

# PERSPECTIVE

MARCH 2021

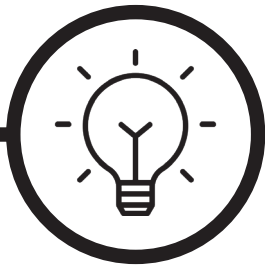


**DENOMINATIONS,  
THE SBC,**  
& serving other churches

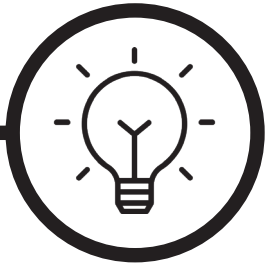
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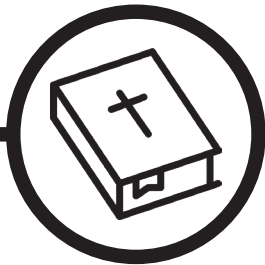
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**Aaron Menikoff**



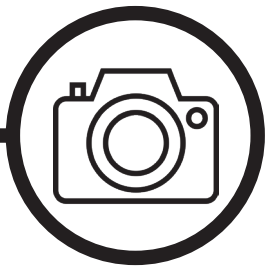
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## Denominations, the SBC, & Serving Other Churches

If you are a Christian, you should care about other churches. That's the argument I've been trying to make in the *Perspective* articles this year. Most of us, myself included, have tunnel vision. We tend to focus on what is right in front of us: our own families and churches. However, we know Jesus is the head of the *universal* church, which means he is the head of every *local* church. For example, as an American, I care about my fellow citizens in North Dakota. I've never been to North Dakota, but we are, after all, the *United States*. Similarly, as a Christian, I care about my fellow believers around the world—Christians in Decatur and Damascus. This is basic Christianity.

Historically, one of the ways we show our care for other churches is by being part of denominations. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, a denomination is "a religious group or a community of believers called by the same name." Nationally, Mount Vernon is part of the denomination known as Southern, or Great Commission, Baptists.<sup>i</sup> Churches within this denomination partner with other churches primarily to send missionaries, educate future pastors, and plant churches here in the States.

David Dockery, a Southern Baptist leader, noted denominations "have historically provided accountability, connection, coherence, structure, and organization to support churches, benevolent work, missions, and educational institutions."<sup>ii</sup> Obviously, this kind of cooperation is important and, because of the size of the Southern Baptist Convention (by recent estimates 47,000 churches), it can support many good works.

Much of what happens at the national level with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) happens at the state level with the Georgia Baptist Convention (GBC). When you give a dollar to the Cooperative Program, sixty cents go to the GBC to fund its programs, and forty cents go to the SBC.

My goal isn't to get into the history of denominationalism or the mechanics of these two conventions. I simply want to raise a couple of concerns about denominationalism today and then chart a way forward. I suggest that whatever happens at the national level, serving other churches must have a nitty-gritty feel to it—whether we are serving a church down the street or on the other side of the world. In other words, though denominations do good work, the distance between the average local

church and the national denominational leadership is putting the future of denominationalism in jeopardy.

### IS THE SBC TOO BIG?

The first concern I have about the SBC is simply its size. The sheer number of churches cooperating together, ironically, makes cooperation difficult. By difficult, I don't mean we should give up! However, we ought to acknowledge the unique challenges posed by our mammoth size.

If you pay attention to secular and Christian news, you'll notice much disagreement *within* the SBC right now. Without getting into all the details, it largely has to do with how Christians should navigate social and political issues. For example, should the heads of denominational entities be telling Christians whom to vote for? How should Christians acknowledge and address the history of racism in America and our own Christian institutions? How we tackle such political and social issues is complicated—we've seen it in our own church. Now imagine having some of these conversations in a denomination that, by some estimates, has nearly fifteen million Christians in its ranks!

Big denominations like ours can do some things really, really well. For example, we can fully fund thousands of missionaries who live overseas, often in regions of the world with little to no Christian witness. These missionaries don't have to worry about their salary or retirement. Why? Because churches within our denomination give a portion of their tithes and offerings to the Cooperative Program.

In addition to funding Christian workers overseas, we have top-notch seminaries with faculty trained in Old and New Testament studies, theology, church history, ethics, and more. These classes do much good preparing students for ministry. Though Cooperative Program giving is not the *main* funding stream for each seminary, tuition costs for most students would be significantly higher without our tithes and offerings. As a pastor with two degrees from Southern Seminary, I'm certainly grateful for that giving.

