

Moderates unite? The future of Southern Baptist dissidents

by [Jim Jones](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

Should moderate Baptists, now fragmented into various groups, consolidate their forces into a full-fledged national denomination and try to provide a compelling alternative to the conservative Southern Baptist Convention? That was the most intriguing question brought up when more than 3,000 moderates gathered in Fort Worth in June for the annual general assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The moderates' break with the national Southern Baptist Convention came more than ten years ago after they were trounced in a Baptist "holy war" in the 1980s by politically savvy conservatives determined to enforce their conviction that the Bible is historically, scientifically and theologically inerrant. Moderates were cast out of Baptist centers of learning, missionary boards, publishing houses and the high offices of the 16-million-member SBC. But they have not gone away. They are inside, outside and on the fringes of the 157-year-old Southern Baptist Convention, which moderates contend has been turned into a top-down governed creedal body—one that Roger Williams, John Leland and other founders of the Baptist movement would not recognize.

Networks of Baptist moderates, like the Cooperative Fellowship, have sprung up with the stated goals of preserving Baptist principles of priesthood of the believer, autonomy of the local church, religious freedom and separation of church and state. The moderates have had some success, but it has been limited. Now the moderates, who belong to the Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptists, Mainstream Baptist Network, Texas Baptists Committed and moderate-led state conventions in Texas and Virginia, are contemplating the future and searching for ways to expand.

How their future should unfold was clearly a matter of debate among those who attended the Fellowship's three-day assembly, which had the theme, "It's Time for a New Challenge."

One bold proposal came from Cecil Sherman, a warhorse in the Baptist battles, a founder and the first coordinator of the Atlanta-based Fellowship. It's time, Sherman said, for moderates to begin shaping a national denomination that is larger than, but

also encompasses, the Fellowship. He proposes uniting moderate groups, which he called “an ill-formed cluster of clusters.”

“We have been building a new denomination for ten years,” he said, comparing the moderate struggle to the Exodus. “We are out of Egypt but not yet in the Promised Land.”

Moderates now are in a kind of wilderness, Sherman contends, and need to take steps to utilize energies provided by powerful moderates who run state conventions in Texas and Virginia, plus other new moderate groups in Missouri, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Illinois.

“The ones most likely to lead us out of the wilderness,” said Sherman, are Charles Wade and John Upton, executive directors of the moderate state groups in Texas and Virginia, respectively; David Currie, director of Texas Baptists Committed and Mainstream Baptists; and Daniel Vestal, chief executive of the Fellowship, who took over from Sherman in 1996.

Leaders of the 2.5-million Baptist General Convention of Texas—which is larger than many national denominations—are among the most active players in the moderate movement. They have been slowly distancing themselves from the SBC, cutting back on funds sent to the denomination’s six seminaries and other agencies. Some more militant Texans, including former Baylor University President Herbert Reynolds, are advocating forming a Convention of Americas, with the Texas convention at its center.

Those at the Fellowship assembly met Sherman’s call for a moderate denomination with some resistance, mostly on practical grounds, while others felt some organizational development is inevitable.

“It ain’t gonna happen,” said Vestal. “You don’t just form a convention by announcing it. I don’t think churches are going to join a new convention.”

Vestal says local churches don’t want another denomination. Baptist church members, he said, have the SBC “in their DNA” and aren’t about to sever all ties with the denomination, even if they disagree with its leaders. Also, he holds that America is in a “postdenominational” era and that the Fellowship’s looser network structure is more attractive to local churches.

Vestal drew a pyramid to illustrate what he called a “dinosaur” method of top-down leadership exemplified by many national denominations, including the SBC. In contrast, he drew a molecular model with the local church at the center and lines radiating out to many groups like the Fellowship, which are “partners” with the local church.

James Baucom, 36, of Lynchburg, Virginia, agrees with Vestal about the Baptist reluctance to leave the national denomination. “It’s hard to leave Mama,” he said. “To say you are a Southern Baptist is a cultural statement, and to break those ties is for many churches and many leaders very difficult.” Baucom also thinks local churches are now dictating their own programs, and denominations aren’t as important. His church, the 1,000-member Riverfront Baptist Church, partners with many groups, including the Fellowship, the moderate-led state conventions and the Willow Creek Association (created by Bill Hybels’s Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago), to provide resources for evangelism and spiritual growth.

Hardy Clemons, a South Carolina pastor and moderate leader, opposed the idea of a new moderate denomination. “I think that’s going back to Egypt,” he said. But he likes Sherman’s analogy about moderates being in the wilderness. “Baptists have always been in the wilderness, and we like it there. Being in the wilderness means we are free of the restrictions and narrowness of the new management of the Southern Baptist Convention.”

