

COMING SOON FROM
NORTHEASTERN BAPTIST PRESS

The illustration shows a stylized church building on the left side of the cover. The church has a brown roof, a steeple with a yellow window, a cross on the wall, and a dark brown door. A thick red arrow starts at the top of the church's roof and points downwards, ending in a large arrowhead at the bottom of the page, symbolizing a decline.

The Best Intentions

How a Plan to Revitalize
the SBC Accelerated
Its Decline

Charles S. Kelley Jr.

Foreword by Dr. Robert Jeffress

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AN INTRODUCTION

Northeastern Baptist Press is honored to introduce Dr. Chuck Kelley's newest book, *The Best Intentions: How a Plan to Revitalize the SBC Accelerated Its Decline*. No book is for everyone, but every book should be written with (1) a target audience in mind, (2) aim at a particular purpose, and (3) to satisfy a particular need. Dr. Kelley admirably meets all three expectations.

THE READERS

Having read the pre-publication manuscript of *The Best Intentions* (which, at least for me, was both informative and 'jaw-dropping' in several places), I will suggest a few readers in Dr. Kelley's apparent target audience. You will be interested in this book if:

- You are a pastor or lay leader who is deeply passionate about evangelism and the challenge of reaching the lost with the Gospel;
- You are a member of a local Southern Baptist church and seek to honor and serve Jesus Christ through your church;
- You give tithes and offerings to a Southern Baptist church, thereby contributing to the Co-operative Program;
- You sacrifice annually to give to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American Missions and/or the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions; and
- You are an employee or trustee of a Southern Baptist institution, agency, or entity.

Some non-Southern Baptists will also be interested. If you are curious, and perhaps concerned, about the effective Gospel witness of the largest non-Catholic family of churches in the United States, *The Best Intentions: How a Plan to Revitalize the SBC Accelerated Its Decline* will intrigue you. You may see applications to your own family of churches.

THE AUTHOR

Kelley is well known to Southern Baptists. He served as the eighth President of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) through the sometimes-turbulent years, from 1996 until his retirement in 2019. Those 23 years witnessed the height of the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the extreme leadership challenge of leading the seminary through the aftermath of the historic destruction of New Orleans and the seminary campus following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Kelley's ministry calling from the Lord has always been to evangelism. He taught evangelism and occupied the Roland Q. Leavell Chair of Evangelism at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary from 1983 to 1996. He has been actively involved in his personal evangelism ministry (Innovative Evangelism) since 1978. He has written numerous publications on evangelism and produced

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a variety of print and video evangelism tools for youth, adults, and pastors reflecting both historical perspective and professional expertise. Kelley has long been regarded as a leading authority on the history of SBC evangelism.

Kelley was an active participant and leader in the Conservative Resurgence. He served on the committee appointed to update the *Baptist Faith and Message 1963*. That committee's work resulted in the approved *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. Kelley was one of the three committee members selected to answer the questions of messengers during the lengthy discussion before the overwhelming vote to approve the doctrinal statement.

Kelley's love for the lost and desire for the SBC to reach its evangelistic potential compelled his research and writing of *The Best Intentions*. We can appreciate his willingness to undertake this long and often tedious task, knowing that many Southern Baptists would not want to risk exploring a path that could lead to disappointing news. The project required an unflinching search for truth, a historical perspective of how the SBC and its entities function, and a sense of accountability to the SBC churches and their Great Commission mission to explore what actually happened after the approval of a major Convention initiative.

As an added benefit, *The Best Intentions* reveals Kelley's literary skill. He transformed his research into a vibrant page-turning narrative rather than a lifeless recitation of statistics. The tedious task of gathering SBC data resulted in charts unlike most Southern Baptists have ever seen, making it easy

for readers to see for themselves the outcomes that followed the approval of Great Commission Resurgence proposals and determine their own reactions to those outcomes. We suggest reading with a highlighter in hand to mark key statements that speak to you.

One other important note will clarify the book's content. Being the President of an accredited academic institution requires writing periodic assessments of what one's institution does, why it does it, how it does it, and the actual, measurable results. As Kelley explains, academic institutions are assessed every 10 years. Therefore, as a professor and especially as President of NOBTS, he has been involved in multiple assessments. In contrast, Kelley notes: "One result of the complexities of Southern Baptist life is that even large initiatives rarely get a second glance, much less a formal evaluation, by the SBC after they are approved ... it normally receives little or no attention in the proceedings of the [subsequent] Convention[s]."

THE TEN-YEAR ASSESSMENT

In *The Best Intentions*, Kelley offers to Southern Baptists a 10-year assessment of the Great Commission Resurgence (GCR). The book identifies the GCR as one of the most transforming proposals ever approved by the SBC. The reader can evaluate whether or not Kelley's assessment is true to his research, was needed, and whether or not his conclusions and red flag warnings merits attention.

