Crisis of identity: A clash over faith and learning

by Robert Benne in the January 27, 2004 issue

It is often said that academic squabbles are so nasty because the stakes are so low. But at Baylor University the squabbles are nasty because the stakes are so high.

The conflicts are also numerous. The Baylor community is clashing over the school's newly articulated religious identity; over ratcheted-up demands on faculty for research and publication; over financial decisions endorsing higher tuition fees, expensive new Ph.D. programs, new buildings and more debt; and over how these new policies have been arrived at and implemented. The conflicts have been exacerbated by a national scandal in the basketball program: one player murdered another, and the coach (who later resigned) attempted to exonerate himself by having players lie to investigators.

At the center of the conflict is the administration's ambitious plan for the university, which with 14,000 students is the largest Baptist university in the world. *Baylor 2012* calls for making the Waco, Texas, school a topflight research institution while strengthening its Christian identity.

This plan was launched in the early 1990s when Don Schmeltekopf became provost. It was accelerated when Robert Sloan, the head of Baylor's seminary, was made university president in 1995, and it was formally accepted by the Board of Regents in 2001.

For most of the academic world, these two goals are contradictory: you cannot become a nationally ranked research university and strengthen your religious identity at the same time. The historic trend—perhaps bucked only by Notre Dame (and some think it has lost its Catholic identity)—dictates that a university must shed its religious identity if it is going to be prominent in the academic world.

About 20 percent of the Baylor faculty is angry at the concept or the implementation of *Baylor 2012* or both—angry enough to organize or support resistance to the

president. Most of these are tenured faculty of long duration. They are strongly represented in the Faculty Senate, which passed a no-confidence motion on Sloan by a 26-6 vote in early September. About 40 percent of the faculty are not active in the struggle but are upset by the disturbance and wish for peace and quiet. The other 40 percent, many hired in the past decade by Schmeltekopf and Sloan, are enthusiastic about the plan. After the Faculty Senate vote, around 300 faculty rallied in support of Sloan and *2012*.

The conflict has been magnified by the unusual presence of Baylor's former president, Herbert Reynolds, who has openly opposed Sloan and the strategic plan. Reynolds is a dignified Texas Baptist of larger-than-life proportions. He lives in Waco and is provided a fine office on the Baylor campus.

Many Sloan supporters believe Reynolds is using his connections to coordinate opposition to Sloan on many fronts—through the media, the Alumni Association and the five members of the Board of Regents who publicly called for Sloan to resign. (In mid-September the board voted 31-4 in support of Sloan.) Reynolds's son and the daughter of an earlier Baylor president have also offered high-profile support for the opposition. Oddly, few administration opponents seem concerned about the propriety of a former president leading a struggle against a current president.

As the 31-4 vote demonstrated, the Board of Regents is solidly behind Sloan and *Baylor 2012*. Winfred Moore, a former chair of the board and an esteemed Baptist minister, says he is "thrilled" with the direction that Sloan is taking Baylor. The younger faculty are for the most part very supportive of the strategic goals. "We have the momentum to realize *2012* and we will push forward," asserts Sloan.

Nevertheless, the school has serious problems. At many universities a Faculty Senate's decisive vote of no confidence in the administration could be fatal. Add to that the alienation of many long-tenured professors and the distress of almost half the entire faculty and you have a troubled university.

David Jeffrey, who succeeded Schmeltekopf as provost this past fall, thinks the conflict is about identity. Baylor has meant "Texas, Baptist, and family" but is now becoming "national and international," and operating with "an expanded version of being Baptist," Jeffrey said. Of the 172 faculty members added in the past four years, most are not from Texas and a good many are from other countries. Indeed, Jeffrey himself is a Canadian and until recently was an Anglican (though he was

raised a Baptist). Among the new hires have been a number of Catholics, which seems to discomfort the oldline Texas Baptists. Students are also now more likely to come from other states and nations.

The administration has tried to ensure that half of new hires are Baptists, as in the past, but the new Baptists are very open to other traditions. The non-Baptists include serious Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, along with a smattering of Jews. (Baylor has long had a requirement that all faculty be practicing Christians or Jews.) These “new Baptists” and members of other Christian traditions have different ideas about how Christianity relates to higher education.

The “family” climate has been lost as fewer people at Baylor come out of the Texas Baptist network. People are likely to be hired on the basis of impersonal criteria rather than personal connections. The new emphasis on research and publication brings a competitiveness that challenges the cooperative culture of an undergraduate teaching institution.

Baylor’s new emphasis on graduate education magnifies all these trends. A university aiming at research status needs Ph.D. programs (Baylor is trying to raise its number from 14 to 20) and the faculty and students that can inhabit them. The members of these departments come from all areas of the country and from many religious traditions. The departments that have Ph.D. programs are, by and large, strongly behind the Baylor administration and *2012*.

