

Lifeway president: 'Let us provoke one another in love' during SBC 2022

Carrie Brown McWhorter
The Baptist Paper

California's iconic redwood trees offer an apt metaphor for Southern Baptists in these challenging times: "We are stronger together."

That was the message Ben Mandrell, president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, brought to those gathered in Anaheim for the June 12 opening session of the Southern Baptist Convention Associational Leaders Conference.

Redwoods thrive in thick groves where their shallow roots can intertwine and even fuse together, Mandrell explained.

"Their relationship with surrounding trees gives them strength," he said. "Conversely, a redwood, when it stands alone, is a weak tree.

"We need each other," Mandrell said. "It's why the Southern Baptist Convention exists."

Being bold in our communication

And looking ahead to the SBC Annual Meeting June 14–15, Mandrell said the theme verse for the SBCAL meeting, Hebrews 10:24, resonates even more deeply this year.

"This statement – 'Let us provoke one another in love' – this is what good Christians, strong Christians, do," he said. "They look to positively irritate each other."

Many Southern Baptists are provoking each other, especially

through social media, but not in a positive, biblical way, said Mandrell, who noted he was proud of his “boring” Twitter account.

“We are provoking each other to anger and to resentment, not to love and good deeds,” he said. “The virtual environment we live in is a dangerous one because we are dehumanizing one another. We’re ... demonizing one another, in public view for all to see, in a snarky, hateful kind of way. ... Wouldn’t it be amazing if at every Southern Baptist Convention meeting, everyone was focused on positively irritating?”

What’s our first reaction?

Mandrell said believers should draw near to Christ in prayer as conflict swirls, pointing to Hebrews 10:22.

Prayer is no longer “our first reaction to conflict, our natural reflex when we feel hurt by other believers,” Mandrell said.

“If Hebrews had been written today, another verse might read, ‘too much tweeting, not enough praying.’ How does that sit with you personally? Don’t you just feel the weight of that around our convention?”

“Lord, help us when we reduce each other to 144 characters rather than building up the character of those around us,” he urged.

Mandrell encouraged those gathered to “hold on to hope in Christ” (Hebrews 10:24).

“Strong Christians do that,” he said. We “hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering [because] He who promised is faithful.”

Three prayers for the SBC

Mandrell offered three prayers for the SBC in the days leading

up to the annual meeting.

First, that “every microphone would be filled by a voice who speaks the truth in love.”

“It’s quite possible to say the right thing in the wrong way,” he said. “Questions can be honestly asked, even hard questions, in a respectful way,” he added, citing Ephesians 4:29.

Second, that “the tribes within our denomination would humbly search for common ground.” Mandrell said groups within the SBC have “balkanized,” but his prayer is “the Lord would begin to show us how much we have in common.”

“Let’s start searching for reasons to stay together, not reasons to split apart,” he implored.

If messengers focus on a cooperative spirit, they can leave feeling “like we have just been with sweet people who care about our mission,” and a third prayer will have been answered.

“We have stuff to get out, we have to vent, we have to get motions out on the table,” Mandrell said. “I pray that every person as they are walking to the microphone would feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit to be kind – convictional, but kind – treating every person, including the ones on the platform, with respect.”

“God, help us to mind our manners,” Mandrell said, focused on “getting our roots closer together ... that we might get back on track.”