Kelley begins with an "Executive Summary." In it, he overviews his purpose, his plan and gives a brief summary of the contents of *The Best Intentions*. Consider the following excerpt.

Southern Baptists, we need to talk! We are accustomed to hearing rosy progress reports from SBC leaders. The time has come to talk about the realities of the tangled mass of thorns and weeds underneath some of today's rosy reports. We need to talk about both the strategies we propose and the outcomes over time that we actually receive. We need to pay attention to those outcomes. Disappointing outcomes are reasons for strategic adjustments, not angry fights. Attempts to address unexpected outcomes are not a search for conflict. The Southern Baptist Convention is not a tool for managing autonomous churches, conventions, and entities. The Convention is a tool for enlisting independent churches in a mighty cooperative effort to seek the salvation of every person on earth through Jesus Christ and to overwhelm the darkness of a broken world with the radiance of disciples living their lives in accordance with God's Word. We do that best when the outcomes of our strategies inspire us.

In spite of having the best intentions, the decade following the adoption of the Great Commission Resurgence proved to be more of a Great Commission Regression.

Southern Baptists are a family of churches that did the unthinkable, trading the glory and immediate satisfaction of acting alone for the immense power unleashed by cooperation, embracing the same mission (the Great Commission) and paying for it with a common purse (the Cooperative Program). This document attempts to set

the stage for that much needed conversation about where the SBC is today in its Great Commission progress. This work cannot address every thorn or weed under those rosy reports, but it can provide a place to start talking.

In the summer of 2009, a Georgia pastor was elected President of the Southern Baptist convention. With the best intentions, the newly elected SBC president sought to generate fresh interest in the Great Commission by:

- Changing the SBC funding process;
- Redefining the relationship between the North American Mission Board and the state conventions and regional associations; and
- Making a dramatic shift away from direct evangelism and to church planting.

To indicate the desire for transformative change, the name chosen for this effort was the Great Commission Resurgence (GCR), in hope that it would affect the Convention as deeply as did the Conservative Resurgence in earlier decades. In spite of having the best intentions, the decade following the adoption of the Great Commission Resurgence proved to be more of a Great Commission Regression. This assessment will:

- Describe each component of the Great Commission Resurgence proposals;
- Identify the outcomes after a decade of implementation; and
- Provide charts drawn from official SBC data reports to document the unprecedented decline that deepened and accelerated across all areas of SBC life.

Is the Convention willing to begin talking about adjustments and changes to its strategic approach to the Great Commission?

Readers will be able to see for themselves that the plan did not work as expected. The report concludes with lessons learned from the assessment and suggestions about where the SBC goes from here. The crucial question: Is the Convention willing to begin talking about adjustments and changes to its strategic approach to the Great Commission?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Kelley's bottom line on the assessment is simple: "Unlike the Conservative Resurgence, which transformed the theological foundations of the Convention and all of its entities, the *Great Commission Resurgence* was merely a moment in the SBC story, not a movement that transformed the engagement of Southern Baptists with the Great Commission." It failed to reignite a fresh passion for the Great Commission in Southern Baptist life. The book reveals why this unintended yet almost inevitable result occurred. Kelley offers no individual blame or accusation against the GCR Task Force. In fact, he notes

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more than once that doing so would serve no purpose. Rather, he assumes the best intentions of all involved—from the President who appointed, the Task Force chairman and members who served, or the affirming messengers who voted. The purpose of this assessment is not to find someone to blame for disappointing outcomes. The purpose of this assessment is to start a conversation about where we go from here.

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING

Please read this important book. This book provides a “red flag warning” to Southern Baptists regarding the disastrous outcome of the Great Commission Resurgence. Steep decline and diminished cooperation are the fruit of the GCR. The essential questions are: “Will Southern Baptists admit the mistakes made as a result of GCR; and will they address those mistakes and chart new paths?”

Randy Adams

Executive Director, Northwest Baptist Convention

Chuck Kelley has been a life-long Southern Baptist who served for many years as President of New Orleans Baptist Seminary. With a heartbeat for Evangelism and a deep concern for Southern Baptists today and in the future, he has penned a must-read book. The provocative title says it all: *The Best Intentions: How a Plan to Revitalize the SBC Accelerated Its Decline*. Relying on official SBC data reports year by year since 2010, Kelley points to an SBC in serious decline that is accelerating in virtually all areas of Baptist life. With a major focus on the North American Mission Board and church planting, he demonstrates that the “Great Commission Resurgence” Plan over the past decade has not been working. Lessons learned and possible future directions conclude the book. It is no secret that the Southern Baptist Convention is struggling. This book explains some of the reasons why. Every Southern Baptist should read this book.

