

Comments on the Great Commission Resurgence Proposal

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The Great Commission Resurgence Task Force was organized to examine denominational entities and make recommendations on how we as a denomination can be more effective in missionary work. Formation of the task force was approved during the 2009 Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Louisville, Kentucky and the task force will present its final proposal at the 2010 SBC meeting in Orlando, Florida.

The final proposal was released to the public on May 3rd and is available at <http://www.pray4gcr.com/>. The document is 27 pages long and consists of four sections:

- Introduction
- Proposal, presented in seven components
- Summary of the recommendation to the SBC
- Concluding challenges to individuals, churches, and entities of the SBC

In my comments on the GCR proposal I'm going to try hard not to nitpick. There were a number of statements that jumped out as really good, and a number of statements that jumped out as really bad. Many of the bad statements point to deeper problems within the SBC. I discuss one of those bad statements in a [previous blog post](#). But for the purpose of this post, I want to remain focused on what the GCR proposal is intended to bring about, what specific recommendations are being proposed, and whether or not I think the recommendations are good.

Several months ago, the GCR Task Force released a [rough draft](#) of their proposal. At that time the document had little more than the opening introduction/sermon and the proposal itself. Now, however, the final report includes a section of challenges to Southern Baptists. I think the challenges are the best part of the document and am thrilled to see them in the final report.

Introduction

The introduction of the GCR proposal provides some background for the GCR work and gives reasons why changes are needed within the denomination. The discussion in this section takes place under five headings which I will comment on briefly:

Needed: A Great Commission Resurgence

This brief section contained a call for each generation of Southern Baptists to recommit to the Great Commission.

Assignment: A Great Commission Motion

Here, writers of the proposal gave the history behind the formation of the Great Commission Resurgence Task Force. The task force was formally formed with the overwhelming passage of the following motion at the 2009 SBC meeting:

That the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting June 23-24, 2009 in Louisville, Kentucky, authorize the President of the Southern Baptist Convention to appoint A Great Commission Task Force charged to bring a report and any recommendations to the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Orlando, Florida, June 15-16, 2010, concerning how Southern Baptists can work more faithfully and effectively together in serving Christ through the Great Commission.

The task force is made up of 22 denominational leaders, pastors, and laymen.

Urgency: A World of Lostness

The need for a Great Commission Resurgence is emphasized in the report by highlighting the estimated number of lost people around the world. There are nearly seven billion people in the world and at least six billion are lost.

Just in the United States, the numbers are not looking good. Christianity is on the decline. From World War II to today, the estimated number of American Christians has fallen from 65 percent to 15 percent (the report uses these numbers; I'm not sure where they are from). Today, the SBC has 17,000 more churches than in 1950, yet in 1950 there were 33,000 more baptisms than today. The number of teenagers being baptized today is half the number baptized in 1970.

One issue I had throughout the document begins to show up in this section. There is a persistent tone that American Christians, particularly Baptists, have not done enough, that if we only ran a tighter ship with more workers we would not see such a decline in Christianity. We are told to work harder in order to turn the numbers around. But a decline should not surprise us. Scripture tells us that wickedness will increase on the earth until the return of Christ. There are moments in time when God brings revival and we see society turn toward God, but such times are the exception. This does not mean we should build bunkers and hide away until the return of Christ. I absolutely agree with the task force that we must seek greater faithfulness in evangelism. We are responsible to be faithful to the call of the Great Commission. Through the GCR proposal, the task force seeks to help us as Southern Baptists be more faithful. But I wish they would have avoided language that made it sound as though all we have to do is work harder and revival will come. As the task force mentions in another section, "only God can bring this about."

My approach at my church has been to say, "Let us be sure we are being as faithful as possible to this work. We will leave the results up to God." Hard work is not promised observable results, but faithfulness will always yield eternal reward.

Reality: What is Holding us Back?

This section is really just an extension of the previous section, but instead of looking at the numbers out in the world, attention is given to finances within the SBC. The primary issue addressed in this section is the low percentage of money that makes it to the mission boards. To summarize their numbers: the average SBC church member only gives 2.5% of his income to his church; the average SBC church only sends 6% of its budget to the Cooperative Program; the average SBC state convention only forwards 37% of its CP money to the national SBC. This means only a small fraction of SBC giving finds its way to the International Mission Board or the North American Mission Board.

