:

A DENOMINATION
IN A DECADE
OF DECLINE

to

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Southern Baptists:

A denomination in a decade of decline

JOHN V. RUTLEDGE

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ISBN: 978-1-63492-230-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

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Prologue

Shrinking membership has become a routine lament at Southern Baptist annual meetings. Now it is 2017 and this year's assembly will look back on a decade of decline.

The reason, according to David W. Key, Sr., a former director of Baptist studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, is that "the denomination is no longer in sync with the dominant culture" (Hafiz n. pag.). If I understand him correctly, he was not referring to a culture of All The Baptist Bad Things, but to a culture that does not reject scientific evidence on religious grounds; a culture that refuses to take sides in the church-versus-the-world warfare enjoined by Baptist pulpiteers; a culture that avoids those who place first-century boundaries around twenty-first-century people.

History begins someplace; the mid-twentieth century will serve our purposes. Automobiles were redesigned (compare the '54 and '55 Chevrolet, Ford, and Plymouth); fifties music became a genre; the two-piece bathing suit gained acceptance (the bikini . . . not yet); television burgeoned. The content of the latter mirrored the culture: smoking was common, foul language was not. The cigarette defined the character: the suave, self-assured male; the classy blonde; the scar-faced thug; the tough, world-wise woman: all managed their cigarettes in a manner befitting their roles. Della Street, Perry Mason's immaculate secretary, was as non- as a nun. But nobody swore. Sgt. Joe Friday (Dragnet), in a machine-gun verbal assault, chewed out a smug young punk for sitting on his *bottom* and refusing to cooperate. In a toe-in-the-water test of viewer tolerance, a doctor advised officers that a vaccine was needed "damn quick," but that was damned unusual. Especially apt for our purposes were the plots themselves: they were, in a word, sappy. The good guys won, the bad guys went to prison, the tough guys softened up a bit, and the naive female learned about the ways of the world. Good people lived happily ever after.

In the Baptist fifties, church was the focus of life. Presence mattered, and there was something—several somethings—for everyone to be present for: Sunday school and worship service on Sunday morning, Training Union and worship service on Sunday evening, prayer meeting on Wednesday evening. Tuesday evening prospect visitation. Throughout the week, organizations for men, women, youth, and children. Meetings of every committee. (So many were the committees that churches elected a committee on committees.) Sunday school classes had teachers and officers, and they held meetings. To these add revivals, study courses, camps, retreats, Vacation Bible School. At Christmas and Easter, plays and musical presentations. To be a Baptist in the fifties was to be not much else.

Outside Baptist churches, time moved on, accelerating in the sixties. The pill freed women to have careers, and singles to have "relationships." Business travel increased, school sports expanded, a Catholic won the presidency. The personal computer was the pride of eighties, the Internet that of the nineties. Traditions fell and freedoms rose for every life . . . except Baptist lives, which still were mired in the fifties.

Then someone decided that forty years of the fifties were enough, and the trend train chugged into Nashville, its coaches something to behold: gleaming, plush, convenient, inviting. Churches modernized: structures, dress, and music shed the taints of religion; inside church was no different from outside church. The youth choir tour was born; buses passed each other, exchanging the choirs of First Baptist Here and First Baptist There. New worship styles accommodated the interminably adolescent. Ministries erupted like fire ant mounds, for which Ministers of Fire Ant Mounds were hired.¹

¹ This book was compiled from livestreamed Southern Baptist services. Hardly a Sunday passed that I did not see a new title flashed on the screen as the titled one stepped forth to pray or plead or promote. *Minister of Prayer and Spiritual Awakening, Minister of Assimilation and Spiritual Care, Experience Leader, Worship Associate of Creative Arts*. Pardon the shirtsleeve English, but what the hell do these people do? And does it justify their salaries? See comments on bloated staffs in Chapter 5.

But the train, despite its double-decker cars with vista views was, and still is, pulled by its coal-burning theological engine; still is dragging its quaint little dogma-red caboose. The fireman shovels his literal coal, and the dark smoke billows; the conductor waves his lantern on the back platform, ensuring that dangers to the dogma do not overtake the train.

The belief in Creation, the insistence that the rest of the Bible be taken literally, the proscription of the innocuous, and the prescription of the pointless have eliminated Southern Baptists as practical, desirable-to-be-associated-with responders to Christ's command, "Follow me."²

The previous paragraph is well attested; it came from two years of observing, online, more than 300 services of more than 100 Southern Baptist churches. I took notes, I compared, I codified, I concluded. Those services are this book; it is unvarnished, unmitigated truth: what I saw and heard, I recorded. I did not, as do Baptist preachers, revise, embellish—even create—the evidence to fit my purpose; if I say a preacher said it, he said it.

