

James Michael Stevens: The Encouragement of Arts

[At the Free Will Baptist National Convention.](#)

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Last week, I had the privilege of attending the Free Will Baptist National Convention that was held in Birmingham, Alabama.

Since I was raised as a Southern Baptist, there is a lot that I am still learning since taking on my current position at Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville two years ago. I would like to share with you how Free Will Baptists are encouraging an appreciation for music and culture among its young people.

There have been many denominational type meetings, which I have attended, that have mainly been events for pastors and church staff, who are sometimes accompanied by their spouses. At times, these meetings can be very dry and boring. However, at the Free Will Baptist Convention it is truly a family experience. At the same time as the adults are meeting, the National Youth Conference takes place in another area of the conference center providing times of worship specifically geared to young people. There were literally children and young people everywhere!

However, what really impressed me was the Music and Arts Festival. This festival is a competition that is divided into four age categories: grades 1-3, grades 4-6, grades 7-9, and grades 10-12. There are nine different categories that young people can compete in including various vocal and instrumental music groups and also, communication arts, creative writing, electronic media, and creative art. Each category has additional sub-categories such as in creative art, which includes: painting, graphics, three-dimensional art, photography, fabricated art, and promotional graphic art. There are other events that encourage Bible study such as Scripture Memory, Bible Tic-Tac-Toe, Bible Bowl, and Truth Quest.

Children and youth from all over the convention begin training for these competitions early in the year and compete at regional and state levels before moving to the nationals. By the time national convention arrives, there is truly a family atmosphere that has simultaneous opportunities for every age. An exciting air of anticipation can be felt by all. The winners are announced in a joint service with everyone after the final worship service, and there are even some scholarships that are awarded for the older youth groups.

Even though these are competitions, they are done in a very supportive atmosphere that encourages each participant to develop their God-given talents and abilities.

I believe it is a good thing when the church can find ways to promote music, art, drama, and communication to its young members. This is especially true when so much of cultural arts are being cut from our schools. By including this in a national denominational meeting, it promotes a positive image of the church at a young age that hopefully will not only encourage excellence in the arts, but will foster a greater interest of our future generations in the things of the church and of God.

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Dr. James Michael Stevens is a prolific musician and published composer of over 200 songs. Winner of numerous ASCAP Standard Awards for Composition, he currently resides in Nashville, Tennessee, as Chairman of the Music Department at Free Will Baptist Bible College.

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