

Some 'Spirit-filled' Baptists feel targeted in SBC: New rule on private prayer practice

by [John Pierce ABP](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

When Paul Pressler and Paige Patterson launched a revolution within the Southern Baptist Convention, they found an eager soldier in Ron Phillips.

Phillips, 58, has been pastor of Central Baptist Church of Hixson, Tennessee, near Chattanooga, since 1979—the year the so-called “conservative resurgence” began within the SBC. In the early 1990s, Phillips served as chair of the Home Mission Board, since renamed the North American Mission Board.

But in 1989 he had “an experience with the Holy Spirit” that changed his life and ministry significantly. Though once an insider in the conservative movement, Phillips now sees himself as excluded from SBC life. “I do believe Paige [Patterson] and others have betrayed every one of us,” said Phillips, whose church is now known as Abba’s House and draws about 3,000 worshipers each Sunday.

The congregation identifies itself as “a Spirit-filled Southern Baptist church” that “operates in the gifts of the Spirit while holding to the Word of God.” Phillips said his congregation affirms biblical authority—what he had thought was the sole issue in the SBC conflict.

“We thought it was a commitment to a higher view of scripture, rather than a narrowing view of fundamentalism,” said Phillips, who helped carry out the radical reshaping of the convention as Home Mission Board chairman.

The suggestion that he is now on the receiving end of what he helped create is certainly “fair,” Phillips confessed. He said he has apologized to many who were excluded from SBC life in past years. “I was much younger,” he said. “But I was very serious and sincere.”

Phillips was elected president of the Tennessee Baptist Convention in 1991, even after his “experience with the Holy Spirit.” There were no problems, he said, because “I didn’t get up and talk about it.”

In his book *Awakened by the Spirit*, Phillips shares his emerging theological and historical perspectives as a “Spirit-filled” Baptist. He said his passion for evangelism and missions remains high, but he is finding it harder to support the work of Southern Baptists.

He said convention policies—including the one recently adopted by the International Mission Board that excludes missionary candidates who use a “private prayer language”—are pushing more good Baptists away.

Like others, such as Oklahoma pastor Wade Burleson, who was threatened with removal as an IMB trustee because of his outspoken criticism, Phillips sees the new restrictions on overseas missionaries as an assault on IMB president Jerry Rankin, who admitted to having a private prayer language.

Terming the latest restrictions on missionaries “horrible,” Phillips said private prayer practices “should be nobody’s business.”

Added Phillips: “We’re shocked and betrayed by what has happened at the International Mission Board. I feel like it is a precursor to a total booting out of Baptists with charismatic leanings.”

In response, Paige Patterson said neither he nor anyone else to his knowledge ever made a promise to include charismatic persons in all aspects of SBC life. His position on gifts of the Spirit, he said, has been known publicly for years and is documented in a commentary he wrote on 1 Corinthians.

“The Bible says not to forbid speaking in tongues, since the miracle of Acts 2, for example, was a miracle of God,” said Patterson. “However, Paul builds in so many restrictions in 1 Corinthians 14 as to make the practice of mere utterance, what is practiced mostly today, virtually of little value.”

While, as a Baptist, he would not forbid anyone from speaking in tongues, Patterson said he would not call such a person to be his pastor or appoint someone with such leanings as a seminary professor.

“I cannot imagine why anyone could feel betrayed,” said Patterson, now president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. “Most of us don’t make deals; we try to understand scripture and faithfully preach it.”

Phillips, however, reads such a promise in Paul Pressler’s book *A Hill on Which to Die*, released in 1999.

In his personal recounting of the rightward shift in the SBC, Pressler writes: “The liberals had said that after the conservatives finished with those who held different views of the nature of the Bible, they would begin attacking the charismatics (neo-Pentecostals). . . . They said conservatives wanted to make everybody think just as they do. Such a charge is ludicrous, but it did worry some people such as my friend Wally Henley [pastor of Encourager Church in Houston], who had charismatic leanings. . . . I assured him that Paige, our friends, and I would not turn on charismatics after the battle over biblical authority was won. He trusted us, and he and others have now seen that this issue will not be a test of fellowship.”

That assurance, however, is not being kept by SBC leaders, said Phillips. And the growing restrictions within SBC agencies make it harder for him and others to stay connected.

So does Phillips still consider himself a Southern Baptist?

“I do,” he said. “I think I’m the real deal.”

Phillips said he is not mad at those he helped to gain power in the SBC, just concerned that they have “embraced what I call McCarthyism.” Their philosophy, he said, seems to be “us four and no more.”