

Young conservatives rap SBC leadership as arrogant, isolationist: The Memphis Declaration

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About 30 Southern Baptist conservatives from diverse backgrounds are repenting of the triumphalism, arrogance and isolationism they say threatens the integrity of the 16-million-member denomination.

Saying they represent “disparate constituencies” in the Southern Baptist Convention, the participants met behind closed doors May 2-3 in Tennessee and later issued a “Memphis Declaration,” expressing concern and dissatisfaction over the current direction of the church body. But the group stopped short of proposing a candidate for SBC office or actions to be taken at the SBC convention in June—to the surprise of some participants.

Couched in terms of repentance, the statement says in part: “We publicly repent of triumphalism about Southern Baptist causes and narcissism about Southern Baptist ministries which have corrupted our integrity. . . . We publicly repent of an arrogant spirit that has infected our partnership with fellow Christians.”

The closed-door Memphis meeting was organized by a group of mostly young pastors who have called for more openness in SBC life, particularly among agency trustees. “We publicly repent,” their statement added, “of our inattentiveness to convention governance,” of not holding “trustees accountable to the body which elects them to preserve our sacred trust and direct our entities with the guidance, counsel and correction necessary to maintain the integrity of those entities.”

Many in the group have been critical of recent decisions by trustees and leaders of the International Mission Board, the North American Mission Board and other SBC agencies.

Much of that dissatisfaction came to a head after Wade Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church of Enid, Oklahoma, and an IMB trustee, used his blog to criticize new policies adopted by his fellow trustees. Those trustees recommended in January that Burleson be dismissed from the board but later rescinded that motion, replacing it with a policy restricting the freedom of dissent.

Benjamin Cole, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church of Arlington, Texas, acknowledged that he and a few others called the invitation-only meeting.

Among those in the meeting were participants in the SBC's loose-knit young leaders network, "emerging church" pastors, Baptist bloggers, leaders of Calvinist groups in the SBC, and others on the outside of convention leadership—including gadfly Wiley Drake, a pastor in southern California.

The group's emphasis on openness echoes a similar urging from SBC chief executive Morris Chapman, who at the 2004 SBC meeting warned that "crusading" conservatives are in danger of driving the convention into "separatism and independence" by becoming too narrow. *-Associated Baptist Press*