However, to be honest, big denominations do some things really poorly.

It's extremely difficult to have careful, nuanced conversations about important issues. Politics is one example. Is it appropriate for a Christian denomination like ours to invite a politician to address it? For many, the answer is obviously "yes." Advocates insist we ought to do everything we can to promote those whose moral values align with ours, especially if they have the power to influence our nation's direction. However, critics of this practice insist giving politicians a platform at

denominational events invites a marriage between the church and politics that Jesus seems to discourage in Mark 12:17 and John 18:36.<sup>iv</sup> These two sides are at odds. One side says to the person eager to have a pro-life politician on stage, “Don’t you care about the purity of the church?” Meanwhile, the other side asks the person who thinks it a bad idea, “Don’t you care about the future of our nation?”

Race is another example. There is no denying the Southern Baptist Convention was birthed on the wrong side of history when it comes to racism. In fact, the messengers to the 1995 annual meeting in Atlanta issued a formal resolution apologizing to African-Americans “for condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime.”<sup>v</sup> Twenty-five years later, SBC leaders are at odds over how to address the lingering effects of racism. Some argue it’s time to stop apologizing and move on. Others insist we have more work to do, acknowledging our history and speaking out against racism much the way we speak out against abortion. These two sides are at odds. One side says to the person eager to make racism a more central issue, “Can’t you acknowledge America is the greatest nation on earth?” Meanwhile, the other side asks the person ready to move on, “Can’t you acknowledge people of color are still discriminated against?”

There are well-meaning Christians on both sides of these issues. But how can brothers and sisters enter into meaningful, substantive, charitable conversations at annual meetings which host as many as ten thousand messengers?<sup>vi</sup> These gatherings are too large to get into the weeds of questions like these. We can simply vote up or down, or for or against the proposals of leaders who have been appointed or elected to bring issues to the floor. Such careful conversations may be happening behind-the-scenes, but the fruit of these discussions is not made public. The tone of the public discourse makes it unlikely that profitable conversations are taking place in closed quarters.

Furthermore, the size of this denomination means it is impossible for churches within the convention to know each other well. We should praise God there are churches in Alaska and Arizona, New Mexico and New Hampshire. However, the vastness of our nation and the sheer number of churches in our convention means it is extremely difficult to foster the kind of relationships that makes healthy, God-honoring conversation about tough questions possible.

### IS THE SBC HEALTHY?

The size of the SBC is one problem. Let me bring up one more: differing views on the practice of church membership make cooperation hard. In other words, it’s not just the size of this denomination that’s a problem; it’s the *health*.

A couple of years ago, the SBC reported having a total membership of 15.2 million people. Each person represents a member of a local church. At the same time, the SBC reported 5.2 million people gathering on any given Sunday morning.<sup>vii</sup> Of course, some of those in attendance would be non-Christians, children who aren’t members, and people visiting from other denominations. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that on any given Sunday morning, the vast majority of individuals who call themselves members of SBC churches aren’t actually attending the church to which they belong—roughly 65 percent.<sup>viii</sup> This was long before Covid-19!

What does this suggest about the health of many SBC churches? They are unhealthy. No, going to church doesn’t make anyone a Christian. Not at all! We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. To be a Christian is to *love* other Christians, which is why the author of Hebrews didn’t speak of church attendance in terms of reluctantly checking a box but as joyfully loving your brothers and sisters. Notice how he phrases his charge to gather: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching” (Heb. 10:25). For all those physically able, gathering in-person with other believers is not an option. It’s the call of the Bible.<sup>ix</sup>

How can a denomination of churches be truly healthy if such a large percentage of its members don’t do the basic work of showing up to “stir up one another to love and good works”? It can’t.

One of the distinguishing marks of being Baptist is believing church membership is for believers only. This is why we only baptize those with a credible profession of faith (in other words, we don’t baptize babies who, obviously, cannot profess faith in Christ). At Mount Vernon, before someone joins the church, we do the work of hearing their testimony, asking them questions, and doing all we can to make sure they understand how Christian discipleship and church membership go together.

What then should we say when millions and millions are, on paper, members of “our” churches but don’t regularly attend? Baptism is just the *start* of the Christian life. We’re to reaffirm our faith as we gather together to hear the Word preached and to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. We should expect true believers to grow in grace and godliness. Of course, none of us are perfect. We all struggle, and these struggles vary from person to person. Still, every true believer’s trajectory is the same: greater degrees of sanctification, which is, simply, growth in holiness.

