

Narrow Southern Baptist Election Showcases Divide In Nation's Largest Protestant Body

A pastor who endorses claims of racial 'systemic injustice,' Ed Litton, has been elected president of the largest U.S. Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

https://thefederalist.com/2021/06/18/narrow-southern-baptist-election-showcases-divide-in-nations-largest-protestant-body/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=the_federalist_daily_briefing_2021_06_18&utm_term=2021-06-18

By [Matthew Garnett](#) The Federalist JUNE 18, 2021

A pastor who endorses claims of racial “systemic injustice,” Ed Litton, has been elected president of the largest U.S. Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

Litton’s primary opponents in the race were Mike Stone, backed by the newly formed [Conservative Baptist Network](#) (CBN), and the iconic Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Seminary. In the first round of voting, Stone received 36 percent of the nearly 16,000 votes cast, Litton 32 percent, and Mohler 26 percent. (Randy Adams also received 4 percent of that first vote.) A runoff between Stone and Litton ensued, and in a narrow and surprising victory, Litton ended up edging Stone in the final vote by 2 percent.

It came as a shock to many that Litton so handily outperformed Mohler. Mohler’s name recognition alone, many thought, made him a shoo-in for the presidency of the SBC. Under normal circumstances, that might have been the case.

However, convention delegates (called “messengers”) were in no mood for the moderation Mohler offered and instead focused on Stone and Litton. Stone stood firmly against using critical race theory (CRT) as a path forward in racial reconciliation, while Litton was supported by those within the denomination who also support using CRT and intersectionality as “[analytical tools](#)” to address the SBC’s past and present sins on race.

The breakdown of the vote totals both in the initial election and in the final one indicated to many SBC watchers just how divided the convention is over this

matter. Mohler was clearly the most well-known among the candidates, and ran on stability for the SBC. Stone was backed by the most conservative element of the voters, while Litton was supported by the more moderate and progressive wings of the denomination. The share of Mohler's votes going largely to Litton in the final tally indicates a deeply divided church body.

"Our Lord isn't woke," Stone told [The Wall Street Journal](#) before the convention, to distinguish himself from Litton. Stone went on to say, "We see some worldly ideologies, philosophies and theories that are beginning to make their way into Southern Baptist life." He and others in the CBN are concerned that men like Litton could embed CRT in the denomination. Litton worries that fellow Southern Baptists alert to the possibility that ideologies like CRT will damage theology and relationships is a signal that some are still trafficking in subtle forms of racism. Litton authored, endorsed, and added his signature to two statements, "[Justice, Repentance, and the SBC](#)" and the "[Deep South Joint Statement on the Gospel, Racial Reconciliation, and Justice](#)," in October and December 2020, respectively. The statement on "Justice" states, "we stand firmly in opposition to any movement in the SBC that seeks to distract from racial reconciliation through the gospel and that *denies the reality of systemic injustice*. To deny systemic injustice would be to ignore the effects that sin has on both individuals, societies, and institutions" (emphasis added).

The "Deep South" statement, while making similar claims, adds,

When the very public killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in 2020 brought the nation to a crisis, our cities were affected too. The pain, the fear, and the trauma in our communities revealed a division that many hoped had been relegated to the past. We realize that the problems we face are broad, the division caused by sin goes deep, and the hearts and souls of our neighbors remain profoundly and justly hurt by this sin. To ignore this, or hope it will go away, is to become the indifferent priest in the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

This is the source of friction between the more than 50 percent who voted Litton into the highest office in the SBC and the 49 percent who opposed him. Many Southern Baptists worry that these kinds of statements are too soft on critical race theory and promote an unbiblical view of race relations that worsen racial divisions.

Major headlines about the convention are more evidence that the majority of those involved viewed critical race theory as a key consideration in electing the SBC president. For example, here was an MSNBC headline: [Southern Baptist Convention 2021 offers a Trump and critical race theory litmus test.](#)"

The [Christianity Today](#) subhead announcing Litton's victory reads, "The Alabama pastor, known for his inclusion of women and work on racial justice, beat out Mike Stone of the Conservative Baptist Network in a runoff." "The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) rejected an attempt by its conservative wing to wage battle over critical race theory by voting to elect a moderate pastor as its new leader on Tuesday," says [Newsweek](#) in their subhead. Note that what Newsweek calls "moderate" is considered progressive by SBC conservatives.

The SBC presidency is a mere one-year term. With Stone and his Conservative Baptist Network characterizing Litton and those voting for him as carrying water for critical race theory, this narrow election sets the stage for further fireworks in the denomination over the biblical way to pursue racial harmony.

Matthew Garnett is the husband of Jennifer, the father of two children, a member of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, truck driver, and host of the ["In Layman's Terms"](#) broadcast