

AN OPEN LETTER TO BAPTIST PASTOR SEARCH COMMITTEES *by Foy Valentine*

My Dear Baptist brothers and sisters in Christ:

You have been duly elected by your church to serve on the pastor search committee. It is the most important committee assignment that a Baptist church can make. You may be already heavily and sacrificially involved in this challenging responsibility.

Out of well over 50 years in the gospel ministry and out of a very special love for Baptists, I write you this letter.

“See ye to it,” was Pilate’s word to the religious establishment dead set on crucifying Jesus. He washed his hands of the whole unpleasant mess.

That hand washing has been a quintessential sin that preachers have railed against since the mind of Baptists “runneth not to the contrary.” That hand washing, the sermonizers thundered, was frightened fence straddling, contemptible compromise, craven cowardice.

And now along come today’s pastor search committees with sincere and solid church members by the droves, earnestly insisting, “Find us a pastor who has never taken sides in this SBC fight. Don’t bring a preacher in here all grimy with the dust and heat of all those battles.”

Different from Twenty Years Ago

These good and sincere church members strongly feel that the bitter divisiveness that has characterized most annual Baptist conventions for more than 20 years can be kept out of the local church if only the search committee will shun like the plague anybody who has been involved in the denominational conflict.

Think about it.

The Southern Baptist Convention we once knew and supported no longer exists; and after years of intense politicization, there is hardly a Baptist preacher in the whole land who is not on one side or the other and who does not know full well which side he/she is on.

Preachers who really would like to be considered by your church after you have felt led to be in touch with them will generally be reluctant to declare their affiliation lest by doing so they cut themselves off from consideration by your committee. Make no mistake about it, however; you can easily, and under God you should, if you are to avoid a potential catastrophe for your church, determine where the brother or sister really stands, which side of the controversy he/she is really on.

Fundamentalists will nearly always deny any political inclinations or affiliations with the fundamentalist establishment now controlling the SBC. You must therefore make your own assessment as to whether or not they are being candid, telling the truth.

That determination can easily be made (1) on the basis of who has recommended the prospect to you, for if a fundamentalist has recommended him, there can be little doubt that this prospect is himself a fundamentalist who would be beholden to the fundamentalist kingpins and who would without hesitation or delay seek to lead your church into active involvement in the

fundamentalist political agenda; (2) on the basis of visiting preachers they have recently brought into the churches where they are now serving; and (3) on the basis of whether or not they have purchased themselves a bogus “doctor’s degree” from one of the mail order degree mills hotly patronized by the fundamentalists.

Nonfundamentalists will generally be frank and open with you about where their loyalties are. They can be easily identified by their response to questions you put to them about their current involvement in the life and work of the SBC. If they are in reasonably strong churches and are not so involved, they are almost certainly not fundamentalists. If they are in smaller churches, they will not usually mind sharing candidly with you how they have faced recent elections and issues in annual Baptist conventions.

If your church is particularly strong, look for at least one of the fundamentalist bigwigs to have a “marvelous revelation from the Lord while praying just this morning” about who should be your pastor and will piously share this “vision” which God has allegedly given him for you. They do this directly and indirectly; and they will continue to “be in touch” with you in a persistent, tenacious effort to place one of their own functionaries in your church. If yours is an especially strategic church, it is virtually certain that the fundamentalist “rulers” already know what your search committee is doing. If your church is small, the same kind of lobbying will be done by lesser lights from the fundamentalist camp.

Neutrality Has Its Own Difficulties

Now here is the most important aspect that is often missed by pastor search committees.

If a pastor prospect definitely affirms his absolute neutrality regarding the division in the Southern Baptist Convention, you can be fairly sure that one of the following three things is the case:

1. He lacks perception and insight as to what has been going on right under his nose in Baptist life, or
 2. He knows what is going on but just does not care or lacks the courage and integrity to stand for his convictions if he does care, or
 3. He is not being honest with you.
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1. If he **lacks perception and insight**, it is likely that he has simply opted for a blindfolded approach to an extremely important issue in our organized Baptist life; and, whether he is younger or older, he has – like Pilate – sought to evade responsibility, leaving to others the decisions affecting our corporate Baptist life and cooperative mission endeavors. Do you want a pastor characterized by evasiveness and a self-inflicted amnesia?
 2. If your declared neutralist **knows and cares about what has been going on but has lacked the courage and integrity to position himself**, then it is clear that this prospect has rejected, or severed, the ties that bind Baptists together to do together in God’s world the Lord’s work which we could not do separately; and, in the process, he has become an accomplice in a monumentally wicked thing. Do you want a pastor characterized by cowardice and lack of integrity?
 3. If the declared neutralist **is not being honest with you**, he is not telling you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, because he knows how very concerned

Baptist pastor search committees can be about any controversy or anyone related in any way to controversy; and he hopes that you will recommend him to your congregation partly because, he would have you believe, he “would never bring any of this divisiveness before your fine people.”

I could take you to a dozen such churches and pastors today. The pastor search committees in those churches once upon a time believed those prospects when they declared or clearly implied their neutrality; but once they got called and on the church field, they hit the ground running with the fundamentalist political agenda. Do you want a pastor who does not tell the truth?

The greatest hazard now facing many Baptist churches seeking a pastor is not so much that they will call a fundamentalist pastor but that they will call a “Smooth Operator” who has no nerve, no Holy Spirit-given courage, no intestinal fortitude, no authentic Baptist “fire in his belly,” no real moral energy. Your committee has the high and holy task of delivering your church from such a fate.

May God lead you, and may God bless you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Foy Valentine

Biographical note: Foy Valentine was the first executive director of the Christian Life Commission, first for Texas Baptists and then for Southern Baptists, for 35 years before retiring in 1988. He has been given Distinguished Alumnus awards by both Baylor University and Southwestern Seminary. In 1987, he became the first recipient of the biennial T. B. Maston Christian Ethics Award, presented by the [T. B. Maston Foundation](#), which is named for the Southwestern Seminary professor under whom Dr. Valentine received his doctorate in Christian Ethics.