

**The State of Membership Growth, Sunday School, and Evangelism  
in the Southern Baptist Convention 1900-2002**

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In his study of denomination growth and decline, David Roozen noted several important facts: (1) the decline of mainline churches which some had thought began in the 1960s actually began in the 1950s, (2) the growth rate of all Protestant denominations slowed in the 1950s, and (3) a slowdown in membership growth increased in the 1960s for all Protestant denominations.<sup>1</sup>

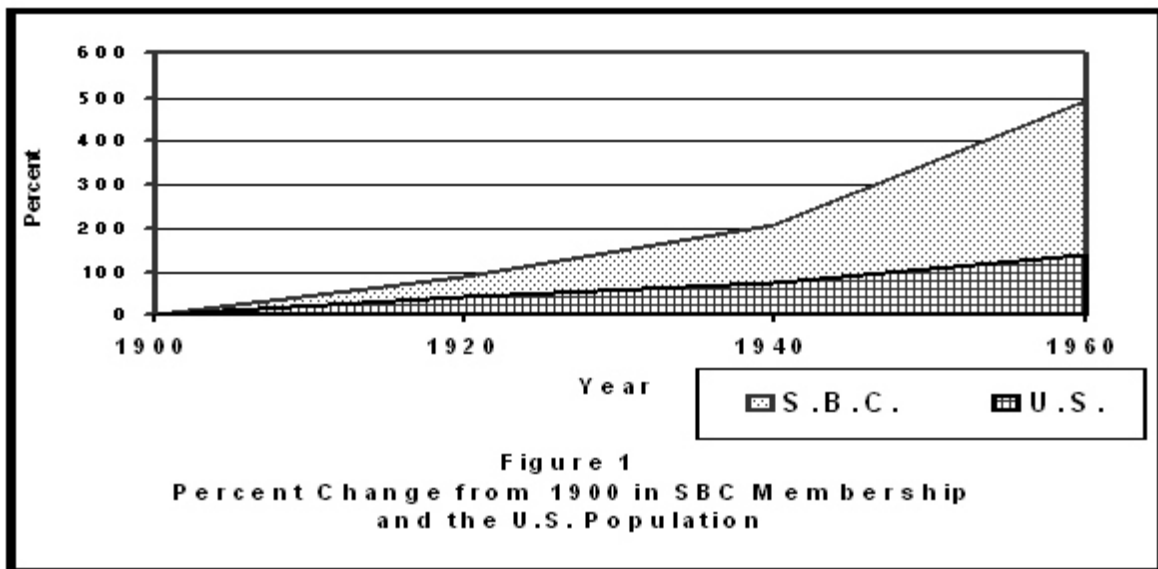
While the focus of Roozen's study was the decline of mainline denominations, the trends he noted also applied to conservative churches. An important contemporary question is what the trend has been in membership since 1990, particularly as it relates to denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention.

The purpose of this preliminary study was to examine growth trends with the Southern Baptist Convention over a broader period of time than Roozen's study. The researcher's intention in reporting the results of the study is to serve as a catalyst for thought and further analysis regarding the S.B.C. membership changes during the past century and to understand their implications for the future.

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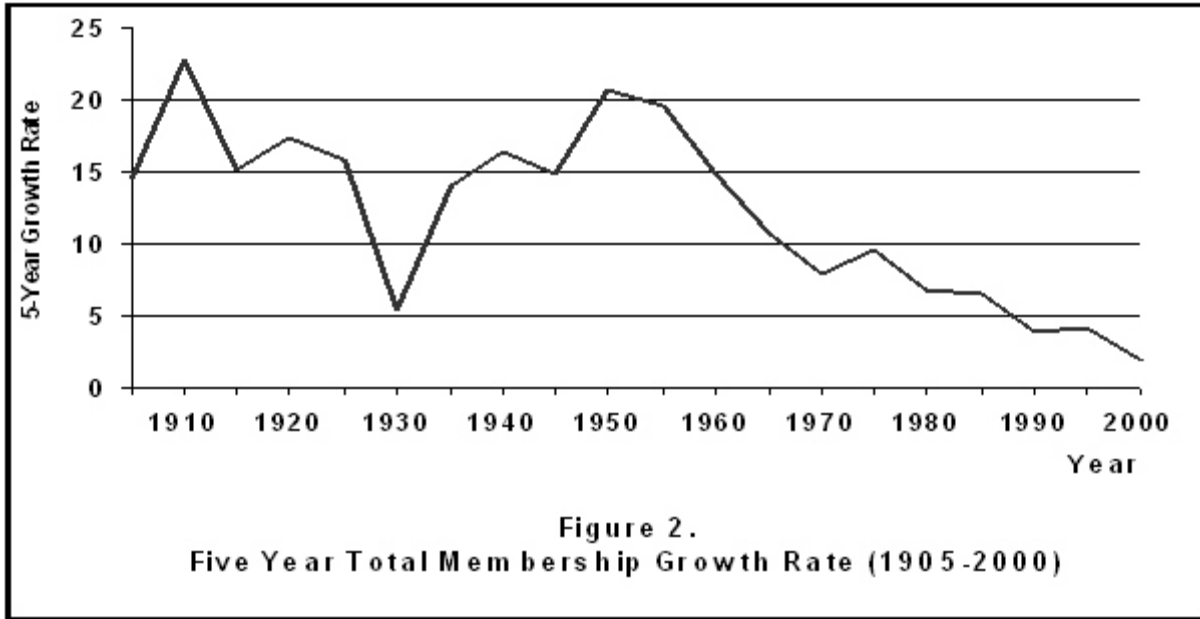
<sup>1</sup>David A. Roozen, "Denominations Grow as Individuals Join Congregations," in *Church Denominational Growth: What Does (and Does Not) Cause Growth or Decline*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 17.