These programs also demand adequate facilities. Baylor has embarked on a huge building program, epitomized by a new science facility costing in the $100 million range. Becoming a first-rate research institution means incurring debt, a condition shunned by earlier leaders. But school officials say debt reduction is taking only 4.7 percent of Baylor’s operating budget—a very low figure, they maintain.

Even so, undergraduate tuition has been raised dramatically to cover part of these additional expenses, or at least so say those skeptical of *2012*. Administrators reply that Baylor’s tuition is still below that of other top-line private colleges and universities in Texas.

The challenges for Baylor’s future are not so much economic, however. The key issues are the vision and its implementation—what we might call the “ends” and the “means” of *Baylor 2012*.

It’s been apparent for several years that those on the receiving end of new policies at Baylor have felt steamrolled. I heard a chorus of voices in Waco that angrily confirmed this view. Reynolds is among those who complain that Baylor has been hypocritical in the way it treats people—professing Christian values while running roughshod over faculty. He likened the “takeover” of Baylor to the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Two Methodist faculty of long standing—both leaders in the Faculty Senate—accused the administration of a “bludgeoning” style. Kent Gilbreath, an economics professor in his 31st year at Baylor and something of a faculty theoretician in the effort to resist Sloan, said that a faculty group has compiled a 92-page paper that documents the “massive mistreatment of faculty.” These veteran faculty expressed great sadness about the condition of Baylor and deep apprehension about both their and the institution’s future.

Their main complaint is that the administration’s initiatives have been carried out subversively by a small group of people, without consultation or even care about what the older faculty are thinking and doing. More dialogue on faith and learning was going on in Baylor classrooms, I was told, than the administration ever knew.

In the early ’90s administration leaders began having breakfast meetings with selected faculty to talk about a new vision for integrating faith and learning. Administrators admit that they did not intend these meetings to be widely publicized. When other faculty became aware of these meetings, some were alarmed. Other major initiatives seemed to proceed in a similar way.

The administration’s two goals—raising the university’s status as a research institution and redefining its Baptist and Christian identity—were indeed pressed by a small group of administrators supported by key faculty members. Several of those leaders told me that the faculty would have squelched these initiatives if they had had veto power. Therefore, strong centralized leadership was needed to get things moving.

However, administrators admit that major mistakes were made in pursuing their goals. “There was less communication than there should have been,” said Sloan. Other typical remarks included: “We should have become more open and public about our plans earlier” and “I regret the faculty division that we’ve experienced.”

The implementation process has jeopardized the goals and in some cases provoked more resistance than was necessary. A number of aggrieved faculty might yet be won over or at last mollified by a more personal approach that aims at reconciliation. This may involve a bit of repentance on both sides. But certainly Christians ought to be able to mend fences. And since the administrators hold the power and have wielded it, perhaps they should take the initiative.

The workings of the university are indeed highly centralized. It is quite possible that the redefinition of Baylor's Christian identity could not have been done without exercising such centralized power. Now that a new generation of faculty and the whole administration is on board with *Baylor 2012*, however, it may be time to devolve some authority and control to lower levels. Departments have brought faculty candidates to the president and have been turned down without explanation. With trusted department chairs appointed by the president in place, it seems time to offer a more collegial model. Without that, even the enthusiastic faculty of today could become the disenchanted resisters of tomorrow.

At the heart of the Baylor conflict is a disagreement about the Christian identity of the university. The administration's sense of that identity is most evident in the way it screens faculty. Baylor has always asked candidates whether they are practicing Christians or Jews and what congregation they belong to. That process has ensured that a strong majority of the faculty are observant Christians and at least half of them Baptists. But the screening had been rather perfunctory and many faculty came on board who were loosely, if at all, related to a living Christian or Jewish community.

Now the provost interviews all finalists for faculty positions after they have met with departmental committees. The provost devotes about a quarter of the interview to conversation about the candidate's religious life. If the candidate does not satisfy the department's or the provost's criteria, he or she is rejected. For example, Baylor recently rejected a topflight candidate because he was a Mormon.

The Christian identity Baylor leaders are seeking is not defined by a confessional tradition, as at Calvin College, or by evangelical definitions of faith, as at Wheaton College. It seeks a "big-tent" kind of Christian orthodoxy that includes Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and others, as well as the hoped-for number of Baptists. It is a "mere Christianity" kind of orthodoxy.

What's so controversial about this? The answer lies in the particular form of Baptist piety—with its accompanying view of Baptist higher education—that has prevailed at Baylor and is now being formally challenged.