Preachers, you will not—at least, you should not—be proud of what you said, and of what you left unsaid. Members, you will be—at least, you should be—ashamed that you believed the tales told by, and succumbed to the demands made by, the preachers.

Notwithstanding its assent to the insipid musical pabulum of the entertain-us-or-else generation, the Southern Baptist Convention—by its insistence that biblical literalism overrules scientific truth, by its contention that church work is the summum bonum of life, by its rejection of human intellect as a personal guide—remains a religious relic of a century past.

² A young man who moved from the Upper Midwest to a Southern state expressed his amazement: "Those damn Baptists; they even go to church on Wednesday" (Personal conversation). He soon learned that they also were behind his inability to buy beer on Sunday. (Election day 2016: Sunday alcohol sales, on the ballot in one of that state's larger cities, finally passed.)

The three essentials for growth

In the United States, Walmart has 5,300 stores and 1,500,000 employees. McDonald's has 14,340 restaurants and 439,000 employees. The Southern Baptist Convention has 46,500 churches, with a membership of 15,000,000. (SBC employment, comprising Convention employees and church staffs, is not published, but based on the number of churches, the total could well be more than 500,000.)

The comparison provokes a question: Why are the companies growing and the denomination is not? More than forty-six thousand "stores" and fifteen million "customers" make the SBC a massive organization by any measure. Practical, intelligent guidance and a sophisticated customer base would have produced yearly increase. That there has been decline instead of growth demands critical analysis of leadership and membership.

Which we will do in the remainder of this book. More than 100 churches⁴ will present their contributions to the decline, and the author will offer practical solutions to reverse the trend. These solutions, however, as with President Hoover's recommendations for curing another depression of another day, may be considered by some to be "too radical for the times" (Burner 277). But times are not sterile abstractions; people define their times, and people can change the definition.

For the answer to the growth question, we return to the adopt / adapt / abandon trinity in the Introduction. Applied to churches, those should mean this:

- **Adopt** technology; use it wherever it will support the goals. And most churches have: websites, video presentations, livestreamed services, and social media presence. PowerPoint sermon outlines, iPads for sermon notes, and even smartphone apps. Video communication systems link multiple campuses. Television and radio ministries penetrate the remotest regions of the earth. Funding by check, credit card, bank draft, or text message. Need cash? Visit the ATM in the lobby.
- **Adapt** to changing times. Casual attire throughout is now the norm; music has been adjusted (corrupted?) to appeal—almost exclusively—to younger generations. The traditional Southern Baptist walk down the aisle in response to the invitation is being replaced with a meeting in a private setting after services. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are becoming hasty rituals, foreshortened to avoid encroachment on the rock group's performance. Even with that, both ordinances are gradually being relegated to a time outside Sunday services.

Adapting, however, comes with a caveat. Hastily undertaken, it misreads the market. Companies have done it, and that to their own hurt, adjusting their products to a garbled message of customer preference. (Had a New Coke lately?)

Churches are reaping what they have sown in their capitulation to the whims of members in prolonged immaturity. Following instead of leading, they no longer offer the fundamental appeals of church. When the young folks grow up, sanctuaries will be restored to their original dignity; rock concert paraphernalia will be on eBay; pulpits will return to the rostrum; and slovenly, jumping bean "worship pastors" will have to find real jobs. A challenge for those whose skills are limited to "Here we go," "Put your hands together," "Sing it from your heart," "That's it," "C'mon, one more time," "Yeah," "Amen? Amen?" and "C'mon church, sing it this morning."

⁴ It may be argued that 100 is too small a sample from a population of 46,500; however, as I will show, Baptist churches are as indistinguishable as pennies.

- **Abandon** the outdated, the coercive, the impractical. Legitimate candidates all, but candidates they remain; denominational detritus awaiting delivery to the ecclesiastical landfill:
 - Boring, doctrinal sermons that threaten and intimidate, but that are without pragmatic value (and often of questionable veracity).
 - Demands for literal belief in far-fetched tales from which greater benefit could be gained by probing the depths of their symbolism.
 - Insistence on total dependence on God, and the corresponding deprecation of personal industry and responsibility.
 - Chain-members-to-the-church programs that occupy time and demand money.
 - Pleas for sycophantic subservience⁵ to pastors who hold themselves to be authorities on what “God wants”⁶ everyone to believe, do, and give—especially give.