The Annual Church Profile (ACP) is a yearly survey sent to all churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>2</sup> Statistics obtained from the ACP from 1900 to 2002 revealed several important church membership trends. From 1900 to 2002, total church membership in the Southern Baptist Convention grew steadily from 1,657,996 to 16,247,736 (see figure 1 and appendix 1).<sup>3</sup> A study of the five-year membership growth rates during this period revealed a different perspective as shown in Figure 2. While the rate of growth of the S.B.C. steadily increased from 1930 to 1950, the rate has declined since 1950 as Roozen noted in his study. Since 1990, the rate of growth continued to fall. During 1995-2000, the rate fell to only 1.9 percent.

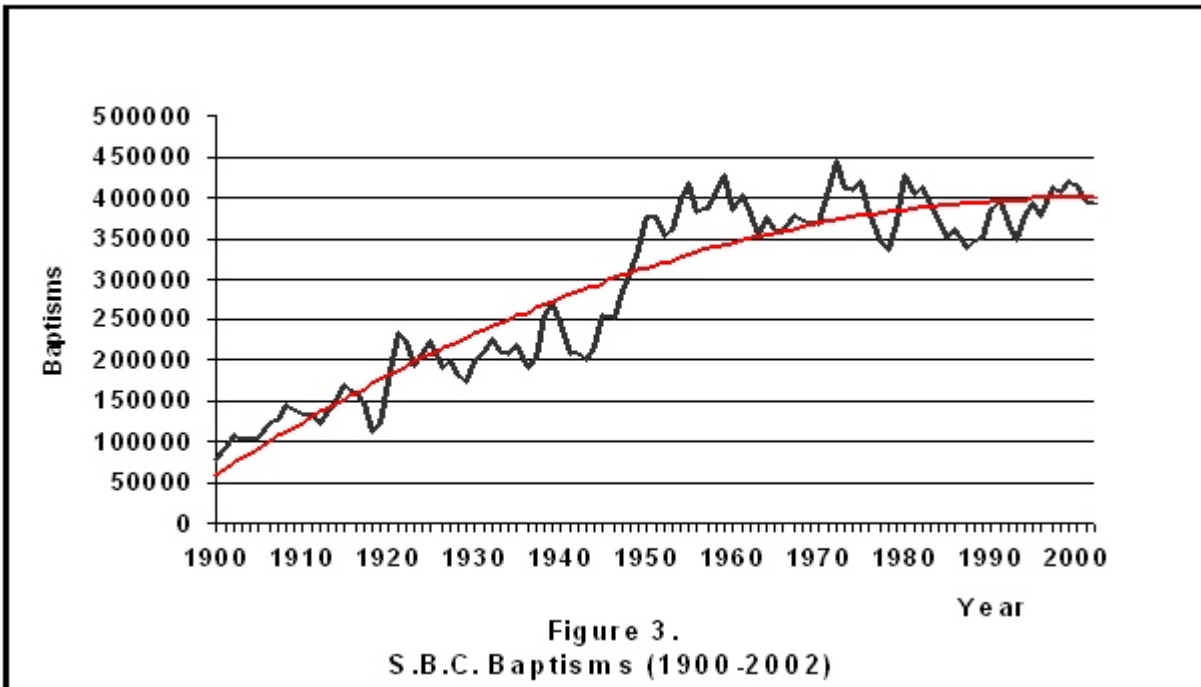


<sup>2</sup>Prior to 1994, the ACP was called the Uniform Church Letter.

<sup>3</sup>Linda S. Barr, *Southern Baptist Handbook 1991* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1992), 9 and the ACP statistical summaries provided by the Stategic Information and Planning Section, Lifeway Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.