I believe one of the main concerns of the task force - and of many individual Southern Baptists - is with the amount of money being kept by the state conventions. Most Southern Baptists likely assume that most of their CP giving is going to missions work around the world, not remaining within the state. But in reality, 2/3rds of all CP giving remains within the states (as we will see later, it is actually more than 2/3rds since NAMB uses its CP dollars to pay for some ministries of the state conventions), funding what appears to many to be bloated bureaucracies or redundant or unnecessary ministries. There are a lot of good ministries sponsored by state conventions, but many of those ministries should be in the hands of the local churches or national entities, not the state convention. And while there are good ministries being performed with CP dollars, there are also unnecessary positions, departments, committees, and travel expenses that drain away money which would otherwise go to more important missions work.

Back to Basics: A Theology for Great Commission Faithfulness

The final section of the introduction contains an overview of the importance of great commission work. Included in this section is a great summary of man's need and God's gift:

We believe that every single person is a sinner, alienated from God and without hope apart from Christ. We are confident that God saves sinners by His grace and for His glory, and that our salvation is secured through the atoning life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that salvation is given to all who come to a saving knowledge of Christ, trusting in Him and in Him alone for our salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of everlasting life. We declare to the whole world our belief that Jesus saves - this same Jesus who is the divine God-man, our substitutionary Savior, and reigning Lord, the Head of His church.

Being aware of the current discussion in the SBC between Calvinist and non-Calvinist folks, I am glad to see a well-crafted expression of sin and salvation that can be embraced by both sides.

Given the heavy bureaucracy of the SBC, I also liked the following statement: "We must also affirm the primacy and centrality of the local church in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention. The New Testament identifies the church as the central instrument of the kingdom

of God. We must return the local church to the primacy and centrality in the life and work of our denomination at every level.” I would really like to see this come about. It is my feeling that churches have very little say in the goings-on of the SBC, whether at the state or the national level. For instance, even if the SBC votes overwhelmingly in favor of the GCR recommendations at the 2010 meeting, the various entities are free to ignore the vote. The entities are controlled by their boards of trustees and in general those boards are not bound by votes at the SBC floor. This is why the Conservative Resurgence took so long and required what some see as underhanded methods; there was simply no other way to reign in the denomination. In fact, Morris Chapman, head of the Executive Committee, has at least implied that trustees are free to ignore the GCR recommendations, defying the will of the SBC (<http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=32781> “Should this happen [passage of the GCR recommendations at the SBC], although the task force will no longer exist, members of the task force and the SBC president, if inclined, will have the green light to insist that the SBC Executive Committee and other entities are mandated to approve the GCRTF recommendations. While this is not true, it does demonstrate the kind of pressure that likely is to be exerted by task force members and others.”). Chapman is right that no one can force trustees to act a certain way, but shouldn’t we expect that SBC trustees would respect the will of the SBC?

Proposal

The GCR proposal is split into seven components, or recommendations, for the SBC to consider. I am not sure if the components will be presented individually or as a package deal. Some of the components don’t make sense unless they are joined with others (#6 and #7, for example) so at least some of them will probably be presented together.

On February 22, 2010, the GCR task force presented an interim report to the Executive Committee of the SBC. The interim report was released for public study and comment. One thing that struck me as a notable difference between the interim and final reports is that the final report is less specific than the interim report. I actually feel better about the final report. It provides more room for affected entities to decide how best to implement the proposals. Instead of the proposal telling entities, “Here’s what you need to do, and here’s how you need to do it,” it says, “here’s what you need to do, now figure out the best way to do it.”

At the end of each component there is a summary statement of the recommendation. As I talk about the components I will start by giving the summary statement. Without further ado, here are the components and my take on them.

Component One: Getting the Mission Right

...we will ask Southern Baptists to adopt this missional vision as a statement of what draws us together, establishes our purposes, and defines our passion before our churches and the watching world.