None of the debates over forming a new convention arose on the floor of the Fellowship assembly. There were no headline-grabbing resolutions; in fact, the Fellowship has a policy against making resolutions. Moderates like to say they are different from the Baptists who show up in the headlines. They deplored the remarks by former Southern Baptist Convention President Jerry Vines, a conservative Jacksonville pastor, who called Muhammad a “demon-possessed pedophile” at the SBC Pastors Conference in June.

Similar disclaimers came from moderates following other SBC actions—its boycott of Disney, its publishing of prayer guides targeting Jews, Muslims and Hindus for conversion on their holy days, and its adoption of a faith statement saying that women should not be pastors and that wives should graciously submit to the servant leadership of their husbands.

The Fort Worth assembly was billed as “not a convention, but a gathering of free and faithful Baptists, both laity and clergy . . . a celebration of new and creative ventures with the Fellowship network.”

One of the highlights was the commissioning of new missionaries, including some going to Afghanistan and other Muslim areas. Names and images of some were not shown because they minister in areas where they are not welcome. A \$4 million anonymous contribution was announced for expanding the global missions program, which targets areas where people are seldom served by other missionaries.

“We minister to street children in Nairobi and in Kiev, Ukraine; the homeless in Miami, Florida; Iranian immigrants in Southern California and Arab-Americans in Dearborn, Michigan,” Gary Baldrige said in an interview. “We also work with people of Romany [Gypsies] throughout western Europe.” He and his wife, Barbara, former missionaries in the Southern Baptist Convention, co- direct the Fellowship’s global missions effort.

Moderates also cheered Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, a new partner of the Fellowship, and David Massengill, a lawyer who lives near Ground Zero in Manhattan, where he and other members of Metro Baptist Church aided people who fled from the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center.

After the terrorist attack, Massengill said, the church’s associate pastor, Marti Williams, who had just come to the church a week earlier, took charge of efforts to help victims of the tragedy. “If you think women are too weak to lead a church, then you’ve been hanging around the wrong kind of women,” said Massengill, drawing an ovation.

Moderates are strong supporters of women in ministry and reject the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message Statement, adopted by conservatives, which says the Bible prohibits women from being senior pastors and that wives should submit to the servant leadership of their husbands.

Vestal countered critics who believe the Fellowship has progressed too slowly. “What has happened in the last ten years has been remarkable,” he said in an interview. “Twelve new [moderate] theological schools have been born. We didn’t start all the schools but we partner with them. We have 139 missionaries in the field; a moderate publishing house, Smyth and Helwys, has been formed; the CBF has a \$19 million budget. We have started a retirement program in cooperation with the American

Baptist Churches, U.S.A. We have a CBF Foundation with a \$20 million endowment, and we have representatives in 18 states.”

But compared with the national SBC, the Atlanta-based Fellowship and other moderate organizations are small. After more than a decade of existence, the Fellowship’s roster of supporting churches has plateaued at about 1,800. Only 300 are solely aligned with the moderate group. The SBC, in comparison, has almost 40,000 member churches.

Why hasn’t the moderate movement grown more? Some blame the apathy of moderate pastors who want to steer clear of denominational controversy; some say the moderate groups have failed to clearly articulate their beliefs in ways that capture the imagination of Baptists.

Conservatives also have successfully smeared the moderates with the liberal label, scaring off many churches, said Keith Parks, who served as the Fellowship’s global missions director after he was forced out of the presidency of the Southern Baptists. “By innuendo and implication the fundamentalists have convinced many that all moderates are soft on homosexuality and abortion and don’t believe the Bible,” he said.

Roger Moran, a Missouri Baptist layman and member of the Southern Baptist Executive Committee, has distributed information through the mail, over the Internet and also through Baptist Press, the conservative convention’s news service, implying that moderates in the Fellowship, and also some moderate leaders in the Baptist General Convention of Texas, are too lenient on gay lifestyles.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas ran advertisements in secular newspapers accusing Moran of fostering “guilt by association” and noting that the Texas convention has taken stands against gay lifestyles and has dissociated itself from an Austin church which named an openly gay man as deacon. Moran says he’s not accusing all moderate Baptists of being supportive of gay lifestyles. But he said he can name many who are.

The Fellowship does not issue official positions on homosexuality or other social issues. But in the wake of Moran’s accusations that the Fellowship condones gay lifestyles, it adopted an organizational policy declaring that the Christian sexual ethic is “faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman and celibacy in singleness.” Also, the policy prohibits giving money to organizations “that condone,

advocate or affirm homosexual practice.”

Repugnance for denominational political activity caused leaders of the Fellowship, from its beginnings, to declare itself a nonpolitical group that would shun verbal battles with Southern Baptist conservatives. Some see that as a blunder.

