

Jonathan Howe:

All right, joining us today here on SBC This week, as we mentioned, is Ed Litton, the new president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and also the pastor at Redemption Church in Mobile, Alabama. Ed, thanks for joining us.

Ed Litton:

Jonathan, thank you for the opportunity. I love your show and I'm honored to be on.

Jonathan Howe:

So would you consider yourself a friend of the pod possibly?

Ed Litton:

Oh, absolutely. I listen all the time. Oh, I'm a nerd. That's what I do. I'm a nerd for history and Amy's [Whitfield] always bringing something I didn't know to the table. And I enjoy that too.

Jonathan Howe:

She does. She does bring that to the table. Absolutely. So we'll have that actually, after we get done with the interview with you, we'll have the, 'This Week in SBC History' moment. So Amy will be joining us for that later, but today it's you and me, and you know, a lot of things going on in the SBC, one of the big ones revolves around a statement that you made last week after a video popped up showing some similarities of a sermon that you'd preached with that of J..D Greear. And you released a statement last weekend, and I'm going to read a part of the statement and we'll jump into the interview right out of that: "... but like thousands of other Southern Baptist pastors, I labor every week preparing to stand in front of the congregation God has called me to serve. In preparation for our series on Romans. I used several resources to help me think through how to structure the series and how best to communicate the profound truths we encounter in these passages." Now, one of those resources you used obviously was a sermon series from 2019 by J.D. Greear. So I know a lot of people have read your statement. There's still a lot of questions out there. So why don't we just start this right here and let you address that right out the gate.

Ed Litton:

I appreciate the opportunity. I stand by the statement. It was a part of our study, and it wasn't just one sermon. I mean, you can hear illustrations and different statements throughout several of those sermons and had J.D.'s permission, and encouragement. The other thing we did is I, as we were trying to outline the book of Romans, which is a challenge, we finally looked at it and looked at what they'd covered and felt like it was sufficient. And we also received permission to use the passages from week to week. And so that makes it look even more similar. But what I'm stating is that we did our, we did our Greek work, we did our commentary work and then usually I'll have someone I listen to when I exercise when I'm doing something, traveling, to help reinforce and give me thoughts and creative ideas. And there's a lot of reasons we do that. In part I do it to stay fresh, listen to new voices. Sometimes I'll listen to older voices, but to help me communicate to my people the essence of what the Word of God is saying.

Jonathan Howe:

Yeah. So I guess what you're kind of saying in essence is that the sermons from J.D. were just like another commentary for you in the preparation, that kind of thing.

Ed Litton:

A lot of them, I didn't really even listen to. I would go straight to his written notes that he provides. And so yes, very much like a commentary in that sense and, and know as well, when you listen to R. Kent Hughes or when you read R. Kent Hughes' commentaries and you listen to a sermon like on Gospel Coalition, you'll find that his commentaries are going right out of that sermon work, which is understandable.

Jonathan Howe:

Yeah. At Lifeway, I mean, there's a whole commentary series. That's the exegetical sermon series, Danny Akin, David Platt, Tony Merida are the general editors of, so I've got the R. Kent Hughes, Hebrews one sitting right here in front of me on my desk. So, and he's awesome. And in your answer, you mentioned "we" a lot. I know you talked about in the statement, you employ a sermon team approach to help you collaboratively create these sermons. So can you talk to us, like, what does that look like at Redemption Church?

Ed Litton:

Well, let me tell you why we started doing it. And it's one of the best things I've been a part of in a long time, we have a lot of young men on staff, and we have young people that feel a call, young men that feel a call to the Lord and laymen in our church to at least on occasion to preach the Gospel. And so our purpose was to raise up a new generation of Gospel communicators and Gospel preachers. And let me just break down the process for you real quick. We start off annually with a retreat where we prayerfully consider what we are preaching, where we're heading next, and this has been for years. So of course I leave that, 'cause I've been there for 27 years. I know what we've preached in the past. We try to break down the text and work out exactly the weeks and put it on the calendar. Plus we're a multi-site church. And then every week we have a, we have a planning meeting. Now that planning meeting, I lead the planning meeting, but it's based on the sermon is gonna be based on my work and the text, but we get together. All the other parts of that team are also sometimes given separate commentaries to study and they bring something to the table so that we're not an echo chamber. And we're looking at the text, we break it down. A lot of times we get out of that meeting with a very clear outline or illustrations. And then we finish the rest of the week, building that out for whoever the preachers are going to be. And again, I lead that process because I am discipling young preachers. And of course, you know, all the people have assumed about this, that people would say don't disciple anymore because you're messed up. But the reality is it is a very effective way. And for me, it's been a powerful tool because I'm listening to other voices.