The first component calls for a renewed vision for missions among Southern Baptist Churches. This missional vision would be: “As a convention of churches, our missional vision is to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to every person in the world and to make disciples of all nations.” And on the role of this statement in churches: “This missional vision must drive everything that Southern Baptists do, and reset every priority of the local church.”

I have three responses. First, I don’t really get mission statements. Historically, Baptists have claimed, “No creed but Christ!” or “no creed but the Bible!” Today, I sometimes feel we should add to that, “and our mission statement!” Those individuals and churches not already aware of our need to spread the gospel will not suddenly become motivated through a mission statement.

Second, as far as mission statements go, this one is decent enough - if we keep it focused on the missions work of the church (more on that in a moment). It is a good, concise statement of the Great Commission. But again, I don’t think it is necessary - Matthew 28:18-20 presents a much better missional vision.

Third, the mission statement is pushed way harder than it should be. I have written more about this elsewhere so I won’t go into detail here, but the first priority of the local church is not missions. As I wrote elsewhere, the main purpose of the local church is to glorify God and we do that through two functions: helping believers grow in the image of Christ (discipleship), and spreading the gospel throughout the world (missions/evangelism). For too long and all too often the SBC has emphasized evangelism while neglecting our great need for discipleship. Missions is one of our priorities, but it is not our only priority.

Component Two: Making Our Values Transparent

...we will call Southern Baptists to embrace and adopt these Core Values as a means of ensuring that we work together in a way that will please our Lord and reflect our identity as fellow believers in service to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Component two is really a subset of component one. While component one presents a mission statement for the SBC, component two lists eight “core values” for the SBC:

1. Christ-likeness
2. Truth
3. Unity
4. Relationships
5. Trust
6. Future
7. Local church
8. Kingdom

The report also gives a brief explanation of each value.

As with mission statements, I don't get core values. While this list contains good, necessary characteristics of Christians, I don't understand the purpose of such a list. What do we do with it? This list is too concise to be comprehensive of all of the Bible's "core values" so a number of things are left off the list which should be high priority for Christians. I'm left wondering why a list of core values is better than a simple statement along the lines of, "Southern Baptists believe the Bible to be the inerrant, inspired word of God and we draw our values and priorities from the commands of Scripture." I don't want to point people to a mission statement or a list of values, I want to point people to the Bible.

That said, I do believe there is value in creeds ([Apostle's](#) and [Nicene](#) are good) and confessions ([2000 BF&M](#), [1689 LBC](#), and the [Three Forms of Unity](#) are good) as ways of clarifying what we believe about the Bible and the doctrines of the Bible, but mission statements and core values are too short to serve this purpose.

Component Three: Celebrating and Empowering Great Commission Giving

...we will call upon Southern Baptists to give as never before, to support the Cooperative Program as never before, and to celebrate every church's eager and sacrificial support of Great Commission Giving at every level.

There are several ways that Southern Baptist ministries receive funding. The normal channel for funding is through the Cooperative Program. Most Southern Baptist churches designate a certain percentage of their budget for the Cooperative Program. Churches send CP money to their state convention which keeps a portion for state work and sends the rest to the national SBC.

In addition to the Cooperative Program, there are several special offerings each year to support international missions, North American missions, state missions, children's homes, and perhaps other special offerings for other works. Those funds generally go directly to the entities, bypassing the Cooperative Program. For example, the Lottie Moon offering collects money that goes directly to the International Mission Board.

Some churches, wanting to ensure that more of their money reaches IMB or NAMB rather than remaining within the state convention, will send money year-round through the special offerings. A church might designate a very low percentage of their budget to the Cooperative Program but a higher percentage to the International Mission Board through Lottie Moon.

The third component of the GCR proposal calls for churches to increase their commitment to the Cooperative Program, but it also calls for the denomination to recognize all the financial support SBC churches give to SBC causes. Currently, churches might be evaluated based on their giving to the Cooperative Program. The third component would change it so that churches report all their giving to Southern Baptist work, not just their giving to the Cooperative Program. As it is, churches do report all of their giving but most of the attention goes to CP giving.

Overall, I'm indifferent to this recommendation. While I think it is ridiculous to evaluate a church - or a pastor! - on the basis of the church's CP giving, I don't know that this recommendation will really accomplish anything. It might change how a few things look on paper but it won't change how anything gets done.

