

Southern Baptist heavyweight Richard Land in the fight of his life

by [Bob Smietana](#)

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c. USA Today 2012 NASHVILLE (RNS) For the past 24 years, Richard Land has used his folksy charm and fiery rhetoric to become one of the leading voices of the religious right and the public face of the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant group.

Now Land's future is in doubt amid an investigation over his remarks about the Trayvon Martin shooting and for alleged plagiarism.

A church committee is scheduled to issue its report by Friday (June 1), and there's a possibility that Land could lose his job as president of the Southern Baptists' Nashville-based Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

Land, 65, is a study in contradictions. The son of a Houston welder, he's an Ivy League graduate with a doctorate from Oxford University. A proud Texan, he's also a lifelong Boston Red Sox fan.

He believes wives should obey their husbands, but admires former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Land's wife, Rebekah, has a doctorate in counseling and runs a private practice in Brentwood, Tenn., outside Nashville.

He opposes gay marriage and abortion. But he favors immigration reform, including a path to citizenship for people in the country illegally, and criticized the Bush administration's support of waterboarding.

During the controversy over the construction of a new Islamic Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn., he spoke up in favor of the mosque. "It's time for this nonsense to end," he said in August 2010. "The First Amendment guarantees people the right to worship where they live."

That's a lesson he learned from his Baptist mother growing up in Houston. When he complained about Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons knocking on the door, she defended them.

If the government can restrict the rights of Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, she told him, then it also can come after Baptists. "That's always stuck with me," Land said.

Land knew he was going to be a preacher from the time he was 14. He hoped to attend the University of Texas before seminary, but a school counselor insisted that he apply to Princeton, too, lending him the money for the application.

At Princeton, Land learned to get along with people who held different beliefs. And that remains one of Land's strengths, said Jim Wallis, a progressive Christian preacher and author who founded the Washington-based Sojourners social justice group.

Wallis and Land disagree on politics but often speak together at conferences, such as the Q gathering of evangelicals in Washington in April, where their talk was titled "What Can We Agree On?" After they speak, they often go out to dinner and talk late into the night.

Land is a close friend of Paige Patterson, one of the architects of the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 1990s. The two met at New Orleans seminary and later taught together at Criswell College in Dallas.

The school was a haven for young conservatives who felt unwelcome at Southern Baptist seminaries. At Criswell, they learned conservative theology and fiery leadership from Land and Patterson.

"They weren't trying to get along with people," said Tom Hatley, a former student of Land's and now pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Rogers, Ark. "It became a place for people who had a real zeal."

Many of the so-called Criswell men became leaders in the civil war between Baptist conservatives and moderates in the 1980s and 1990s for control of Baptist institutions like seminaries and the Christian Life Commission, now the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Land took over at the Christian Life Commission in the fall of 1988.

"First the conservatives said they want parity between moderates and conservatives," said Robert Parham, a former colleague of Land's who now runs the Nashville-based Baptist Center for Ethics. "Pretty soon, parity turned to purity."

Parham thinks Land is more a Republican activist than a Christian leader, and said Land's influence among Baptists is waning.

"I don't see Land as influential among rank-and-file Southern Baptists, not as a megachurch preacher or a seminary president would be," he said. "His main constituency is probably the media, which given the media's aversion to plagiarism ought to be a major problem for him."

Not all of his former students at Criswell remain Land fans.

The Rev. David Montoya of Calvary Baptist Church in Mineral Wells, Texas, who studied with Land at Criswell in the 1970s, said the Baptist ethicist was careless about giving credit to other authors during his lectures.

Montoya said Land often read verbatim from textbooks without telling students. "He'd Xerox the pages and read from them," Montoya said. "Everyone knew about it."

Hatley remembers things differently. He said Land always told students about his sources ahead of time.

"So he didn't always have to tell us every time he read a quote," Hatley said. "We already knew where it came from."

Hatley wants Land to stay on in his current role. Southern Baptists, he said, need someone who can speak clearly about controversial moral issues.

"A lot of preachers have perfected the art of almost saying something," he said. "Dr. Land tells you exactly what he thinks. He speaks with a clarity that Baptists need."

Land has never been afraid to speak his mind. In 1998, he championed the Baptist boycott of Disney over gay-themed events at amusement parks. "Do they expect Mickey to leave Minnie and move in with Donald?" Land told the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention, according to the Orlando Sentinel. "That's Goofy!"

In 2008, he called Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer from New York, who is Jewish, a "schmuck" during a lecture at Criswell College. That led to a public outcry and Land later apologized, saying he didn't realize that some people consider that term an anti-Jewish slur.

His latest troubles started with a March 31 broadcast of the Richard Land Live! radio show. Land defended George Zimmerman, who shot unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in February. He accused President Obama of using the Trayvon shooting for political gain and labeled the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Al Sharpton as "race hustlers."

The comments angered African-American leaders in the convention. Things escalated after a Baptist blogger found that Land had plagiarized the comments from a Washington Times columnist.

Land later admitted he'd not always given credit to sources he used during his radio broadcast and has publicly apologized twice.

In mid-April, all the archives of his broadcasts were removed from the show's website. The website includes a note from his trustees explaining they removed the archived broadcasts out of concerns over plagiarism.

Trustees currently are investigating Land for the plagiarism. Last week, the chairman of the committee investigating Land stepped down, and the new chairman said he wants Land to continue in his ministry.

Land declined to comment about the current controversy, saying it's a matter for trustees.

The Rev. Fred Luter of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans wants Land to stay. Luter, who likely will be elected the first African-American Southern Baptist president in June, is a longtime friend. The two men helped craft the Southern Baptist Convention's 1995 apology for its role in promoting slavery and racism.

Luter said Land has worked tirelessly on racial reconciliation among Southern Baptists. He called Land a smart man who made a dumb mistake with his Trayvon comments.

"I don't think you should throw out a lifetime of doing good because of one mistake," he said.