Jonathan Howe:

Looks like we have an audio issue here in the podcast. Dr. Litton's AirPods just died. Folks, we're going to switch him over to some wired headphones. There you go. Now you got it. Now you were talking about how this was a discipleship issue, that the team approach allows you to disciple those on the team.

Ed Litton:

The real motivation behind this was discipleship. It's helping raise up a new generation of pastors and leaders who can communicate the Gospel and it has had an extraordinary impact. And the reverse part

for me is that it helps me keep my voice young and preaching too, because we're always trying to reach a new generation with the Gospel. And so for us, it's been a very healthy process and over the few years that we've done it, and I think we've been doing about five or six years now, it's really improved the quality of preaching, especially among these young people. We do live preaching on our campuses.

Jonathan Howe:

Yeah. So how many campuses are you guys at now? Just two?

Ed Litton:

Two.

Jonathan Howe:

So live preaching in both places.

Ed Litton:

That's correct.

Jonathan Howe:

All right. So with all the discussion here, what's the impact been on you and maybe even Kathy?

Ed Litton:

Well, I appreciate that question. What God has made very clear to us is that we are according to Isaiah 48:10 in a refiner's fire, Malachi 3 tells us the same thing, that it doesn't matter where the heat's coming from. God being sovereign and intimately involved with our growth is helping us be refined. And I just want to say, I apologize to anybody who has been offended, and rightly so, and hurt. And some of the things that have been represented in such a way, but I'm not denying that that we borrowed these things. And I want to say this too. I'm asked by good people and good-willed people. Why didn't you just credit J.D.? But I want you to hear my heart. This is not an excuse or justification. I am sorry. I did not. I had a preaching professor in seminary that we would preach in front of, and he would evaluate us. And he was one of the kindest people I've ever met for evaluating. But a student got up, probably the smartest guy in the class and every citation from ICC, Linsky, from any critical commentary, he made, any commentary. He cited all of them. And even as illustrations, because I got this from that book and thousand illustrations or whatever, when he got finished, the professor very kindly said, 'That was a good sermon.' And he said, 'I'm going to just tell you something. When a diamond miner goes looking for diamonds, he doesn't hold up the pick and the shovel, he holds up the diamond.' Now, please hear my heart, Jonathan. I am not excusing myself or explaining. I'm just explaining my heart. I love my people. And I want them to see Jesus. He is the diamond. This has opened my eyes, and it's opened concerns. And will I do it differently? I promise you I will do it differently. And even my preaching team was, has been uncomfortable for the last two weeks because we are engaging the subject. They know what their pastor is going through, and they had unsure doubts. I know they do doubts themselves. And we were able to talk out those things. And we're making this a growing experience because our God is a refiner.

Jonathan Howe:

Yeah. Another part of this has been the disappearance of some sermons from the internet. You mentioned it, you had a statement that you put out talking about how there was a website issue. You guys are transitioning over website stuff. The elders put out a statement saying, 'Hey, we pulled some of these down, because we don't want our pastor being attacked unfairly and maligned online.' And a lot of people have said, 'well, those two statements can't live together. They don't mesh.' So what's your take on that?

Ed Litton:

I understand why people think that, but they actually do live together. Our elders and leaders made a decision to take down because they felt the impact was that people were going in and they were pulling things out. They believe out of context. And so to protect the church and the wellbeing of the church and their pastor, they said, 'We're pulling these down.' But what they left was the last 18 months, which is all of all of 2020's sermons and all 2021 sermons. And at the same time, over a month ago, we began a process of migration from our current host of our website to a brand new. And the new website will go live at the end of this month. And it's going to be a leaner, slimmer, whole approach to everything. And the simplicity is the rule that will ultimately only keep about a year and a half to two years on there at any given time. So both of those things are true. Both of those things are happening at the same time.

Jonathan Howe:

You know, a lot of this I think has shown us really the hostility of the day online, both inside and outside of the Southern Baptist Convention. It's happening not just in our convention, it's happening in other conventions, other denominations, the PCA is going through theirs right now with their general assembly in St. Louis. And we see it a lot really in secular politics. I mean, that's been like the last five or six years in secular politics. It's gotten to a point where it's almost unbearable. How do we work with one another across these sides, so to speak, I put that in air quotes, but how can we see each other, and really improve on this culture that seems to be driven by attack, attack, attack, rather than grace and unity and mercy.