The decline in the rate of membership growth was mirrored in the annual number of baptisms reported by S.B.C. churches. Baptisms increased from 80,465 in 1900 to 429,063 in 1959 (see figure 3 and appendix 2). Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention reported over



400,000 baptisms for several years after 1959 with an all-time record of 445,725 reported in 1972 (see table 1). Baptisms tended to plateau after 1960 varying between 350,000 and 450,000.

**Table 1**  
**Top Ten Baptism Years in the Southern Baptist Convention (1900 - 2002)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of Baptisms</b>
1972	445,725
1980	429,742
1959	429,063
1975	421,809
1999	419,342
1955	416,867
2000	414,657
1973	413,990
1997	412,027
1982	411,554

Why has S.B.C. membership growth almost stopped? This researcher proposes two answers. First, an increase in the total church membership to baptism ratio provides one explanation for the plateau in baptisms since 1960 (see figure 4). Before 1935 the ratio was less than twenty members per baptism. Between 1935 and 1959 the ratio was less than 25:1. However, the ratio began to increase in 1960 so that in 2002 the ratio was 41:1 (see figure 4 and table 2).

**Table 2. Ratio of Baptisms to Total Church Membership in the SBC  
1900 - 2002**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Baptisms</b>	<b>T Membership</b>	<b>Ratio</b>
1900	80,465	1,657,996	1-21
1905	105,905	1,899,427	1-18
1910	134,440	2,332,464	1-17
1915	168,235	2,685,552	1-16
1920	173,595	3,149,346	1-18
1925	224,191	3,649,330	1-16
1930	198,579	3,850,278	1-19
1935	220,047	4,389,417	1-20
1940	245,500	5,104,327	1-21
1945	256,699	5,865,554	1-23
1950	376,085	7,080,188	1-19
1955	416,867	8,470,799	1-20
1960	386,469	9,731,591	1-25
1965	361,634	10,772,712	1-30
1970	368,863	11,629,880	1-32
1975	476,002	12,735,663	1-27
1980	429,742	13,606,808	1-32
1985	351,071	14,486,403	1-41
1990	385,031	15,044,416	1-39
1995	393,811	15,668,077	1-40
2000	414,657	15,960,308	1-39
2002	394,893	16,247,736	1-41

The church member to baptism ratio is an indicator of evangelistic zeal and commitment. A steadily increasing ratio seems to indicate that one factor in the decline in the rate of S.B.C. membership growth is a decline in evangelistic fervor.

While the denomination's membership to baptism ratio continues to increase, many churches still have a ratio less than 20:1. Using the 2002 ACP data of 38,123 S.B.C. churches, a study of the ratio of total membership to baptisms revealed 7,137 churches that had a ratio of twenty or less (see table 3). It should be noted that during 2002 over eight thousand churches reported zero baptisms or did not report any baptisms.

While the number of baptisms has plateaued in the Southern Baptist Convention, some churches continue to baptize hundreds of people each year (see table 4). Although most of the churches that baptize over one hundred persons per year are large churches, ACP data shows several smaller churches in this category as well (see table 5).

**Table 3.**  
**The Ratio of Total Church Membership to Baptisms in S.B.C. Churches in 2002**

<b>Ratio (Membership/Baptisms)</b>	<b>Number of Churches</b>	<b>Cumulative Number of Churches</b>
<b>1-10</b>	<b>2,647</b>	<b>2,647</b>
<b>11-20</b>	<b>4,490</b>	<b>7,137</b>
<b>21-30</b>	<b>4,143</b>	<b>11,280</b>
<b>31-40</b>	<b>3,448</b>	<b>14,728</b>
<b>41-50</b>	<b>2,753</b>	<b>17,481</b>
<b>51-75</b>	<b>4,345</b>	<b>21,826</b>
<b>76-100</b>	<b>2,530</b>	<b>24,356</b>
<b>&gt;100</b>	<b>5,535</b>	<b>29,891</b>