Programs and practices may receive the benefits of adopt and adapt and abandon, but the system itself—the theology and the Bible from which it comes—is immune to question. Everyone must **believe**. Facts? Research? Scientific discoveries? Logic? Common sense? Interpretation? No! faithless children, no! Those are tactics of the Evil One who seeks to dominate the wuhhld.

Fix it. Pastors, your turn has come. Throughout your ministries, you have threatened congregations with God’s wrath if they did not sacrifice; you told them to give what they could not afford, and give up what they enjoyed. Intelligent members went away, and the cowed crowd who stayed has gone along to get along; comfortable with, enduring of, the simple, silly programs and intentional biblical distortions by which you extract time and money.

Your arcane religious jargon and cloying sermons must now appear before the judgment bar of ethical intent. You are accused of chicanery, manipulation, demagoguery, and self-serving schemes.

Guilty as charged!

Upon your release from rehab, you shall opine thus:

Today I begin a series titled “*This* Southern Baptist church in the twenty-first century.” What you will hear will be uncomfortable for some and heretical for others, but for most it will be a welcome relief. You will find that you are members of a church whose beliefs are consistent with scientific evidence, whose requests for your time are tempered by an understanding of business and family obligations, and whose solicitations for your money acknowledge that government levies reduce your capacity to contribute. (And that those imposts replace the “storehouse” of Malachi, and the “all things common” solution to needs in early churches.)

⁵ In a sermon, a pastor said that members often come to him asking “if it would be OK” to miss a Sunday to, for example, visit the grandchildren or participate in a golf tournament. Tell me again that Baptists are not a cult.

⁶ Examine the phrase, “God wants.” Are any two words more routinely church-spoken and less logically defensible than these? God, the supreme, eternal, omni-everything should not be *in want* of anything. But, out of mercy to ministers, he conforms to their claims. Clipboard in hand, he looks down from heaven and scans the human herd: “Ahh, ol’ Faithful Fred; he wrote a check to the Special Sweetness Baptist Church. Just what I wanted him to do.” “Teh! Backslidden Bertha; she and Mabel and Gladys and Gertrude got together for a little chat and Chardonnay. I didn’t want them to do that.” Preachers, dammit, be truthful; replace “God wants” with “**I** want.”

Jesus offered freedom; he encouraged the enjoyment of abundance, yet I have insisted that you be in church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and as many other times as I could shame you into. I have, in embarrassing contradiction, scorned wealth, but demanded that you give generously of that with which God had blessed you. Oblivious of the burdens of taxation unknown in New Testament times, I have pleaded that you give and give more. I promised and threatened; I slathered you with fear and wrapped you in guilt. I was the chief of sinners, and I beg your forgiveness.

Jesus' plea was "follow me"; James insisted on a practical faith. The forthcoming series honors both men. Those of you who have measured your piety by how often you attend, by how much you give, and by your abstinence from that for which Baptists are known but not respected, must prepare for a different way of thinking and measuring; a biblical understanding of what God accepts as true worship.

And I assure you of this: you no longer will be embarrassed to invite anyone—even the CEO of your company—to our services. He will find that we believe and do what makes sense, and that we have abandoned all that does not.⁷

Back to beliefs. For open-minded, educated people, beliefs are placeholders that constantly must defend their place; they are ever subject to revision by better knowledge. In religion, that better knowledge has come from the sciences; they have contributed to religion what they have brought to the rest of life: enlightenment demanding acceptance and application. Evolution has destroyed Creation; cosmology supports a fourteen-billion-year-old universe; paleontology continues to fill in the gaps between modern humans and our simian ancestors. Linguistics demystifies for us what the Tower of Babel explained to the satisfaction of a primitive audience. Archaeology has forced the conclusion that biblical events either didn't happen, or were not as the Bible reports them, of which the Exodus is a convincing example (Finkelstein and Silberman 62). Mythology places the Noah tale among the destruction myths of other cultures. Many peoples had them, either by flood or by fire, and some of those predate the Bible.

The Noah story invites analysis: it gives the dimensions of the ark and lists the passengers. Read the numbers and do the math. Then, accepting as literal, every *every* and all the *alls*, await the arrival of the polar bears and the penguins; the birds, beasts, and all the creeping and crawling things. Gather their food: dietary staples peculiar to each one, and store it without refrigeration.

