

Southern Baptists affirm belief in 'eternal' hell

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

Southern Baptists delivered a group rebuttal to Michigan pastor Rob Bell for writing a book that questions traditional views of hell.

Their resolution, calling hell an "eternal, conscious punishment" for those who do not accept Jesus, urges Southern Baptists "to proclaim faithfully the depth and gravity of sin against a holy God, the reality of hell, and the salvation of sinners by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, to the glory of God alone."

Several leaders at the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Phoenix in mid-June coupled warnings about hell with pleas for evangelism—especially in areas where there are no churches or missionaries. Statistical declines in recent years have already spurred a focus on evangelism, and Bell's book sparked calls for greater effort.

"Is hell real? Is hell forever? Did God really say sinners would perish in eternal torment forever and ever?" asked pastor and author David Platt of Birmingham, Alabama. "Oh, readers of Rob Bell and others like him, listen very carefully, be very cautious, when anyone says, 'Did God really say this?'"

Bell's book, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Has Ever Lived*, released in March, criticizes the "misguided" view that "select Christians" will live forever in heaven while the rest of humanity will suffer eternal torment in a punishing hell. "At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church has been the insistence that .

. . hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins," Bell wrote.

SBC

president Bryant Wright prayed that fellow Baptists would take to heart the statement that they passed on hell. "Father, because the reality of hell is so real, the permanent separation from you is so real, and our hours here on this earth are so limited, we pray that you will give us a fresh sense of conviction of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ," he prayed right after the resolution was adopted June 15.

On the

first day of business, the nation's largest Protestant denomination elected Fred Luter, a black pastor from New Orleans, as first vice president, the second-highest office in the SBC. Luter is already being talked about as a prime candidate for president next year. "It's a great feeling," Luter said in an interview, comparing his election to the accolades he received when he was tapped as the first African American to give the convention sermon in 2001.

The mostly white

denomination, which traces its roots to Civil War-era defense of slavery, voted June 14 on specific measures to increase the ethnic diversity of its top leadership—which Luter cited as a genuine shift. "I think the change is that the denomination is purposely at the point where we know we have to open up the doors for more ethnics to be involved in leadership roles in the convention," he said.

As for a

possible presidency, Luter said he's not campaigning. "I do hear the people talking," he said. "They talk to me about it. But I've been telling them, 'Let's just take this one day at a time, one year at a time.'"

After heated debate, Southern Baptists adopted a resolution that supports a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants but clearly states that they reject "amnesty." The statement called for secure borders and "a just and compassionate path to legal status, with appropriate restitutionary measures" for illegal immigrants

already in the U.S.

Some delegates said the language on "legal status" was tantamount to amnesty, prompting an almost equally divided vote over whether to remove it. In response, officials added language that said: "This resolution is not to be construed as support for amnesty for any undocumented immigrant."

In other business, the Baptists passed resolutions that:

- Decried public "speech or activities" that bring "shame upon the name of Christ and his gospel," citing individuals and groups who have protested funerals, burned Qur'ans and prayed for the deaths of public officials.
- Criticized any governmental "coercive measure," including restrictive zoning laws, that aim to limit religious speech or worship, and affirmed the liberty to "convert to another religion or to no religion." —RNS