When it comes to our national denomination, millions are absent. This reality, however, is rarely discussed—at least not publicly. If only half of my family showed up for dinner every day, I'd know my family is broken. Sadly, much less than half of the members of SBC churches are showing up for the Sunday meal. Something is broken. Again, how can a national denomination of Christian churches be healthy if this is reality?

Long story short, given the size of our denomination and its lack of spiritual health, cooperation is really hard.

#### IS THERE A WAY FORWARD?

Ironically, the way forward is the way backward. Denominations didn't start as giant programs covering thousands of miles and millions of people. They started as small networks of pastors and churches who worked hard to know each other well. This personal knowledge created good relationships, which allowed for hard conversations and much spiritual growth.

It's easy to throw stones and complain about denominational life. I know there is no perfect denomination, even as there is no perfect church. My main concern is not with our denomination. My chief priority is to help the members of Mount Vernon obey Scripture, and this includes the call to serve other churches. I have identified this call as *knowing, encouraging, strengthening, and sharing with other churches, all for the sake of the gospel*. This requires more than annual meetings—it requires relationships. The way forward is to do network building at the local level. How do we do this at Mount Vernon?

Last month we hosted Feed My Sheep, an annual conference for pastors, church leaders, and really anyone interested in church life. Mount Vernon supported this ministry financially, but you also supported it with your volunteer hours and your prayer time. Keeping the conference to just a day keeps it small and regional. We had about forty churches, mainly from Georgia. These are churches, over time, that we are getting to know. Our goal is to encourage the pastors to persevere in the ministry, remind them they aren't alone, and develop relationships that may very well last a lifetime.

In October, we are hosting Feed My Sheep for Pastors Wives. This overnight retreat is going to provide a theologically-deep respite from the hard but important work of ministry. Once again, this won't be a large event—the goal isn't to have the large event. The goal is simply to bring women together who may not get the encouragement they need—that we all need—to keep our hand to the plow.

Feed My Sheep is a ministry of Mount Vernon. However, there are other networking ministries we don't lead that still allow us to serve other churches. The most tangible is the Greater Atlanta Baptist Network (GABN). Every Sunday morning, I pray for a church that is part of GABN. Every month, I lead a pastors' fellowship where anywhere from 15–30 brothers come to discuss God's Word, pray for one another's churches, and talk about some practical aspects of pastoral ministry. In addition, because GABN has no staff, all the money we receive is given directly to strategic ministry. This year, GABN is contributing toward a church plant in East Point, an internship program at a great church in Decatur, a church planter heading to the DR, a mercy ministry in Tucker—and that's just a few of the ministries we are able to significantly fund because GABN has no staff.

A few months ago, Mount Vernon joined the Pillar Network of churches. All churches within Pillar are part of the SBC. The leadership of Pillar is working hard to promote biblical church membership as well as to connect churches to one another at the local level. As the years go on, my prayer is that Pillar will be able to promote and help organize some of the fruitful networking we've seen take place here in Atlanta and Georgia.

Of course, God is working outside of Atlanta, and a key component of serving other churches is our relationships with brothers and sisters who are part of churches overseas. We don't just want to send missionaries; we want to put our resources behind missionaries with a great understanding of what a local church ought to be. As the years go on, we can encourage these Christian workers and the congregations God may use them to start. One of the most strategic mission trips you can ever take is a trip designed to encourage a pastor and his team planted in a part of the world in desperate need of larger and deeper gospel influence. From Central Asia to Munich, Kenya, and, most recently, Fujairah, UAE, we are serving other churches that bring the gospel to the darkest corners of the world.

I do believe there is a role for large national networks like the SBC. However, unless local churches recapture a vision for *knowing, encouraging, strengthening, and sharing with other churches*, the future of denominationalism is dark. House Speaker Tip O'Neill once said, "all politics is local." In my opinion, all denominationalism should be local too.