Ed Litton:

Again, that's a great question. I'm going to say this. I applaud the people who are trying to do this, and there are good people trying to bring a civility to this on Twitter and other social media. We need to learn how to be civil in our conversation because, well, for a lot of reasons, because Christ commands it. The second one, because the world is watching this. The hallmark of scriptural debate conversation among believers is honor, first, respect for one another listening without condemnation, Romans 8:1, we need to assume the best of each other and leave room for repentance. When there is a need for genuine repentance the assumptions on each other's hearts are just wrong, and we need to humble ourselves with that, but we need to engage in hard conversations, but we have to develop the skills of being able to do so for two primary reasons. One is, how we talk to our brothers and sisters reflects Jesus and what He's doing in our hearts, but there is a public witness at stake. So I'm not saying we don't talk about hard things and we don't confront painful things, but I'm saying we do so with humility, always aware that what people are watching it matters. People are watching us. And I see this more and more as I do media events or media conversations, especially of the secular nature, but the hostility of the day seems to rule our culture. And I think it's impacting our dialogue within the body of Christ.

Jonathan Howe:

How have you seen that maybe impact your church? You've been there 27 years. I want to talk a little bit about your, your pastoring at Redemption Church there in Mobile, but how have you seen your church maybe work through maybe some of this hostility that maybe it's related to secular politics. That seems to be the kind of the way it really creeps into the local church? I would think especially in the south.

Ed Litton:

Well, I think a lot of times we've, we've realized our people because we do talk about this, that there's a false narrative. And in my particular case, it's about me that I've been called woke. I've been called woke because of my work in racial reconciliation. And, but they know it and the people know it. And that's one of the reasons they stand behind me. It hasn't been 27 years of perfection and it's been 27 years of pain and suffering and difficulty together. But what happens is people learn to trust, and that is a core issue here. And that's why this conversation is so important because we automatically are distrustful of each other. And especially if we're strangers to each other. And I will say this though, this is what I love about Southern Baptists. When I was elected, for the next day and a half, I would encounter people in the hallways at lunch at restaurants, but particularly at the convention event center. And people would walk up and say, 'I did not vote for you, but I love you. And I'm praying for you.' And to me, I tell that to the secular world, you need to understand that we aren't divided on many issues, but we're not divided in Christ. And if we can return to that, I believe that God is glorified. And I believe that we will be a part of advancing His mission.

Jonathan Howe:

Amen. And one of the things that you mentioned just a minute ago is the diversity and the work that you've done there in Mobile, a lot of that has to do with your work with the Pledge Group. So let's talk a bit, a little bit about how you've seen Redemption Church change, how the Pledge Group really has changed you and your people.

Ed Litton:

Right? Well, it began after Ferguson and we realized that our city shared some similarities to St. Louis area and especially Ferguson, and that we really had no community with each other across any racial lines. And so it was just a group of pastors leaders in our community that started meeting together. At first, we thought we could solve a problem. We realized this is a long-term wound and problem, and it takes a lot of intentionality. And so someone challenged us from a group called Mission Mississippi, who's been 25 years of experience under their belt. They said, sit down and talk, be honest, transparent, become friends, learn to love each other as Christ told us to love each other. That's what's been happening the last seven and a half years. And relationships have been born, crises have been navigated. Disagreements, honesty, all of that's on the table, but it's been led through the blood of Jesus Christ. It is the Gospel that binds us together. It's interesting, not a single time to critical race theory ever enter our conversations. And so the Gospel brings a more powerful or more salient answer to the problems of division at any level—in marriage, in a convention of churches, in our individual churches and in our communities. And so we approach it through the Gospel, and it's forced us into His Word. It's forced us to honor and respect one another first. And to listen to one another, if I'm talking, I'm not listening,

Jonathan Howe:

What would you say to pastors that want to kind of mirror something like this in their own communities, their own church?

Ed Litton:

One of the things I thought the Convention did this year that was really quite exciting is that they added a sixth point to Ronnie Floyd's vision [Vision 2025], which should be Southern Baptists' vision, which I wholeheartedly approve. Ronnie has an amazing ability to break things down in bite-sized chunks. And so he's done that for us, but they said, 'Well, we got one on top of that, we're going to have these two things: deal with the issue of abuse, and then also seek racial reconciliation.' One of the dreams I have, and one of the reasons I think God may have put me in this position for this time, is because we, we've talked about this. But we've, we've not let it get into our hearts to where we really reach out and start to develop relationships in our community, realizing that we can't reach our communities by ourselves. And as we cross lines, it's a little scary. I was intimidated at first, I was intimidated about being with other belief systems, other ideas. I was intimidated, but I didn't want to be called a bigot because my skin was white or because maybe I've got some deep stuff in my heart, but the truth was that we all have things in our hearts that we have to process through. But the most important thing was listening and understanding what someone else is going through. You don't have to be woke. You don't have to be anything. You just have to have a compassionate heart. We're not talking about stuff that happened in 1919. I'm talking about people who 19 weeks ago were walking through something like this, or 19 minutes ago would have just gone through something like this. And wounds don't heal by themselves. They take intentionality.