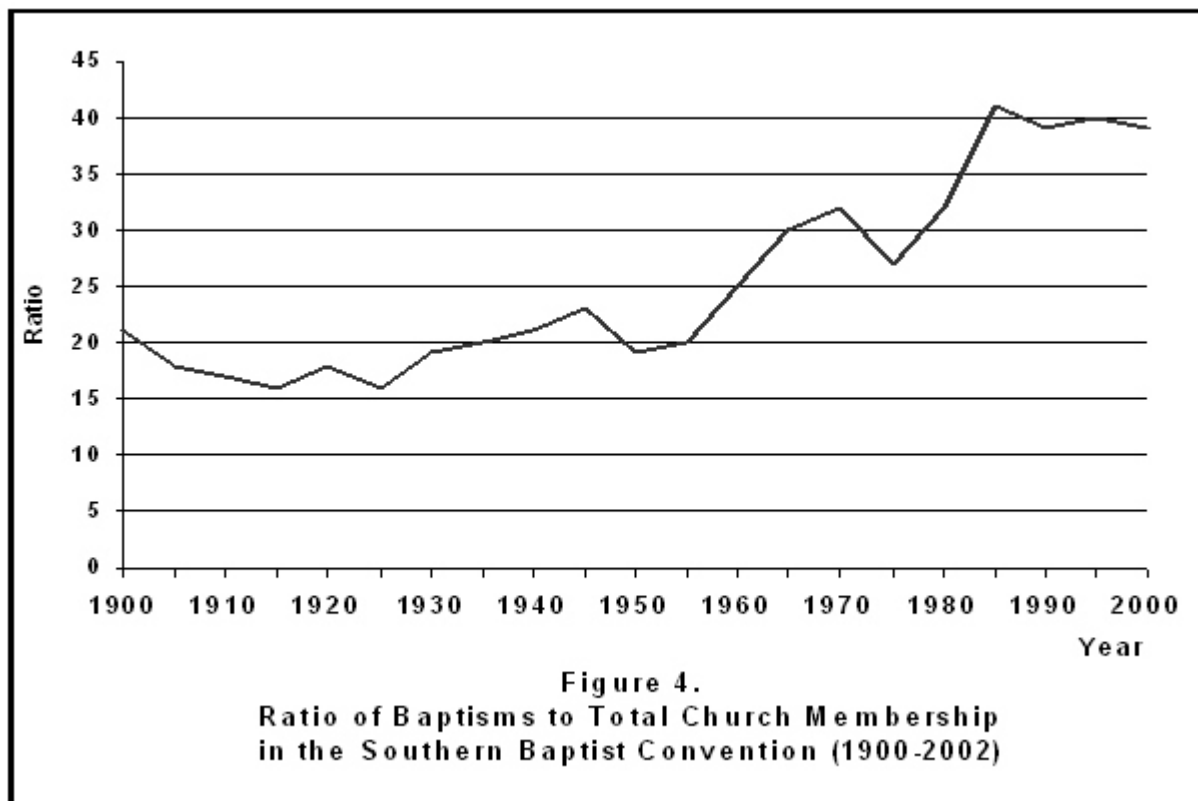
**Table 4.**  
**S.B.C. Churches with One-Hundred or More Baptisms (1994-2002)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. Of Churches</b>	<b>Highest No. Of Baptisms</b>	<b>Top Church</b>
1994	236	1211	<b>FBC Dallas</b>
<b>1995</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>1313</b>	<b>FBC Dallas</b>
<b>1996</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>1316</b>	<b>Rehoboth</b>
<b>1997</b>	<b>293</b>	<b>1637</b>	<b>Rehoboth</b>
<b>1998</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>1815</b>	<b>Rehoboth</b>
<b>1999</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>1313</b>	<b>Rehoboth</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Rehoboth</b>
<b>2001</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>1677</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Houston</b>
<b>2002</b>	<b>306</b>	<b>1730</b>	<b>Fellowship</b>

**Table 5.**  
**Top Churches in the S.B.C. by Resident Church Membership in 2002**

<b>Resident Membership</b>	<b>Baptisms 50-99</b>	<b>Baptisms 100 or Over</b>
500 or Less	133	21
501-1500	334	61
1501-2500	164	61
2500 or Over	78	153
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>709</b>	<b>293</b>