– Aaron Menikoff



- <sup>i</sup> The name of our denomination is, legally, the Southern Baptist Convention. However, the Convention voted to accept being designated “Great Commission Baptists” to weaken the affiliation to one geographic region of the United States.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and the Future of Denominationalism*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H, 2011), 35.
- <sup>iii</sup> Go to the MVBC annual budget, turn to the section on missions, and you’ll see a line-item for the Cooperative Program.
- <sup>iv</sup> Mark 12:17, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” John 18:36, “But my kingdom is not from the world.”
- <sup>v</sup> The language of the entire resolution can be found at <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-racial-reconciliation-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-the-southern-baptist-convention/>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Each church is allowed to send a certain number of representatives, on its behalf to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. Those representatives may vote on issues at the annual meeting. They are called, messengers.
- <sup>vii</sup> See “Some Facts About the Southern Baptist Convention,” *Associated Press* (6 June 2018), found at <https://www.foxnews.com/us/some-facts-about-the-southern-baptist-convention>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Why is this the case? Consider diving into *Conversion: How God Creates a People* by Michael Lawrence (Crossway, 2017) or Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Crossway, 2013).
- <sup>ix</sup> If you are reading this during the pandemic and you simply can’t gather with the body, we all understand God is gracious. He cares about our health and the health of others. 2020 and 2021 has been a difficult season, but one that will soon pass.

## How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?

Written by Andrew David and Jonathan Leeman

Have you ever had a conversation with a brother or sister at church about politics? Were you surprised to learn that they voted differently than you in the last election? Maybe you thought to yourself, “Why do they hate America (or fellow human beings, freedom, justice, etc.)?” or “How can they vote like that and call themselves a Christian?” If you have had that conversation (or haven’t yet), then the little booklet *How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?* is for you. At less than 60 pages, it is a quick read and is very useful.

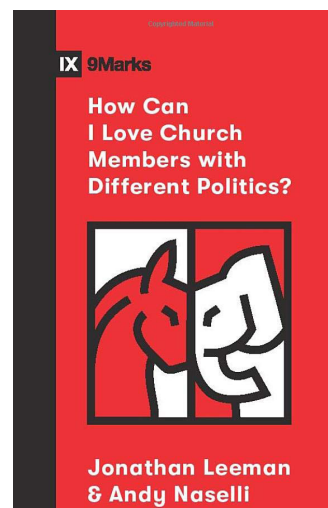
First, the authors don’t minimize politics in the Christian life. They start by telling us that the God-given “work of government is fundamentally the work of justice.” This means that as Christians, those who have been justified by Christ, it is natural and good for us to care about issues of justice and human flourishing. Christians can’t, nor should try to, leave behind our identity as followers of Jesus when we enter the public square.

Second, because we are “People of the Book,” we have God’s divine revelation and guidance about life’s fundamentals. For instance, mankind is made in God’s image; therefore, all life is precious. Marriage is the covenant union between one man and one woman. Humanity’s primary problem is sin, and the solution to that problem is Christ—Christ crucified. When Christians say these things, we repeat what God has revealed about himself in Scripture, so we speak with God’s authority.

However, we Christians can create problems when we believe we are speaking with God’s authority on less fundamental issues. Am I speaking with God’s authority when I say that taxes should be lowered (or raised)? What about my stance on trade policy, the environment, border security, or school choice? These are justice issues for sure, but if I disagree with a brother or sister about a particular policy, is one of us in sin? Is correction or even church discipline required?

Leeman and Naselli offer helpful categories and several recommendations for how Christians can think about these questions and not be silent. We must engage and love other believers with different viewpoints in our local church for God’s glory and our good.

— RECOMMENDED BY BEN BREWER



Excerpts From  
the Book

**1**

“We’re interested in the disagreements that affect your heart’s posture or that hinder fellowship with another person in your church. Maybe you feel scorn. Maybe you are angry that they support a cause that you are convinced is unjust. You might even find yourself questioning their profession of faith: “How can they be Christians and support that?!”

— p.11

**2**

“The gospel does not automatically resolve all our wisdom-based political judgments in the here and now. It helps us to love and forbear with one another amid those different wisdom-based judgments. It creates unity amid diversity, not uniformity.”

— p.26

**3**

“We must treat God’s Book with holy reverence and fear. We must take great care to distinguish its authoritative and inerrant wisdom from our own. To help with that, Jesus established local churches.”

— p.45

## ***Dying to Speak: Meditations from the Cross***

Written by Anthony Carter and Lee Fowler

Jesus' single purpose in life was to do his Father's will (Jn. 6:38-40). Everything he did was with that goal in mind. Everything he *said* was part of his Father's will, including the final words he spoke when dying on the cross.