David L. Allen, PhD

*Distinguished Professor of Practical Theology
Dean, Adrian Rogers Center for Biblical Preaching
Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Memphis, TN*

Southern Baptists are known as a family of autonomous churches that come together with the only purpose of advancing the Great Commission. The way we accomplish this is by sending missionaries at home and abroad through a mystical yet practical system that connects us all: the Cooperative Program. Sadly, in recent years we have seen a decline not only in membership and giving, but also the deterioration of our institutional consistency. In this well-researched book Dr. Kelley challenges us

to reexamine with all honesty the results of the Great Commission Resurgence while pointing out the urgent need for a great conservative revival.

Javier Chavez, PhD

Senior Pastor, Amistad Cristiana International, Gainesville, GA

With strength from his depth of years in careful research and a keen understanding of Southern Baptist life, Charles Kelley, a seasoned Southern Baptist leader, has provided perhaps the most astute assessment of the work of the Southern Baptist Convention in recent history. Millions of Christians call the SBC their spiritual home. For some time now, many have noticed the darkening storm clouds gathering in the distance. Kelley adeptly demonstrates that the storm is no longer distant, but that it has already begun to thunder and rain with intensifying ferocity. What remains to be seen is whether or not the historic and unprecedented work of Southern Baptists will survive this impending tempest. You don't want to miss his startling assessment. Read it with eyes open.

Z. Scott Colter, PhD

*Assistant Professor, Mid-America Theological Seminary
Executive Director, Conservative Baptist Network
Partner, Colter & Co.*

The language of the "Great Commission Resurgence" was noble and well-intended, but "the road to disintegration can be paved with good intentions." And I thank Dr. Kelley for so aptly demonstrating this.

Mark Coppenger, PhD

Pastor, Author, Educator, SBC Leader

Every Southern Baptist needs to carefully read and intensely reflect on the assessment of Dr. Chuck Kelley regarding the current state of affairs in the Southern Baptist Convention. His research is right on point and profoundly insightful. Finally someone is bringing to light what no one has been willing to address until now. The question is, "What will we do about these revealed truths?"

Jerry Drace

Senior Pastor, Friendship Baptist Church, Friendship, TN

Having the best intended, and biblical, goals of winning the lost throughout the world by means of the Great Commission Resurgence of the Southern Baptist Convention a decade ago, apparently are not working. Chuck Kelley has provided a sobering critique of how the Resurgence is progressing.

It examines the aims and goals of the Resurgence against actual data since its formal adoption. The picture he paints is not pleasant. The SBC is in decline despite our Best Intentions. This is a must read for members of the churches, pastors, professors, and seminary students to recognize, that while we are trying to fulfill Christ's great commission, we are failing. Serious discussions in churches, colleges, seminaries should form circles of concern and design changed strategic steps to realign with our desire to seeing all people come to Christ.

Keith E. Eitel, PhD

Retired Professor of Missions and World Christian Studies, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

In his book, Dr. Chuck Kelley delivers a searing critique of the Southern Baptist Convention's disastrous handling of the Great Commission Resurgence report, which was approved for implementation in 2010. Rather than resurgence, there has been an accelerated regression. The most significant change that has occurred since then is the North American Board's drastic shift away from a cooperative, regional approach to church planting and evangelism, in favor of a narrow strategy that emphasizes central control and minimizes evangelism resourcing. Kelley painstakingly documents the unprecedented decline that has occurred during this decade, making this book a must-read for any Southern Baptist who values transparency, cooperation, and effective use of mission funds.

Dr. Bobby Gilstrap

Founder, Dynamic Church Ministries, Inc.

Former Executive Director of Baptist State Convention of Michigan

In *The Best Intentions: How A Plan to Revitalize the SBC Accelerated Its Decline*, Dr. Chuck Kelley provides a comprehensive analysis of the Great Commission Resurgence initiative proposed and approved at the 2010 SBC Annual Meeting. Dr. Kelley draws on his expertise as a distinguished research professor of evangelism to provide a critical and objective dissection of the GCR motion and its 10-year impact on the SBC. This book accurately details why a motion that started out with good intentions rapidly turned into one of the most destructive initiatives ever approved by SBC Messengers. The sad truth is, as detailed by Dr. Kelley, it continues to negatively impact the SBC. This book is informative, jolting, eye-opening and a must read for every Southern Baptist.

James Gregory

Pastor

SBC Executive Committee Officer

UISBC President

In Dr. Charles Kelley's new book, *The Best Intentions: How A Plan to Revitalize the SBC Accelerated Its Decline*, he has thoughtfully and methodically evaluated the results of the Great Commission

Task Force recommendations and provided a clear analysis of where Southern Baptists are today compared to 2010 when the Convention adopted the Task Force's report.