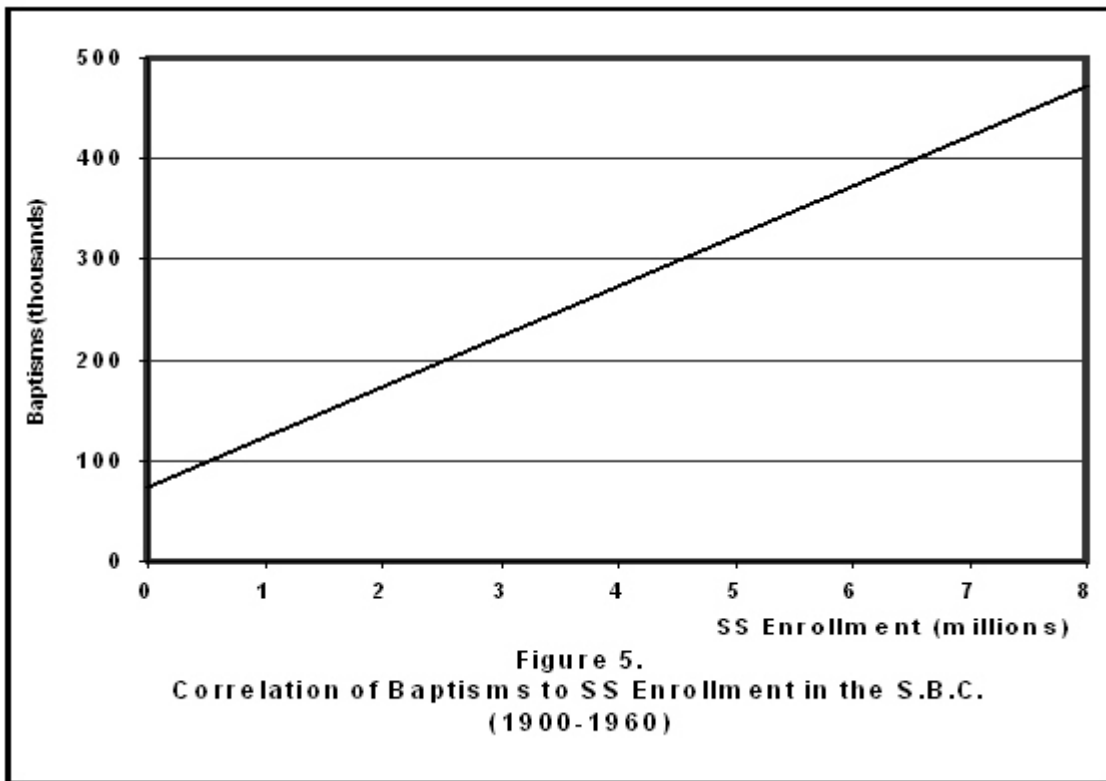
A second reason for the decline in the rate of membership growth in the Southern Baptist Convention is a change in the role of the Sunday School relative to evangelism. Dr. Chuck Kelley in his book about evangelism in the S.B.C. identified the Sunday School as one of the major contributors to the evangelistic growth of the denomination. Kelley emphasized, “While the international