Within the recommendation, however, are several challenges, such as calling on churches to increase CP giving. State conventions are also challenged to forward more money on through the Cooperative Program. Entities are encouraged to be more careful and more faithful to use CP money for good, effective ministry. While I am indifferent to the recommendation itself, I think most of the challenges (the last one is a bit quirky) are good.

Component Four: Reaching North America

...we will ask Southern Baptists to unleash the North American Mission Board for a new era of leadership and service to Southern Baptists, pushing back against the lostness of the United States and Canada.

The fourth component contains the biggest changes proposed in the GCR report. It involves a fairly fundamental restructuring of the North American Mission Board, turning it into a Southern Baptist church planting network focused on reaching regions that currently do not have a strong Southern Baptist presence.

The recommendation lists six changes to NAMB:

1. Direct the focus of NAMB to the regions of North America that have less Christian witness: "...implement a missional strategy for planting churches in North America with a priority to reach metropolitan areas and underserved people groups." In addition, challenge SBC churches to take responsibility for planting new churches with NAMB assistance.
2. Increase the cooperation of NAMB and Lifeway in developing materials to train pastors in discipleship.
3. Along with item 2, give NAMB the task of pastoral leadership development, with a particular focus on training for "contextual evangelism and church planting".
4. Focus NAMB spending on unreached areas. The report notes that "approximately two-thirds of our Cooperative Program dollars are spent on regions where only one-third of the population resides... the greatest percentage of mission funds remains where our own churches are concentrated."
5. Eliminating cooperative agreements. This goes along with item 4 and is perhaps the biggest item. From what I can gather, much of NAMB's current work is done through cooperative agreements with state conventions, so rather than establishing their own workers and support structure, NAMB works through state conventions. But this means states with a stronger Baptist presence have a greater chance of entering into cooperative agreements with NAMB, keeping NAMB money in regions that already have a lot of

Baptist churches. By ending cooperative agreements and charging NAMB to focus on metropolitan and underserved areas, money would flow back to less-reached areas.

6. Even though cooperative agreements would come to an end, the report calls for NAMB to work in partnership with state conventions.

I think this component is ultimately good, yet risky, with a dash of bad. On the good side, I like the idea of turning NAMB into a more sophisticated church planting network, independent from, though working with, state conventions. Many young church planters are moving to groups like the Acts 29 Network. The proposed changes would turn NAMB into a church planting network more accessible to young planters.

Ending the cooperative agreements will also send money where it needs to go. Currently, the money is funding some good ministries but it is funding good ministries in places that already have good ministries. The money needs to go to regions that have few if any ministries.

On the risky side, in component three we noted the challenge to state conventions to increase the amount of money given to the Cooperative Program, yet component four would eliminate one of the sources of funding for state conventions and component six would increase some of the responsibilities of state conventions. Which is more likely: that states will reduce their own spending in order to increase (or just maintain) giving to the Cooperative Program, or that states will reduce their Cooperative Program giving in order to keep all of their programs in place? If states do reduce CP giving, all national entities will suffer. Seminaries, mission boards, and other entities of the SBC all receive a fixed percentage of CP giving. If states reduce what they send, all entities - not just NAMB - will take a hit.

On the bad side, I'm not crazy about items 2 and 3. I am not a fan of Lifeway's material, and I'm not crazy about most of what passes for leadership development these days. These items have the potential to produce good results, but I'm not optimistic.

Also, I'm not clear why NAMB would need to take on any training role to begin with. We already have six seminaries that serve to train and prepare men for ministry. What are the seminaries not doing that NAMB would need to do?

Component Five: Reaching Unreached and Underserved People Groups Within North America

...we will ask Southern Baptists to entrust to the International Mission Board the ministry of reaching unreached and underserved people groups without regard to any geographic limitation.

Recognizing the increase of world travel and relocation, the GCR proposal recommends that the borders of IMB be expanded to include work within North America. There are many

international groups now living within North America and many of our churches and conventions are not equipped to reach these groups.