“Moderates in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship made some major mistakes in its early stages by not being more aggressive,” contends David Currie, director of Texas Baptists Committed, a highly political moderates support group which has helped keep the Baptist General Convention of Texas in the moderate camp. Robert Parham, director of the Nashville-based Baptist Center for Ethics, which arose out of the moderate-conservative conflicts, said moderates have allowed themselves to be defined by others. When conservatives criticize the Fellowship, he said, moderates should be ready to quickly respond with “This is who we are. This is what we believe.”

Sherman said a moderate denomination, to be successful, must focus on bedrock Baptist issues and warned against what he called “elitist” moderate groups that focus on single issues, like women in ministry or gay rights.

“Baptists are conservative people,” he said. “If we don’t present ourselves in ways that make us sound more like them, they’re not going to join us. Christianity is about Jesus. It’s looking at God through Jesus. That’s the big idea. All the rest I can talk to you about.”

Other factors, including regional bias, have kept many people west of the Mississippi from joining the Fellowship, said Bob Stephenson, a geologist and leader of Mainstream Baptists of Oklahoma. “There’s still a frontier mentality in Texas, Oklahoma and other places west of the Mississippi,” he said. “We have a tradition of solving our own problems.”

Stephenson said the moderates can’t lose heart, though, because they are representing “pre-1979” Baptists. The fracturing of the SBC began in 1979 in Houston when conservatives won the first of a series of presidencies which would allow them ultimately to dominate the denomination. Prominent moderates were shut out of leadership positions.

Attempting to fight back, moderates adopted some of the same political tactics they had decried when used successfully by Paige Patterson, Houston Judge Paul Pressler

and other conservative leaders. The conservative methods were described by Roy Honeycutt, former president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, as “unholy forces” threatening to destroy cherished Baptist traditions of soul liberty and priesthood of the believer.

Conservatives won key presidential elections year after year as both sides sought to bring their people to the annual conventions. A Dallas convention drew more than 45,000 in 1985. But conservatives dominated. After a final conservative presidential victory in 1989 in New Orleans, moderates gave up the battle and began taking steps toward forming their own moderate organizations, such as the Cooperative Fellowship.

Walter Shurden, chair of the department of Christianity at Mercer University, says most Baptist congregations have sought to avoid the controversy but now are being forced to take sides. This is particularly the case in Texas, Virginia and Missouri, where there are rival moderate and conservative state conventions.

Shurden, in an article last year in the Fellowship newsletter, put the Baptist conflict into three periods: the struggle for national control (1979-1990), the fight over state conventions (1990-2000) and bitter battles in local churches (2000-2010).

About 90 moderate Baptist congregations have seceded from the conservative national body, including the 2,000-member Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas. “We got tired of explaining to people that we were not like those other Baptists,” said its pastor George Mason, a member of the Fellowship’s governing board. One of Mason’s members, Dot Laux, 82, who is making a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-sponsored mission trip to Macedonia this summer, said the decision to leave the denomination of her youth was painful, but she favored it. “We’ve been Southern Baptists all our life and we were concerned about the missionaries,” she said. “Fred [her husband] and I still give to the Lottie Moon Christmas offering,” a fund for the national denomination’s missionaries.

Jimmy Allen of Big Canoe, Georgia, the last moderate elected SBC president (in the late 1970s), tends to agree with Sherman that moderates have been in the process of forming a new denomination for some time.

“I think we are in the birth pangs of a new denomination, but the birth pangs have lasted much longer than we would have liked,” said Allen, who presided over “A Consultation of Concerned Baptists” in Atlanta in 1990 that led to the forming of the

Fellowship. Baptists should listen to both Vestal and Sherman, he said.

"I think Dan Vestal is right in that there is not a yearning to repeat some traditional denominational structure," said Allen. "But I think Cecil Sherman is right that it is time to move to the next chapter."

Allen believes "a new breed of denomination" which will allow broad freedoms will arise in the next eight to ten years, centered on the moderate state conventions and other groups. "I doubt if any existing structure can contain it," said Allen. "The Fellowship won't be the containment of it. It will be a denomination larger than the Fellowship, but the CBF and its missionary programs will be a pivotal part of it."

Foy Valentine, who headed the old Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission before the conservative takeover and is something of an elder statesman among Southern Baptist moderates, said his fellow moderates have to be patient as they seek the best way to promote their Baptist vision. "It will take decades for this split to get gestated, but it is gradually taking place," he said. "The Baptist movement is not going to perish. It is a part of the way Christians are prepared to do church, and that is going to take place."

Valentine said moderates are fragmented at the moment, but that will gradually change. "Now we just have to do things in the old society method, which is what a lot of Christians have always done," he said. "But ultimately down the line there will be some coagulation where we can do things better together."