While Dr. Kelley contends that faithful Southern Baptists wanted to devise a strategy to rescue the Convention from an obvious decline, the seven recommendations have not reversed the downward trend as one might hope. The writer correctly explains that the root of the problem is that the Task Force envisioned the SBC as an organization that functioned like a church when its actual purpose is to create a cooperative synergy out of the work of autonomous, independent churches and entities – that the focus should be on coordinated effort, not coordinated management.

Dr. Kelley's book clearly points out that two of the major concerns among the recommendations pertains to Great Commission giving and the phasing out of all Cooperative Agreements between NAMB and the state conventions. The book implies that these two issues have compromised the cooperative synergy between the states and the national convention. The author also wisely points out that the new emphasis on church planting presupposes evangelism would happen without giving it much attention. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that a great soul winning effort has emerged out of the church planting emphasis.

J. Gerald Harris

Pastor for 41 years

Former editor of The Christian Index

The urgency of the hour that we live in needs to move us to be ever-more on mission to share the hope of Jesus with our communities, nation and world. This extremely insightful resource from Dr. Chuck Kelley is valuable on multiple levels for Southern Baptists pastors and churches who are committed to the Great Commission call of Christ.

Dr. Brad Jurkovich

Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Bossier City, LA

Spokesman, Conservative Baptist Network

A lawyer friend once said, "Facts are stubborn things." Dr. Kelley, in his book, *The Best Intentions*, has meticulously stuck to the facts. The fact is that the statistics for the Southern Baptist Convention reveal there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of baptisms over the last decade. The heart and soul of Southern Baptists is the salvation of the lost that is evidenced by baptisms. Dr. Kelley asks an important question: Is it time to evaluate the successfulness of the Southern Baptist Convention implementation of the Great Commission Resurgence strategic plan? It is an honest question. In reading this book, you will be challenged to answer that question. It is not a book of "blame" but one of introspection. As a pastor, staff at the North American Mission Board, and member of the Great Commission Taskforce, I welcome an honest review of where we are as Southern Baptists. To ignore the "facts" is to fail. In his book, *Smart Thinking for Crazy Times: The Art of Solving the Right Problems*, Ian I. Mitroff's proposition is that we solve the "wrong problems" precisely. The conclusion is we are good at problem

solving but not good at problem identifying. Dr. Kelley has identified a critical problem: evangelism is not a priority for Southern Baptists according to the statistics. It is time to “solve” this problem correctly. The “best intentions” are not sufficient.

Harry Lewis

Kingdom First Ministries

Dr. Kelley writes with the mind of a scholar, the heart of a statesman and the soul of an evangelist. I wrote and voted against the GCR recommendations, foreseeing the very consequences outlined in this book. The research here unfortunately proves we have indeed had a Great Commission Regression. This is a sobering but needful read for every Southern Baptist!

Mike Stone

Senior Pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Blackshear, GA

Speaking the truth in love is not always easy, but it is essential. Dr. Kelley’s assessment marshals the critical evidence compelling us to ask what has happened to our convention and our strategic evangelistic objectives. This siren call cries for an honest examination, evaluation, and transformation of our strategic cooperative agreements in order to reinvigorate our cooperative efforts to reach the world for Christ. Hopefully, it is not too late, for we all long to hear our Lord’s commendation, “Well done, good and faithful!”

Dr. Chris Thompson

Pastor, South River Baptist Church

Those of us who know and respect Dr. Chuck Kelley are not surprised by his latest book. Both irenic and thorough, it gives an eye opening and hopeful account of the current state of The Southern Baptist Convention. Whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, all will be helped by his excellent analyses.

Jerry Vines

President-Emeritus, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, FL

Two-time President, Southern Baptist Convention

Proverbs 14:12 says, “there is a way that seems right to a person but in the end it leads to death.” Many decisions, even well thought out ones, on the surface appear to be wise, prudent and selfless. Over time, the results of such decisions prove otherwise. Rather than face the arduous, and quite frankly

unpleasant task of admitting and addressing the downward trends, leaders choose to maintain the status quo while seeing the same results.

Chuck Kelley, once again, is calling for an honest and frank discussion about the institutionalization of the SBC caused by a failure to keep the main thing the main thing which is the SBC does not exist for itself but for those who have yet to come to faith in Jesus.

Dr. Mike Whitson

Pastor of Indian Trail Baptist Church, Indian Trail, NC

A FINAL WORD FROM NORTHEASTERN BAPTIST PRESS:

Dr. Chuck Kelley has ably, kindly, and self-sacrificially... birthed a bombshell. Don't miss it! Pre-order your copy of *The Best Intentions* today.