IMB has the training and resources to reach internationals within the United States and Canada. The proposal does not state *how* IMB would go about reaching internationals in North America, just that they should be allowed to do so. This would also help keep NAMB focused on church planting rather than on organizing ministries to internationals.

One interesting statement in this component is that “we are fully confident that these two mission boards can and will serve Southern Baptists and maximize their combined reach by working together.” When the GCR task force first started its work there were rumors that the task force would recommend merging IMB and NAMB. But the task force has made it clear that the mission boards will continue to exist separate from each other and would serve different functions. IMB will expand to do some work in North America, but it will not displace the NAMB work of church planting.

Component Six: Promoting the Cooperative Program and Elevating Stewardship

We strongly encourage the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention to work with the state conventions, charged with the responsibility of Cooperative Program and stewardship education, in developing a strategy for encouraging our churches to greater participation and investment in the Cooperative Program. This is an immediate need, made more urgent by the rise of a new generation of Southern Baptists, ready for leadership and deployment in service to the Great Commission. Our hope is that a unified strategy with clearly established goals will be in place by the meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in 2013.

In 1995 the Executive Committee of the SBC was given the responsibility of promoting giving through the Cooperative Program. Later, all stewardship promotion was given to the Executive Committee. Prior to that, such promotion was the work of state conventions. The GCR task force recommends that the work of CP promotion and stewardship education be given back to the state conventions.

I'm somewhat indifferent to this. I'm not sure about putting another burden on state conventions at the same time that funding is pulled from them (removal of the NAMB cooperative agreements), but I can see the value of moving promotion away from the Executive Committee. It seems odd to me that they would have received this task to begin with.

Component Seven: The Call of the Nations and the SBC Allocation Budget

We ask Southern Baptists to support this goal by affirming an intention to raise the Cooperative Program SBC Allocation Budget percentage received by the

International Mission Board to 51 percent. Further, we ask that Southern Baptists affirm the intention to fund this increase through a reduction in the budget granted to Facilitating Ministries, thus making a statement about our commitment to reducing denominational infrastructure in order to set the pace for growth in commitment to reaching the nations.

Components six and seven go together. With the reduction in the responsibilities of the Executive Committee, they (or more specifically, Facilitating Ministries) would lose 1% of the Cooperative Program money. That 1% would be shifted to the International Mission Board. Currently, IMB receives half of all Cooperative Program money. With the change, IMB would receive 51%.

The intended message is that the SBC is working to reduce a bloated bureaucracy, getting the money out of bureaucratic structure and onto the mission field. While a 1% increase would not make a huge difference to the IMB (although the decrease would make a difference to Facilitating Ministries), this is still an important message to send.

Concluding Challenges

The report concludes with the recognition that this proposal only marks a starting point to the changes needed within the Southern Baptist Convention. In addition to the seven components, the report includes a long list of challenges to various groups within the SBC. The challenges touch on additional areas where change needs to take place within the SBC.

The list of challenges is my favorite part of the proposal. The list is thorough, direct, and at times, hard hitting. It is my feeling that the SBC's primary problem is not a lack of dedication to evangelism but a lack of dedication to God. If we were to take the challenges to heart, it would go a long way to drawing our focus back to Christ.

The challenges are well worth reading and applying, so I encourage you to get the GCR report and read the challenges yourself.

Challenges are directed to:

- Individual Christians
- Individual families
- Local churches and pastors
- Local associations
- State conventions
- LifeWay
- Seminaries
- Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission
- GuideStone Christian Resources
- All Southern Baptist leaders

My Conclusion

When I read the interim report of the GCR Task Force, I was left with mixed feelings. There were some good ideas but some of the suggestions seemed to go too far or not far enough. The final report is a much better document and fixes many of my concerns. Overall I have no particular issue with the seven components, though I could do without components one and two, and I think the recommendations of component four would bring about good changes to NAMB.

Ultimately, though, it was the challenges at the end of the final report that pulled me into the GCR camp. While some of the components will bring about good changes, the challenges really get to the heart of issues that need to be addressed in the SBC. I hope that in all of the discussions about the components, people do not overlook the challenges.

So in conclusion, if I am at the 2010 SBC meeting in Orlando, I will be voting yes for the GCR recommendations.