

Critics complain about Calvinists influence on SBC Pastors' Conference

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LAS VEGAS (ABP) — The president for the 2011 Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference defended a program he's put together for June 12-13 in Phoenix, Ariz., saying critics who find it outside the convention's mainstream hold too narrow a worldview.

"The Kingdom of God is bigger than Southern Baptists," said Vance Pitman, 2011 Pastors' Conference [president](#) and pastor of Hope Baptist Church in Las Vegas, a church plant in partnership with First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Ga., and the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.



Vance Pitman

"The main intent of our conference is to communicate the big picture of the Kingdom of God," Pitman said in a telephone interview March 18. "God is alive and at work all over the world. We as the Southern Baptist Convention are one very small part of that."

The Pastors' Conference has long been a barometer for Southern Baptist theological weather patterns and a launching pad to the SBC presidency for its leaders. Consequently, although it is not an official organization of the SBC, its direction is closely monitored.

Negative reaction has included placement on the worship team of Jamar Jones, executive director of music and fine arts at the Potter's House Church of Dallas. That is because he is on the ministerial staff of T.D. Jakes, whose critics claim holds to the heresy of "modalism."

Modalism, a non-Trinitarian view that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different aspects, or modes, of one God rather than three distinct, co-equal and co-eternal persons, was first condemned as heresy in the fourth century but is held by some Pentecostal and Apostolic churches today.

Dwight McKissic, an African-American pastor in Arlington, Texas and former trustee of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary who advocates greater inclusion of minorities in convention life, said that even though he doesn't think Jakes is a heretic that the pastor was the real target and Jones "a casualty of not so friendly fire from fellow Kingdom soldiers."

Jones, a boyhood friend of Pitman's worship arts pastor, withdrew to avoid controversy, a move that McKissic called "tragic, sinful and shameful" because Southern Baptists "missed an opportunity to bridge an obvious racial divide and to fellowship with a Kingdom saint who is not of the SBC fold."

People Pitman trusts tell him "Jakes is not a modalist." Besides, Pitman said, his books are for sale in SBC bookstores. "How ridiculous is it that we can sell his books but his music guy can't play piano at our meeting?" he asked.

Others have protested inclusion of speakers who are prominently

recognized as Calvinists and the fact that the Pastors' Conference is heavily subsidized by the SBC operating budget.

While Calvinism is now the de facto systematic theology of Southern Baptists' oldest seminary, and the favored perspective of an increasing number of young pastors, the majority of Southern Baptists reject the "particular" nature of Calvinism that says Jesus died only for those "elected" for salvation before the dawn of creation and not the "whosoever will" that Baptists traditionally hold dear.

Included among speakers is Acts 29 Vice President Darrin Patrick. Acts 29 is a church planting network linked to the "emergent church," a movement that presents the gospel in culturally relevant ways that critics call theological compromise. Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Baptist Church in Seattle and Acts 29's founder and leader, was the target of eight negative motions at the 2009 Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Louisville, Ky.

Also on the docket is John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, not affiliated with the Minnesota-Wisconsin Baptist State Convention or the Southern Baptist Convention. His writings have been a strong influence among young Calvinists.

"We are wandering in a wilderness in our current SBC life," said blog writer Ron Hale. "Our leaders are hyper on Piper; LifeWay materials encourage our people to visit Mark Driscoll's website to download his sermons ... and we have a couple of ACTS29 guys preaching."

Pitman termed accusations that he has put together a "Calvinist" conference "beyond my wildest imagination." He pointed out the lineup includes well known non-Calvinist preachers like former SBC President Johnny Hunt and nationally prominent pastor Rick Warren.

"The vein that unites all of them is that they are all practitioners," Pitman

said. “They are all engaging nations and planting churches.”

Pitman, exasperated at what he feels is unmerited criticism for a conference lineup that will inspire pastors and give them an encouraging view of God’s work in the world, agrees it is important for believers “to be defenders of the faith.”

There is a difference, however, “in being discerning and in having a judgmental spirit.”

Other questions have been raised related to conference expenses. While the public image is that the independent organization pays its own way, and offerings are collected each session to “cover” conference expenses, in fact the SBC heavily subsidizes the meeting, first held in 1935.

The Pastors’ Conference reimburses the SBC \$38,000 — as it has since 1992 — to reimburse expenses for additional use of the meeting hall, shuttle buses, audio visual expenses and security. In 2012 that amount will increase to \$50,000.

SBC Executive Committee records show that the SBC operating budget covered \$141,549 of Pastors’ Conference related expenses in 2010, in addition to the \$38,000 reimbursement received from the conference participants.

Pitman says in a series of video presentations at www.sbcpc.net that this year’s “expenses” already are covered by sponsors. All offerings received at the meeting will be dedicated to translate the “Jesus” film for evangelistic use in the Arabian Peninsula and to start pastor’s conferences on two other continents, reaching and training pastors in as many as 20 countries.

“Diamond level sponsorships” costing \$10,000 each are listed at the website. They include through March 21 the North American Mission Board, Crossway and LifeWay, three SBC entities. Others are LOGOS Bible

Software, Maranatha Tours, Dayspring International, Ministry Partners Investment Co., CCL Associates real estate development and investment, Life Action Ministries ConnectionPower.com, Institute for Creation Research and ImpactStewardship Resources.

Norman Jameson is reporting and coordinating special projects for ABP on an interim basis. He is former editor of the North Carolina Biblical Recorder.