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Welcome Address to the 2009 Southern Baptist Convention

Friday, June 26, 2009

[This week the Southern Baptist Convention met in Louisville for its annual meeting. This is the welcome address I was privileged to deliver on June 23, 2009. Responsibilities with the SBC this week precluded regular commentary writing. I will return to regular commentary next week.]

It is my high honor to welcome messengers of the 2009 Southern Baptist Convention to the city of Louisville, Kentucky. The city, strategically located within the heart of the nation and historically situated where America's westward expansion began, is now one of America's major cities and metropolitan areas. This city welcomes the 2009 Southern Baptist Convention.



Baptists have been active in Louisville and its surrounding area ever since settlers crossed over the Alleghenies in the Revolutionary era. Baptist pioneers helped to establish the communities of Kentucky even as they planted churches, supported missionaries, and sought to win their neighbors to Christ.

Now, the Long Run Baptist Association and the Kentucky Baptist Convention number hundreds of Baptist churches. The roots of the Southern Baptist Convention reach deep within the churches of Kentucky and Louisville and Baptists from this area played leading roles in the shaping of Baptist identity and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Here, at the Falls of the Ohio, Baptists learned to defend their faith and theology over against the rise of rival denominations with different conceptions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here, Baptists developed historic patterns of cooperation and cooperative giving to missions.

This is the eighth occasion on which the city of Louisville has welcomed the Southern Baptist Convention for its annual meeting. In 1857, the seventh session of the Southern Baptist Convention was held in Louisville with 184 registered messengers and R.B.C. Howell of Virginia serving as president. In 1870, the Convention returned to Louisville with 399 registered messengers and P.H. Mell of Georgia presiding. The Convention returned in 1887, when P.H. Mell again presided, this time with 689 registered messengers. In 1899 the Convention was once again in Louisville with 869 registered messengers and W.J. Northen of Georgia serving as president. In 1909, just ten years later, the number of registered messengers was 1,547, almost double the registered attendance just a decade before. Joshua Levering of Maryland served as president. The convention was once again in Louisville in 1927 when President George W. Truett presided over 4,424 messengers. Finally, the Southern Baptist Convention came to Louisville in 1959 – exactly a half-century ago - when 12,326 messengers were registered and Brooks Hays of Arkansas served as president. Now, the Southern Baptist Convention makes history by returning to Louisville 50 years after the last Louisville convention.

This historical survey points to the growth and development of the Southern Baptist Convention, its churches, and its reach around the world. This year, the Southern Baptist Convention meets in Louisville not only to mark history but to

make history.

In 1959, the Southern Baptist Convention came to Louisville in order to celebrate the centennial of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Now the Southern Baptist Convention returns to Louisville in order to mark the sesquicentennial celebration of Southern Baptist's mother seminary.

Southern Seminary was born within the bosom of the Southern Baptist Convention and it began its history as classes first opened in Greenville South Carolina in 1859. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Seminary moved to Louisville in 1877, finding here a city and a community of Baptists that would provide vital support and sustenance for the Seminary and keep it alive.

Now, as The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary celebrates its 150th anniversary, it does so by making clear its commitment to the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention, to the faith once for all delivered to the saints, to the convictions that frame our identity as Baptists, to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to the great task of sending ministers and missionaries into our churches and to the outermost parts of the earth in order to see the name of Jesus Christ exalted among the nations.

By God's grace, Southern Seminary today is one of the largest theological institutions ever to serve the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. More importantly it is an institution that has been brought home to Biblical inerrancy, theological fidelity, and missionary urgency.

Southern Seminary welcomes the Southern Baptist convention to Louisville Kentucky and we welcome all Southern Baptists to celebrate the 150th birthday of Southern Baptist's oldest institution and to visit your mother seminary as you visit Louisville.

Brothers and sisters, in these precious hours we spend together in this Convention may we not only mark history in Louisville — may we make history.

To God be the glory, Amen.

Photo: John Gill

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