Sunday School movement shifted away from the priority of evangelism and conversion through Sunday School work, Southern Baptists made a conscious decision to use Sunday School as ‘the outreach arm of the church.’ The result was an evangelistic harvest from Sunday School that was unequaled by other denominations in this country.”<sup>4</sup>

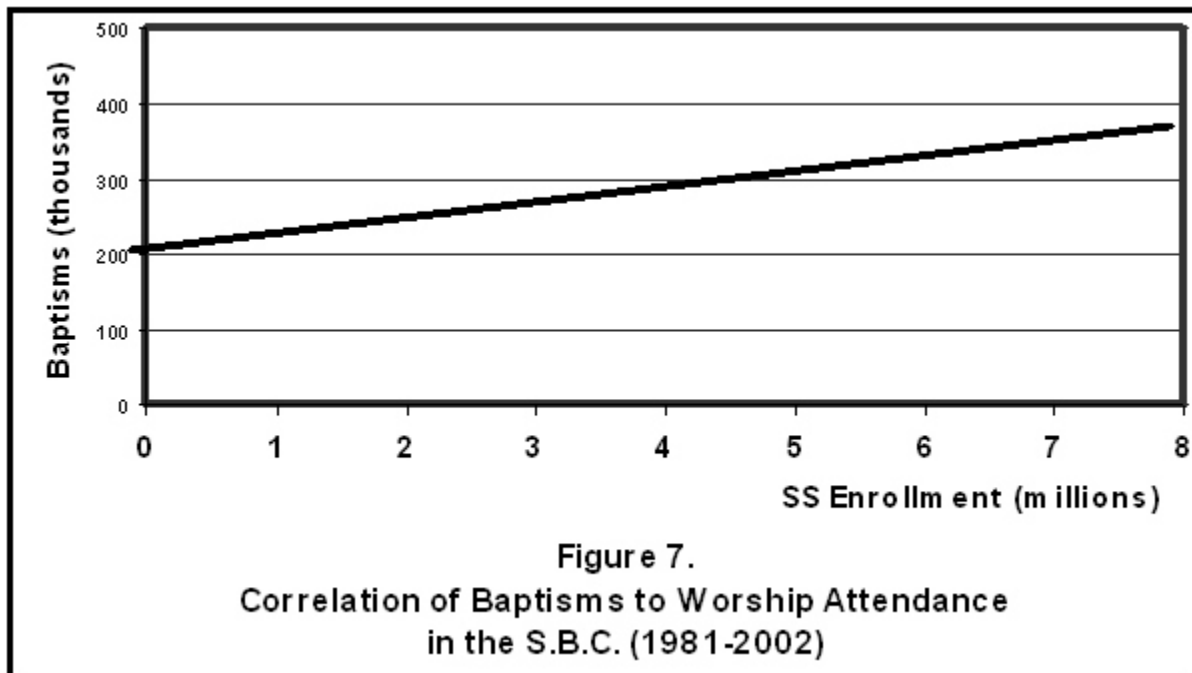
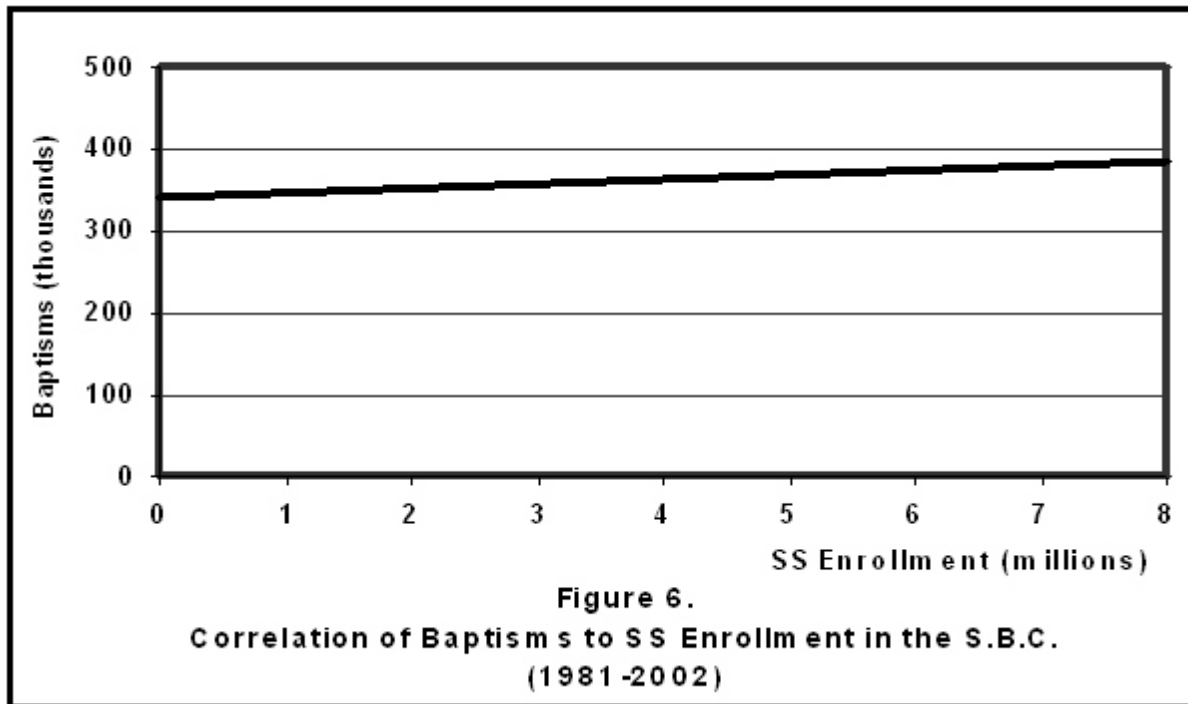


