

Coming together, coming apart: Embattled Baptists in Texas

by [Bill J. Leonard](#) in the [December 16, 1998](#) issue

As baptist historian Walter Shurden once noted, Southern Baptists are "not a silent people." Their battles are often very intense and very public. The divisive issues of 1998 were merely a continuation of a long tradition. In June, messengers (delegates) to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention gained national attention when they added a new article on the family to the denomination's confession of faith. The amendment, now an article of denominational faith, states that "a wife is to submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ." Southern Baptist leaders said they were simply articulating the "biblical mandate" whereby men exercise "headship" over their families just as Christ is the head of the church.

This fall denominational agencies began requiring employees to "reaffirm" the newly amended confession as a requisite for continued employment. Faculty members at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth were told that since the school's charter requires conformity to the denomination's confession of faith, they would be expected to confirm their support for the revised document. Press reports indicate that 90 members of the faculty agreed to do so, while two others announced their resignations. No doubt other denominational workers will be asked to follow suit. The confession of faith, known as the Baptist Faith and Message, is also used by many congregations as a guide for evaluating the orthodoxy of pastors, church staff members and ordinands.

The article on spousal submission has led some moderate churches to relinquish all connection to the Southern Baptist Convention. Of particular note is the decision of First Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, to end its SBC affiliation, a relationship which had existed since the founding of the denomination in 1845.

But the year's most dramatic action came when the Baptist General Convention of Texas approved changes in its constitution. These changes distanced the state

organization from the national SBC, moved it toward greater autonomy in its own operations and created a full-blown schism among its 2.7 million members. The action, which required two years and a two-thirds majority for approval, redefined "member" churches, enabling them to contribute funds to the SBC, the Baptist General Convention of Texas or other Baptist causes such as the Baptist World Alliance or the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group organized in 1991.

Other changes allowed greater support for Texas Baptist-related theological seminaries and schools of theology (two new schools have been organized at Baylor and Hardin-Simmons universities), expansion of a state-based mission program, possible direct membership in the Baptist World Alliance (current membership is through the SBC) and creation of new Christian education publications for Texas Baptist churches. Responding to SBC statements on the role of women, the Texas messengers passed a resolution asserting the "biblical equality" of men and women in the family relationship, thereby challenging and essentially rejecting the denomination's statement. All these changes suggest a weakening connection with the Southern Baptist Convention and a stronger denominational identity for the 150-year-old Texas convention itself.

These changes, which marked a decided victory for Texas Baptist moderates, led a group of 537 messengers from 183 churches to form a new fundamentalist-oriented convention called Southern Baptists of Texas. Calling themselves "the real Texas Baptists," the leaders of the new convention affirmed their loyalty to the SBC and attacked the Baptist General Convention for abandoning its long relationship with the denomination. Moderates responded that there was still room for those who wished to remain closely related to the SBC, but fundamentalists, who have consistently lost in their efforts to control the state convention-unlike their dominance in the national convention-felt that the time for a split had come.

In Baptist polity each organizational entity is autonomous and freestanding, but in the SBC, connections have been strong. Local churches relate directly to regional associations, state conventions and the national denomination, yet monies are sent from churches to state conventions, which then funnel a portion of the funds to the SBC itself. The Texas convention is the largest in the SBC, contributing some \$43 million annually to denominational programs. Thus, any financial and organizational realignment will have significant impact on the denomination. The SBC is certain to recognize the new fundamentalist group, reacting as it did in 1996, when the General Association of Virginia Baptists experienced a similar division in its ranks.

Texas will then have two Baptist conventions-each officially related to the SBC.

No sooner had the vote been taken than some moderate Baptists were calling for a complete break with the SBC and the formation of a new hemisphere-wide Baptist denomination. Herbert Reynolds, Baylor University chancellor and Texas Baptist leader, immediately challenged Texans to use their size, energy and resources to become the center of "a possible Baptist Convention of the Americas." Reynolds insisted that since "there is not even the remotest possibility" of reconciliation with the fundamentalist-oriented SBC, Texas Baptists and other moderates should seek a new denominational identity.

These Texas actions compound the fragmentation that seems to have affected every segment of Southern Baptist life. While state conventions such as Virginia and Texas have completely redefined their relationship to the national SBC, many other conventions now give churches multiple options in designating their funds. The North Carolina state convention, for example, now offers four different plans. Moderate Baptist organizations such as the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship provide funding for mission endeavors, theological education, publication and other activities. A Texas group known as Baptists Committed worked to bring about the changes in the state convention, and promises to continue efforts to unite "mainstream" Baptists (moderates) in new cooperative enterprises. Numerous Baptist colleges and universities, including Baylor, Furman, Wake Forest, Richmond, Samford and Carson-Newman, have redefined their relationships with state conventions, turning to self-perpetuating boards of trustees and away from direct convention control. Eight new seminaries, divinity schools or "Baptist houses" have been founded during the past decade.

Given its size, energy and economic clout, the Baptist General Convention of Texas has the potential to unite many of these diverse subgroups, formally or informally, into a new Baptist entity. Thus religious Americans, who have watched the 20-year effort of fundamentalists to control America's largest Protestant denomination, may spend the next two decades watching it come apart.