In *Dying to Speak: Meditations from the Cross*, Anthony Carter and Lee Fowler examine and apply Jesus' last words on the cross. They write, "Our goal at this time is to show that Christ, in dying, spoke words full of the ongoing saving and redeeming power of God in our lives" (15). They observe nothing remarkable about Jesus' crucifixion—meaning, the form and experience were no different from many other crucifixions administered by the Romans, including that of the two men crucified with Jesus. Part of what makes Jesus' crucifixion remarkable are his dying words. They were words of "conviction, clarity, and control" spoken by the "Son of God, Messiah, Shepherd of our souls, and Savior of the world" (13-14).

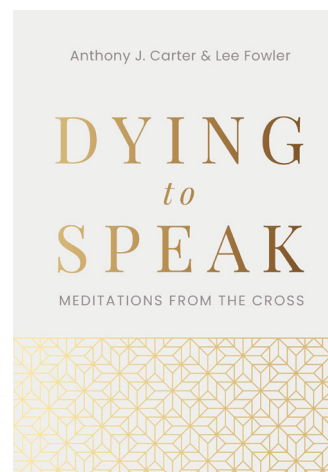
I found there to be four ways to best read this book. First, read it as part of your quiet times. That's what I did. After my Bible reading, I read one chapter and prayed about what I had read. Second, make it part of family worship. It may be a bit much for preschoolers, but it's very accessible for elementary and older children.

Third, read it out loud in a discipling relationship. It's not a heavy theological lift, so it may not lead to many deep discussions. But much of it is very insightful. I was encouraged by chapter 5, "Be Refreshed," reflecting on Jesus saying, "I thirst" (Jn.19:28). This should lead you and another Christian to thoughtful prayers and meditation.

Fourth, give it to a churchd non-Christian. To be clear, the book is written for Christians, but its content is the heart of Christianity—Jesus' death on the cross. Any non-Christian raised in a gospel-preaching church or familiar with biblical Christianity will understand much of what's written. Most importantly, each chapter calls for a response to Jesus' words, as indicated by the chapter titles. Jesus' dying words are the very ones our non-Christian friends need.

*Dying to Speak* is a brief devotional book. Its seven chapters explore the seven things Scripture records Jesus speaking on the cross. Carter and Fowler provide perceptive explanations and applications of the texts. It is an excellent book to read to prepare for Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. This book is an easy and delightful read.

— RECOMMENDED BY BRAD THAYER



### Excerpts From the Book

# 1

"The power of Christianity is the power of forgiveness. Make no mistake about it. God's most magnanimous act is his forgiving rebellious sinners. Forgiveness is his delight, and it stands as the chief outworking of his exceedingly exalted attribute: love."

— Be Forgiven, p.22

# 2

"Yet, according to Jesus, the greatest love is not love for self but love for others. The greatest love looked down from the cross and reminded us that love is selfless. Jesus looked down at his mother, looked down at his beloved disciple John, and said what no doubt he had said to them many times before: "Love one another."

— Be Loved, p.37

# 3

"Contentment is a quality learned through the crucible of life. Contentment separates, in this world, the ordinary from the extraordinary... The contented man or woman has become assured on this earth that heaven is to be preferred and is worth the wait."

— Be Satisfied, p.72



# MARCH

*These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!*

March 1	2 Samuel. 5	March 17	John 13:21–38
March 2	2 Samuel 1	March 18	John 14
March 3	2 Samuel 2	March 19	John 15
March 4	2 Samuel 3	March 20	2 Samuel 7:1–13
March 5	2 Samuel 4	<b>March 21</b>	<b>1 John 5:1–12</b>
March 6	1 Peter 2:13–25	March 22	1 John 5:13–20
<b>March 7</b>	<b>2 Samuel 5</b>	March 23	John 16:1–15
March 8	2 Samuel 6	March 24	John 16:16–33
March 9	2 Samuel 7	March 25	John 17
March 10	2 Samuel 8	March 26	John 18:1–14
March 11	2 Samuel 9	March 27	Isaiah 42:6–8
March 12	2 Samuel 10	<b>March 28</b>	<b>1 John 5:13–20</b>
March 13	Revelation 14:6–12	March 29	Acts 3:11–4:12
<b>March 14</b>	<b>2 Samuel 6</b>	March 30	Acts 1:1–11
March 15	1 John 5:1–12	March 31	Acts 1:12–26
March 16	John 13:1–20		

**\*Sermons in bold**

# TAKE UP & READ

# NEW MEMBERS

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Kyle Buck



Laura Swann



Carianne  
Whitlow



*Mount Vernon*  
BAPTIST CHURCH