<sup>4</sup>Charles S. Kelley, *How Did They Do It?* (n.p., Insight Press, 1993), 98.



A study of Sunday School enrollment between 1900 and 1960 affirms Kelley’s thesis by showing a strong correlation between enrollment and baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention. Statistical correlation analysis produced a Pearson  $r$  of 0.970 and  $p < 0.01$ , two tails (see figure 5). However, analysis since 1981 demonstrates that Sunday School enrollment no longer significantly correlates with baptisms,  $r = 0.033$ ,  $p = 0.885$ , two-tails (see figure 6). While by itself correlation (or lack of it) does not prove or disprove a relationship, the lack of correlation seems to indicate that Sunday School is no longer the evangelistic force it once was in the S.B.C.

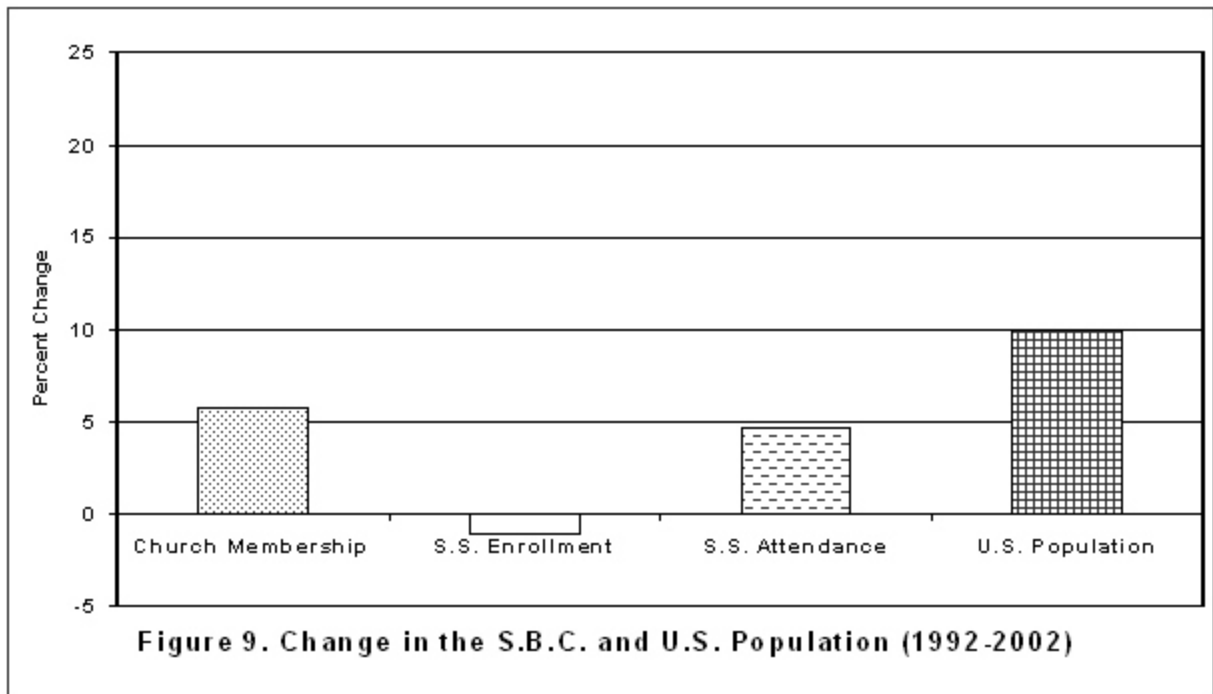
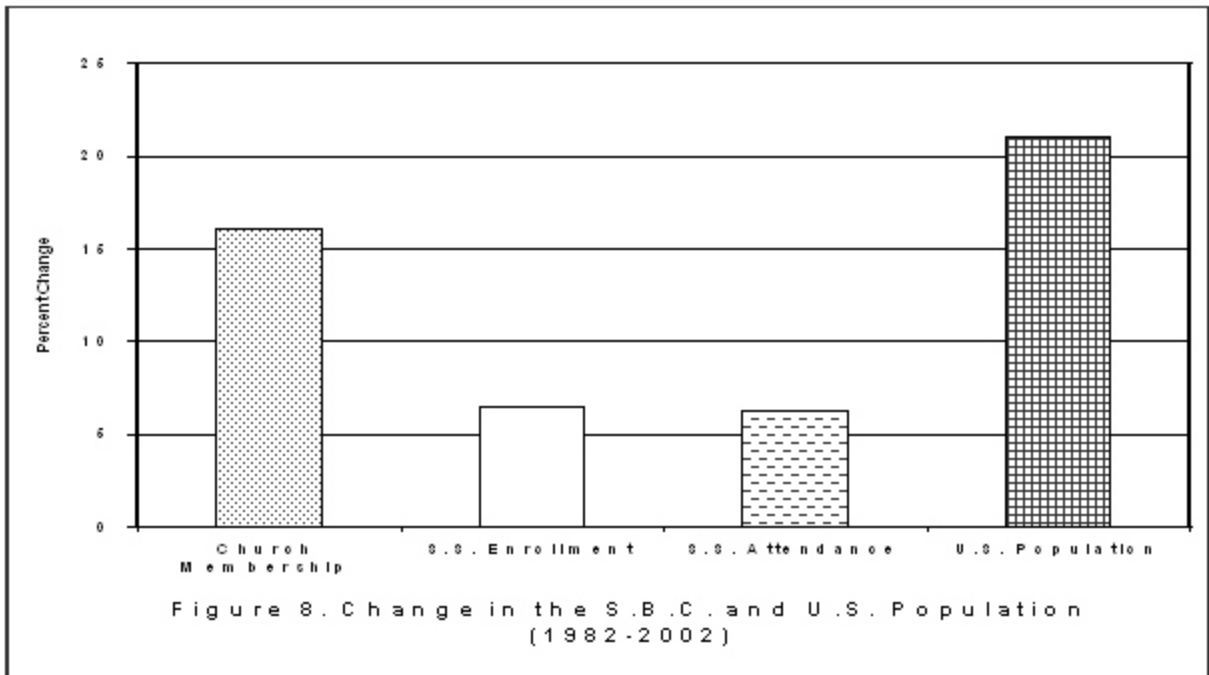




Interestingly, worship service attendance between 1991 and 2002 did correlate with baptisms(  $r = 0.616$ ,  $p = 0.03$ , two-tails), but not nearly as strong as Sunday School enrollment before 1960 (see figure 7). A steady decrease in percentage of Sunday School attendance vs. worship attendance provides additional evidence of a shift of emphasis away from Sunday School to the worship service (see table 6 and figures 8 and 9).