Jonathan Howe:

Yeah. One of the things you talked about there was directing the convention to deal with sex abuse. Now, another thing that happened at the annual meeting and basically your first big task as Southern Baptist president is to name a task force to oversee the independent review of the Executive Committee's handling on reports of sexual abuse. So can you give us an update on that?

Ed Litton:

Yeah. From the very beginning, I knew this was a strong statement. The convention made the vote was very overwhelming and clear, and the direction of the convention is to do this independent of the Executive Committee. So from Day One, this is what I've been working on and we'll be revealing soon. The people that we have prayerfully sought. We've sought professionals. We sought people who are respected within our Convention—statespeople and pastors. And so we're going to present this and soon you'll hear about it. Of course we have a 30-day mandate to do that.

Jonathan Howe:

Yeah. So it's gotta be in by July the 15th. Right. Right, right. Okay. So we'll just kind of keep our ears and eyes open for that. Like you said –

Ed Litton:

I am greatly encouraged by the response I'm getting of those that we are asking to serve in this area, that they are willing, they see the seriousness of this issue and they see the enormity of the task, but they're willing to do it. And I'm grateful for Southern Baptists who are.

Jonathan Howe:

Absolutely. So a couple of final questions here, as you start your tenure as Southern Baptist president, what really concerns you the most about where Southern Baptists are and maybe where we're headed?

Ed Litton:

First of all, what I tell the secular press when they focus on our division, I say, 'Well, I understand we are very loud. We're the largest deliberative body in the world. And so when we talk, we talk loud. If you can get the microphone, anybody can talk. But what's interesting is when you listen to the Convention, you really see that there is unity in purpose.' Everybody got on a bus train or plane and went back home to do what they've been doing. This weekend, pastors are going to faithfully bring the Word of God, celebrate the love of this country, and at the same time, their focus isn't politics. It is Jesus. And so I bless everyone who is doing that this weekend and continues to labor. But we are about making disciples and getting this Gospel to the nations. To me, that's a challenge every day for every one of us, but it's also the greatest blessing of being part of this Convention. But we do have some challenges for thoughts and ideas that I'm concerned will cause us to drift further away from actually impacting the world with the Gospel. And I think we have to be honest about that. We have to wrestle through those things and I'm grateful for the Baptist Faith and Message because it's sticky enough to hold a very diverse group of people together for the purpose of glorifying God by making disciples and going to the ends of the Earth.

Jonathan Howe:

Now, kind of on the flip side of that question, what excites you the most about leading Southern Baptists as president?

Ed Litton:

I think at the core that's who we are. I think at the core of our Convention are people who choose, they're autonomous leaders, autonomous churches, but they choose to cooperate, sacrifice and give. And the other thing that excites me is the potential—and I've heard this from many of our former presidents and our entity leaders—the potential of this denomination has never been fully realized. And I believe that God wants to draw this out of us. I'm also praying for revival in our hearts. I'm praying for us to get together and lay down our swords and talk honestly with God about what's in our hearts. That we would have a renewed commitment to the beauty and the glory of unity and cooperation, because we can do more together than partitioning off, causing division and doing everything that stymies the gospel. If we could come together to pray together. And there's a thought process here that obviously I'm working on a way for us to be able to do that in regions to really start to get before God, because what we need is not what our organization gives us. It's not the power of our purse. What we need is the Holy Spirit of God to pour out a fresh fire and a fresh anointing on us as we lift up the unsearchable riches of God's Word.

Jonathan Howe:

Well, thank you, Ed. We appreciate you taking the time this week and please say 'hey' to Kathy for us. And also if you get a chance, send me some Conecuh sausage.

Ed Litton:

Hey, listen Alabama has some homegrown sausage. Sausage is never fun to be watched being made, but it is good to eat. It's called Conecuh sausage, and I'll make sure you get some all right.

Jonathan Howe:

Well, sounds good. Well, thank you. It's good to talk to you today and we wish you all the best in the future and looking forward to seeing soon.