For former President Reynolds and his faculty supporters, one's relationship with Christ is what is essential in faith. One willingly enters into that relationship and strives to live up to the teachings of Christ. While Christians should not be ashamed to proclaim Christ, it is better to act Christianly. "Preach the gospel at all times; use words if necessary" was the aphorism from St. Francis that Reynolds cited to me.

Christianity, in this form of Baptist piety, includes an inevitable moral imperative. But in one's relationship with Christ—which is highly individual and inward—one has "soul competency." A true Christian shares the freedom of the priesthood of each believer. This competency and freedom compel one to read the Bible and its meanings according to conscience. Nothing about the faith should be articulated in creeds or systems of Christian thought.

"We do not believe in systematic theology," said Reynolds, explaining his style of Baptist piety. According to his view, public articulations of systematic theology, as well as public displays of piety, partake in the kind of "religiosity" that Jesus condemns in Matthew 6. Moreover, such affirmations quickly become oppressive and rob other believers of their Christian freedom, their "soul competency."

This traditionally Baptist construal of the faith results in a particular vision of the Christian university. Some have called it the "atmospheric" or "two-spheres" approach. The Christian character of the university resides in the hospitable, friendly, caring, just and edifying atmosphere created by sincere Christians. It also resides in the religion courses and the extracurricular religious activities that permeate the university. But what happens in the classrooms of this kind of Christian university is pretty much the same as what occurs in public universities. The only difference is that the Christian professor operates out of a sense of Christian vocation. Professors are in the university to "teach algebra, political science, the best way they know how, which is to me the Christian way to do it," said Reynolds.

"Faculty are not here to engage in religiosity," Reynolds has stated. Bringing theological notions into the classroom reminds Baptists like Reynolds of the "creedal" requirements that the Baptist fundamentalists have wielded—another

case in which Baptist freedoms are being destroyed.

These sorts of Baptists are also uneasy about public expressions of piety. While they would endorse prayers at some ceremonies, they disapprove of prayer in classrooms and meetings or even before meals in the faculty dining room.

Above all, traditional Baptists disagree with Sloan's contention that Christianity has intellectual content. In the view of Baylor's new leaders, faith is more than atmospheric. There is a deposit of Christian belief that all Christians should hold to. On the basis of that belief they should engage the secular claims of the various academic disciplines. In Sloan's view, the Christian faith gives a comprehensive account of all of life and reality; it addresses the key questions of life, death, human nature, salvation, history, meaning and conduct. The "integration of faith and learning" means that the perspectives of Christian faith should be at play in the classroom.

Judging from the sophisticated notions of faith and learning expressed by Baylor leaders, this does not mean that teachers will focus on "trumping" secular claims or that issues of faith will be obsessively engaged. It does mean that Christian claims are seen as publicly relevant to the entire academic enterprise. Baylor's administrators define themselves as "ecumenical" Baptists—Baptists who have recognized the deficiencies in their tradition and are bringing together Christians of all denominations.

What will this approach mean in practice? For the sociology department, which is moving toward a Ph.D. program in the sociology of religion, it means that religion is regarded as an independent (real) variable, not something that can be reduced to a social dynamic. That approach has drawn the formidable scholar Rodney Stark to the program. In the work of a cancer researcher, integrating faith and learning means openly interpreting one's efforts to find a cure for cancer as a Christian calling. In the work of a physicist specializing in "string theory," it means reflecting on the religious possibilities in a 12-dimensional universe.

An influential philosophy professor, Robert Baird, has argued that requiring such "orthodox" Christian belief will impede Baylor's reach for elite status because it will deter many fine candidates from applying. Moreover, he argues that for pedagogical reasons the university should have real pluralism among its faculty, including members of other world religions and those of no religion at all, as long as they

pledge to respect the Christian character and mission of the university.

The administration says such an approach would dilute the Christian character of the university. As for possible difficulties in finding scholars who endorse the new approach to faith and learning, Larry Lyon, dean of the graduate schools, who once shared Baird's concern about finding Christian scholars, said the task "has been easier than I expected."

The new Baylor is certainly not fundamentalist. It is moving from a particular kind of Baptist interpretation of the faith to a more mainstream orthodox Christian construal, and it is planning to create a research university that will take orthodox Christian claims seriously. This is an audacious undertaking in the face of historic trends in church and society. Though Protestant traditions founded many of the great research universities in this country, they have since lost any meaningful connection to them. Can Baylor reverse the trend?

Opposition to this plan has come from unlikely sources. The way the plan has been introduced has had nightmarish implications for some at Baylor. But it is an extremely important enterprise that all Christians should watch closely—and, I would add, cheer on.