**Table 6. Percentage of Sunday School Attendance vs. Worship Attendance the the Southern Baptist Convention 1994 - 2002**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1994	86
1995	82
1996	78
1997	76
1998	74
1999	74
2000	73
2001	72
2002	70



### Conclusion

Church membership in the Southern Baptist Convention continues to grow. Some churches are reporting hundreds of baptisms each year. However, overall the rate of growth in the Southern Baptist Convention is almost nil. Furthermore, the number of baptisms has plateaued. Two causes for the lack of growth appear to be a lack of evangelistic zeal and a change in the evangelistic role of the Sunday School. The implications of these trends certainly warrant additional study.

**Appendix 1.****Total Baptisms in the SBC 1900 - 2002**

Year	No. Baptisms	Year	No. Baptisms	Year	No. Baptisms
1900	80,465	1935	220,047	1970	368,863
1901	95,610	1936	191,993	1971	409,659
1902	108,517	1937	204,567	1972	445,725
1903	103,241	1938	256,814	1973	413,990
1904	103,021	1939	269,155	1974	410,482
1905	105,905	1940	245,500	1975	421,809
1906	124,911	1941	209,593	1976	384,496
1907	129,152	1942	209,127	1977	345,690
1908	146,717	1943	202,301	1978	336,050
1909	140,980	1944	218,223	1979	368,738
1910	134,440	1945	256,699	1980	429,742
1911	132,396	1946	253,361	1981	405,608
1912	123,471	1947	285,152	1982	411,554
1913	137,396	1948	310,226	1983	394,606
1914	151,441	1949	334,892	1984	372,028
1915	168,235	1950	376,085	1985	351,071
1916	160,497	1951	375,525	1986	363,124
1917	148,699	1952	354,384	1987	338,495
1918	113,833	1953	361,835	1988	346,320
1919	123,069	1954	396,857	1989	351,107
1920	173,595	1955	416,867	1990	385,031
1921	233,571	1956	384,627	1991	396,668
1922	224,844	1957	389,716	1992	367,847
1923	195,864	1958	407,892	1993	349,073
1924	209,676	1959	429,063	1994	378,463
1925	224,191	1960	386,469	1995	393,811
1926	193,279	1961	403,315	1996	379,344
1927	197,155	1962	381,510	1997	412,027
1928	183,020	1963	355,325	1998	407,264
1929	175,631	1964	374,418	1999	419,342
1930	198,579	1965	361,634	2000	414,657
1931	211,253	1966	360,959	2001	395,930
1932	226,855	1967	378,937	2002	394,893
1933	211,393	1968	373,025		
1934	209,364	1969	368,225		

**Appendix 2.**  
**Selected Statistics for the Southern Baptist Convention (1982 - 2002)**

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Churches	36,302	36,531	36,740	36,979	37,116	37,286	37,567
Total Members	13,998,252	14,185,454	14,349,657	14,486,403	14,618,567	14,727,770	14,818,496
Baptisms	411,554	394,606	372,028	351,071	363,124	338,495	346,320
Bapt Ratio	1:34	1:36	1:39	1:41	1:40	1:44	1:43
SS Enrollment	7,678,604	7,815,443	7,857,337	7,960,796	7,943,973	7,942,106	7,911,373
SS Attendance	3,859,813	3,813,760	3,791,345	3,586,217	3,880,629	3,850,939	3,822,326
Wor Attend.	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Churches	37,785	37,974	38,221	38,458	38,741	39,433	40,087
Total Members	14,913,538	15,044,416	15,238,283	15,365,486	15,404,621	15,619,912	15,668,077
Baptisms	351,107	385,031	396,668	367,847	349,073	378,463	393,811
Bapt Ratio	1:42	1:39	1:38	1:42	1:44	1:41	1:40
SS Enrollment	7,936,015	8,009,498	8,183,801	8,262,521	8,246,250	8,263,558	8,207,860
SS Attendance	3,802,216	3,851,340	3,915,991	3,917,798	3,934,283	3,752,057	3,742,631
Wor Attend.	NA	NA	4,579,630	4,610,058	4,610,128	4,401,824	4,562,639

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Churches	40,613	40,887	40,870	41,099	41,588	42,334	42,775
Total Members	15,694,050	15,891,514	15,729,356	15,851,756	15,960,308	16,052,920	16,247,736
Baptisms	379,344	412,027	407,264	419,342	414,657	395,930	394,893
Bapt Ratio	1:41	1:39	1:39	1:38	1:38	1:41	1:41
SS Enrollment	8,242,128	8,140,107	8,147,939	8,147,457	8,186,415	8,183,801	8,174,793
SS Attendance	3,776,149	3,907,703	3,901,868	3,945,189	3,999,149	4,041,569	4,101,173
Wor Attend.	4,898,872	5,224,640	5,398,692	5,418,348	5,544,439	5,730,980	5,839,945