Even with today's technology, a twenty-first-century Noah could not assemble a consortium of shipbuilding companies able to float a behemoth to do what is claimed for the ark. Yet there remain literal believers! Those who are not literal believers in this and other myths—the majority by far—though unwashed, are not seeking salvation in tales of hogwash.

Fix it: Ministerial bookshelves⁸ and church libraries must yield space to science. Darwin, Dawkins, and their peers can replace the fantasies with facts: useful, revealing knowledge that is valid today and that will be refined by the discoveries of tomorrow. An ever-unfolding universe of wonders that compel humility before, fealty to, and worship of, the Great I Am.⁹

⁷ This is not a small thing. See Section 4.11, Discomfort for non-Baptists.

⁸ Some church Websites, in staff profiles, include a "My bookshelf" tab. One pastor listed 14 books, 13 of which were church-related. One book was on leadership, but that one was written by a religious darling-of-the-day. Preachers who read nothing of the secular world are ill-equipped to lead members who live there.

⁹ The non-fiction audio-visual section of municipal libraries contains audio books and college lectures on subjects that can free the biblical literalist from his prison.

Refusing assent to the naive mantra, “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it,” an intelligent Bible reader finds literal interpretation risible, but is awed by its practical directions, and by the enlightenment of a vast collection of allegories, metaphors, and similes. He sees the symbolism in the stories; he connects that to his own life, and he cannot suppress his response: “This makes a hell of a lot of sense!”¹⁰ An Exodus of six hundred thousand men, plus women, children, flocks and herds? Literally impossible, but symbolically expandable in all directions to illuminate aspects of both God and man.¹¹

Among twenty-first century people, some were born in the nineteen thirties, forties, and fifties. Most of these are comfortable with the fictions and sophistries with which they grew up. They have not been lifelong learners; they have adapted—selectively—to technology only as a matter of necessity; they remain distant from—and fearful of—scientific discoveries.¹² In their childhood churches, Rev. G. Norton Longloud preached literal belief, and belief was easy. Easy for the pulpit, easy for the pew. Nail the literal door shut and nothing passes in either direction; no one has to think. It is all so simple; everyone just believes. Belief, like ignorance, is effortless.

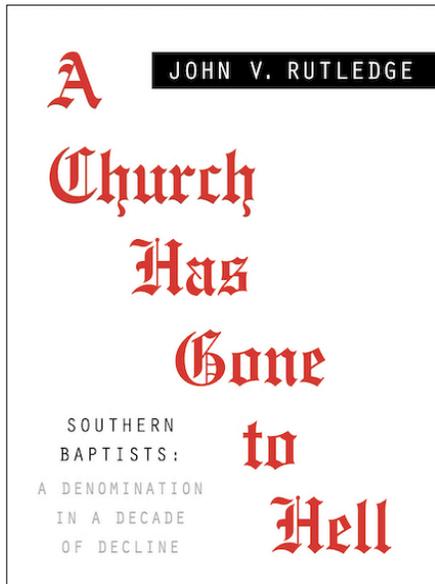
But what of future generations? I am concluding this book in 2017; children born in 2000 will become seventeen this year. How likely are they to occupy the pews of their gullible grandparents?

The literalism of earlier days was well-intentioned; it was a sparkling effervescence in the muddy intellectual pools of an unsophisticated people. Admitting this and correcting this will not be without controversy, but Baptist pastors must confront reality. As long as they beat the dead horses of literalism, they will watch riders walk away, and will observe that no others are coming in to remount the carcasses.

¹⁰ Preachers, disregard the obligatory “enjoyed your sermon,” and strive for this from every member: “Damn good sermon, pastor; made a hell of a lot of sense!” When you are confident that your message merits this approbation, your preparation is done; when your congregations confirm it, you have earned their respect. Only then do you deserve their favorable response.

¹¹ Though the Exodus and all its details are mythical and hyperbolic, the effect is to present God as the deliverer—albeit an eventual deliverer—from impossible circumstances. The story also makes clear the responsibilities of the delivered. Suicides—of both life and will—could have been prevented if the victims had placed themselves, their circumstances, and their God in this narrative. Yet preachers insist on, enthuse over, and *stop with*, literal interpretation. Nothing for Monday. Nothing to keep the coroner away.

¹² Among these doddering die-hards are those who have had open-heart surgery, laparoscopic gall-bladder removal, hip or knee replacements, and laser vision correction. Ethical consistency should have required that they decline these procedures because they were not the same as those practiced by their parents’ physicians.



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